

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Defining the 'Downtown Era' of the 1980s

By ANDY BETA

When Tim Lawrence set out to research his new book, "Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor: 1980-1983," he had predictable challenges.

Club denizens can often have difficulty remembering last night's party—who spun what, who wore what, which creative types lent their cool to the scene—much less recall what happened in the dark 30-plus years ago.

That didn't deter the British author and scholar, whose 2004 book "Love Saves the Day" documented the rise of '70s disco culture. After it became clear that the initial idea for his new book, a history of '80s American nightlife, was too ambitious, he homed in on the first part of the decade, specifically in New York City.

It was there, he argues, in night spots like the Mudd Club, Danceteria, Club 57 and Paradise Garage, that lasting cultural phenomena—post-disco dance music, hip-hop, art and punk—all began to blossom and cross-pollinate.

"The downtown era was an uncontained explosion of energy, creativity, community, ideas, collaboration that resisted form, but was also precisely wonderful because of that," said Mr. Lawrence.

His book, published by Duke University Press, offers fresh detail and insight on the clubs, DJs, parties and recordings that emerged from the scene. He even offers DJ playlists from different clubs.

In documenting the rise of the Mudd Club, where scenesters from art, fashion, film and music collided, Mr. Lawrence describes the importance of good doorkeepers in preventing the mix inside from descending into chaos. Artist Richard Boch, for example, could recognize important artists and musicians, but also maintained the Mudd Club's defiant vibe—making record company executives, tastemakers and anyone who arrived in a limousine wait while a punky 16-year-old got in first.

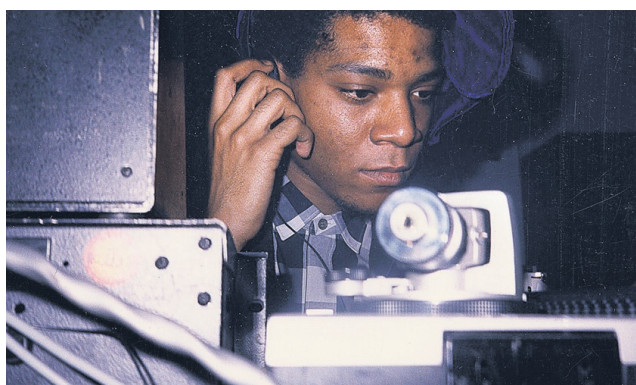
It was an era of constant cultural synergy: when new wave bands like the Talking Heads embraced dance grooves and Blondie dabbled in rap. Downtown artists like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat drew inspiration from break-dancers, graffiti and other street culture.

And the '80s club scene didn't lack for rising stars—Madonna, Russell Simmons and Run DMC, among them.

Basquiat epitomized the kinetic artistic energy. Already a rising star in the art world, he was the lead in the film "Downtown 81," which documented the era's art and music scene. He also DJ'd and played in an experimental band.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BILL BERNSTEIN; ANDRE WHITLAND; JOHNNY DYWELL



Tim Lawrence's new book, "Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor: 1980-1983" features, clockwise from above: the dance floor at Paradise Garage, one of the 1980s nightclubs that helped shape the era; the front cover of East Village Eye magazine in June 1982; Keith Haring, an unknown guest, Grace Jones and Fred 'Fab 5 Freddy' Brathwaite at the Fun Gallery (c. 1983); and Jean-Michel Basquiat DJs in the lounge at Area in 1986.



"We were having so much fun and being so creative," said his bandmate Michael Holman, also an artist, writer and filmmaker, who has been credited as the first journalist to use the phrase "hip-hop" to describe the sound coming from the South Bronx. "We

had to make our own party." For musician John Robie, who recorded with Chaka Khan and New Order and played on '80s classics like Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock," the era's artistic interaction was also cross-cultural: "It was black, white, Hispanic

and Asian, all somehow coming together to create, often serendipitously."

Due to the outbreak of AIDS and the rise of the crack epidemic, many of the era's most prominent artists died young, including Haring, Basquiat, Paradise Garage DJ Larry Le-

van and interdisciplinary musician Arthur Russell. But that challenged Mr. Lawrence, a professor of cultural studies at the University of East London, to dig deeper and find people whose stories had never been documented.

"I realized that there's a

whole history of voices that hadn't been accounted for," said Mr. Lawrence, who ultimately interviewed more than 130 people for the book.

This week, he is in town to celebrate the book with film screenings, lectures, readings and—of course—dance parties.

AUDI

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chestra and chorus. "I thought it was such a fascinating piece—almost unstageable," Mr. Audi, whose production had its premiere in 2013 in Amsterdam, said earlier this month. "How do you do it?"

Don't expect painted Alpine backdrops or medieval costumes. When the curtain rises after the famous overture, Mr. Audi offers up a stripped-down, abstracted staging intended to highlight the opera's universal themes of liberty, loyalty and betrayal. The architectural sets, by his frequent collaborator George Tsybin, are meant to evoke the shape of chalets with being overly literal.

The "Circle Map" concerts were already in the pipeline before he arrived at the Armory last year. As of last week Mr. Audi was still working out the specifics of what the audience would encounter inside the organization's vast space.

He calls the process "mise-en-space"—putting a work in space using elements such as lighting, video or deciding where people sit.

"We try to get the audience to surround the orchestra," he said, to break down the barriers between performers and listeners. "It's organizing these ingredients, using one's experience to shape them, that motivates me."

Fluent in English, French



Pierre Audi speaks with Marina Rebeka during rehearsal of the Metropolitan Opera's 'Guillaume Tell.'

and Dutch, he is accustomed to juggling continents and creative endeavors. He is also now, at age 58, balancing the needs of a family. He married in June of 2015, the same month his appointment at the Armory was announced; he and his wife have a young daughter and a second child on the way.

Family, he said, provides "an additional layer of humanity and helped me to manage the stress a little bit better."

Born in Beirut, Mr. Audi grew up there and in France. After studying history at Oxford University, he founded London's Almeida Theatre in a once-derelect Salvation Army hall, where he presented experimental theater and intro-

duced British audiences to John Cage, Arvo Pärt and other contemporary composers.

In 1988 Mr. Audi was hired to lead Dutch National Opera. He was just 30 years old, with no traditional opera experience. Mr. Audi ultimately put the young company on the map, with premieres of new operas and by working with boundary-pushing cultural figures ranging from the artist Anish Kapoor to American theater director Peter Sellars and the Chinese composer Tan Dun.

From 2004 to 2014 he served as artistic director of the Holland Festival, and has directed productions for opera and theater companies across Europe. He plans to step down as director of the Dutch company in

2018, when he will assume leadership of France's famed Aix-en-Provence music festival.

Mr. Audi already knows many of the major players in New York's cultural scene. As he ramps up his work for the next Armory season, he is diving in deeper, making frequent visits here and meeting young New York-based artists.

The Armory, which opened in 2007, gets the benefit of Mr. Audi's vast international Rolodex.

"He has worked with so many musicians, composers, conductors, directors," said Rebecca Robertson, the Armory's president and executive producer. "You get this kind of encyclopedia of the avant-garde."

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