

You can DANCE if you want to

Jack Lamport

The pop artist Pink once speculated, "If God is a DJ / life is a dance floor / and love is a rhythm / then you are the music." When I left the UK in August 2004, I imagined that in New York City – the land of Saturday Night Fever, Frankie Knuckles and Studio 54 – life would indeed be a dance floor. Accustomed to dancing my socks off back home, I was in high anticipation of losing myself in newfound apocalypses of sound systems, lasers and smoke machines; I licked my chops at the prospect of downtown dance-topias spilling blissfully into bars, rooftops and house-parties. Sadly, shortly after arrival in the Big Apple the "I love New York" record I was playing scratched. Teetering

on the brink of a dark, lonely, lackluster dance floor somewhere off Christopher Street, I must have been looking a little disheartened. A worldly old queen felt moved to confess, "Dancing in New York is not what it used to be, kiddo."

Regardless, during those first few weeks I charged round as many hotspots as Manhattan's online listings could muster. There *were* dance clubs in this city. But, sure enough, this was not dance-topia. The go-go boys seemed somehow to be dancing in-lieu of the crowd; the explosion of lights, sound and lasers I had awaited was nowhere to be found. Bridge and tunnel superclubs—barren hangars on 11th avenue—



were overpriced and rightly deemed “too much of a commitment” by chic Manhattanites; while the only credible option – clubs in (or spawned by) the East Village – favored no lighting at all, so that to impress folk with one’s dance-moves it was necessary to open one’s cell phone and shine it upon oneself. In New York’s bars, I soon understood what it meant to be in a city with cabaret laws: if you broke into a jive, people would think you’d lost your mind.

At my first New York house party, after hours of bonding, drinking, and whiplash humor, I wondered if the dancing would at last begin. After all, the vodkas were strong, the music deeply prance-worthy, and the cabaret laws not in effect here. Offering encouragement, I attempted to nurture a boogie by introducing the subtlest sway, the faintest sashay, the merest smattering of a shimmy. Before long I realized I was being eyeballed in a manner that unmistakably signified the question, “what on earth are you doing?” At the end of the day, in New York, dancing was just not cool. If God was a DJ, then this city was very secular indeed.

Since my early days of wide eyed optimism, I’ve considered that “British reserve” might have been reincarnated in New York in the form of the American “D-low”. Compare Friday nights. These days in the UK young people get riotously drunk, making the sight of vomiting on the street familiar in the Sceptered Isle. In New York, on the other hand, people restrain their drinking, succumbing to a different fate: a pandemic of pouts. Many beautifully presented Martinis do not even make it down the gullet past the all-important moue. The cocktails may be in hand, but their sugared rims are barely broken. The result: posture, poise, strut and swagger all stand in rude defiance of the disco-ball.

As a friend from Norway pointed out, if The New School for Social Research were really true to its European roots, like any institution of further education in Europe, it would have a bar. Heritage

aside, this would mean that all those glances exchanged between the escalators and reading room could lead somewhere. But why the need for *another* bar in the middle of the Village, you ask? Because the real purpose of a student bar is to offer discounted drinks. Five cheap pints work wonders before heading out into the city with a group of friends for a romp. In Britain, where folk are legal to drink at 18, even undergrad years typically amount to one public and prolonged booze-up. At my first night at Cambridge University, college authorities laid on enough free liquor to poison all the freshmen. Within hours, hapless souls, following time honored tradition, fell flat on their backs and projected great rainbows of vomit into the drizzly evening air. Meanwhile, back across the pond (from decadent Europe to religious America), you can fight

for your country long before you can legally enjoy a pint. Call me a lush, but I always considered a round of machine gun fire (God bless America!) to be a little more hazardous than a whisky on the rocks.

And call me a spinning Jenny, but I do like a dance – and preferably with an alcoholic beverage in hand. In my opinion, to pass through one’s youth without regular spells of dancing and drinking is by far the most heinous crime of dissipation. But, as the jaded queen on Christopher Street suggested, life in New York is not going to metamorphose into a dance floor any time soon. As a Liberal Studies student I can take some comfort from the fact that our department does have its hedonistic moments, laying on strong Martinis in the Wolff Conference room. And sometimes, just very occasionally, if people have had enough white wine... we even have a little dance.

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