

From left: Keith Haring, Bethany Hardison, Grace Jones, Fred 'Fab 5 Freddy' Brathwaite at the Fun Gallery, New York, circa 1983



Life And Death On The New York Dance Floor 1980–1983

Tim Lawrence

Duke University Press Pbk 578 pp

Towards the end of Tim Lawrence's determined and focused study of New York City's early 1980s party scene, one is overcome by a sense of loss while simultaneously feeling captivated by the promise of possibility. Just like Lawrence's earlier *Love Saves The Day*, an unforgettable excavation of the 1970s US disco scene, and *Hold On To Your Dreams*, a devoted uncovering of Arthur Russell's professional and personal lives, *Life And Death On The New York Dance Floor* is a remarkably intense piece of "community history writing". It breathes life into an iconic historical epoch and sociocultural scene without ever retreating into nostalgia or naive celebration.

In fact, there's something unexpectedly electrifying about reading Lawrence's exceptionally well-researched historical studies. It is the sensation of remotely yet meaningfully becoming part of something hitherto only secretly known. One becomes slowly yet unequivocally aware of how that specific era's cultural and sociopolitical conditions, so thoroughly reconstructed in these works, resonate with the current sense of cultural and political impasse.

Lawrence, as he mentions in the opening pages of the book, initially set out to write the successor to *Love Saves The Day*. His intention was to mine the history of 1980s American dance culture, and more precisely the ways in which post-disco evolved into house and techno music and, ultimately, how this epitomised a shift towards Europe as the centre of the global party scene. Instead, Lawrence got sidetracked by the

decade's previously undervalued, creatively vibrant and socially dynamic first four years and how they were shaped by New York City's pulsating dance floors. As the author rightly notes, it is a period marked by a "lack of identity as well as the kind of clean-cut generic innovation that can provide an easy anchor for chroniclers and readers alike".

So Lawrence convincingly undercuts the usually perpetuated, straightforward disco to house narrative fuelled by, among other things, the uncritical rehashing of Frankie Knuckles's infamous dictum that house was "disco's revenge", and thus puts this brief in-between period marked by the unique meeting and synthesis of post-disco, post-punk and early hip-hop centre stage. For Lawrence, this hybrid party culture in which cross-cultural music scenes (Afrika Bambaata, Anita Sarko) collided with artistic ones (Keith Haring, Jean-Michel

Basquiat) as well as intellectual spheres (Sylvère Lotringer, Antonio Negri) on New York's dance floors (Danceteria, Mudd Club) is of interest not in spite of its lack of generic clarity but because of its unique social and sonic possibilities of interaction, openness and exchange.

As in his previous, meticulously researched studies, Tim Lawrence truly performs an act of captivating scholarship, without ever falling into the pitfalls of academic-speak. He presents each year's events in four parts throughout the book, each sectioned into chapters that take on New York's diverging party scenes and the music linked to them, the relationship between broader cultural developments and those in the music industry, as well as urgent sociopolitical matters and sparsely yet sufficiently (never exhaustingly) applied theoretical analysis. He does so through a structure that is more ambiguous than it is linear, often moving sideways while the harsh conclusions of his narrative start to gradually seep in.

In a chapter halfway through the book ("Shrouded Abatements And Mysterious Deaths"), these conclusions are first hinted at as an "exotic new disease" making its appearance, and "nobody knew how you got it or why". "People were dying quickly" and thus a "viral death sentence" started to haunt New York City's clubs as early as 1981. Together with increasingly tough Reaganomics, the crack epidemic, real estate inflation, demographic shifts and musicians and clubs catering to increasingly segregated audiences, the synergistic elements that first set the scene apart weakened severely from 1984 onwards.

Tim Lawrence is a master of relating these developments to the sonic worlds they have shaped. Despite his narrative being shrouded in loss and anger, you walk away with the idea that "given the right conditions, a different city can exist". This is both energising and politically apt, with that decade's unscrupulous New York real estate mogul now dictating today's unforgiving global political climate.

Niels Van Tomme

Message To Our Folks: The Art Ensemble Of Chicago

Paul Steinbeck

University Of Chicago Press Hbk 336 pp

The Art Ensemble Of Chicago are one of the most uniquely American groups in history. By their very existence, they weave together multiple cultural streams from across the African-American diaspora: jazz and the blues; African music, both traditional and modern (trumpeter Lester Bowie spent close to a year in Nigeria, living and working with Fela Kuti); the avant garde and modern composition; and more. Their visual presentation – Bowie's lab coat, saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell's professorial blazers, and the Asian and African-derived face paint worn by saxophonist Joseph Jarman, bassist Malachi Favors and drummer Famoudou Don Moye – and their willingness to turn concerts into guerrilla theatre performances, with sketches, props and

dialogue, took them far beyond the realm of jazz or even avant garde music. As Muddy Waters said to Malachi Favors backstage, after the 1972 performance documented on the live album *Bap-Tizum*, "I don't know what y'all was doing, but y'all was doing it."

Active since 1968, at their peak The Art Ensemble were more than a jazz band: they were a model of collective artistic organisation. Particularly during a sojourn in France from 1969–71, they lived and worked together, pooling creative and financial resources (without the cult-like atmosphere of Sun Ra's Arkestra) and setting up infrastructure so that in the years that followed, other avant jazz artists could make the same trip they had and find an audience waiting. Lester Bowie, who had the good fortune to marry Fontella Bass – an R&B singer with a mainstream career and a hit single – and thus make inroads into the music industry, was able to finance some of

the group's early gambits (like the journey to Paris) and set in motion a process that ultimately found all five members of the group living in middle class comfort, while still playing wild, challenging avant garde art music.

Paul Steinbeck's book dives deep into each member's biography; in the process, he examines multiple ways of being black in mid-century America, and shows how they all ultimately twined together to create the multi-headed thing that was The Art Ensemble. He also shows how the group fit into larger worlds: the Chicago scene, the AACM (which they co-founded and subsidised), the black expatriate community in France, and the record industry. In exploring The Ensemble's critical reception, he points out the romantic myopia that caused them (and other free jazz musicians) to be portrayed as some sort of revolutionary vanguard, and how they

fought, frequently in vain, against such a narrow understanding of themselves and their work. He also devotes entire chapters to thorough musical analyses of specific albums and live performances.

The book is not perfect. It fast-forwards through The Ensemble's career after 1980, spending relatively little time on their ECM or DIW albums. Granted, the tsunami of work they released between 1969–74 (15 studio albums and three live albums) is commonly understood to be their artistic peak, but if one has chosen to write an entire book on a group, shouldn't that be the moment for critically underexamined work to get its turn in the spotlight?

Still, this is a crucial work of scholarship, one that's been a long time coming. The Art Ensemble Of Chicago were a once in a lifetime phenomenon; a book this passionate and informed is the least they've earned.

Phil Freeman

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