

Paradise Garage dancefloor, New
York, 1979 Photograph Bill Bernstein
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Words Andy Thomas Portrait Mattias Pettersson

LIFE AND DEATH ON THE NEW YORK DANCE FLOOR

A new book by Tim Lawrence on the party scene at the
start of the 1980s reveals a countercultural melting pot of
remarkable creativity, diversity and cross-pollination.



“The early 1980s would reveal themselves to be one of the most creatively vibrant and socially dynamic periods in the history of New York,” writes Tim Lawrence in the introduction to his new book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*. “Those superficially amorphous years contained some kind of coded lesson about creativity, community and democracy in the global city.”

Lawrence’s book is the much anticipated follow up to his *Love Saves the Day: a History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979*, which took its name from David Mancuso’s 1970 Valentine’s party that inspired the Loft, a series of underground dance parties. “Sanity dictated that this book should have told the history of 1980s dance culture in the United States in the same way that my first book *Love Saves the Day* excavated the 1970s,” writes Lawrence in the preface to *Life and Death*. But instead of following the mid-decade rise of Chicago house and Detroit techno, Lawrence immersed himself in the countercultural melting pot of 1980 to 1983. Instead of being a mere bridge between 1970s disco and 1980s house and techno, the post-disco, post-punk and hip-hop scenes interacted with each other and became blurred. If there was one figure that epitomised this convergence it was classical cellist turned mutant disco producer Arthur Russell. And prior to *Life and Death* Lawrence wrote *Hold on to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992*.

Life and Death is drawn from years of research and hundreds of interviews, resulting in an authoritative study of this riotously creative time in New York. In the introduction, Lawrence credits books as disparate as Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* and Simon Reynolds’s *Rip it Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*. But as he explains, “While these authors capture a slice of the city’s cultural history, their angled approach inevitably slices up an era that was arguably defined by its synergy and interconnectedness.” And it is in studying these intersections of post-punk and post-disco that Lawrence goes deeper, to reveal the true creativity of New York’s counterculture in the early 1980s.

“Disco had got so precise, so heavily produced that there needed to be a twist if it was going to excite the dancefloors.”

***Love Saves the Day* is widely recognised as the most in-depth book on 1970s New York dance culture. How did that project come about?**
I was supposed to write a history of house music and rave culture. I had been hearing DJs like Louie Vega playing in London and I wanted to experience that every week really. So I went out to New York to study a PhD in English Literature at Columbia University in the autumn of 1994. The dance culture there at clubs like the Sound Factory Bar was just blowing me away. I was having a difficult time as both my parents had died in quite quick succession. So dance culture became very important to me; it gave me a sense of wellbeing, of joy and community. One of my professors, Edward Said, was a really interesting and inspiring guy and he suggested I write a short book about dance music. The idea was to begin in mid-1980s Chicago with the beginnings of house music. At the time, I was going regularly to buy records from Dance Tracks that was run by Stefan Prescott and Joe Claussell.

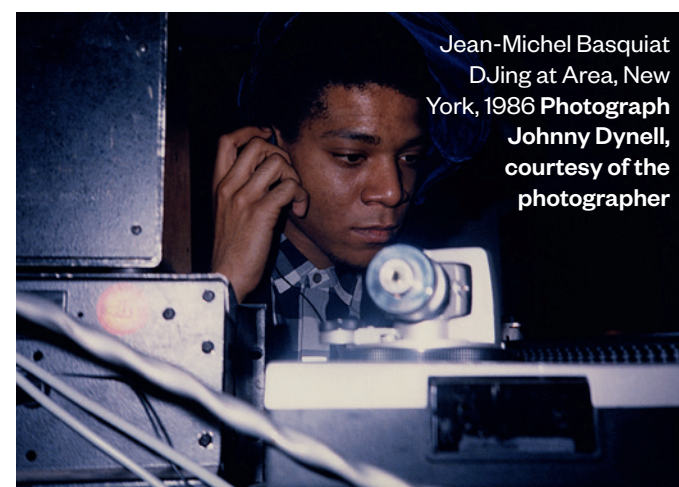


Tim Lawrence, author of *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983* Portrait Mattias Pettersson

Stefan suggested I talk to this guy called David Mancuso who he said was there from the very beginning. I was actually a bit reluctant because at the time I didn’t want to go back to the 1970s.

Was that because you didn’t understand the link with what was happening in New York at the time?

I didn’t really want to go back to disco because to me house music was much more interesting. I thought it was an irrefutable advance of what had gone before. Stefan and Joe at Dance Tracks were always trying to sell me disco classics but at the time if it didn’t have an electronic drum on it, I didn’t want to listen to it. Also, quite a few people I spoke to were saying that David Mancuso wasn’t



Jean-Michel Basquiat DJing at Area, New York, 1986 Photograph Johnny Dynell, courtesy of the photographer

really that relevant any more. He was this figure who was into high-end sound systems and didn’t really mix with anyone, he didn’t interact with other DJs, and so he was very much separate from what was going on. The Loft was no longer really happening at the time either, and he was struggling financially. But I thought I would go to meet him.

What was that first meeting like?

I went to meet him at an Italian restaurant in the East Village and we spoke for three hours. I thought I knew quite a lot about New York dance culture at that juncture; but I didn’t know anything or hardly understand a single word he said. All the references were new to me; the Record Pool, Nicky Siano, Michael Cappello, Steve D’Acquisto, David Rodriguez, Reade Street, the Tenth Floor. This was all new to me. And I was like, “How come I haven’t heard any of this at all?” Anyway, I carried on writing this book about house music until my editor said I should have at least one chapter on disco. The first three key interviews were with Frankie Knuckles, Tony Humphries and David Morales. At the end of each interview I would ask them: “By the way, have you heard of this guy called David Mancuso?” And they all gave the same response almost line for line, that David Mancuso was the most important person in their life and that he had introduced them to the social and sonic possibilities of the dancefloor. They all said the Loft was like a birthing place for them. So this was when it got really interesting. Here were the major DJs from house music all saying the same thing and following the same lineage back to the Loft.

What made the story so interesting to you?

As I carried on going through the archives it became apparent that the word disco simply wasn’t in circulation before 1974. It hadn’t been conceptualised as a genre, the record companies didn’t know what was going on. So there was this whole period of four or five years when what became known as disco was developing. There was this very young, open and democratic culture that was intertwined with gay liberation, civil rights, experimentation

with LSD, and experimentation with sound. So it all just presented itself as a great story for me. And I just followed it and as I did so it led into so many different directions.

How long did it take for all the strands to fit together?

In some ways, it was quite quick. By the time I got home that

night after the interview with David Mancuso there were about 10 messages on my answer machine with people wanting to talk. So I started following up these leads and I knew that it was something really interesting. And all routes seemed to lead back to the Loft. Frankie Knuckles and Larry Levan had been absolute diehards there, they had gone to work for Nicky Siano who had based his club the Gallery on the Loft, Michael Brody’s dream was to open an expanded version of the Loft that would become Paradise Garage. Nobody had written about any of this before. This was 1997. I soon realised this was the book I wanted to write and that one on rave culture would have to wait.

After *Love Saves the Day* you wrote the first book on Arthur Russell. Can you tell me how you came to write it?

One of my earliest interviewees had been the pioneering Italian American DJ Steve D’Acquisto who had told me about this crazy, brilliant guy called Arthur Russell who had hung out with Allen Ginsberg, recorded with John Hammond and made the most extraordinary disco, but at the same time recorded beautiful folk songs on the guitar and cello. But at the time I thought, how could I write a story of someone who is so all over the place, doing everything all at once. There was just no lineage trajectory there to hang things on. But then when *Love Saves the Day*

was going into production I was thinking, I don’t want to go right into the next book about the 1980s straight away. At one of the Loft parties held for *Love Saves the Day*, this guy called Steve Knutson from Audika Records was there and he had brought with him the Arthur LP *Calling Out of Context* to give to David. I had already been fishing around with my editor and publisher about the idea but they didn’t think there was the interest in him. So the Audika record came out, then the one on Soul Jazz Records (*The World of Arthur Russell*). Then there was a piece by David Toop in *The Wire* and features in *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* so things really started to move along. Then my editor said, “OK, let’s do it.” So it was an interesting way for me to stay in the same territory of the New York scene but to move sideways.

That leads us into *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor* and what you described in the intro as your sideways “crab like approach”.

Writing the Arthur Russell book definitely gave me a new way to think about New York at that time. The new book is a continuation of *Love Saves the Day* and picks up that story, but New York of the 1980s is quite a different place sonically to New York in the 1970s. And it was by spending time on the Arthur book and understanding his legacy that I got a proper tour of the many different corners of the New York music scene and how everything connected.



Anita Sarko DJing at the Mudd Club, New York, 1980 Photograph Scott Morgan, courtesy of the photographer

I understand you were planning for the new book to focus on the continuation of disco into what became house music.

The idea of the new book was to take it up to at least 1988 and to be very much about the clubs like the Loft, Paradise Garage and the Saint, and then the arrival of house music. But what happened was very quickly, I realised there was this largely forgotten period before the rise of house music and after the death of disco. I initially thought I could deal with this period quite quickly because it didn’t really have a name and wasn’t being talked about very much at all. I thought of it as an interesting period but not enough to attract people into it. So I really did



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think I would go from the late 1970s into the arrival of house quite quickly, at a similar pace to *Love Saves the Day*. But I realised there was something else going on and the book couldn't be just about what happened next with David Mancuso, Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles. It soon became clear that there was so much going on in this early 1980s period, so much mayhem and inventiveness that I needed to step out from what I made my name with in *Love Saves the Day*. I had to go sideways, as that is the way things were moving at the time.

How did you approach the writing of the book?

I realised the story was quite a simple one. The 1970s had thrown up these three genres: disco and associated DJ culture; punk music, which largely germinated in New York; and hip-hop, which broke through at the end of the decade. But by 1980, there has been the backlash to disco, punk has failed to really break through commercially, and most people think rap is going to be over within six months. But it's actually the start of the new decade and a new moment for music culture in the



Steve Mass and Diego Cortez, Lower East Side, New York, 1978
Photograph Bobby Grossman, courtesy of the photographer

city. There were these historic antagonisms between punk and disco and hip-hop and disco, but then all of a sudden people started to explore what else was going on. Disco had got so precise, so heavily produced that there needed to be a twist if it was going to excite the dancefloors. And Arthur Russell was one of the first to anticipate this with the track 'Kiss Me Again', as he brings in all the distortion and asks his vocalist to sing out of key.



Keith Haring, Grace Jones and Fred 'Fab Five Freddy' Brathwaite at Fun Gallery, New York, 1983
Photograph Ande Whyland, courtesy of the photographer

So we had this moment when people were starting to ask, "What if?" When I came to write the book I couldn't decide how to open it. How do you start a book where everything is happening at once? What actually happened was, the club I thought I would end up writing least about became the one I wrote most about. And that was the Mudd Club.

Why was the Mudd Club so important?

It was this punk discotheque, and as I started to interview people connected to it they all said the same thing - the punks wanted to dance too. There had been no dancefloor at the other main punk clubs like CBGB and Max's Kansas City. One of the first people I interviewed was a guy called Johnny Dynell who was in a no wave band

living above the Mudd Club. He became the DJ there and thought, what is the ultimate punk gesture a DJ can make at this club? He decided it was not to play punk music but to play quite commercial disco music that the punks were meant to hate. And he does this dressed as John Travolta. This was a piece of art really, but the reaction was that all the punks in the

Mudd Club started to dance. It was meant to be a provocation but instead it becomes an invite. It was this moment when people were ready to do something not pre-written for them to do. This is going on right across New York at the time.

These connections across genres and scenes worked on many different levels. Could you talk about the importance of the "mixers" that you write about in the book?

What I ended up concluding about New York in the early 1980s was that the people who came to the fore were those that were mixing previously

discrete elements together. They were the ones who became most respected and revered. So first, you had the DJs and producers who were mixing by bringing in a diverse range of music, and in that amalgamation they create a higher platform. This was the peak period for the greats like Larry Levan and François Kevorkian in the studio, then you had Arthur Baker and John Robie coming through. And they were all thinking about how they could bring different elements together. And then you had someone like Arthur Russell. With Arthur it was all about how many different things

could be thrown in to create one record. And this sort of thinking led to records like 'Go Bang', which combines the new wave scene with the compositional orchestral scene - it's got the R&B rhythm section, loft jazz style playing, it was all in there. Then you have the party hosts that take mixing to a different level. So places like the Mudd Club, Club 57, closely followed by Danceteria and Pyramid. There you have this approach to party culture that brings in DJing, but on top of that they create venues where this explosion of artistic experimentation and cross pollination can be integrated into the club.

That's something Chi Chi Valenti talks about in the book, the importance of these clubs as places of experimentation.

Yes, so you have the Mudd Club that combines DJs with no wave cinema, an extraordinary range of live performance and amazingly elaborate and immersive happenings where reality is challenged following the philosophy of the situationists. Then at Club 57 you have similar events but much more performance art based, so there are a lot of theatrics often mixed with mushrooms so it's a little bit giggly and wacky. And that is where Keith Haring starts coming through and starts curating exhibitions. That leads Steve Mass to open his dedicated art

You have this supermarket choice of cultural experience. Wherever you go you will find something new and dynamic.

gallery at the Mudd Club. Then eventually Danceteria opens and it has three floors with one for the DJ, one for live bands, and one for experimental video from the downtown art scene. And the whole idea here was that you have this almost supermarket choice of cultural experience. Wherever you go you will find somewhere new and dynamic and varied. So it was the mixers who were bringing things together and this was all happening in party spaces. This is where things really germinate. It's the people who run these spaces that help make the connections.

One of the arguments of the book is that rather than being simply hedonistic, party culture in 1980s New York was hugely important both socially and culturally.

There are so many levels to this. One of the most important parts to it is that this whole party culture was a place for people that somehow were slightly outcast of society and not comfortable in the mainstream. You can trace it back to David Mancuso who grew up in an orphanage and created the Loft as a place for people who needed a wider family. So there were a lot of gay black and Latino men and women who would go there as a welcoming place as they weren't able to come out to their families at the time. And this carries on in the 1980s.

Another part to this is the importance during this time of New York as a place of migration for artists, bohemians, hedonists, gay activists and libertarians from across the US.

That's something I didn't touch on so much in *Love Saves the Day* but wanted to in this new book, as you see it much more during this period. New York City and particularly downtown became this refuge for what Ann Magnuson calls in the book "suburban refugees". People who had grown up in all different parts of the United States, quite often in white middle class homes and feel fundamentally alienated by the routine, the conventions, the conservatism, the 9am-5pm clocking in and clocking out, the whole regulated nature of family life. And they

This whole party culture was a place for people that were slightly outcast of society and not comfortable in the mainstream.

wanted to turn all this on its head and have something that was far more exploratory, much more exciting and democratic and free. So there was this huge flow of migration to Downtown in the late 1970s that peaked in the early 1980s. These people who want to find new forms of community and sociality are a very important part of this social mix. You mentioned Chi Chi Valenti; she is an iconic Downtown figure, a promoter, performer, and bar woman, a very charismatic scenester. She said they wanted to go to bed when other people were going to work. They would have been out all night putting on events, taking part in some kind of performance, socialising with friends and often funding ways to get more work; get a part in a film, fashion show or whatever. These clubs became hives of activity for this very diverse range of people.

What was the most dramatic development to come out of this socialisation?

It was very much about groups coming together who had never met before and what would happen when they exchanged ideas. Up until then if you were a performer you would mix with other performers, sculptors with sculptors, punks with punks and so on. And as the decade progressed and people discovered that they were living in the same buildings with different creative people they started to have conversations with each other. And it was out of this that the multidisciplinary, hybrid collaborations started to come about. But the most extraordinary development was this meeting point of the downtown art punk scene and the South Bronx hip-hop and graffiti scene. That was the most unlikely coming together.

What did these two scenes have in common?

At the time, the downtown art scene at clubs like Club 57, Mudd Club and Danceteria had an interest in cut up, in semiotics, in collage and recycling. And when they come into contact with the nascent hip-hop scene they see that their aesthetic matches very closely with what is happening with South Bronx party culture.

And the first person to really make something of this overlap is Fred Brathwaite, Fab 5 Freddy, who is invited to a downtown party by Michael Holman [filmmaker and founder of the band Gray with Jean-Michel Basquiat]. He wants the Fab 5 collective to come downtown to do some live graffiti. So Holman is also a key figure in realising that there is this parallel energy between Uptown and Downtown. At that party

there are all sorts of downtown art celebrities, people like Andy Warhol, so this diverse community are coming together for the first time. Jean-Michel Basquiat is there and at the time he was the co-author of this notorious graffiti tag Samo. Until then nobody realises who Samo was and at the party he reveals it was him and his friend Al Diaz. He becomes very tight with Fred Brathwaite and they start to head to the Mudd Club. And soon they are meeting with Debbie Harry and Chris Stein [of Blondie] and the whole bunch of new wave figures. So they quickly realise this affinity. And so it started with graffiti but then you had people like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash; they had this same aesthetic of recycling music and working with fragments.

Recycling was also a big thing in London, from the Creative Salvage of Tom Dixon and Ron Arad to the clothes of Chris Nemeth. As with New York this was very much a result of the economics of course.

Yes exactly, there wasn't a lot of money around in New York so



Fred 'Fab Five Freddy' Brathwaite after filming *TV Party*, 1980
Photograph Bobby Grossman, courtesy of the photographer

people were doing the DIY thing out of necessity to begin with. Downtown was pretty down and out at the time; it wasn't anything like it is today. Canal Street was really cheap, where you could get material like foil or whatever you needed to decorate a space or make something. And then there was all sorts of stuff being dumped on the sidewalk so that was being used as well. You also had buildings crumbling and falling apart. I mean AM/PM, where François Kevorkian was DJ, had great big concrete slabs



Ruza Blue at Danceteria nightclub, New York, 1984
Photograph Rhonda Paster, courtesy of the photographer

coming out the wall; but instead of trying to cover that up it was like, how can we turn this into a sculptural installation. And then in the music, as well as with the hip-hop guys, you also saw a DIY aesthetic in disco. That was partly a reaction to the corporatisation that had happened towards the end of the 1970s. Initially disco was extraordinarily earthy and there was rawness to it. But it had reached a point that where there was this disco that was being churned out by the major companies and much of it sounded the same, so there needed to be change. The DIY thing became very important. And you can see that with people like Arthur Russell. He called his label Sleeping Bag - it was saying, "We're not fancy we're just roughing it and down and out." And that was cool.

Sleeping Bag was just one of a number of independent labels alongside Prelude, West End, Tommy Boy, 99 Records etc. How important were they to this scene?

With the major corporations gone, it was the independent sector that were connecting to the DJs and so there was an awful lot more openness to what could get released and how it could get released. There was what I call a virtuous self-sufficient economy kicking in where it becomes a regular experience to sell 50,000 copies of a 12-inch single. And that's an awful lot of copies for an independent record label to sell and for the DJs who did the mixes to be working on. So it was a good moment for everyone involved. It was quite a healthy form of low-level commercial capitalism. The profits were shared and it was very participatory and people really looked out for each other as well.

One of the other interesting intersections was hip-hop and disco. It could be argued that they were never that far apart in the first place.

There has always been this historic assumption about people who write about disco or hip-hop

that these were largely separate scenes. What really amazed me as I started to explore this was that guys like Afrika Islam, apprentice of Afrika Bambaataa, and others from that whole Zulu Nation crowd, were going regularly to the Paradise Garage and they loved it. To me that was really interesting. And then all these new wave DJs like Mark Kamins at Danceteria and Justin Strauss from the Ritz, they were going to the Garage. And then Larry Levan would go to places like the Ritz and go into the DJ booth and watch the bands like Kraftwerk when they played there. So there was all this movement going on that I don't think anybody has captured before.

Another interesting intersection was with the dub music coming in from Jamaica and England.

François Kevorkian was of course one of the key guys with his work with the Prelude label. He starts to take the dub sounds and techniques and uses it as an integral part of the studio mix. It was very dramatic. And then of course Larry Levan with his productions with records like Peech Boys' 'Don't Make Me Wait' was very into dub. Then you had groups like Tom Tom Club going off to record at Compass Point Studios in Nassau. So it was all going on into this heady mix.

You've called the book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor* - could you end by talking about the death of this hugely vibrant, cross-pollinating scene?

The death is kind of complicated and happens in various ways. The most obvious thing was of course Aids. It reaches epidemic proportions by 1983. We get to the point where key figures on the scene are starting to pass away, so there is this great terror and cloud that is hanging over everything. And it wasn't just in the white gay scene at places like the Saint that this was happening; it was also devastating the East Village art scene. Then in 1984 crack reaches epidemic proportions and so the whole black

community was in crisis, everyone seems to know someone who is addicted to crack. Reagan is slashing the money going into the inner cities so poverty is increasing as the drug is tearing through the community. Then hip-hop took a more radical turn and became much harder edged. So with Aids and crack, people on both scenes are generally becoming more defensive, and this whole period where there was openness to hybridity and exploration through meeting different people - that is very hard to sustain.

You end the book by talking about the economic changes in downtown New York in the mid-1980s and the effect on the scene.

If you look at Downtown New York today it's very clean, polished and commercial and of course it's very expensive to live there. One of the arguments of the book is, if you want to see how it ended up like that you need to go back to 1983. Reagan becomes the first politician to seriously push an agenda of cutting back the state, cutting back taxes and trying to centre things around market competition and the priorities of the individual versus the public and social. By 1983, the free market growth Reagan set in motion starts to come into play in quite a serious way. As well as people being priced out of Downtown, the subsequent gentrification took other forms. The new people moving into the city join the neighbourhood association and start complaining about the Paradise Garage, as they don't want 3,000 Latin and black gay men on their doorstep. And this became fairly typical, the rise of neighbourhood associations and the pressure they start to put on New York City to more tightly regulate the party scene. So things become less affordable, rents go up and the city becomes a more regulated and repressive place. And all these things conspired to bring this incredibly exciting and creative period to a close. And now of course it's very hard to pursue your artistic dreams in New York because it's so expensive - even if there is openness for people to mix and be creative.

Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983 is out on 30 September
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Futura and Patti Astor, New York, 1981
Photograph Anita Rosenberg, courtesy of the photographer

