

Review: Tim Lawrence - Life and Death on the New York Dancefloor 1980-1983

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Life and Death on the New York Dancefloor, 1980-1983, Tim Lawrence (2016)

Durham: Duke University Press, 578 pp., ISBN: 9780822362029, p/bk, £20.99

Reviewed by Rona Cran, University of Birmingham

In the early years of the 1980s New York City was plagued by an epidemic of murders, robberies, burglaries, arson attacks, subway breakdowns, and heroin dealing: as punk poet Lydia Lunch put it, the city felt, to some, like ‘a filthy spectre who refuses a final exorcism’ (95). And yet, as Tim Lawrence’s immense book makes clear, New York during this period was also a vibrant, experimental, and performative playground that ‘saw party spaces reach a level of intensity that knew no historical precedent’ (459). *Life and Death on the New York Dancefloor* tells the story of those spaces, during ‘a time when staging a party became one of the highest forms of expression’ (125), and reveals the extent to which, between 1980 and 1983, venues like the Mudd Club, Club 57, Danceteria, the Loft, Paradise Garage, Negril, the Roxy, the Funhouse, Disco Fever, Zanzibar, Pyramid, Area, and the Saint ‘scaled new levels of immersive socio-sonic possibility’ (459).

The book is peopled with stars, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Grandmaster Flash, Freddy Brathwaite, Debbie Harry, Madonna, Afrika Bambaataa, and David Wojnarowicz, each of whom both helped to shape and was shaped by the city’s diverse dancefloors and eclectic performance spaces. Far more numerous, though equally fascinating, are the book’s less well-known night crawlers – the pioneering DJs, doormen, dancers, and drag queens, not to mention gallery owners, record producers, and entrepreneurs, whose creativity, communality, and cultural influence brought about the period’s ‘shift into sonic convergence and mongrel transformation’ (460). The resulting ‘party network’, Lawrence argues, ‘engineered a form of accelerated integration that facilitated encounters between

revellers from diverse backgrounds, their interactions anticipated and supported by the compound sounds that surged through the city' (461). Such a network was perhaps bound to be short-lived, and its demise comes in the form of 'shrouded abatements and mysterious deaths' (239) – in other words, in the onset of AIDS and the arrival of money. As Lawrence observes, 'at the moment of dance culture's rebirth', the heavily subsidized New York real estate market began to smother it, whilst 'a viral death sentence started to circulate in its midst' (242).

Unlike music produced during the 1960s and 1970s, from rock'n'roll to disco, the sounds of early 1980s New York City were rarely codified, partly because, as Lawrence demonstrates, participants were 'wary of the commercialism that had blunted disco's edge', and 'weren't in a hurry to name their activity' (8). In keeping with the mercurial qualities of the music of the period, Lawrence also avoids a retrospective codification, instead framing his approach through

Henri Lefebvre's description of the ideal city as "the perpetual *oeuvre* of its inhabitants, themselves mobile and mobilized for and by this *oeuvre*," where a "superior form of rights" emerges: the "right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit" (xii).

The city presented in *Life and Death*, then, is one in a continual state of becoming, its sounds and scenes created through the social interaction of people whose 'way of life could shift almost seamlessly between different parts of the city as circumstances required' (57). Iris Marion Young's conceptualisation of city life as 'the being together of strangers' (237) speaks to Lawrence's depiction of New York during the early 1980s, a time in which, he argues

revellers would head out not in pre-established friendship groups that would stick together but as part of a spontaneously formed colony of like-minded people who, with answering machines yet to come into popular use, gathered in order to socialize, experience culture, and exchange information (126).

Similarly (though it doesn't feature in *Life and Death*), Michel De Certeau's vision of New York as a place that 'invents itself, from hour to hour' (91) and whose pedestrians create 'contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power' (95) chimes with Lawrence's evocation of the important DIY impetus driving the city's party culture. This was 'a time of elastic self-fashioning', he suggests, 'as well as one in which the self was usually conceived within some form of improvised collectivity' (125). As performer, producer, and partyer Chi Chi Valenti puts it: 'there was this really big and strong DIY ethos everywhere ... The look was not just punk but low rent, xeroxy. It was really about creating something from nothing' (20).

Life and Death on the New York Dancefloor is huge: drawing extensively on over one hundred interviews with former participants in the party culture it describes, it is a sprawling, exhaustive, strikingly dense examination of an abundance of ephemera, including 'DJ sets, band performances, theatrical explorations, immersive happenings, fashion shows, dance styles, and graffiti/Xerox/found-object art efforts' (xi). The level of detail offered is to Lawrence's credit: although the cumulative effect (on readers less well-versed in the scene than he is) can be overwhelming at times, *Life and Death* provides a wealth of valuable material for current and future scholars and enthusiasts to mine. And where repeated references to the names of seemingly interchangeable scenesters (as well as the density of anecdotal material presented) might risk readerly fatigue, the inclusion of items such as DJs' set lists and images of the clubs, artists, and scenesters in question is illuminating. The images used are numerous, and include Basquiat fiddling quizzically with a clarinet during a

performance with his band Gray, Rock Steady Crew's Take One break dancing at the Lincoln Center in August 1981, dominatrix and designer Anya Phillips wearing latex during a Cramps show at CBGB during the late 1970s, and Sharon White (a mixed-race lesbian) DJing at the Saint (a club made up of 95% white gay men) behind a Plexiglas shield. The set lists include Larry Levan at the Paradise Garage in 1980 (featuring tracks by Blondie, Grace Jones, Young & Company, and Phreek), Dany Johnson at Club 57 in 1980 (James Brown, Bobby Byrd, Petula Clark, Lene Lovich, Talking Heads), Sean Cassette and Mark Kamins at Danceteria, also in 1980 (Black Uhuru, the Clash, Ian Dury, The Slits), Afrika Bambaataa and others at the Roxy in 1982 (The B-52's, Chic, Fab 5 Freddy, Peter Gabriel, Musical Youth), and Robbie Leslie at the Saint in 1983 (ABBA, Sharon Redd, Chris Rea, Donna Summer, Spandau Ballet).

These images and set lists provide readers with a visual and audible apprehension of the period Lawrence describes. The set lists in particular elicit an active response, whether a process of musical research with regards some of the more obscure artists played or a revisiting of those more familiar (both easily done in the age of YouTube and Spotify, which facilitate the recreation of the playlists Lawrence provides). As such, the images and set lists function as a kind of currency that connects a reader's body with the written narrative Lawrence weaves, cutting through its density to provoke an affective reading experience commensurate with the immersive, highly sensory, performative New York dancefloor in the early 1980s.

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