
LIFE AND DEATH ON THE NEW YORK DANCE FLOOR 1980–1983

TIM LAWRENCE

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Cultural historian Tim Lawrence’s first book *Love Saves the Day* adopted a chronological approach to East Coast disco’s dramatic arc through the 1970s. Then his follow-up *Hold On to Your Dreams* widened the timeline, honing in on a valuable contributor to New York’s downtown music scene—cellist and composer Arthur Russell. While *LStD* ranged widely across many spaces, DJs, artists, assorted characters and issues, the Russell biography was an intimate portrait of a key player, who died from AIDS-related complications in 1992.

Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor 1980–1983 (henceforth *Life and Death*) is the third segment in Lawrence’s New York project. Now he narrows the timeline and brings a forensic examination to just four years in the party scene. On the title, Lawrence explains, “the reference to life is intended to evoke the way that New York party culture didn’t merely survive the hyped death of disco but positively flourished in its wake”. And he clearly and convincingly argues that the short period was one characterised by a stirring artistic ferment, across music, art, dance and club space innovation. Lawrence explains: “instead of depicting the 1980–1983 period as a mere bridge that connected the big genre stories of 1970s disco and 1980s house and techno, I submitted to its kaleidoscope logic, took my foot off the historical metronome, and decided to *take it—the book—to the bridge*” (ix).

His excavation uses all available sources to bulk out the progression through the years across a variety of intersections, downtown and uptown; legal locations such as clubs and galleries, to homes, disused industrial spaces, drilled DJs to first comers, established genres such as disco and R&B and the fresh fusions, collisions and cross pollinations garnered from a quintessentially New York DIY outlook pickled by new keyboard and synthesizer,

recording and sound system technology. Lawrence's greatest resource is the many era participants happy to recall their exploits and share their knowledge. But early on he cautions, "Because the story of a person can never be fully re-created, it follows that the portraits developed here will inevitably appear slim, yet the broad intention is to show how the multitude of participants . . . helped create and in return received sustenance from a towering scene" (xii).

Lawrence begins with downtown's punk-art nexus, chronicling the opening of the Mudd Club and the lesser known Studio 57. Whereas Mudd promoter Steve Mass's White Street alternative to Studio 54 catered to a fashionable elite—including Andy Warhol—and in time built a strong reputation internationally, 57 was smaller, emphasizing bizarre happenings and intimate collisions. Soon-to-be influential artists of the era—Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and others—found their graffiti art and mixed-media explorations promoted and supported within these frenziedly creative spaces. To follow, scaling up, was Danceteria, which had floors dedicated to video and music. Soon Lawrence's attention turns to the subcultural happenings in African-American communities away from downtown, across the city in the Bronx, where discrete expressions—graffiti, breakdancing, rapping and DJing—were gradually pulling together and, in time, powering downtown and midtown venues such as Negril and the Roxy.

Having established the degree of (sub)cultural ferment, Lawrence launches a trenchant analysis of the post-disco formation. Honing in on the medium-to-large clubs—The Funhouse, Paradise Garage, The Saint, The Loft and Better Days—he illustrates time and time again that early 1980s New York seldom lacked a valid replacement to fin de siècle disco, hardcore punk and embryonic hip-hop. We are introduced to the key players: The Loft's David Mancuso again (although he is given a much less prominent role than in *LStD*); former rocker Mark Kamins; the fiercely exact groove-master of new R&B mixing Tee Scott; the progenitor of Latin hip-hop and electro funk dub John "Jellybean" Benitez; the richly creative Arthur Baker who realized the seminal "Planet Rock"; Tony Humphries who laid waste at the Zanzibar in New Jersey; radio mix-master deluxe Shep Pettibone; and the acknowledged genius of the day Larry Levan.

If *Life and Death* has a centre—and determined researcher Lawrence crafts horizontal accounts of cultural production wherever possible—then it has to be Levan. The author charts his ascent from jobbing DJ, to the visionary behind the Garage's legendary sound (with top audio designer of the period Richard Long), to master artist on the decks always re-shaping his eclectic track list, to remixer and producer of some of the R&B post-disco dubified classics of the day, and on, sadly, to his death, weakened by long-term heroin use. Lawrence does not get caught up in the mix too much, but the sections on the Levan peaks are strong, such as the story behind arguably the era's most throbbing, sublime track—the nine-minute remix of the Peech Boys' "Don't Make Me Wait". Insights, stories and gossip on Levan and Garage culture spill from participants eager to share memories.

A DJ—or, rather, a track selector as he never mixed records—David Mancuso can be viewed as a central thread, a solid presence through this fast-moving scene. His Loft club on Prince Street, although small, was still the favourite for many African- and Latin-American dancers, Mancuso's fierce attention to sound always the prime focus. Mancuso tells Lawrence why in 1983 he removed the mixer from his system: "Without the mixer there was a three-decibel increase in the sound, which was a lot. It was like I was 97 percent of the way up the mountain, and that last 3 percent made a big difference" (387). Mancuso and Levan were at opposites poles: Levan forever re-calibrating the music in line with his restless spirit on a system which would "break light bulbs in the apartment building next door (Bruce Forest interview, 388), while Mancuso's search for a sonic purity—a steady centre in the ecstasy of flow—was produced on an admittedly superlative but nevertheless home-sized system. And he never touched the tracks, wanting to remain true to the creator's vision.

Indeed, the Garage and Loft peaks chime with the heights of the downtown scene in general. Lawrence watches as the Mudd Club and other iconic locales lose their edge, and others such as The Roxy and Area come into vogue (this latter period also sees the emergence of Madonna). Readers may be surprised that relatively little time is awarded to major threats like the rise in hard drug consumption and the proliferating AIDS crisis. However, these key areas are judged contextually rather than given a life of their own. Towards the end of the riveting account, Lawrence senses, "Even when confronted by the spectre of decay and even death, New York's partygoers lived for the night – for the meeting of friends, for the embrace of strangers, for the performance, for the immersion, for the surge, for the scream" (457).

In summary, Lawrence reflects from a number of vantage points. He assesses that with the rise in rents and ongoing gentrification, fewer artists and alternative creatives could survive in downtown, and the political landscape became increasingly demoralising. Finally, as Lawrence draws his paean to the era's ethic of "democratic socializing" (461) to a close, he draws out parallel urban lives and deaths: "Clearly the task of redemocratizing New York and indeed other global cities remains daunting, yet the gathering desire to listen to music, dance, and engage creatively with a level of public freedom that was once taken for granted is visceral. Feeding the appetite for change, the downtown era and its scarcely believable level of activity attest that, given the right conditions, a different kind of city can exist" (483).

Life and Death is a major contribution to scholarship on cultural production. Its fine-slicing of a short, fruitful period in one great city's life helps better situate both well-known and little-known music cultures. Lawrence charts the dawn of electronic dance music with verve, detail and sensitivity. What's next for him?