TALKING LIFE, DEATH, AND DOWNTOWN IN '80S NEW YORK WITH DANCE MUSIC HISTORIAN TIM LAWRENCE

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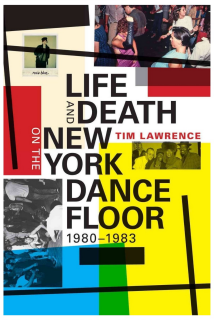
When I moved back to New York from New Orleans in the late-'70s, I expected the city to be worse-off than when I'd left. Bankrupt, blocks upon blocks of buildings torched by tax-dodging landlords, open air drug markets, the highest murder rate in the country, a 10 percent unemployment rate, I'd been leading a fairly bucolic life among the magnolias and night blooming jasmine while teaching at the University of New Orleans, writing for local publications and hanging out in the French Quarter. Back in the city among the tall skyscrapers, I felt small, inconsequential and out of place until I landed a freelance assignment at the SoHo News, a weekly that covered local politics and the burgeoning music and arts scene that had grown up around Mark's Kansas City, The Mercer Arts Center and CBGBs. I kept on freelancing and getting to know the pink and henna-haired folks who covered nightlife. But it didn't all fall into place for me until I was assigned to write my first cover story, "The Pistol and the Knife," an account of the alleged murder of Nancy Spungen by her boyfriend Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious, that introduced me to the subterranean downtown scene. Two weeks later, the infamous Mudd Club opened and I was now a bona fide insider with a front row seat to what is now deemed to be one of New York's most creative and combustive periods.

Tim Lawrence's *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor 1980-1983*, the definitive history of that fabled time in the city, is already taking on the status of a sacred text. (This is the third book of a series that began with *Love Saves the Day: A History of Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* followed by *Hold on To your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992.*) The talk among that elite group of DJs and die-hards of the night who made the scene back then is that they are ecstatic that Lawrence has come along to canonize them. In the middle of a whirlwind tour, he's appeared on panels and signings at MoMA and Rough Trade in Brooklyn as well as at Yale, a day-long symposium at NYU followed by an exhibition with four photographers featured in the book at *Howl* in the East Village. The *New Yorker*, the *Times*, the *Village Voice* and the *Guardian* have all reviewed *Life and Death* with a degree of seriousness not normally accorded to an ephemeral subject like DJs and nightlife.



Most historians view late 70s-early 80s New York as a sordid low point in the life of the city. But Tim Lawrence has a different point of view: "I interviewed 130 people," says Lawrence, "and I did not meet a single person who did not in one way or another express the sentiment that being in New York City in that time was so remarkable that it wasn't that they didn't find the city unlovable, they were absolutely traumatized at the thought of even leaving the city for a day."

Far from being the worst, of times, "There was a such a level of community," he says, that the "interaction and creativity turned out to be the most productive cultural period in New York's history. In terms of the sheer level of concentration and output of people living in the city doing things together, daily, nightly, all around the clock, I can't think of anything quite as prolific."

Lawrence's exegesis of the historically under-appreciated four years weighs in at over 539 pages. It is nothing if not thorough, very much like Lawrence himself. Ask the tall, thin and bespectacled Englishman a question and he's off, citing statues, quoting off-the-rubber DJs like Anita Sarko and Mark Kamins and public policy authorities with equal facility. "In the early '80s everyone wanted something new because punk is in decline, disco has died, rap is considered a gimmick. There's all this energy, all these musicians, but there's no one sound." What followed is what he calls "a instant hybrid explosion that's become this way of life in downtown New York."

Photo by Markus Fedderson

For Lawrence, the Mudd Club was the apotheosis of the commingling mutation of dance and punk, art and performance. Opened on Halloween Eve 1978, the Mudd Club was the brainchild of Steve Mass, Diego Cortez and Anya Phillips who saw a community cast adrift in post-punk, post-disco, No Future New York. "Mass and Diego and Anya saw that CBGBs was an extraordinary prolific and cutting-edge venue but ultimately one-dimensional." There were live bands but you couldn't dance. "It was anti-disco. Diego and Anya planned the idea and Steve Mass ran with it. Steve's brilliance was to say 'lets have a punk discotheque because we want to dance.' They also saw it as a cross-arts kind of place. Live performance, DJ, theme nights, installation, different forms of creative necessities – there would be a mini army of people – and then the audience would come and become part of this unfolding tableau. All of these cultural and social energies in one place in one night was barely recorded."

Lawrence sometimes has to contain himself like some born-again party animal even though he's been preaching this dogma for almost twenty years. "Everything I've written so far has been an accident," he says going into the story of how a would-be academic with an interest in English lit wound up as the reigning authority on the history of dance music in New York.

While out one night at a London club that featured New York City House music, he had an epiphany. "There was a guest appearance by "Little" Louie Vega, this producer who was a hero of mine. It was a powerful experience for me, one of the factors that led me to New York City to be close to the music I loved."

He enrolled at Columbia University thinking he could pursue his academics by day and music at night canvassing at the Sound Factory Bar and buying records at Dance Trax.

But it wasn't until a professor suggested he write a book about dance culture that the pieces began to fit into place. "The idea was that it would be a quick, clever book. And very early on in the research someone at the record store I was going to said why don't you meet this guy Daniel Marcuso who I hadn't heard about though I was quite knowledgeable." Regarded today as one of the founding fathers of modern dance music, Marcuso's parties, started at the Loft in 1970, are legendary and still going strong six years later. "At the time I wasn't into disco," Lawrence recalls. "I thought it'd as nice danceable, radio music. But house was this post-modern propulsive soulful sound that had completely taken over my life."

The epic three-hour meeting between Lawrence and Marcuso has so far produced three volumes and it looks like there's more to come. "Everything he said was new, a whole history of underground, downtown pre-disco culture that was in many respects gay, but also fundamentally open to women, African- Americans, fishermans, Latins, anyone who wanted to dance the night away. This was where DJ culture was born. This transformed DJs. Before that DJs were like puppeteers. They thought they were going to manipulate the floor, make tricks. They had to send the people back to the bar. That was the whole dynamic. They would play four or five songs and then they were required to kill the dance floor so people could go out and drink. Marcuso didn't care about that. It was a private party."

Photo by Yuliu Niyomkhew/squares

Writing about the seminal downtown composer/musician Arthur Russell in his second book was equally revelatory. "Then I got on this tangent about Arthur Russell. A beautiful tangent. Arthur took me from DJ and disco to The Kitchen, New Wave, punk, hip hop at the Roxy. Into the folk scene, dub music," says Lawrence. "I wrote the biography about him because he was into all those things and more interested in collaborating than in his own career."

History has a hard time with collective genius. "What was happening at the time was party culture. A DJ performance doesn't get recorded, people dancing doesn't get recorded, the immersive happenings of the Mudd Club were barely recorded. These incredible artistic, participatory, multi dimensional events are inherently unrepeatable. We have a long tradition in western culture of the individual as the source of creativity. This book argues against this premise of artistic creativity and to say [instead] that as social animals anything that is created is an expression of a whole series of social engagements and wider cultural experiences than any one person can have."

This theory has found a strong advocate recently in Brian Eno who lived in New York City for a short time as a roommate of Steve Mass's during this period. He even coined a word to describe the phenomena of collective genius. Eno "says this in the most concise way when he creates the idea of the 'scenius' which posits that creativity comes not so much from the individual – the I – but from a person's insertion and part in the wider scene. The real cultural explosions happen when these relations are formed."

While in New York for what was expected to be a short visit producing the Talking Heads album which would become Remain in Light, Eno was making the club scene and seeing bands playing a strange kind of rewinded music that combined art theory, funk, punk and rock 'n' roll. He got turned on to James Chance's Contortions, Lydia Lunch with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars and DNA with Arto Lindsay and put them on an album called No New York, which remains an essential and rare recording of that time.

The Mudd Club gets its deserved attention, but so does Club 57 located in the basement of the Polish church on St. Mark's Place. The cool thing was that you could go to both, two very different but complementary experiences. The Mudd Club had a more European-Kafkaesque feel, more Eastern bloc than jetsons, more black and white to Club 57's pop sensibility. Club 57 was home base to Ann Magnuson, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, John Sex and 'trannies who had a decidedly post-modern perspective on mass culture, both critical and adoring at the same time. While the Mudd Club continued to expand, Club 57 remained small, maintaining a full calendar of events, film festivals and parties on his smallest budgets. Eventually the locales merged spiritually as the Club 57 crew began doing shows at the Mudd Club as well to help them finance Club 57.

And then there's the "death" part of the book's title. "1983-1984 is the turning point. AIDS reaches epidemic proportions, the stock market rockets, real estate goes through the roof, Crack reaches epidemic proportions the following year and Reagan is reelected in November. The city changes. We see division in the dance scene and the rap scene," says Lawrence. "Rap becomes much more aggressive, macho, sometimes homophobic, partly predicated on the crack epidemic. You have an African-American community in crisis. And likewise on the gay party scene, the development of AIDs into an epidemic reaches new levels of intensity and also decimates the community."

Life and Death reads like a high school year book for the class of '1985. Many photos of the era's best known figures are included, as well as playlists by the day's top DJs Jean-Michel Basquiat, David Wojnarowicz, Lydia Lunch, Patti Astor and the Fun Gallery artists, Johnny Dynell and Chi Chi Valenti... I could go on and on [but then you wouldn't have to read the book].

Downtown was our campus to romp at night and act out our fantasies. We went to the Pyramid to see the Magicka's Nadine in Tarnabine, to Danceteria where Madonna made an appearance on Haiau Montaug and Anita Sarko's cabaret night Na Kinteedes. And to the Roxy, the sexiest club where hip hop met downtown and Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation ruled the turntables. Futura, Dondi, Fab 5, Phase 2 et al made their art while Crazy Legs and the Rock Steady Crew danced the night away.

I remember a lot of it but thanks to Tim Lawrence we can now also appreciate the "scenius" of it.

Lavish photo by Yulie Skjoldbærg-Iqvanes.

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