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Praise for *Altered State*

'At last somebody has written the real history of the last ten years, and written it with such wit, verve, empathy and profound intelligence. If you've been part of the scene in any way, this brilliant book will serve as positive affirmation. If you haven't, yet still feel moved to pontificate about it, you will no longer have the excuse of doing so from a position of ignorance. I can't recommend this marvellous piece of work enough and in a sane world it would sell more copies than any other book written over the last decade' Irvine Welsh

'The first full history of the dance boom which, fuelled by Ecstasy, has transformed British culture over the past decade: here you will also find the drive to transcendence, or oblivion, that is at the heart of British pop' Jon Savage

'*Altered State* is not just timely; it was crying out to be written' *Independent*

altered state

the story of ecstasy culture and acid house

matthew collin

with contributions by john godfrey

A complete catalogue record for this book can be
obtained from the British Library on request

First published as *Altered State* in 1997 by Serpent's Tail

First published in this revised edition in 2009 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
website: www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 84668 713 6

Designed and typeset by folio at Neuadd Bwll, Llanwrtyd Wells

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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foreword

(a long time afterwards)

When *Altered State* was written in the mid-nineties, the culture which it documents had yet to reach its peak. Although it had already been transformed from an underground scene with roots in renegade urban cults and the secretive psychedelic avant-garde into a mass-market phenomenon which brought recreational drug use into the social mainstream, at that time it was still evolving. What was first called 'acid house' and then the 'rave scene' in the late eighties had turned into a multi-million-pound leisure industry known as 'dance culture'; a far less mutinous and outlandish phenomenon, although its narcotic allure remained strong.

It had become the most vibrant, diverse and long-lasting youth movement that Britain had ever seen, one which continued to send out cultural and political shock waves more than a decade after it began. The fundamental reason why it became so pervasive and influential was simple: it was the most extraordinary entertainment format yet invented. The combination of Ecstasy and electronic dance music had genuine transformative power: it could deliver altered states of consciousness; experiences which changed the way we felt, the way we thought, the way we lived.

The scene had an inclusive, open-access ethos rather than a defined ideology, and this was the vital force which drove it forwards. It was a culture with options in place of rules; a series of possibilities which people could use to define their own identities, possibilities which could be adapted to each

individual's social background and belief system. The recurring story was of people being inspired by the revelatory flash of the primal Ecstasy experience, then getting involved and altering the direction of the scene by bringing in their own ideas and influences. Musicians, entrepreneurs, artists, criminals, political activists, hippies and football fans all affected its development by adapting it to suit their own desires – hence the scene's relentless dynamism, its constant self-reinvention and its unprecedented longevity.

At its heart was a concerted attempt to suspend normal transmission, if only for one night; to conjure from sound and chemistry, however briefly, a kind of utopia – what anarchist philosopher Hakim Bey has described as a *temporary autonomous zone*. Such zones, Bey says, are 'successful raids on consensus reality, breakthroughs into more intense and more abundant life', fleeting moments where fantasies are made real and freedom of expression rules before external reality intervenes. Sometimes these autonomous zones could feel very real and very potent indeed.

Ecstasy culture was no freak storm which burst miraculously from the ether. It was shaped by time, place, and very specific economic and social conditions: the late eighties in urban Britain, the end of the Thatcher years, when the psychic map of the country was redrawn. So long afterwards, it's hard to imagine how powerfully the Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher once dominated our ideological life and how much her politics divided us, but at the time it was inescapable. The Thatcher fantasy was about breaking free from the past, entering a paradise of unrestrained entrepreneurial and consumer opportunities where materialism was elevated to a creed, individualism was celebrated and collective action was discouraged or outlawed; an ideology which would define the decades that followed. Acid house and the rave scene expressed

deeply-felt desires for communal experiences which Thatcher rejected – 'There is no such thing as society', in the words of her most notorious assertion – but they also seemed to echo her libertarian capitalist doctrine of market freedom and consumer choice. They provided an outlet for Thatcherite entrepreneurial impulses, even amplified them, enabling people to get involved, to participate rather than simply observe or consume, to *do something*, whether it was recording a techno track in a bedroom studio, organising a warehouse party or selling a bag of pills (although criminal entrepreneurialism probably wasn't exactly what Conservative ideology envisaged).

Simultaneously, the exponential increase in recreational drug use in Britain from the late eighties onwards, which was catalysed by Ecstasy – the 'miracle pill', as some of us saw it back then – ensured that the mainstream of youth culture became intimately connected with illegal activity. As drug use became normalised, criminality was democratised. What the author Irvine Welsh called the 'chemical generation' was also a generation of outlaws. Three separate pieces of legislation were introduced by the British government during the nineties in an attempt to contain the spread of Ecstasy culture; one of them even tried to outlaw electronic dance music, if it was played in certain circumstances. All of them were unsuccessful.

The scene's highest point in Britain, at least in terms of the sheer numbers of people involved, probably came some time after the start of the new millennium, a few years after the first edition of *Altered State* was published and more than a decade and a half after the origins of acid house in an obscure nightclub in an unfashionable district of south London. From then onwards, its populist appeal began to decline, although electronic dance music continued to evolve and Ecstasy continued to be an extremely popular drug in Britain, while elsewhere in the world its usage still seemed to be growing.

(The United Nations has estimated that in 2008 more than nine million people took the drug.)

Re-reading *Altered State* now, it inevitably reflects the period in which it was written: the reckless enthusiasms, the exaggerated impulses and the sheer intensity of living through those high times. But although it might be, in many ways, a partisan insider's account, the book also documents the seamier side of a culture based on illegal drug use, the problems created by criminality and excess, and the difficult questions about Ecstasy's long-term effects which have yet to be properly answered. Millions of pills have been swallowed since it was first published, but scientists still can't agree whether or not it causes any serious damage to the human body and brain, while attempts to restrict recreational drug use have almost always failed. Two decades on, the fallout from Ecstasy culture – social, political, legal and medical – continues to cause controversy.

This new edition tracks the scene to its populist summit as well as following up some of the disparate post-rave subcults which were still developing when *Altered State* was first published. But despite the fact that Ecstasy culture is now a global phenomenon, the book still focuses, unashamedly, on Britain, where the scene (if not its drug and its music) first developed, and the formative years of acid house and rave culture in the late eighties and early nineties, when many of the most remarkable incidents took place – some of them so extraordinary it's hard to believe now that they really happened.

In recent years, those of us who were there at the time have regularly been asked to reminisce about our experiences for television and radio documentaries looking back on the era. It's a sign that, like punk before it, acid house has now become an established part of pop history, respected and respectable enough for nostalgic retrospectives; a set of sounds and symbols which can provide inspiration to new generations,

but a moment which has passed, never to return. Most of these documentaries inevitably revisit many of the same incidents and anecdotes which appear in this book, and focus on the same cast of characters: the ones who became pop culture celebrities. The stories of those who simply participated, those who lived it but didn't earn a living from it, have generally been overlooked. However, a couple of years ago, a British artist asked me to contribute text to a more unusual project which rediscovered some of these hidden tales. The artist, Matt Stokes, had sought to recreate the history of an all-but-forgotten collective of DJs from England's north-west who had, at the start of the nineties, organised illegal parties in a cave in the wilds of the Lake District. He had collected their promotional flyers and DJ-mix cassettes, and had even built a facsimile of their sound system from old photographs and scribbled drawings.

Sifting through these fragments of a lost era, the trajectory of these marginal figures seemed to be a kind of parable for those times, unknown yet remarkably familiar, encapsulating some of the universal experiences of the hordes of 'ordinary' ravers who followed the same path at other times and in other places. Their story began optimistically, with the raw idealism so often inspired by the first rush of Ecstasy: they wanted to spread the word, to make things happen, to *live the dream*. This, for them, was paradise revealed. 'There were no inhibitions whatsoever,' one of the crew later recalled, unconsciously echoing the words of so many people who experienced this sensation before and afterwards. 'Everyone was on the same level, and everyone was really happy.'

They imagined, of course, that this beatific state would endure forever, and of course it did not. First gangsters moved in to steal the money generated by their illegal raves, then local newspapers started to publish hyperbolic headlines about the dangers of narcotised revelry, and finally the police set

up roadblocks to stop their raves completely. After the parties were over, there was a long, uneasy comedown. Over the years that followed, the crew drifted apart, close friends became estranged, several people connected with the raves were jailed for drug offences, and one of them ended up dead – stories, again, which will be familiar to many of us who lived through all this. Some of the former ravers no longer wanted to talk about those days, perhaps having moved on to a more 'normal' life in which illicit drugs could have no part, and yet others still glowed with nostalgia. 'They were special times,' one insisted, 'Really special times.'

But were they any more than 'special times'? Was that all that it was: drug-crazed hedonism? Or was it – as many of us so much wanted to believe – more significant than that? Since the birth of acid house, the question of *what it all really meant* has so often been asked, and this book contains a whole range of answers, all inevitably dependent on personal perceptions, and ultimately, none of them definitive. Perhaps, looking back now, to simply have lived through those spectacular times was enough. Perhaps to have experienced those rapturous moments of communal abandon was, in itself, more than we ever could have hoped for.

Matthew Collin
2009

prologue

a night in the eighties

manchester, 1988

We were handed the capsules at about ten o'clock. I cupped the little gelatin bullet in my palm and took a surreptitious look: it had an opaque white casing, just over a centimetre in length, slightly sticky with the heat and the perspiration of my fingers. It was just a capsule; its appearance offered no clues as to what its contents might bring. Well, *here goes* … I popped it into my mouth and crunched it between my teeth, feeling the gelatin splinter like cracked plastic and the white powder ooze out. Bitter, not like the queasy taste of paracetamol, but a sharper chemical tang which spread unpleasantly over the tongue and teeth. I washed it down with a mouthful of Coke, which didn't quite rinse away the repulsive aftertaste, and we sat down at a table on the balcony overlooking the dancefloor.

Ten minutes and counting. We were both slightly edgy, trying to make small talk, lapsing into fretful silence, both wondering what would happen next. Neither of us knew much – if anything – about this stuff, what it would do, what its after-effects were, whether it could harm us in any way. Where would it take us? Were there demons in this other world? Would we still be the same people when we returned? None of these thoughts took real shape, they just flitted darkly around the corners of our consciousness.

Twenty-five minutes. Another sip of Coke. Rather have a beer, but we'd been told that this stuff didn't really mix with

alcohol. Sip the Coke. Sip, sip. Wait. Sip. Wait … was that something? A twinge? The lights seemed to shimmer strangely, just for a millisecond, a flutter in the belly, a tiny glow. I searched my metabolism for signs of weirdness. No?

Forty minutes. Almost imperceptibly, everything shifted, like an elevator accelerating upwards. An overwhelmingly powerful charge surged through my body, rising through the veins and the arteries and the bones and the teeth, pushing me down into the plastic chair. Sit back … *fuuuuck* … sit back and hold on, let it carry me … My mind began to reassure my body: *ride it, ride it, go with it. You'll be alright, it's good, it's good, ride it.*

Then it eased slightly, and I felt a desperate urge to talk – to voice the babble of feelings which were welling up inside me. We exchanged a few, brief words, hardly a conversation, but it seemed infused with an intensity of meaning it never had before – like no conversation we'd ever had before. I understood his faults, his hopes, his dreams, his pain and joy, what he had been through, what we had been through together, what we had all been through, and I knew he felt the same. Now, in this moment, it was all resolved … it was going to be alright. Everything was going to be alright.

Then that wave crashed over me again and I was struck dumb … Oh … the feeling … *sooooo* strong … I couldn't speak, but my emotions raged more intensely than they ever had before. *Need to be touched* … my skin felt clammy but sensitised beyond belief.

'Are you alright?'

Paralysed, I found it difficult to nod yes.

'It's OK.' He held my arm. 'It's OK.'

The light caress felt glorious. We clenched hands. Sensuous. Great.

'I'm alright.'

I tried to sip. Couldn't. Not possible. The rush seemed to last for hours but it must have only been a few seconds.

Suddenly the music which had been pounding out of the speakers suspended above the dancefloor flashed right into focus, searing into the consciousness. It felt like the sound, each gorgeous slash of the riff, was slicing through every single cell in my body, transmuting its physiology. The drums seemed to sparkle in mid air, reverberating as if in a cathedral … and the bass … *it was as though I'd never heard it before.* It resonated right through to the core, pulsing from both inside and outside simultaneously. The tune separated out into its constituent parts, a lattice of textures, each ringing with angelic clarity, each sliding right into me, locking, holding, releasing …

The pressure in my head lifted dramatically and I felt warm all over; stroking my arm gently I realised I'd broken a sweat without even moving. The world had opened up all around, the blank warehouse had somehow changed into a wonderland designed just for us, glistening with a mystic iridescence which I which I hadn't been able to see earlier. New world. New sound. New life. Everything felt so right. A huge, glowing, magical *YES*.

The friend who'd given us the capsules came back to our table. It was like seeing him again for the first time after a long absence; we'd all changed, but the elapsed time – could it be that it was only an hour? – made us realise how much we loved him and missed him.

'Are you alright?' he asked, gauging the response from our smiles. 'The music's great, isn't it? You've got to stand up, you've got to move, we've got to go and dance. Otherwise you'll just sit here all night.'

We stood up unsteadily, and as we negotiated the stairs down to the dancefloor, we began to slide into the contours of the rhythm, becoming immersed in it, the bass curling round the spine, which felt like it had been loosened of its inhibiting

rigidity, like it had slipped the bounds of all that was holding it – us – back, and could just flow, loose, warm, *alive* … And in a second we were among the throng, synched right into the matrix of bodies and sound; transported, transformed, together. *Alright,* the feeling resonated through us as the drums thrashed upwards towards climax, *let's go* …

1

the technologies of pleasure

> Where once there was frustration, alienation and cynicism, there are new characteristics among us. We are full of love for each other and are showing it; we are full of anger at what has been done to us. And as we recall all the self-censorship and repression for so many years, a reservoir of tears pours out of our eyes. And we are euphoric, high, with the initial flourish of a movement …
>
> Carl Wittman, *A Gay Manifesto*, 1969

New York City at the turn of the seventies. The end of the civil rights era, the last days of the hippies. At 1.20 a.m., one hot summer night in June 1969, the New York Police Department raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. Police harassment of gay bars was common practice, but this time something snapped and people fought back, an outbreak of righteous anger sparking off a full-scale riot which continued through the night. 'Queen power exploded with all the fury of a gay atomic bomb,' declared one New York newspaper breathlessly.[1]

The Stonewall uprising, the 'Boston Tea Party of the gay movement', heralded a rising mood of militancy and public openness, the golden age of pre-AIDS euphoria. 'The Stonewall riots were a watershed for gay people,' remembers historian Ian Young, 'and when the dam broke, a lot of idealism, anger and longing burst out of their social restraints …'[2]

As late as the sixties, homosexuality had been considered a medical condition, a pathological state, an aberration; gays were isolated and almost invisible. Now from this outpouring of repressed energy came the new politics of the gay liberation movement – and almost simultaneously, the emergence of a vibrant new nocturnal culture.

Amid this heady mood, New York's underground clubs experienced a dramatic creative upsurge. The Sanctuary in the Hell's Kitchen district, one of the first flamboyantly gay dance clubs in the city, was a temple to joyous decadence. In his portrait of the era, *Disco*, author Albert Goldman compared its decor to a Witches' Sabbath, with a huge painted Devil flanked by a host of angels locked in sexual communion. Drinks were sold from chalices, Goldman reported, and pews were arranged around the walls, while the DJ, Francis Grasso, would preach from an altar above the dancefloor. Grasso helped pioneer the technique of seamlessly mixing one record into another; he would layer the orgasmic moans from Led Zeppelin's 'Whole Lotta Love' over heavy percussion, cutting the bass and treble frequencies in and out to heighten the energy level, segueing from dirty James Brown funk and sweet-voiced soul to rock'n'roll, then on into hypnotic African drums and chants.

'Francis was like an energy mirror,' wrote Goldman, 'catching the vibes off the floor and shooting them back again recharged by the powerful sounds of his big horns.' Many of the Sanctuary's dancers would load up on LSD, amphetamine pills or mood-altering quaaludes, and the men's room became an orgy of rutting males hyped by the libidinous atmosphere. A new militancy was evident, too; when the police raided the club, hundreds would chant 'Fuck you!' in unison.[3]

By the time this 'cathedral of Sodom and Gomorrah' was shut down in 1972, after a state official described the club as a 'supermarket for drugs' and a 'menace to the community', the

Sanctuary had not only influenced the soundtrack of New York nightlife, but its very shape and form.[4]

The seminal after-hours club of the early seventies wasn't actually a nightclub at all: The Loft was just that, a loft apartment on Broadway inhabited by a bearded, idealistic LSD aficionado called David Mancuso. Mancuso had been profoundly influenced by the ideas of psychedelic guru Timothy Leary, but the hippy 'gatherings' which he had been organising at his home since the sixties evolved into dance parties. Every Saturday night from 1970 onwards, Mancuso would fill his apartment with brightly-coloured balloons and throw it open to a crowd of hedonistic acolytes – a glorious rainbow mixture of blacks and whites, gays and turned-on straights – who would dance, sweat and romp until well into Sunday. He would lay on a buffet of fruit, nuts and juice, no alcohol, and play music he loved – songs of passion, spirituality and lust, a bridge between psychedelia and the disco era – through a hand-tooled sound system.

Black and gay clubs have consistently served as breeding grounds for new developments in popular culture, social laboratories where music, drugs and sex are interbred to create stylistic innovations that slowly filter through to straight, white society. Mancuso may have been white, but his music was black and decidedly gay – the sound which would soon be known throughout the world as disco. He was also a zealot with very specific beliefs about how music should be presented. 'He was searching for a new disco sound, a new mix,' suggested Albert Goldman. 'He wanted to trip people out, to lay them under a spell. Many people regarded him as a magician.'[5]

If you were a 'Loft baby', you felt part of a secret society of initiates (attendance was strictly by invitation), a privileged sect which was somehow describing new contours of human experience. 'Dancing at the Loft was like riding waves of music,

being carried along as one song after another built relentlessly to a brilliant crest and broke, bringing almost involuntary shouts of approval from the crowd, then smoothed out, softened, and slowly began welling up to another peak,' journalist Vince Aletti wrote at the time.[6] David Morales, later to become one of New York's most famous DJs, would come down from Brooklyn carrying a spare set of clothes to change into, and stay at The Loft until six o'clock on Sunday afternoon; he remembers dancers on acid slipping into ecstatic reverie under Mancuso's spell, limbs and brain synched into the matrix of percussion and melody.

At this time, the dominant club sound was lush, orchestrated disco from Philadelphia, the 'City of Brotherly Love'. MFSB's 'Love is the Message' was its inspirational height, a careening wash of strings locked to a compulsive bassline and a manifesto of joy and hope: it became the anthem of black America and a nationwide number one hit in 1974. The Philadelphia International label was the Motown of the early seventies, its in-house session players fashioning a string of gems for MFSB, the Three Degrees, the O'Jays and countless others; a dance factory founded on the labour of virtuoso musicians playing drums, bass, guitar and strings. Philadelphia's sumptuous orchestration was emulated by Salsoul Records – but this New York label would also herald another step forward. In 1975, disco producer Tom Moulton, a genuine innovator who was one of dance culture's first remixers, started to make test pressings of his mixes on album-sized 12-inch vinyl. Moulton was already re-editing and stretching songs into more abstract, percussive forms; now he had the format to enhance his experiments yet further.

The 12-inch single, the first new record format in almost thirty years, was revolutionary not only because it sounded so physically devastating over huge speakers, but it gave dance

music a new dynamic: both length and depth. Remixers could extend the breakdown – the few bars where the instruments dropped out leaving just bass and drums to carry the pulse – into a mesmeric tribal drum ritual, like the African drums and Latin percussion records which had fired up The Loft. The first commercially-available 12-inch was Walter Gibbons' remix of 'Ten Percent' by Double Exposure on the Salsoul label. Transformed from a three-minute single into a nine-minute epic, it was aimed directly at the club underground of New York City. Salsoul's themes seemed to speak intimately to a gay community: passionate, sensual, charged with sweat, sex and the ecstasy of release.

Disco continued to accelerate into the future. From the mid-seventies onwards, a series of records began to emerge that used electronics to revolutionise the form: Giorgio Moroder's compulsively metronomic production of Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love', the opulent sleaze of Cerrone, Patrick Cowley's wide-screen productions for gay diva Sylvester. Many of these records were inspired by European electronic music, as disco felt the impact of the stark minimalism of the German synthesiser quartet Kraftwerk. On 1977's *Trans Europe Express* and 1978's *The Man-Machine*, Kraftwerk styled themselves as glamorous robots, 'Showroom Dummies' in identical suits tapping out motorik rhythms on computer keyboards. Kraftwerk had come from the fringes of Germany's classical avant-garde, yet their vision of a synthesis between man and machine tore through black American dance music.

'I don't think they even knew how big they were among the black masses back in '77 when they came out with *Trans Europe Express*,' hip hop innovator Afrika Bambaataa explained. 'I thought that was one of the best and weirdest records I ever heard in my life … It was funky.'[7] Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force, alongside producer Arthur Baker, reworked *Trans*

Europe Express, adding rapped lyrics and accidentally inventing a whole new musical genre: electro.

Electronics and studio mixing techniques seemed infused with possibility, giving fresh impetus to disco as it first boomed, and then almost went bust. By the end of the seventies, what was once an underground culture had been increasingly commercialised as it became America's leading nightlife scene, and a backlash had started to gain strength. The release of the film *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977 had brought disco to the mass market, caricaturing it and ironing out its depth and complexities in the process of commodification, largely shedding its black and gay context. The fictional tale *Saturday Night Fever* was based upon, *Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night* by Nik Cohn, was a portrait of working-class youth who poured their frustrated dreams into a frantic outburst of weekend lunacy. But although the film helped to turn disco into a multi-million-dollar business, it also made it seem cheap and trashy, a mere fad. Record companies started to pump out increasing numbers of substandard disco mixes in an attempt to cash in on the phenomenon while it lasted, while in New York, the city's most famous club, Studio 54, was more concerned with celebrity glamour than musical innovation and communal spirit. A crusade against disco began, led by rock DJs on radio stations across the US. It culminated in a 'disco demolition' rally during a baseball match in Chicago, where explosives were used to blow up thousands of records in a symbolic attempt to kill off a culture which they despised as both superficial and inauthentic (although their campaign also had a noxious undercurrent of homophobia).

But just as it seemed that disco was suffocating on its own spectacular success, evolving technology began to change its very nature. Black music has always been at the cutting edge of new invention, from the electric guitars of the Chicago

bluesmen to the primitive sound effects employed in Motown's Detroit studio and the space-age big bands of Parliament and Funkadelic, and now disco's emphasis also started to shift, as the music moved on from the surging, string-driven grooves of Salsoul and Philadelphia International. The record labels that exemplified the new, increasingly electronic dance sound were Prelude and West End. Both employed the finest remixers of the moment to lace the grooves with synthetic textures which sometimes echoed the deep space of Jamaican dub reggae. Many rock critics regarded disco as frivolous and throwaway – 'Disco sucks!' was their battle cry at the height of the late seventies backlash – yet here were disco mixers traversing the frontiers of the possible, auteurs who attempted to heighten consciousness using sound, virtuosos whose instrument was the recording studio itself: DJs like François Kevorkian and Brooklyn-born Larry Levan.

The Paradise Garage, the club where Levan played from 1977 until its closing night in 1987, was a former car-park in New York's SoHo district. It had an awesome sound system, possibly the best in the world, custom designed by the city's premier sound technician, Richard Long, and lovingly refined by Levan. 'As you climb its steeply angled ramp to the second floor, which is illuminated only by rows of sinister little red eyes,' wrote Albert Goldman in 1978, 'you feel like a character in a Kafka novel … From overhead comes the heavy pounding of the disco beat like a fearful migraine. When you reach the "bar", a huge bare parking area, you are astonished to see immense pornographic murals of Greek and Trojan warriors locked in sado-masochistic combat running from floor to ceiling. On the floor of the main dancing room are the most frenzied dancers on the disco scene: the black and Puerto Rican gays, stripped down to singlets and denim shorts, swing their bodies with wild abandon, while from

their hip pockets flow foot-long sweat rags that fly like horses' tails.'[8]

Levan, born Laurence Philpot in 1954, was a graduate of David Mancuso's Loft, and one of the finest ever conjurers of the psychoactive power of dance music to create a fleeting vision of spiritual utopia. 'Larry Levan used music as a unique storytelling vehicle that transported his audience on a collective journey, reaching to the roots of their emotions and releasing unparalleled waves of excitement and energy,' suggested the Garage's backer Mel Cheren and François Kevorkian.[9]

Although 'garage' music, which took its name from the Paradise Garage, later came to mean uptempo house music with a gospel-style vocal, Levan had an incredibly eclectic taste, playing anything that captured the devotional, life-affirming feeling he was after: disco, soul, funk, reggae, post-punk rock, European electro-pop, even German *kosmische* synthesiser epics like Manuel Göttsching's 'E2: E4'. 'He would experiment with records that most people wouldn't go near,' says Cheren. 'He really was an engineering genius as far as sound was concerned – they even have speakers that were named after him. He was brilliant. He wasn't an easy person but most artists aren't. He was very self-destructive – but there were a lot of DJs at that time that were very self-destructive.'

Levan mixed records as if he was trying to work the drugs that were percolating through the dancers' brains – trying to *play* their body chemistry – creating a homology between sonic texture and the chemically-elevated cortex. 'Larry invented new levels of bass and treble that worked on various parts of your body,' believed fellow New York DJ Richard Vasquez.[10] As pure mood enhancement, his mixes of Taana Gardner's drugged-out, metallic 'Heartbeat' or the Peech Boys' shimmering 'Don't Make Me Wait' were without peer, staking out new frontiers for disco in the early eighties. 'The way people party now, the

drugs that are in the street, everything has got to be wild and crazy and electronic,' Levan once insisted.[11] Although drug-taking was far less open than it would become in British clubs, an astounding pharmacopoeia of substances was being consumed in the name of pleasure on the gay scene of the time – pleasures that Levan freely and copiously enjoyed. His club buzzed with energies of all kinds: musical, sexual, spiritual, chemical.

The final night of the Garage, on 26 September 1987, marked the end of an era, the last gathering of a clan who to this day insist that the sense of nocturnal spirituality that Levan engendered has never been recaptured. Artist Keith Haring, whose iconic graffiti covered the building's walls, returned from Japan just to be there. 'Under the spell of Levan's narcotic mix, people seemed to transcend human limits,' journalist Frank Owen wrote. 'Men crawled around on their hands and knees howling like dogs, while others gyrated and leapt as if they could fly. After a 24-hour marathon, an exhausted crowd gathered in front of Levan's DJ booth and pleaded, "Larry, please don't go".'[12]

After the Garage closed, Levan's notoriously prodigious capacity for drugs, particularly heroin and cocaine, reached critical levels. He spent his rent money on pharmaceuticals, sold his precious records, and his mood swings became extreme. 'When Larry knew the Garage was going to close, he freaked. He went on a self-destructive binge,' recalled DJ David DePino.[13] He missed club bookings, screwed up his studio work, and his health deteriorated. On 8 November 1992, Larry Levan died of heart failure. He was thirty-eight.

chicago and detroit

The almost devotional intensity of the atmosphere in the

black gay clubs of New York created a template that has been employed, knowingly or not, in dance cultures ever since. As black people, the dancers were excluded from many of the economic and social benefits of mainstream America; as homosexuals, they were excluded from its moral universe; as black homosexuals, they were even prevented from expressing their identity within their own communities. This contributed to a powerful frustration which found its release in the clubs, the only place where they could truly be themselves and play out their desires without fear or inhibition. The explosion of energy was enormous; the bonding too. Compounded by drugs, the rhetoric of unity and togetherness which echoed down through club cultures to come was forged in these clubs: disco and house both mixed the secular, the invocations to sexual abandon, with the spiritual, the wistful yearning for a 'better day' when 'we will all be free'.

Larry Levan had started his career at New York's Continental Baths, where Bette Midler also got her break, accompanied on piano by a young Barry Manilow. The Continental Baths was the most famous of the gay sex-dens known as 'bath-houses' (the rest of which were shut down in the eighties by the city's health department as AIDS devastated the gay community). It was primarily designed for orgiastic abandon, complete with saunas, showers and private rooms – but it also had a dancefloor where men could sweat out the physicality expressed in the music.

Levan's friend, a South Bronx-born 'Loft baby' called Frankie Knuckles (his real name, not an alias), was also a DJ at the Continental Baths. Knuckles had worked with Levan before, as assistant to another pioneering mixer, Nicky Siano, at the Gallery. Siano was a bisexual drug fiend and a genuine musical innovator, and his club had been one of the birthplaces of disco in the early seventies. 'There were points when the music was

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