



FASHION BOOK

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Bill Bernstein on Photographing New York's Disco Era: The Latest Exhibit Goes Behind The Strict-Door Policies of Studio 54

By: Natalie Chui



During the mid to late 1970's, New York's disco scene emerged from the underground to the mainstream, and became one of the city's most culturally defining eras of history. The nightclubs that thrived during disco's heyday is the subject of a new exhibition at the Museum of Sex. Dubbed "Night Fever: New York Disco 1977- 1979: The Bill Bernstein Photographs," the exhibition is centered around 40 photographs, that document a glimpse into the happenings within exclusive nightclub scenes at Studio 54, Xenon, Paradise Garage, and many more.

Bill Bernstein—whose interest in photography came from imagery by Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus, captured these unseen photographs over a two-year period, allowing a different look into the real communities that these clubs created, bringing together people from the LGBT community and breaking societal barriers. Divided into sections by clubs, the photographs also include interviews from some of the club regulars, revealing more details about certain images. Also included in the exhibition is a pop-up disco soundtracked by an original Richard Long Audio System— a fixture within these nightclubs, and a fully operating bar offering 70's inspired cocktails. Here, Bernstein weighs in on the stories behind the photographs that freeze the city's short-lived but much adored era in time.

How did you start photographing New York's disco scene?

After I left college, I was hired regularly by The Village Voice. Fred McDarrah—who was the head photographer there, sent me an assignment to go to Studio 54 to cover an event. I wasn't really interested in disco scene, although at that time it had become extremely popular after the release of Saturday Night Fever. Earlier, I had actually out of curiosity tried to get into Studio 54, but wasn't able to because I wasn't cool enough. So this night I knew I was going to get in as I was on the press list. After I got in and covered the event, I decided I wasn't going to leave with the rest of the paparazzi. I waited for the regular crowd to come in at about 10 or 11pm. I thought I was never going to be able to get in again as it had such a strict door policy. I ended up leaving at 6 or 7 in the morning the next day and was totally fascinated by the scene inside.

What was the atmosphere inside the nightclub scene like?

What drew me into the scene that night, that kept me going for the next couple of years to clubs in New York City, was that I saw this inclusiveness that I'd never seen before. I saw gays, transgender men and women, straights, really old, really young, African American. I saw a real mix of various cultures all partying together harmoniously, having fun on the dance floor and really enjoying themselves. In terms of really mixing and partying together—I didn't see any transgender men and women during Woodstock. What I saw in the late 70's was a victory dance for all of the movements that happened; the civil rights movement, the women's movements; all the LGBT movements that were happening at that time. From a photojournalist point of view, that's what caught my eye. The outside view was not inclusive and accepting but once you got into the door, you were in a different world.

What kept you photographing clubs until the late 70's?

"Looking back on it, disco was really a fad. It was something that all of a sudden, took over the culture. Rock radio stations overnight turned into all disco—major rock bands started dipping into disco. Style grew out of this disco craze which resulted in a lot of different styles mixed together. If you look at the history of New York City during the mid to late 70's, it was a really bad time—New York city was near broke, there were garbage strikes and trans strikes and the city was told to drop dead when they asked for money from the general government. Artists flocked from all over the world to New York City because it was cheap and these people ended up at discos at night. So, the fashions and environment they created was extremely creative."

How did people in the nightclub react to you as a photographer?

"I never ever had someone tell me, 'Don't take my photograph.' I wasn't going on special 'party' nights that were celebrity only where paparazzi would be expected. I considered myself to be more of a portrait photographer, so I decided my focus was going to be on the regulars that went there as to me, they were the most interesting."

Were there any regulars within the club that particularly stood out to you?

"There was a woman named Disco Sally, who was about 78 years old. She and her husband were both lawyers—he had passed away a few years earlier and she was broken hearted. One night someone suggested that she should go to Studio 54. She was about five-foot tall, grey hair but full of life and very spunky. She ended up having a great time at Studio 54 and became a regular there. Celebrities, would end up lining up to dance with her."

How did the exhibition with the Museum of Sex come about?

"When my book—Disco came out last November, the curator of the Museum of Sex approached me with a lot of interest in this era of New York City and the sexual revolution within the time. At first, they used one of my photographs for their subway advertisements. Then, we had a meeting where they discussed the idea of the exhibition. Initially, I felt that it was a little off course for my work, as they wanted to focus on the sexuality, which wasn't necessarily my main focus. However, I felt that was also an interesting side element to it as this was a subcultural norm that was happening within these clubs that weren't happening anywhere in the mainstream culture. I worked with them particularly on the choice of images. My goal

was to create an environment where you would walk off the New York City streets in 2016 and end up in a club that looks and feels like 1977 or 1978."

Amongst the pictures within the exhibit, is there any particular one you carry a special attachment to?

"There's one picture that was taken at Studio 54 of five people in a couch—four guys and one women. The men are all crowded around her, and she looks like the Queen Bee, and the men are her drones. She just looks like the Queen of the hive. To me, that's one of the very first images I took and it had a real impact on me because their so interesting to look at, yet they are there to be seen and watch—It's this tiny little freeze of people at the club that night."

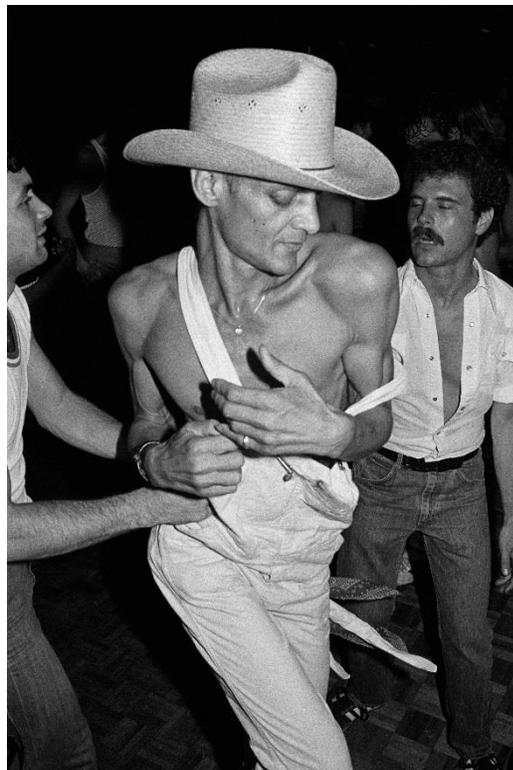
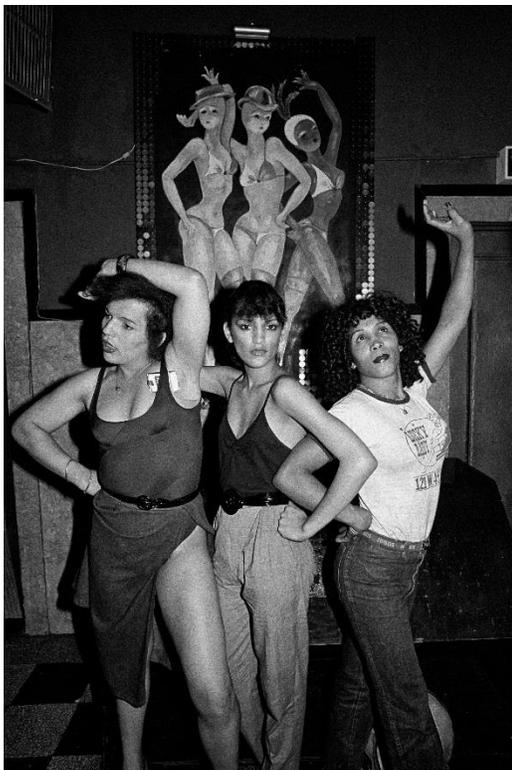
Does this exhibition carry a lot of nostalgia for you?

"This really is very nostalgic for this because theres so many people involved in this project that had contributed and are really dedicated towards that time. So there's a lot of additional knowledge you can learn from that era that was written by people about that time."

When people come and see the exhibition, what do you hope they leave with?

"There's going to be shock value when they see some of the photographs. When I show my book to millennials, the main comment I get is that people wish they were alive during that time. During that late 70's period, there was a lot of homophobia out there, and clubs were a form of escapism from the reality. I think people will gain a lot of knowledge in terms of what the era was about and to see what made it so incredibly unique in New York's history. It was, in many ways, a sneak peek of the inclusiveness that became part of mainstream American culture."

Night Fever: New York Disco 1977-1979, The Bill Bernstein Photographs is currently running until February 19, 2017 at the Museum of Sex, 233 Fifth Avenue.



All Photographs: Bill Bernstein