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Night fever

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NIGHT FEVER
by
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Date \[1/31/84\]
INTRODUCTION

Locally and across the country in the winter/spring of 1979, disco dancing was pulsating, throbbing, glittering in clubs full of home-town stars.

The photographs for my thesis project, "Night Fever," were taken over a six-week period at Rochester's Club 747. Before beginning to shoot, I had frequented a number of local disco clubs and found them, and the whole subject of disco, exciting. Disco was an interesting social and cultural phenomenon, which I set out to illustrate by using photography to grasp some of the possible inner significance of body gestures, group interaction, portraiture and fashionable garb.

In a culture with an abundance of hero worship, discos were an outlet for many people to become "Saturday Night Stars" -- every night. Andy Warhol declared that everyone in the United States would have their fifteen minutes of fame. The discos' stars made their own fame.

As the late Neil Bogart (who was president of Casablanca Records) observed, "A few years ago, I went into the clubs and I realized people needed mood music. They were tired of guitarists playing to their amplifiers. The wanted to be the Stars."
I observed the regular attendance of particular individuals who seem to have become local "Stars" of Club 747. In my photographic study, I have concentrated on dance style, clothing, gesture portraiture and group interactions.

Over the six weeks of active shooting, I shot pictures twice a week to allow time for selection and proofing existing materials. In the fall of 1979, I displayed approximately eighty 16 by 20-inch black and white prints accompanied by disco music. The sounds and sight.
APPROACH

The project was completed with the use of 35 mm camera, motor driven, 24 mm and 35 mm lenses, with light source coming from flash attachment. This equipment was chosen to provide me with enough mobility to carefully document this compacted environment.

My approach was extremely candid and as unobtrusive as possible. After a night's shooting, I processed and contact printed the film. The contacts were edited by viewing them under a high-powered magnifying glass to bring out details in each exposure one normally couldn't see under a regular loupe. Eight-by-ten inch prints were then made from selected shots. At this stage I made work prints only to give me an idea of the material covered. Eventually, I reduced the enormous amount of images to 250 workprints. Eighty-five finished sixteen by twenty prints finally comprised the "Night Fever" thesis show.

Approximately 75 rolls of Tri-X (36 exposure) film were exposed and processed in D76 1:1 for ten minutes at 70 degrees. Contact sheets and workprints were made on eight-by-ten Brovira contrasts 1, 2 and 3 developed in D72 straight. Finished prints were made on the same paper in sixteen-by-twenty-inch size, and with the same developer.

All finished photographs were archivally printed and preserved.
Taking on the "Night Fever" project was a pleasurable experience for me because I enjoyed the atmosphere, the music and the people. I frequented Club 747 to the extent that I gained a very good feel for the rhythms and routines of the place and got to know the "regular crowd" -- those people who could be counted on to be at the disco club every Friday night, for instance. I discovered the interesting characters, the "in-group" and newcomers alike. The "regulars" were often costumed in the most elaborate dress--leopard-skin, tight pants, off-the-shoulder and low-backed tops and sweaters, and exaggerated make-up (photo A). Newcomers often tried to emulate these styles, but often wore more "everyday" clothing -- clothing you were more likely to see in the office or on the street.

I tried to capture the nature and character of Club 747 -- this particular club at this particular time -- which is not to say I tried to capture all disco clubs. Each has its own character, its own ambience.

What did I observe at Club 747? A host of emotions, interactions, dramas. A closed society in which the stars could shine, if only for an evening, and in which the outsiders, the newcomers, looked longingly to those stars as role models to emulate.
One thing I wanted my photographs to show was the exquisite care and attention these disco dancers spent on their appearance. Make-up and garb are a large part of the social structure. Just as these people see themselves as "stars for the night", their clothing and make-up constitute colorful, theatrical costumes.

"Their dresses and their shoes are new
But their hearts are weary through and through.
And it's a long way into the light of day,
While the juke box and the radio play."¹

The clothes are shimmery, sparkling, shiny. Did these office workers/machinists-by-day spend all of their weekly pay on beautiful finery for their weekends of stardom at the discos?

Shiny, flashy clothing is a way of communicating, sure as spoken language is another. Clothing slots the wearer neatly into a particular social category and is a form of body language; clothing is a means of visual display.

"Displaying the latest mode indicates not only the social awareness of the individual but also the ability to pay for new clothes at regular intervals, and therefore has its own special status value....In this way clothing is as much a part of human body-language as gestures, facial expressions and postures."²

¹. Jackson Browne, "Disco Apocalypse" © 1980 Swallow Turn Music/ASCAP
The flash on my camera highlights the shine on the clothes and picks up the glittery harshness of the lights and chrome and metal surroundings of the airplane-like club itself. The paper I was to use to make the prints, Agfabrovira, is highly contrasty to carry out this harshness. And the harshness the eye focuses on is part of the deeper atmosphere of the disco club. It is a highly stratified atmosphere, with a well-defined, although unwritten, set of regulations. "Stars" reign, and outsiders may not step over their secondary-status boundaries. So the atmosphere is not a happy, casual one, but rather a strictly structured one. Harsh is a good description of the mood.

The rhythms and sounds are loud and driving. They, too, are harsh, not melodious and pretty. One can't help but sense a sadness, and an emptiness, in the loud gaity, the unrelenting beat, the emphasis on cosmetics and costumes, like masks to hide behind. The music is a drug to take the pressures off of life's modern toughness and dreariness. The disco is a place where one can forget. A high-flying place, a night place, dark and mysterious. And it's a place for instant seduction and sexuality; mating dances, prenning and strutting.
"Courting, mating and various social pursuits are used as sources for dance sequences... on the disco floor young couples do not circulate, partners preferring to face each other and make sexual-intention-movements and exaggerated locomotion on the spot actions, often containing elements of turning away from the partners and then turning back to them"\(^3\) (photo B).

"Where the days turn into the nights
People move into the sounds and sights
Like the moth is drawn into the lights
Like the tight-rodle walker into the heights
It's in their hearts
It's in their hips
It's in their feet
It's on their lips
A single sound that never ends
They die each night and live again."\(^4\)

The photographs I took at Club 747 show the variety of people and interactions. There's the woman all alone and looking so isolated. All dressed up with no place to go, nursing her solitary drink and hoping someone will ask her to dance. The inevitable wallflower, the loner, the outsider (photo C).

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3. Ibid., p. 178.

There is the tough-guy-with-his-chick couple all "duded up" in leopard-skin and sheik headress (photo D). Looking defiantly into the camera lens as if this was truly their chance at stardom -- the big time is just around the corner -- full of cocky self-confidence.

There is pure sexuality -- dancing that unabashedly and joyously stimulates sex and intimacy. The dress up around the waist, the plunging neckline (photo E). The music, of course, is sexual -- a highly sophisticated blend of rhythmic essences. "The disco beat that throbs under the surface of modern life is as ingeniously designed, as finely tooled, and as professionally manufactured as the engine of a BMW. Its phallically probing bass line comes from soul, its fast, flying tempo from jazz; its thumping, mechanically insistent beat from rock...Disco is meant to be experienced subliminally, not so much in the mind as in the body...a pleasure-oriented party music, sometimes a musical stroke book or an aural porno flick, the disco mix says nothing but suggests a great deal." 5

Part of the social structure of Club 747, as I mentioned, is the "regulars," the people who continually returned to the club over the many nights I was there. And because they have grown to know each other, they are uninhibited, liberated with each other. For this group, they feel all the comforts of home -- and so their dancing style recognizes and reflects this familiarity and intimacy (photo F).

And as photographer, I could not keep myself anonymous. I became know, too, as a frequent part of the scene. This served me well because the dancers reacted to me in one of two ways. Either they tended to ignore me because I was familiar, which was a great aid to candid results, or they started to perform for me and my camera at times, which provided very interesting and attractive moments. They saw the camera as glorifying them, and they were "on" when the camera was near-by (photo G).

The club is not named after an airplane for naught. Drugs make the dancers even less inhibited, more self-secure, if only temporarily, through their highs. The disco dancers soared in the ionosphere when flying in their private 747.

Extremes in dress, motion and drugs are defining states in all disco. "(Binding) these otherwise dissimilar establishments together is the music and the shared atmosphere of overstimulation. If disco is emblematic of where its at today, then the stunning profusion of lights, sounds, rhythms, motions, drugs, spectacles and illusions that comprises the disco ambience must be interpreted as our contemporary formula for pleasure and high times. The essence of the formula is the concentration of extremes. Everything is taken as far as it can be taken; then it is combined with every other extreme to produce the final rape of the human sensorium." 6

6. Ibid., p. 21.
For all their extroverted, exhibitionist appearances, however, the Club 747 disco society members were a remarkably self-conscious group. They are extremely concerned with how other perceive them. Behind the poses are a host of insecurities. Every article of clothing, every smear of make-up, every outrageous hairdo, was carefully chosen and applied. Models and actors awaiting direction.

"The whole thing about disco is the sound," as one disco drummer, Jean Marc Cerrone, said.7

The music is, as described earlier, a hybrid of various elements -- Latin percussion, and its sensuous rhythms; jazz; the 60s Funk music of James Brown and Sly Stone (who said, "Everybody Is A Star," in one of his 60s hits); Afro-Cuban music and early basic rock-n-roll, and rhythm and blues.

The sound, mixed with revolving lights and turned-on dancers, produces a feeling both sensuous and sensual. It's that feeling the photographs in the "Night Fever" project are meant to portray.

There is movin' all around
There is something goin' down
And they can feel it.
On the wave of the air
There is dancin' out there...
Got the fever
And the feelin' is right
Night fever
Night fever."^8

In "Night Fever" there are individual portraits and there are pictures of interaction. In the Cluo 747 disco scene, everyone is interwoven, touching, grabbing, groping. And yet there is a sense of aloneness and solitude -- like the pretty young blond girl who was dressed in dazzling, off-the-shoulder dress, a ribbon in her fluffy hair, staring up into space in her own separate world. The "stars" in the background make a perfect backdrop for this spacey portrait (photo H).

The play of light at Club 747 was fascinating. I wondered if the moving lights would play havoc with my photo attempts. The lights turned out to be no problem, really. In many exposures, the lights danced off the surroundings, and added to the moving, rhythmic atmosphere. Because I was using an on-camera flash, the lighting was artificial and harsh. The reflected light and ambient light worked to highlight the subjects, along with the flash (photo I).

I was careful to frame and compose photos quickly, as I was determined to print them absolutely full-frame. I wanted a spare, clean design. There would be no cropping. Whatever the camera saw was included.

Some photos are purely graphic -- such as a shot of arms, torsos, (Photo J) legs. But more often, the photos capture a moment alive, a "slice of life" and the interplay between elements and people (photo K).

One photo shows another social aspect of the club, homosexuality. Two strikingly beautiful women dancing, in their own universe, staring intently and deeply at each other. What do we see in their interplay? Are they intoxicated with one another, or simply intoxicated? I'm not sure, but it says to me powerful interplay, underlying hopes and expectations, the power of the music and of the whole scene (photo L).

This photograph shows, again, that there is a rich variety of human experience at the club. And as self-conscious and "displayed" as everyone is, there is also the element of live-and-let-live. We are all different, and yet we're all here together in this tightly closed society.

Togetherness is, and always has been, an aim of social dancing. "Dances consist of repetitive, abstracted versions of familiar everyday activities. Elements were taken from hunting, food-gathering and a whole variety of domestic and agricultural chores....the main reward for performing these in a stylized way as part of a musical ritual is the simultaneous, joint activation of the whole group.
It is as if the dancing action, performed by everyone together at the same time and at the same place, emphasize the consensus of feeling in the group about their patterns of living...they all feel 'as one' and the reward is in this sense of belonging."^9

At Club 747, there are uncharacteristically older couples, (Photo M), fat and decidedly unattractive people (Photo N). There are happy looking people, sad looking people, people looking for lovers, looking for fun, looking for a friend (photo O). Each was there for their own reasons.

"I come from a world where there's nothing you can live for
Except when day turns into night.
I'm the star in the neon lights.
I know the only way out is through my dancing
That's when I live my fantasies
When I dance they look at me
That's one thing you can't take from me..."^10

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CONCLUSION

My Night Fever" pictures are about music. Sound and image play off each other. You can picture the movement in the music, hear the rhythms in the pictures.

The challenge for me was to capture that rhythm -- live, candid, fast and yet intelligently composed.

I became a part of the scene, part of the group. The people of Club 747 let me in and opened up their world -- and themselves -- to allow me to really document what went on there. Thanks to them, I was able to make a successful, permanent record of the cultural phenomenon that represents everyone's dreams of stardom, everyone's grab at the top.
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