

# filthy dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own  
Minorities

Lost In Music: Reclaiming Past Disco Days At Martin Beck's 'Last Night'  
Posted on March 26, 2017 by EMILY COLUCCI



Martin Beck's Last Night at The Kitchen

We're lost in music  
Caught in a trap  
No turnin' back  
We're lost in music  
—Sister Sledge "Lost In Music"

The ladies of Sister Sledge knew what they were talking about when they said there was no turning back in their song “Lost In Music.” While the singers meant giving themselves over to the rhythm of disco at the height of its dazzling era, there is, indeed, no turning back now either.

In other words, how can we, in 2017, turn back, revisit or reclaim the ecstatic energy of the disco days of the 1970s and 1980s? Between then and now, an entire generation of dancers was decimated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic while our cities wiped out communal nightlife spaces, exchanging them for online communities and app cruising. How can we negotiate these losses, honor what has been lost and what is left?

Artist Martin Beck tangled with these questions of loss and the drive for disco preservation in his deceptively simple film *Last Night*, the centerpiece of his four-day long exhibition of the same title at The Kitchen. *Last Night* memorializes one of the last dances at influential invite-only party The Loft at its 99 Prince Street location in 1984. But, rather than trying (and failing) to recapture the amyl nitrate-scented high of that night, Beck strips away the sweat-covered bodies, the dancing and the mirror ball and balloon-strewn scenery for what is left—the music as its sonic memory.

Beck films the entire staggering 118-song playlist on a series of vintage record players in a mundane, domestic space. Watching a record spin around and around on a monumental screen is admittedly about as visually interesting as watching paint dry. I found myself sitting for song after song, maddening spin after spin, of this parade of record players blasting disco classics.

The entire film runs an exhausting 13-hours, an extreme level of disco reverie that could only be helped by copious and precisely dosed drug taking. However, in The Kitchen, all viewers did (including me) was sit like lumps on one of three sofas. Hey! Anyone got any poppers?!

Despite its repetitive visuals, the music still maintains its transcendent high. The thing I’ve always loved about disco, particularly the music played by The Loft founder David Mancuso, is its sincerity. It’s even sincere about its cheesiness, as well as its unwavering positivity. Another room in The Kitchen features a serigraph print that lists song titles. From “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now” to “Come On Down, Boogie People,” and “Prepare To Energize,” the print reads like a manic poem to disco excess from days gone by.



Film still from Martin Beck, *Last Night*, 2016 (Courtesy the artist and The Kitchen)

## Remembering The Loft

In many ways, the film, as well as the exhibition, works as a tribute to David Mancuso, who passed away with seemingly everyone else last year. And it's Mancuso's inclusive legacy that makes *Last Night* feel like such a powerful and provocative disco memorial.

Sparked in 1970 by his Valentine's Day Love Saves The Day party, Mancuso, a guru-like figure, began to throw parties at a loft in 647 Broadway, which would move several times in its existence. The disco was influenced by rent parties in Harlem that, as Tim Lawrence reflects in his book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*, "suggested community-based model of unlicensed, private partying that could be sustained by donations" (60).

Community-based is key to understanding the collective joy harnessed by Mancuso and The Loft. Tim Lawrence explains, "The civil rights, gay liberation, feminist and antiwar movements fed into the rainbow coalition identification of his come-as-you-are crowd" (61). And true to Lawrence's historical observation, club attendees at the Loft supported this fact. Louis "Loose" Kee Jr. described a scene "with blacks, whites, old, young, straight and gay in the same room" (62).

The Loft was unusual because of this mixed crowd, a direct contrast to the more exclusionary discos that came later. As his friend Colleen Murphy wrote in "David Mancuso Taught Us That Being Selfless Is The Ultimate Act of Rebellion" for *Thump*, "His cause was informed by the ideals of the 60s counterculture, and was concerned with respect, equality, love and freedom. This may sound like reverent, outdated "hippie-speak" to a young contemporary audience, but I would argue that this set of values is not only defiant, but absolutely imperative in the face of the growing right-wingism of the Western world."

And it was then too. It's no surprise that this air of acceptance became a communal space for dancers, particularly queers and people of color who felt marginalized from dominant society and certain nightclubs. As Archie Burnett said in *Life And Death On The New York Dance Floor*, "The Loft was a sanctuary" (62).

Murphy echoes, "David's aim was to build a community of like-minded souls and to provide an inclusive safe haven where the only requirement was an open mind. In this era of social division, this is a very daring concept indeed." Yes, Colleen, yes it is.

## Where Do Old Sanctuaries Go?

What is left of these sanctuaries (though there are even still Loft parties today) other than the likely very blurry memories of the club goers? Well, as Beck shows, it's the music, which still contains that utopian energy that can, in its listening, gesture to an imagined space of possibility. A record player in a dull space can still reflect on and point to the promise of communal belonging, inspired by the sanctuaries of the past and a better future.

This impulse to glimpse at other worlds, even ones on a certain night in 1984, is reminiscent of Jose Esteban Munoz's notion of queer utopia as laid out in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. As Munoz writes, "queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (1). Not only does Beck's *Last Night* reference the past, but it also invariably points to a possible collectivity in the future.

"The here and now is a prison house," writes Munoz, as he goes on to assert, "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (1). This is what Beck's film achieves. I won't lie, it made me quite depressed to see the maximalist ecstasy of disco converted into minimalism, but, on further reflection, Beck does exactly what Munoz articulates: in transforming the euphoric to the monotonous, he points to the lack in the "here and now." More than envisioning a disco-filled world beyond this one—either in the past or

the future— himself, Beck leaves the work up to the viewer, allowing the unwavering feeling of loss to motivate a drive to recapture these communal spaces.

“We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world and ultimately new worlds,” describes Jose Munoz (1). And just maybe, as Sister Sledge croons and as Beck’s film indicates, the music will be our salvation.