

Night People

A history of the eclectic post-disco scene in early-'80s New York

SIMON REYNOLDS

LIFE AND DEATH ON THE NEW YORK DANCE FLOOR, 1980–1983 BY TIM LAWRENCE DURHAM, NC: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 600 PAGES. \$28.

The title of disco scholar Tim Lawrence's new book has taken on a more ominous overtone following the massacre at the nightclub Pulse in Orlando. Of course, the grim reaper alluded to in *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980–1983* is not a homophobic terrorist but a disease, AIDS, which scythed a deadly swath through the cast of characters in this absorbing history: performers and artists such as Klaus Nomi, Keith Haring, and Arthur Russell, to name only a few casualties. But Lawrence also means "life and death" in a less literal way: He identifies in club culture a vitalist spirit of eros, a celebration of the ways in which desire, communality, and improvisation can dissolve boundaries. Conversely, a genre or scene that closes itself off to new influences or diversity becomes homogeneous and stagnant. Laws like those that restrict dancing in bars (which have periodically been stringently enforced in New York) have the effect of killing joy and stifling subcultural energy.

Lawrence's book focuses on a period that's usually considered an intermediary phase, a mere gap between the classic-disco era and the house-music explosion. For want of a better term, it's been called post-disco; at the time, people just talked about club music. The sounds and styles of this period mutated and fragmented into myriad substyles: the slower grooves of what some DJs nowadays call boogie; the bouncy, diva-dominated Hi-NRG that eventually took over gay clubs; a brash, crashing music known as freestyle. In all these genres, electronic textures and programmed elements—synth bass, sequencer pulses, drum-machine beats, early sampling effects—gradually took over, as heard on classic tracks like Peech Boys' "Don't Make Me Wait" and Man Parrish's "Hip Hop, Be Bop."

In describing the four-year period Lawrence examines here, the prefix *post* comes in handy. There was postpunk, for instance, with No Wave groups like the Contortions striving to be more extreme than CBGB bands like the Ramones. Or the postfunk of hip-hop groups that isolated the percussive quintessence (the breakbeats, the half-spoken, half-sung chants) of James Brown-style R & B. And then there's that old reliable catchall term *postmodern*. In the early '80s, retro first became hip, with revivalisms galore and camp parody infusing nightspots like the Mudd Club and Club 57. Staging themed parties, these clubs were more like arts laboratories than discos—dubbed "envirothèques" by some club-goers—although DJs remained key figures and dancing was always a fixture.

Life and Death provides the most intensive mapping of this brief era of New York subculture we've yet seen. The book's strength is its depth of research, drawing on the real-time journalism of the era as well as many new interviews. The detail is fascinating, as Lawrence salvages ephemeral events, forgotten people, and lost places from the fog of faded memory. For example, Lawrence vividly recounts DJ Anita Sarko's Cold War-themed party at Danceteria, during which she played Soviet-banned music like Abba alongside state-sanctioned music like Socialist men's choirs, while the club's cofounder Rudolf Piper, dressed as a commandant, pretended to arrest dancers. And one of the most interesting, detailed descriptions of a lost locale is of the lavishly designed gay club the Saint, with its planetarium-like ceiling: Owner Bruce Mailman engineered a total environmental experience for dancers, using disorienting lighting and engulfing sound to create sensations of transcendence and absolute removal from reality.

But strengths can become weaknesses, and *Life and Death* sometimes gets too list-y: There are rather too many passages where, say, twenty-one bands are named to indicate a venue's booking policy without anything much of substance conveyed. Part of the art of a book like this is knowing what to leave out. And writing about an era roiling with overlapping action presents formidable structural challenges. Lawrence opts for chronology, dividing his book into four yearlong sections: 1980, 1981, 1982, and 1983. That has its downside, though, as the story seems to constantly flit from one figure or scene to another. There simply isn't a perfect solution to the tricky task of writing the biography of an epoch, and Lawrence's

approach at least retains a sense of propulsion through time.

Lawrence is drawn to this era of New York club culture because of the currents of cross-fertilization, eclecticism, and



From top: Cover of *East Village Eye*, June 1982. Flier for "The Land of Make Believe" party at the Saint, New York, April 2, 1983.

hybridity that animated the scene. By the end of 1982, these qualities were at their peak. "The melting-pot city was entering its hyper-whisk phase," he writes. Ideas traveled among disco, rap, postpunk, avant-garde composition, and more. And the border-crossing wasn't limited to music: This was an era of polymath dilettantes, a time when most people in bands were also poets, actors, filmmakers, or visual artists, and a club maven might found a Lower East Side gallery as readily as organize a themed party.

By 1983, the scene began to atomize. Lawrence's last section raises a question: If "the drive to integration and synthesis" was so potent—and by 1982, so febrile and fecund—what went wrong? Like an ecosystem, the polymorphous jungle of New York bohemia flourished thanks to biodiversity—the intermingling of different ethnic groups, different sexualities, different artistic traditions, different income levels. But every tendency produces a counterreaction. And the sheer variedness of downtown culture encouraged a kind of retribalization, as well as the emergence of music-based identity politics. By the mid-'80s, concepts like punk-funk and mutant disco had gone out of fashion. Rock became undanceable noise with the rise of Swans and Sonic Youth; purist strands of club culture emerged; hip-hop increasingly defined itself as its own movement and extended nationwide.

Club culture has always evolved through a dialectic of openness and exclusivity. Its rhetoric leans toward inclusive populism—the utopian ideal of all classes and colors united in the collective abandon of the dance floor. But in practice, when the bridge-and-tunnel types arrive, the hip early adopters move on. Achieving a "mixed crowd" is usually what promoters and DJs exalt as their ideal, but such a balance is hard to maintain. And some clubs, like the Saint, were always exclusive, fostering a dynamic opposed to the boundary-crossing ethos that Lawrence prizes. Both Mailman and the membership decreed that on the club's peak night, Saturday, the crowd should ideally be 98 percent male. This admission policy fed into an increasing uniformity of appearance (what one attendee described as "pectoral fascism") and a conservatism of taste that kept DJs on a tight leash. But the whole point of the Saint was to provide a sanctuary for a segment of the city's population, a stronghold for a certain vibe. And "vibe," as a vernacular concept, could be defined as "collective single-mindedness."

Along with this self-segregation, other factors brought to an end the post-disco belle époque. AIDS killed off many of the club denizens, but it was finance capital and real-estate speculation that led to the death of the scene. In his conclusion, Lawrence confronts the fact that downtown artists and musicians were not just on the cutting edge of their particular forms of expression but also an unwitting vanguard enabling real-estate agents to rebrand rundown areas as cool and rich neighborhoods. Bohemia priced itself out of its own habitat. That raises a further question that Lawrence leaves unresolved: Why are these culturally potent ferments so weak in the face of money and power? The Stonewall riots provide one example of an embattled site of pleasure, creativity, and identity giving birth to an activist movement. But generally speaking, the politics of partying are too diffuse and motile to translate into anything as permanent and disciplined as a political party.

Writing about club culture in *Interview* in the early '80s, Glenn O'Brien argued that dancing is the ideal form of cultural resistance against fascism, because its rhythmic fluidity works to dissolve the rigidities of what Wilhelm Reich called character armor. Greil Marcus had a more skeptical take on dance-floor utopianism in a 1993 column for *Artforum*. Discussing *Design After Dark*, a history of UK dance-floor style, Marcus praised the book for capturing the vibrant, ever-changing creativity of these "tribes of black and white Britons," but ultimately found it "a little depressing. So much flair, so much energy, so many ideas, so many good smiles, and, finally, no power. Style changed but not society; no-future didn't move an inch from where it stood in 1977." When I first read those words in 1993, as a convert to rave culture, I resented this dismissive verdict. But in 2016, with political darkness roiling on both sides of the Atlantic, I wonder about the eros-aligned liberating energies of music and dance, and their ability to withstand the forces of division and death. The dance club as micro-utopia seems terribly circumscribed, terrifyingly defenseless. How do you get the fascists to dance? □

Simon Reynolds's new book, *Shock and Awe: Glam Rock and Its Legacy, from the Seventies to the Twenty-First Century*, will be published in October by Dey Street Books.