

When NYC's Dance Scene Reign'd Supreme

BY MEGAN PUGH

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The Paradise Garage dance floor (1979).

DJ Lawrence

A Brent Nicholson Earle, an early AIDS activist who spent months doing long-distance runs around America to raise awareness about the disease, credits at least part of his drive to an East Village dance club: the Saint. In the early Eighties, some three thousand men a night would dance beneath the rotating stars of the Saint's planetarium ceiling. "At times," Saint regular Jorge La Torre recalls, "it felt like we were levitating." On the dance floor, Earle was "welcomed and absorbed into the tribe," he says. "I never would have dreamt that I could become a hero if I hadn't had that image of transcendent glory, that iconized version of myself, bestowed to me under the dome of the Saint."

For these men — whom Tim Lawrence quotes in his new book, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor 1980-1983* — the stakes of partying were high. On the dance floor, you might embrace your identity or try out new ones, find a groove, form a movement. Two miles from the Saint, at the Roxy in Chelsea, the promoter Ruza Blue tells Lawrence, "B-boys, downtown trendies, punks, famous people, musicians, painters, gays, trans — everything you can think of — routinely partied together. This wasn't just a matter of physical proximity. As people shared space, they also shared ideas, aesthetic and political sensibilities. Disco had been declared dead, but in New York, people kept moving, reimagining what dance music and the cultures around it could be.



Left to right: Keith Haring, Jannet Ross, Fred "Freddo" Stacey, Terrence of the Fun Gallery (1983).

And Whyland

The music industry had begun its general rite for disco in 1979, when more than fifty thousand listeners brought their invented disco records to Chicago's Comiskey Park for a demolition that turned into a riot; when the phrase "disco sucks" became shorthand for a particular kind of rock 'n' roll machismo; when America fell out of love with the Brothers Gibb and the slick commercialism they'd come to embody. Never mind that Donna Summer and Michael Jackson had topped the charts with disco records that same year. By 1980, all the major labels had axed their disco departments — a move that Lawrence explains was, counterintuitively, good for dance music.

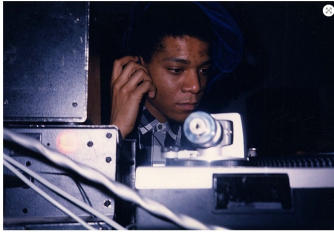
Out of the national spotlight, freed from marketing pressures, and shedding its leisure-suit straitjacket, dance music entered a period of shape-shifting, hybrid grace. Lawrence tells this part of the story through its main players: DJs (also the heroes of his 2003 tome, *Love Saves the Day*, a remarkably detailed, mammoth history of disco). At the Paradise Garage on the west end of Soho, DJ Larry Levan played r&b and disco alongside dub, gospel, and new wave tracks. In the Bronx, hip-hop giant Afrika Bambaataa was sampling from whatever records he pleased; soon he was also DJ'ing in Manhattan at Negrit and the Roxy. At the Mudd Club, an art-punk hangout that served simultaneously as a dance club, gallery, and salon, owner-impresario Steve Mass brought in acts like Eddie Palmieri, Mary Wells, and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. New wave and punk bands began taking inspiration. The Bush Tetras got funky. Blonde rapped, and with *Romantic Right*, the Talking Heads began making just about the moodiest music that would still make a body move. As Afrika Islam, then a member of the hip-hop ensemble Soul Sonic Force, tells Lawrence, "Everybody was listening to everything!"

UPCOMING EVENTS	
The Best Of Martin New York, NY	Oct 5, 10:00am
Fredrick Westland NY	Oct 5, 10:00am
Samuelly Rolland NY	Oct 6, 10:00am
Kerry Day NY	Oct 6, 10:00am

Of course, place mattered, and Lawrence is careful to sketch out the distinctions in taste and ethos from club to club, even when their crowds overlapped. Performance artist Ann Magnuson hung out at the Mudd Club plenty, but Club C was her home base: "They dressed like characters in a New Wave film," she explains, "whereas we were much more into laughing, and bright psychedelic colors." But as Lawrence writes, "talk of difference concealed important ties," and downtown New York was positively knotted. While some of his

interviewees describe a rivalry between the Paradise Garage and the Loft, for instance, Boyd Jarvis, a regular at both venues, says it was common for Loft and Garage dancers to bring their radios to Washington Square Park or Central Park the morning after, to "continue the party right there until three in the afternoon." When you start connecting the dots — and Lawrence does — different scenes become part of a big, sprawling tangle.

The cast of characters in the book can be staggering, the exhaustive accounts overwhelming — Lawrence interviewed or corresponded with more than 120 people, and he makes room for their voices — but that's part of the point: He wants a crowded and motley party. This is a scrupulously researched, marvelously detailed history.



Keith Haring at the Airo (1984).

Johnny Opard

Temporarily speaking, it's also a relatively short one: In six hundred pages, Lawrence covers just four fertile years. He ends the book in 1983, when Jackson's Thriller burst onto the national scene and British new wave bands began exporting danceable hits to the U.S. Even the city's scene was in flux, with financial deregulation and the New York real estate boom reshaping Lower Manhattan. Benets went up. Clubs closed. A slicker, more moneyed gallery culture threatened to edge out the largely DIY ethos with which the decade had begun.

But it wasn't just market pressures that cooled the swirling energies of downtown New York; so did human loss. Nineteen eighty-three was the year that AIDS became an epidemic, killing more than 1,000 people, including downtown luminaries such as singer Klaus Nomi. Dance floors started to change. As Terry Sherman, a Saint DJ, tells Lawrence, "Lots of people died, a lot were sick, and a lot of the friends of the members who had died or were sick stopped coming because it was too painful to go to a place with so many memories of the fun times they had enjoyed with their friends or lovers." And no longer, he says, was dancing in gay clubs "considered 'cool' by straight people in the domestic record industry." Fear had sundered alliances.

In the wake of these forces — death, homophobia, capitalism — the scene settled into separate pieces, both socially and artistically. Clubs became more homogenous, and so did the music they played. Lawrence closes his book with an epilogue mourning the promise of a time when, as the scenester Chi Chi Valentini puts it, people could "live this alternative life that was not just nocturnal but communal." Perhaps, Lawrence writes, it's an era that will remind us that "you" given the right conditions, a different kind of city can exist." First, though, he takes us to some parties: New Year's Eve, as 1983 comes to a close and revelers head out. No one's going gentle into that good night: They choose the best, the party, the collective experience, dancing beside folks they may not yet know but will want to. From there, Lawrence tells us, who knows what might come.

Tim Lawrence will speak about his book at CUNY's Graduate Center on October 7.

Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor: 1980-1983
By Tim Lawrence
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