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

Edited by Tim Lawrence

Duke University Press: 2016, 600 pp.

Dubbed out electronic handclaps crackle in space, their echoing digital delay moodily fading as a rubbery synth bass pulses into the mix. This is the haunting, exuberant, impossible introduction to “Don’t Make Me Wait,” the NYC Peech Boys’ 1982 “12” record, famously produced by Paradise Garage DJ Larry Levan. Melding disco, gospel, and rock, the song is one of the many genre-breaking works closely profiled in Tim Lawrence’s exhaustive *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980–1983*. Building on his previous study of 70s dance culture in *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* and complementing his most recent book, *Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973–1992*, Lawrence ambitiously maps the many overlapping early-80s scenes—No Wave, New Wave, post-disco, early hip hop, 80s R&B—all at once. Focusing on the usual suspects like Levan, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Afrika Bambaataa, and James Chance, he allows equal or even greater play to the many other vital figures who comprised these scenes: the club owners, promoters, gallerists, producers, musicians, DJs, label owners, filmmakers, bookers, record sellers, graffiti writers, drag performers, and others who contributed to what Brian Eno terms the “scenius” (462), that collective creative zeitgeist of the early 80s downtown community. Although Madonna still receives her requisite cameo, then, Lawrence’s broadened view reveals the importance of this larger, shifting network of scenesters and the concomitant power of the early 80s New York nightclub—in its many, varied forms—as incubator for cultural innovation.

New York circa 1980 “resembled a huge nocturnal adventure park” (127), Lawrence writes, charting the proliferation of downtown art-party clubs that built on the continuing legacy of David Mancuso’s Loft and Nicky Siano’s Gallery—Larry Levan’s bombastic multiethnic, total sound immersion at the Paradise Garage; the white, 130 beats-per-minute high NRG clone conformity of The Saint; the early hip hop parties of the Roxy; along with the Fun House, the Pyramid Club, the Peppermint Lounge, Bonds, Zanzibar, Area, and others. The Mudd Club, Club 57, and Danceteria emerge as exemplary case-studies in the narrative, all post-punk discos variously incorporating DJs and bands, but also themed events, performance, graffiti, and video—“[i]mmersive parties [that] drew inspiration from the Fluxus happenings of the 1960s that saw avant-garde artists and musicians integrate a range of media and disciplines” (18). The nascent elements of hip hop run throughout, as Fred Braithwaite, Afrika Bambaataa, Ruza Blue, Grandmaster Flash, Michael Holman, Patti Astor, and many others mix DJing, rapping, graffiti-writing, and breakdancing, a cohesion reportedly first fully achieved at, of all places, a Bow Wow concert (177).

Lawrence provides meticulously composed playlists, revealing what top DJs were selecting throughout the four years (readers can decide if they would have preferred Anita Sarko’s 1980–81 Mudd Club sets—Was (Not Was), Tuxedomoon, ESG—or if they’re really more of a 1982–83 Larry Levan Paradise Garagehead—Gwen Guthrie, Peech Boys, Imagination). Yet while each dance floor had its own focus, a common groove emerges. When interviewed for Jools Holland’s *The Tube* in 1983 about popular New York club tracks, Danceteria DJ Mark Kamins explained, “There’s no specific genre of music. It’s whatever’s got that magic feeling...right now, Quando Quango is big in New York, and Afrika Bambaataa and the Peech Boys...they’re all different but they all have that beat...something that turns that floor on out there.” Lawrence dissects these scene-defining recordings and provides music obsessives with a look into the recording sessions for Bambaataa’s seminal “Planet Rock,” Peech Boys’ “Don’t Make Me Wait,” and others. What develops is a feedback loop between studio and dance floor, as producer-DJs mix and remix tracks with specific clubs in mind (404). Producer Arthur Baker recalls of “Planet Rock,” “I want to make it so they can play it at Danceteria, and they can play it at the Garage and it will also be a rap record” (289). Lawrence conjures the music video for New Order’s 1983 single “Confusion,” where a studio session with Baker ends with the just-recorded reel being tested out by DJ Jellybean Benitez for discerning dancers at the Fun House. But what worked in the club might not succeed on the radio—even

within the context of the same song. Benitez admits, "A lot of records I mixed I didn't play at the Funhouse...[it] was very underground and different. I got away with some of my mixes in the early part of the night. Otherwise I played the dub mix or my own special version that I created for myself" (444).

The styles and sounds of the early 80s persist through successive waves of revival, from the early aughts efforts of DFA Records, to keepers of the flame DJs Optimo (Espacio), to Klaus Nomi/Tom Tom Club freakster Geneva Jacuzzi—even rap weirdo Danny Brown samples 80s downtowners Pulsallama on his 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition*. But could this kind of total, perfect confluence of art, music, and club culture ever happen again? Not in New York. Late in *Life and Death*, we find ourselves inside Area, the overblown, cash-infused ultimate evolution of the Mudd Club-style art disco, looking on as Wall Street bros scream at a behind-Plexiglass Ann Magnuson, performing blindfolded in an art installation. Along with the AIDS epidemic, crack, the art market explosion, and gentrification, the party was coming to an end. "A once grand, magic, venomous center of the world has been transformed into a ridiculous, self-pitying village of Wall Streeters," as Danceteria impresario Rudolf Piper sees it, "all looking for the next trendy restaurant serving the finest zucchini, all text-messaging feverishly night and day" (481).

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SHARECROPPER'S TROUBADOUR: JOHN L. HANDCOX, THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS' UNION, AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN SONG TRADITION

Edited by Michael K. Honey

Palgrave-MacMillan: 2013, 225 pp.

Looking back, songwriter and activist John Handcox recalled that "all of my songs and poems point directly to the conditions in which people was livin'...That was why I wrote songs, to get it over to the people." (69) This mission statement offers a fitting summation of Handcox's career. From the 1930s through the 1950s, Handcox worked for economic and racial justice with the pivotal Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), who battled for the rights of Black and white sharecroppers and other poor farmers in the rural South. Standing on the front lines of their daring and dangerous campaigns, Handcox also wrote a series of songs that rang through the halls of mass meetings, were published in the union's newsletter, and became the core of a protest repertoire that contributed key songs and musical practices to the "folk revival" and the Civil Rights era. Some of Handcox's songs – like "Roll The Union On" – are still sung by contemporary organizers. Despite this, Handcox has largely faded from public memory and scholarly consideration in recent decades. Michael K. Honey's important biography corrects this absence. In *Sharecroppers' Troubadour*, Handcox receives his due through Honey's deft exploration of Handcox's artistry and activism.

Numerous texts document the links between the music and politics of the labor and Black freedom movements, but Honey's book stands out due to the compelling and underappreciated figure at its center. Honey traces Handcox's journey from Arkansas sharecropping roots and participation in STFU campaigns through his championing by Pete Seeger and other folk-music heroes to his ultimate reclamation as a respected elder by a new generation of activists and musicians in the 1980s. Although he provides copious historical context, befitting his celebrated work as a historian of race and labor in the American South, Honey makes the wise decision of letting Handcox's own words anchor the book. Oral histories with Handcox form the core of the narrative, and Honey also reprints extended portions of Handcox's lyrics, usually with helpful annotation.

The detail that Honey devotes to Handcox's poems and songs is doubly valuable. First, it reaffirms Handcox's individuality, marking him as a singular voice of the southern working class. Second, though, Honey's words also firmly place Handcox in a broad and varied artistic tradition. For example, Honey mentions Handcox's "Mean Things Happening In