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## WHEN RENT WAS CHEAP AND DANCE MUSIC REIGNED

By **Sasha Frere-Jones**, SEPTEMBER 27, 2016



Tim Lawrence's new book, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor: 1980-1983*, chronicles four years in the life of several New York City clubs, including the Danceteria.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WARING ABBOTT / GETTY

Halfway through Tim Lawrence's "Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor: 1980-1983," a six-hundred-page book about four years in the life of a dozen New York City clubs, there's a short chapter called "Shrouded Abatements and Mysterious Deaths." It describes two forces that began warping New York City in the early eighties, neither of them musical, and it elegantly explains how a period of artistic flourishing was squashed.

The first of these forces, chronologically speaking, was money. More specifically, Lawrence points to a system of tax abatements pushed for by the city's mayor at the time, Ed Koch. Designed to keep big companies in the city, these abatements transformed the New York real-estate market. They also marked the forefront of a larger national change—Lawrence quotes from William K. Tabb's "The Long Default," a study of the fiscal crisis of the nineteen-seventies, which was published in 1982: "The shift to neoconservative reprivatization that is proceeding rapidly under the Reagan administration is, as we have said, merely the New York scenario writ large," Tabb wrote. (These abatements have lately been in the news again, because Koch tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent Donald Trump from getting one for Trump Tower. The *Times* reported earlier this month that, in the years since, Trump "has reaped at least \$885 million in tax breaks.")

Two pages after that remark from Tabb, Lawrence quotes from one of the first reports on an unnamed disease, published by the *Times* in July of 1981. "The cause of the outbreak is unknown, and there is as yet no evidence of contagion," Lawrence K. Altman wrote. "But the doctors who have made the diagnoses, mostly in New York City and the San Francisco Bay area, are alerting other physicians who treat large numbers of homosexual men to the problem in an effort to help identify more cases and to reduce the delay in offering chemotherapy treatment."

Money and AIDS laid waste to most of the glories that Lawrence documents before and after this slim chapter; you could plausibly go further and say that the New York of the early eighties simply disappeared in the wake of these two forces. As a New Yorker whose teen-age years overlapped with that period, and who spent many weekends at the Danceteria on Twenty-first Street, I may be biased in favor of that view. And if you have no abiding love for New York, disco, hip-hop, studio techniques, or fast and dirty real-estate shuffles—there must be such people, statistically—perhaps “Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor” will not hold you. But if you care for any of those things, and even if that concern borders on the obsessive, you will benefit from Lawrence’s investigations.

Lawrence is a professor of cultural studies at the University of East London. His writing is conversational, and the pacing here is brisk, despite the author’s tendency to repeat salient points about certain clubs and characters. (You will know the difference between the sound system at the Loft and that of Paradise Garage when you are done.) This is Lawrence’s third book about roughly the same time period and topic, which is the kind of valuable longitudinal commitment that academia facilitates. The previous two, “Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979” and “Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992,” both contain detours away from the city, but all three books carefully trace the growth patterns of dance music in New York during the seventies and eighties.

One of the key points that “Life and Death” makes, through the aggregation of eyewitness accounts, is that some genre terms actively confuse history. “Dance” is really the only useful term available if you want to characterize the social aspect of an American-pop continuum that piles up like so, over several decades: R. & B.-disco-rap-hip-hop-R. & B. Malcolm McLaren’s single “World’s Famous,” for instance, a staple for New York street dancers in 1983, sampled a squelchy, half-time breakdown from the 1979 single “Rocket in the Pocket,” by the disco star Cerrone—and that sample was then used in a grip of rap songs during the eighties. In that decade, in an attempt to mirror this blend more accurately, *Billboard* began toying with its Disco Action chart, changing it to the “Hot Dance/Disco” chart, and then dropping the word “Disco” altogether. It was obvious people were dancing at venues like Mudd Club, Paradise Garage, and Danceteria. It was not obvious what they would dance to, or if the dancers themselves would even agree to be part of a cohort with a name.

But the d.j.s of the time knew they were operating in a zone between genres. Afrika Islam was the right-hand man to Afrika Bambaataa, and called himself “the son of Bambaataa, none hotter,” on his seminal hip-hop radio show, “The Zulu Beat.” Lawrence quotes Islam as saying, “We were anti-disco because disco was John Travolta and *Saturday Night Fever* and Studio 54.” He goes on to say that “we didn’t look like John Travolta, but it didn’t mean we didn’t listen to the music or dance to it. . . . A lot of disco records became hip hop classics.” Islam’s sentiment is echoed in “Life and Death” by various participants who followed the same principle. B-boys from the Bronx and painters from Brooklyn and entrepreneurs from Germany all gravitated toward music that was made for dancing, however it was tagged.

It’s true that some rejections of disco were simply sublimations of racism and homophobia. (Many of the people who helped smash records at Steve Dahl’s Disco Demolition event, which took place at Comiskey Park, in July of 1979, did not bother to sublimate their feelings.) But for many New Yorkers rejecting disco wasn’t about race or gender; it was about what disco had come to signal: dumb wealthy people and the dumber clubs that catered to those people, and a narrow, tamed version of music they knew as fire.

**T**he ending of the dream period Lawrence describes in “Life and Death” was both complex and miserable. He cites a piece in the *Times* from July of 1981, after Koch’s tax abatements had kicked in, in which a tax consultant says, “There is virtually no building going on in the city which is not subsidized.” Before that, rent was cheap and entrepreneurs could move from one venue to the other without much interference from the city. Enormous clubs like Area, intended to be the spiritual heirs to Mudd Club and its ilk, were overrun by what the performer Ann Magnuson called “awful Wall Street frat boys.” At the other end of the axis, crack began to undo communities not graced by the presence of Wall Streeters, as the real-estate developers lived on an ascending X-curve of profit.

AIDS was even more destructive, as far as an artistic cohort is concerned. After AIDS, the city lost much of its legendary heterodoxy. Although “intersectionality” hadn’t entered the lexicon, it was, in the period Lawrence examines, happening organically on the dance floor. Straight crowds were being mentored and tutored by people of color and the L.G.B.T. community, who were sharing records with each other before those crowds arrived. Even if the scene largely consisted of apolitical enthusiasts, the politics of the downtown hybridity were a conversation topic, as Lawrence reveals. The curator and connector Diego Cortez (born James Curtis) “abandoned the SoHo art scene because it consisted of white people drinking white wine in gallery rooms that were painted white.” Initially, the Queens artist Lady Pink thought that the director Charlie Ahearn, who was then working on his movie “Wild Style,” might be “just another entrepreneur trying to profit from graffiti.” (She later decided his interest was legitimate.) But, in general, the goings on felt largely unsupervised. No scene like downtown 1981 could flourish today under the eye of the Internet. Chi Chi Valenti playing fast and loose with Nazi regalia at Mudd Club? There would be trouble.

Lawrence chases most of his stories to their concrete end. Though I saw Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five being booed when they opened for the Clash at Bond’s in May of 1981, I had no idea until now that they returned for a second opening slot at Bond’s, and got through it without major incident. This is the beauty of research with a generous deadline: footnotes can one-up the text.

The final blanket over all the fantastic noise in “Life and Death” was thrown in the nineties. It was then that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani resurrected an antique law requiring clubs to have “cabaret licenses.” This allowed police to shut down clubs that were ostensibly producing the kind of late-night traffic that might disturb a new breed of New York tenant—the sort of person who preferred order over, well, New York.

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