

Let there be light

THE UNTOLD GENESIS OF DISCO ILLUMINATION

BY ANDY THOMAS



“The best feeling in the world is when the lights are timed and synchronized just right with the music, when the music is hot and the dance floor is overflowing with crazy dancing people.”

**—DJ Mike Pace,
from Vita Mieztis and Bill Bernstein’s 1980 book *Night Dancin’***

“The way the lights would move to the music was basically like having another dance partner. And if you have a great sound system, all this noise and light and energy, when that is all merged into one, it is so intoxicating,” says London DJ and video artist Jeffrey Hinton, who first experienced the thrill of disco lighting at London’s Heaven in the early 1980s.

Much has been written on the legendary sound systems of disco created by pioneers such as Alex Rosner, Richard Long, and Barry Lederer, but next to nothing about the club’s lighting systems and the designers, technicians, and operators behind them. But for DJs and dancers, lighting has always been as important as sound in creating the atmosphere and drama.

Going right back to the earliest days of disco, lighting was used in tandem with sound, albeit a world away from the spectacle of the late 1970s and ’80s. As early as the mid-’60s, Terry Noel thrilled the crowd at Sybil Burton’s seminal discotheque Arthur in New York, both by his mixing on two Technics decks and his use of the club’s stage lighting.

Moving to DJ at Salvation in 1967 (and Salvation II a year later), Noel began to use lighting for more dramatic effect. “The Chambers Brothers’ ‘Time’ was like the theme song to Salvation,” he told writer Bill Brewster of DJHistory.com in 1998. “I’d build up to that and everybody would know it was coming. I’d turn off all the lights and you’d hear—*thud, thud, thud*. We were so primitive then, we had this ball that had a light inside it. It shot out little rays of light, and it actually had a string on it, and I would pull it to make it rock across the dance floor. ‘Time has come today.’ I’m doing lights, I’m pulling strings. I was like the Wizard of Oz. I had great lighting, I was in control of the whole thing.”

For Terry Noel, who passed away in 2011, lighting was integral to the theatrics at Salvation. “This is a play. You’re directing a play,” he told Brewster. “It’s very dramatic. It has to be dramatic, and no automatic programming is ever going to be any use, because it’s different every night and every time you play the record.”

In 1970, Francis Grasso—the pioneering spinner who took

over for Terry Noel at Salvation II two years prior—moved on to the iconic gay club Sanctuary, in a former church near Times Square. There he became the founding father of the disco mix, both in the records he played and the way he played them. Using rudimentary equipment to create his early beat-matching and blends without the privilege of speed adjustments on his Thorens turntables, Grasso worked everything himself. “The lights were on my right-hand side on a switchboard, but for the main room lights I had to go out of my booth, run past the service bar and go into this little room where there were these heavy-duty switches,” he told Tim Lawrence in a rare interview for the book *Love Saves the Day* before Grasso passed away in 2001. “I would flip the switches to the beat of the music, and then I’d run back to the booth. I earned my pay.”

The lighting system included a state-of-the-art set of strobe lights. They were used to dramatic effect by Grasso to augment his raw and rhythmic soundtrack, which ranged from the deep funk of James Brown and psychedelic soul of Rare Earth to the Latin rock of Santana and African fusion of Osibisa. “The Sanctuary was my first experience of disco lighting, and I’ve never seen strobe lights as intense as those used there, even up until today,” says DJ David DePino, who began his career in New York club culture behind the bar at the Sanctuary.

Over at 647 Broadway, at David Mancuso’s Loft—a private “club” located in his Manhattan apartment that had its debut gathering on Valentine’s Day 1970—the party host wove an equally eclectic yet more heady soundtrack—from obscure Latin rock and African drumming, to psychedelic soul, jazz fusion, and ethereal LP tracks discovered in the dustiest corners of New York’s record stores.

On his first visit to the Loft in the early 1970s, a visit that inspired him to set up his own club, the Gallery, Nicky Siano watched as David Mancuso, like Francis Grasso before him, created an immersive party environment. “He had very simple lighting, four colors against the wall—red, blue, green, and yellow—and then he had this white light that when [the music] hit a hot point, it would flash with that blinding white light,” Siano recalls. “So I am dancing and all the lights go out, but at

the end of the dance floor, there is this little lamp between two chairs that is still on, and I am focused on it. David was playing [Eddie Kendricks's] 'Girl You Need a Change of Mind,' and it comes to a break in the song, and that little lamp dims. It didn't go out; it dimmed down. That's when I realized David is controlling everything in the room. And I leaned over to my friend Robin and said, 'I've got to do this.'"

Another future DJ to watch and learn from Mancuso was Larry Levan who would become a regular at the Loft as a teenage devotee with his best friend, Frankie Knuckles. Many years before his tenure at Paradise Garage, Levan had worked as lightman at one of Manhattan's legendary gay party spaces where he got his break as a DJ. "The first place I played at was the Continental Baths... I was doing lights and the DJ walked out," Levan recalled in a seminal interview with Steven Harvey for *Collusion* magazine in 1983. When Levan graduated to DJ at the Baths, his friend Frankie Knuckles took over as lightman. "Back in the day, that's how you got a job as a DJ—if you could be the lightman, you could ultimately become the DJ, because you're right there with the music, and sooner or later the DJ has to go to the bathroom," Knuckles told Defected Records label head Simon Dunmore in an interview in 2011 three years before Knuckles sadly passed away.

Inspired by the Loft, Nicky Siano opened the Gallery in 1973 on West Twenty-Second Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Moving his party to its second location—Seventy-Two Mercer Street in SoHo—in 1974, Siano would take the blueprint of the Loft but bring a new heightened energy. "It was about seeing an idea and embellishing it. I stepped it up a big level," he told me in a previous interview for *Wax Poetics* Issue 37. While the Loft sound system cocooned its acrobatic dancers with its warmth, the Gallery sound system assaulted the senses. Designed in partnership with audiophile pioneer Alex Rosner, the system (including custom-built horns based on the low-end cabinets of corner Klipschorns) was designed explicitly to complement the extremities of Siano's wild and orgiastic soundtrack.

Responding to the dynamics of Alex Rosner's sound, Siano worked in partnership with lightman Robert DaSilva, Siano's lover at the time, to create and constantly modify the Gallery's lighting system. "The Gallery was the most advanced club at that time, but we didn't spend a lot of money. All we did was do it creatively," says Siano. "Instead of mounting the lights on one level, we mounted them on three levels so they looked like they were moving up and down. And you could view them from three points—from the balcony, the staircase, and underneath when you were on the dance floor so you had this illusion of movement."

Like the sound, every element of the lighting at the Gallery was designed around the architecture of the club. "We had regular floodlights that they used in gardens, no big pin spots

[spotlights], just red, blue, green, and yellow floods. And there were four of them on each section of the dance floor, so we split the floor into four quarters. The lighting panel had each color on a switch, so you could go *boom* and put the color onto each section. So it was sort of how you would set up stereo," says Siano. "And each of the four switches was also controlled on a dimmer. So you could either bang in the color on the lighting or dim them. If you knew the records like we did, you could really bring it all to life. And Robert became way better at it than I ever was."

One of the famous photos from the Gallery shows a mirror ball hanging from the ceiling amidst a sea of balloons and tinsel. "We had two white spots aimed diagonally at the mirror ball and also two color-wheel pin spots so we could change the colors with a switch in the booth," says Siano. While playing on three turntables, Siano operated a foot pedal designed by DaSilva. "Putting in that foot pedal for the white flash was classic," says Siano. "If all my hands were busy, as I was constantly working the EQ, I could boom with the foot pedal."

This had the effect of blinding the dancers momentarily before plunging the crowd into darkness, a trick Siano had learned at the Loft. It was simple but starkly effective. "I remember playing [MFSB's] 'Love Is the Message' and there was this point when I would always turn the bass up, and Robert knew exactly when," says Siano. "Right before it came in, he would go *boom* with the white light and then turn everything else out. So it would be totally dark. And people would go totally nuts—they would just scream. It is actually quite scientific, though, the way the eyes react to the white light and become dilated. Then you throw them into darkness and what happens—they are blinded, and what happens—they scream."

After working as lightman then DJ at Continental Baths, Larry Levan became a bona fide "Gallery baby" blowing up balloons to decorate the party with his friend Frankie Knuckles and learning about drama from Nicky Siano. It would give him a solid foundation when he took the helm at New York's legendary Paradise Garage. Known for its audiophile Richard Long-designed sound system, the Garage's bespoke lighting system was equally impressive and constantly evolving.

Responding to Levan's mixes and the sonic intensity of the club, the lighting at the Garage could veer from the dramatic to the subtle. "The lighting was so important because it created the atmosphere, and if you were not comfortable on the dance floor, you didn't let go and release yourself to the music," says David DePino, one of the few DJs to spin there alongside Levan. "And that's the way Larry designed the lighting—he wanted to enhance your musical experience. It supported the sound. It was never the star like at places like Studio 54."

While Larry Levan was most definitely the architect of the atmosphere at the Garage, he had a number of lighting



technicians and operators to assist him. "One of the very, very early ones," according to David DePino, was Joey Madonia, who joined the Garage's first lightman known simply as M.G. A regular at the Sanctuary and the Loft, Madonia earned his spurs as DJ at clubs like Galaxy 21 (alongside Walter Gibbons), where Madonia would also work the lights. "I come from the old school where DJs were the lightmen, and I think DJs make the best lightmen, because we know the music instinctively and where to extenuate things," Madonia says.

After meeting Larry Levan during his previous residency at the Michael Brody-owned club Reade Street, Joey Madonia was brought in soon after Brody opened the Garage in 1978. "In the beginning, it was all what I would call 'homemade' stuff. There were a lot of pin beams, PAR cans [parabolic aluminized reflector lamps], mirror balls, mechanical scanners," he recalls of those early years of lighting the clubs. "Then spaced out on all the walls around the dance floor, we had these heavy, thick outdoor floodlights hooked up to a controller so you could change the speed and create different patterns."

Madonia returned to the Garage in 1981 after a year-long gap during which time the lighting had been redesigned by Litelab, the company behind many of the big clubs' lighting systems during this era. With former Studio 54 lighting tech Chip Bullock now acting as lighting director, the redesign included the iconic eight giant rings that the lights now hung on. Levan also designed his own lighting panel for the Garage



with fifteen control boards that were laid out on a console that was six feet long and four feet wide. "As a lightman himself, Larry specifically wanted that panel he designed at a certain height so it was more comfortable for the lightman to stand there and work the lights," says David DePino. "Larry was very vocal on everything in the room," adds Joey Madonia. "But we were allowed to get creative. We had our own workshop in the back where we had all this gel paper that we would use to put over the lights as filters."

Madonia recalls how he also used tricks he had learned from watching other masters of their environment. "One of



the things I took from David Mancuso at the Loft at Prince Street [the party's second SoHo home in the mid-'70s] was this thing he used to do with this light right over the mirror ball," he says. "He would use that as a flashing whiteout, but it would leave this big moon shadow because it was over the mirror ball. So at the Garage, just before the blackout, I would time it just so you had this little eclipse-like effect. And the whole place lost its mind."

While he worked closely with his lighting men, Levan also brought in elements in the design that allowed him to operate the club's lights himself. "He also had a control panel above him so he was able to take control over the whole lighting console to do lights when he felt the urge and a foot pedal [like that at the Gallery] that was used to work the club's white lights," says David DePino. "To me, it made sense for Larry to have that controller," suggests Joey Madonia. "You have to remember, a lot of times something happens in a song that is so fast you don't have time to tell the lightman. And in that moment, it's gone. So Larry made it so when he knew something needed to happen with the lights in time with the music, he could just cut in and do it."

Controlling the whole environment of the club, Levan once famously got up on a ladder to clean the club's mirror balls in the middle of the party. But while Levan was most definitely in charge, he had a number of lighting technicians



and operators to assist him. "Larry used to say a good lightman is like having a great engineer in the studio while making a record—they've got to be on your wavelength, creatively," says DePino. After M.G. and Joey Madonia, some of the Garage lighting techs were Robert DaSilva, Peter Munoz, and Michael Sampson, who was there right up to the closing night of the Garage in August 1987. According to New York DJ Danny Krivit, "It was fifty percent Robert DaSilva, twenty percent Larry himself, twenty percent M.G., and I feel like less than ten percent, the others."

In 1980, a new lighting system was installed at the Garage by Litelab, conceived by designers Joe Zamore and Chris

Harms and installed with the help of a young lighting geek by the name of Marsha Stern. Also working as a music promoter on the New York club scene, Stern began working lights in the late '70s at a tiny little spot in the Village called the Cock Ring, where she would go with a group of industry friends including Sharon White, the only female DJ at the Saint. "I got friendly with the lighting guy Tom Kozalka, and at some point, he asked me to fill in for him," Stern recalls. "Tom let me work some weekdays with my friends, DJs Wayne Scott, Howard Merritt, and Richie Rivera. The lighting console was designed from a modified typewriter and you would press the keys to work the various lights. It was: *push a button and get a light*, and, as I was originally a percussionist, it came naturally."

Stern then moved to the nightclub New York, New York, where François Kervorkian began his DJ career. "Larry Shaw, one of the two lighting operators there, was going over to Fire Island where his main gig was the Ice Palace on Cherry Grove, where he worked with my great friend, DJ Roy Thode," she says. "One day, [Shaw] turned to me and said quite literally: 'Marsha, I need someone to cover for me. You know the music. If you can figure out the controllers, you've got a job.'"

Then in the spring of 1980, Stern got her big break when she was approached by the owners of the Pavilion on Fire Island to take over the lighting position as technical director. "As an aside, they said, 'By the way, we want you to design the lighting system as well,'" she recalls.

Opened in 1980 by a collective from the Pines community (Charles de Rohan Chabot, Sam Haddad, Jerry Arcaro, Steve Goodfriend, Larry Lavorgnia, and Harvey Einman), after the closure of the Sandpiper, the Pavilion was designed for serious late-night dancing with a roster of top DJs. These included names that would become legend at the Saint, including Robbie Leslie, Alan Dodd, John Ceglia, and Warren Gluck.

She called on two old friends to help with her first design of a club's lighting system, replacing the original that was installed by Tom Kozalka. "My mentors, Chip Bullock and Mark Ackerman, really helped guide me," she says of the lighting director from the Paradise Garage and lighting designer and tech director at the Saint, respectively. "Mark, who I had met through Sharon [White] when they worked together at Starship Discovery, gave me a book on how to read blueprints, and I went on from there with my first-ever lighting design from a completely clean palette. I used predominantly Litelab controllers as well as video projections done by Scott Facon. It was all very hands-on with the six owners who created something that was really unique and special. And that was to create a party environment for their community."

While the famous Studio 54 took lighting to theatrical levels befitting the club's surrounds, the most advanced of all the mechanized disco lighting systems was undoubtedly at the Saint in New York. Opened by Bruce Mailman (who owned the

nearby New St. Marks Baths) inside the former Fillmore East theater at 105 Second Avenue in September 1980, this temple of light redefined gay nightlife forever. "The Saint's renovation cost a staggering \$4.2 million," wrote Alice Echols in her book *Hot Stuff*. "The Saint was designed to make its members feel special, in a class by themselves." Inside the club, those lucky enough to get one of the three thousand memberships would have their minds blown both by the incredible quadrasonic sound system and the most legendary lighting system in all of disco.

Conceived by lighting specialists Spencer Designs in collaboration with the club's designer, Charles Terrell, the



system centered on a nearly seventy-six-foot-diameter perforated-aluminum dome that framed the 4,800-square-foot oak dance floor. Beneath the dome's huge mirror ball was a vast circular hydraulic elevator ringed with lights that created mind-blowing effects when shone on the dome. The centerpiece was a planetarium-style star-machine projector that created the starlit night sky on the dome suspended thirty-eight feet above.

In an article on the Saint for Red Bull Music Academy in 2015, Susan Tomkin, former assistant to owner Bruce Mailman, described the effect the lighting system at the Saint had on her: "I can remember the first time I went upstairs into the dome. The star machine was on, and the lights were going. I felt like somebody had sliced off the top of my head, and poured acid in my brain. That's the only way I could describe it. It was absolutely like another world."

Bruce Mailman employed a big team of lighting experts to help fulfill his dream. Among them was Marsha Stern. Alongside her colleague at the Saint, Karen Luderman, Stern was one of the few female lighting operators and designers. Graduating from her work as a behind-the-scenes lighting person, she became the first woman to operate the lighting at the Saint. "Any night I was there working, Mark [Ackerman, who was the head lighting man in the early years,] would summon me from the dance floor when he wanted to take a break, and of course I knew how to operate this equipment from working on the technical side," says Stern.

Working that system took a deep knowledge of the complex architecture of the Saint's lighting. "What made that whole setup so incredible was that nothing was digital, everything was analog," says Stern. "There were various Litelab controllers, each working specific lighting fixtures, whether that was the group of lights around the perimeter of the 360 degree dome, the lights that were on the exterior of the dome pointing inwards, or the lights in the center structure that rose from the floor."

The infamous star machine was located in the center of that masterpiece of design. "Working the controller for the star machine was like flying an airplane," Stern adds. "Then you had a controller for the hatch that was at the top of the dome that opened and another to lower and raise the mirror ball, and another that spun it. In

addition, there were two Diversitronics strobe controllers for the strobes and also four special Joshua Light Show liquid-gel-effect fixtures with their own control."

Talking to Bill Brewster in 2005, DJ Robbie Leslie described one night when a fellow DJ at the Saint, Alan Dodd, played the crescendo of "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." "Instead of a splash of light and strobes at the crescendo, what happened was everything was shut down except for these stars," he recalled. "So it went almost from morning light to pitch black and [you were] looking up and seeing a starscape like a planetarium. The crowd roared their approval. It was amazing."

Marsha Stern describes another magical night when she was working the lights for DJ Roy Thode. "We did a tea dance on the Ides of March in 1981, and to this day, that was [one of] the most memorable times I have ever worked on with anyone to this day," she recalls. "That night, Roy turned to me and said, 'That's the first time I have seen my music.'"

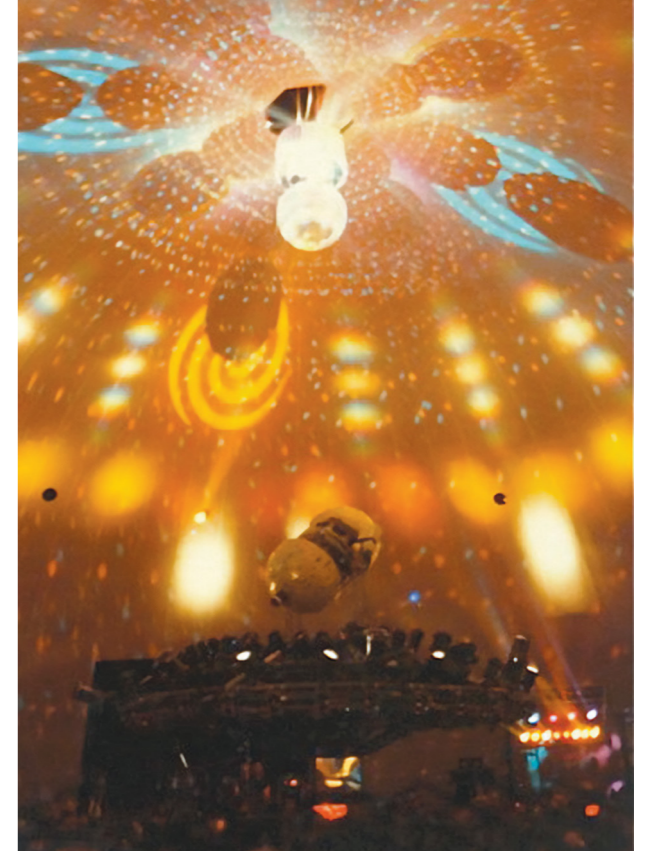
On his visits to New York from London, a young Jeffrey Hinton was also blown away by what he heard and saw. "The Saint was just amazing, and as a design of a club, I have never experienced anything like that since," he says. "It really was the best club in the world. It gave you theater, it gave you drama, and when you arrived, you never had any idea of what was going to open up in front of you. There won't be anything like that again, because all the industry behind the hydraulic disco lighting has gone."

Hinton had fallen in love with disco lighting at London's gay mecca, Heaven. Jeremy Norman opened the club in December 1979 in a former club called Global Village, housed in the arches beneath Charing Cross railway station.

In his feature for Red Bull Music Academy, "Nightclubbing: Gay Clubbing in '70s London," Luke Howard writes, "Costing a staggering £300,000 to renovate, Heaven boasted 5,000 watts, overhead tweeters and bass horns built into the floor, plus a hi-tech light show complete with lasers, lightning-effect and planet-shaped neon spotlights and high-power floodlights."

"I went there soon after it opened," Hinton says, "and it really was an incredible place. That is where I started my huge romantic passion for hydraulic disco lighting, and Heaven was the first place I had seen that. I used to love lying flat out on the dance floor with my friend Space, and we would just look up and bathe in music and lights while people danced and stepped over us."

Hinton watched in wonder at the technology that created these effects. "That was the start of me seeing all this mechanical, heated, motorized lighting that was timed to the music," he says. "They were buying all these pieces of equipment all the time, and there would always be something new to wow you. It was all part of the excitement—new visuals and new music."



Three years before the opening of the Saint, Trocadero Transfer in San Francisco had set the template for drama and theater. It was the brainchild of Dick Collier who moved to San Francisco in 1977 and was swept away by the newfound freedoms at gay clubs like the I Beam and the City Disco with the latter's 1,600-bulb lighting system operated by a young Patrick Cowley. In the documentary film *The Castro*, gay historian and activist Allan Bérubé described the liberation of dancing in the city's gay clubs: "There'd be all these lights and fans and this wonderful disco music, where you felt this beat that really united you."

But Collier wanted to add even more drama to gay nightlife in the city. He had recently been to Paris and was transfixed by old photos of the Palais du Trocadéro concert hall. He found what he thought could be San Francisco's own palace of disco opulence in an old TV studio at 520 Fourth Street. After converting the space, he brought in Barry Lederer to install the famous Graebar sound system, like the one he created for 12 West in New York, custom-built to match the acoustics of the building.

Collier set about creating the sonic and visual environment to match the great clubs of New York. The original DJs at Trocadero Transfer were Vincent Carleo and Gary Tighe, but



the spinner who would create the club's legend and connect sound and light was Bobby Viteritti. One of the masters of sleaze—or “morning music”—Viteritti's legendary sets were augmented by lighting man Billy Langenheim, who created a kaleidoscope of color through a cluster of mirrored disco balls. As skilled and dramatic as DJ Bobby Viteritti was in his spinning, lightman Billy Langenheim was held in equal reverence by Troc regulars. “The two of them together collaborated to create a mood that could go from dark and edgy to really energetic and bright in a matter of seconds,” says Steve Sukman, DJ at Studio One in Los Angeles.

The central feature of his lighting system was the cluster of mirrored balls that hung above the dance floor. “That was incredible,” Viteritti told me in 2014. “It was the huge system that came from the Fillmore East and had belonged to the J. Geils Band. It had a motor with those rotating lights, and I said, ‘Billy, can't we do something with that?’ So we bought it cheap from them and added this mirror-ball cluster. It was the first of its kind anywhere. Then we got arc lights shining up. They would create real bold dots—it was like snow.”

In his book *The Fabulous Sylvester*, Joshua Gamson explained how Bobby and Billy “believed that if they could totally control the audio and visual environments, then they could actually control the group consciousness and influence people's [LSD]

trips.” The pair worked together with telepathic-like intuition. “I wouldn't have been able to do anything without him. He knew my music and was right on cue with every break,” said Viteritti. “He knew if it was a light song, he knew if it was a frantic song, or a sleazy one. He would know all the moods, and everyone would come up to me and say, ‘Wow, the lights, the lights.’”

Langenheim would use a number of tricks to create his immersive lighting experience. “When you say ‘blackout’ to most lightmen, they get insulted, but Billy would do some of the most incredible blackouts,” said Viteritti. “He would run around the room and turn the bar lights off. He'd turn the light bulbs off on the exit signs... I remember one night I was about to play ‘The Night the Lights Went Out’ by the Trammps. Billy left the booth about five minutes before to do his rounds turning off all the light sources, and then he comes back and has it real bright. Then when the blackout section comes on the record, he goes *boom* and plunges the room into total darkness. It was so cool.”

The Trocadero was designed to play with the minds and emotions of the dancers throughout the night and into the morning. “We also had skylights that were wonderful,” said Viteritti. “We covered them up with tarps, and when the sun finally came up, we'd get six people on the roof to pull them back



(opposite) The Saint's domed ceiling. (top) Studio 54 control booth. Photo by Bill Bernstein. (above) Photo by Bill Bernstein.

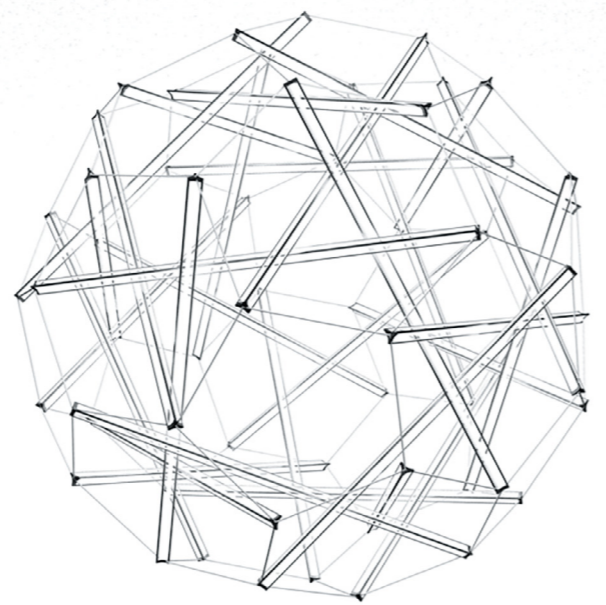


and then, *bam*, I'd start playing the morning music. We would then cover them again and it would get really atmospheric with all those low-tempo songs."

Like Dick Collier, Canadian club impresario Yvon Lafrance also took inspiration from the clubs of New York for his own palace of disco decadence when he opened Lime Light on Stanley Street, Montreal, in 1973. The original spinner was George Cucuzzella, who went on to become a key figure in the Canadian disco scene, forming the country's first record pool and founding the Unidisc label. Inspired by watching the way his predecessor Cucuzzella kept an eclectic set of music in time, Robert Ouimet, who sadly passed away in April 2022, became one of the pioneers of beat-mixing.

Ouimet's sets at Lime Light were augmented by lighting technician Richard Joly, whose eye for drama matched the flamboyance and hedonism. "My idea was that the dance floor is a theater," Joly said in a 2016 article for Red Bull Music Academy. "This was always my first concern. I went to extremes, from total darkness to total brightness. I would do things I've never seen anybody else do. I would spend a whole evening using only red lights for six hours."

Working together to create the drama, Joly and Ouimet operated a bespoke lighting board with a 16 x 16 custom-made



matrix grid that allowed them to play with the lights like a keyboard. The hydraulic lighting system hung over the dance floor like something from the future, with huge chrome PAR

lamps that sat in clusters swirling and whooshing perfectly in time with Ouimet's mixes.

In another interview with Red Bull Music Academy in Montreal in 2016, Robert Ouimet gave thanks to his lightman. "Without [him]...I wouldn't be where I am right now, because he knew exactly what to do and when to do it, and we did that without talking," he began. "I never said anything to him. He was always on beat, on time... Sometimes I was hiding what I was playing just to see how he would do, and he was always blowing me away with light... He was one of the first light DJs I ever saw."

Over in Paris, club impresario Fabrice Emaer, who had made his name bringing glamor to the city's nightlife with Le Club Sept, had his eye on a new venue after a trip to New York's Studio 54 with Le Sept DJ Guy Cuevas. "It was fabulous there and really mad," Cuevas recalls. "And Fabrice said, 'That is what we have to do in Paris but even bigger and better.' But Fabrice had very European tastes, so [he] wanted to do it our own way. We came back from New York and started to look for somewhere in Paris and found it in this old theater [on Rue du Faubourg Montmartre]. It had been there since the '20s. And Fabrice found the money and converted the place. He was great and had so much energy and ideas."

After removing the seating from the old music hall, Emaer set about creating a futuristic playground amid the old art deco interior—Le Palace. "Fabrice really thought of the club as his theater," says Cuevas. "So he made us rehearse all the effects we would use that night, like all the smoke and confetti falling down. And then all the different lights and lasers spelling out messages to the audience, like, '*Vous êtes notre plus belle histoire d'amour*,' meaning 'You are our most beautiful love story.' It was real drama, and I really loved that."

The highlight of the club's design was a state-of-the-art light show, the centerpiece being a great sphere of neon tubes that would descend towards the dancers. In an article for *Vogue Hommes* in May 1978 (as translated by Richard Howard in the book *Incidents*), the literary theorist Roland Barthes wrote: "At Le Palace, it is the whole theater that is the stage; here light occupies a deep space, within which it comes alive and performs like an actor; an intelligent laser, with a complicated and refined mind, like an exhibitor of abstract sculptures, produces enigmatic traces, with sudden mutations: circles, rectangles, ellipses, tracks, cables, galaxies, fringes."

The worldwide disco boom of the late 1970s had created a huge industry around lighting. "There were operators, mechanics, maintenance, inventors—and we were lucky to experience the results of this big lighting invention curve between the '70s and early '90s," says Jeffrey Hinton. "Tragically, much of this stuff was completely ripped out of clubs and replaced by the same generic gobo [stencil] projectors and flat, cold, LED-lit patterns projected from the same point



and not even timed to the music. This cannot compare with the overwhelming drama, noise, and thrill of the original hydraulic lighting." Nicky Siano also mourns this loss. "You turn up at most clubs today and there's no lightman. And if there is one, they are doing all these programs that are pre-set. It's just bullshit," he says. "If you aren't working in time with the music, you're not doing lights. You are just allowing the computer to do it."

Despite this, there are still lighting pros who treat their work like art, working with the DJs to create an immersive sonic and visual experience. The best known is Ariel Figueroa who made his name at Tracks in Chelsea, Manhattan, in the late 1980s, and at the Sound Factory in the early '90s, before his long residencies at Body & SOUL and 718 Sessions.

Ariel came into the world of club lighting in 1978 after a life-changing visit to Inferno on New York's Nineteenth Street where DJ Rene Hewitt held sway. "This was the first club I had ever been to, and I'm there listening to this big sound with all these incredible lights and I'm like, 'Holy shit, what the fuck is this?'" he recalls. "I'm looking around and then I notice the guy operating the lights is going in time with the music. And he was doing the lights to the music beat by beat, and I was, like, blown away. Then you had the dancers perfectly in time with the music and light. That is when I got the bug, and I knew this is where I belonged. My tribe is here—these are my people."

Many years later when he was working the lights at Body & SOUL at Club Vinyl, Ariel would discover from Rene Hewitt that the man operating the lights was future Studio 54 DJ Kenny Carpenter, one of the many famous spinners who began as a lightman. "Kenny was the one who opened my eyes to what was possible with lighting," says Ariel. "He had these



beacons that rotate like the ones on the top of a cop car. They are huge and they would drop down from the ceiling all the way down to the floor. He would work those rotating lights perfectly in time to the beat. I mean, it was amazing.”

After this epiphany, Ariel became a bona fide club head, hanging out at early '80s spots like Bonds International and the Fun House. Then one night in 1986 at a new club that opened in Chelsea called Tracks, Ariel saw his chance. “I approached the guy working the lights and asked him who was the main lighting guy, and he said Eddie Lopez,” he recalls. “So the next day, I called Tracks and asked to speak to Eddie Lopez. I told him I was looking for a light job. And he told me he was just about to put an advert in *Village Voice* for lighting people. I lied about what experience I had—I really had no clue about lighting.”

Initially hired to fix and repair, he watched and learned from Tracks lighting operator Joey Ratnor. “He was really good with lighting, really on point with the beat—and the whole scene with the music and lighting,” Ariel says. “With Eddie Lopez, Joey began to train me about lighting. I would learn things like, if the song is about love, make the lighting red. I learned so much from him. Then Joey decided to leave, so now there was a night open. And that night was Tuesdays

with David DePino.”

It was on Tuesday nights at Tracks that voguers from the ballroom community in Harlem and Brooklyn brought their competitive artistry into downtown dance culture. A fierce spinner who knew his crowd inside out, David DePino was the first DJ that Ariel worked with intuitively. “I started to use different lights for different parts of the music using those two consoles that Eddie Lopez had brought in,” says Ariel. “What I learned from the old-school cats was that we are there to make you see what you hear in a language you understand. So for the vocals, I would use these huge scoops with giant light bulbs that were in the wall that were yellow, blue, and red. And I would mimic the vocals with those lights. The piano would be the pin spots, then Eddie had created these four-foot arc lines for the strobe lights. They had five buttons that I would hit like drums to react with the music, sending the strobes to different corners of the room. It was incredible.”

With the closure of Tracks in 1991, Ariel moved to his next legendary residency at Sound Factory where DJ Junior Vasquez played hard-edged house music from labels like Tribal and Strictly Rhythm with many tracks tailored for the vogue battles that commenced. Using pin spots, PAR cans, mirror balls, and strobe lights, all fired off by different analog boards,



Ariel also operated a huge siren to respond to the fierceness of Junior’s music. “The whole thing was about energy. When a certain record was starting to peak, I would hit the big siren, and when the record dropped, I would turn off the siren and black everything out,” Ariel says. “I would also use the track spots a lot, which were great to pick out the vogue battles. That was one of my all-time favorite lights.”

Ariel also worked the lights at the Sound Factory Bar, the sister venue to Sound Factory. “I was playing there one night, and Danny Krivit came in and told me about this new party he was starting with François Kevorkian and Joe Claussell. And that turned out to be Body & SOUL,” says Ariel. Held on Sunday afternoons at Club Vinyl down in Tribeca, the party became a hot spot for dancers, both old Garage and Loft heads, and the new house dance generation. “I was lucky because my day off was Sunday, and so I started working there from the start,” he says. “The lighting was really good. I had track spots, pin spots, strobes, a mirror ball, and quite a few other toys.”

As well as continuing to work lights for Body & SOUL, including their recent twenty-fifth anniversary, Ariel is known to a new generation thanks to his long-standing tenure at 718 Sessions. Started by Danny Krivit and promoter Benny Soto, like Body & SOUL, the club’s energy and atmosphere owes

much to the on-point lighting of Ariel. “This is the way I look at it after so many years of this thing—it’s chemistry,” he says. “Firstly, the DJ has to come into the party rested, and is ready to do his thing. Then the lighting person has to feel him and what he plays so they have to have a communication—for example, when there is going to be a drop or when there needs to be a blackout. The DJ is projecting the music into the crowd with my lights in time, and then the crowd responds. So it becomes like a circle.”

As new technology continued to evolve, lighting in clubs changed dramatically with much of the art lost to time. “I come from the old-school disco era where it was much more hands-on and you had more control so you could work in time with the music,” says Ariel. “You used to have multiple boards, a lot of switches to do this light and that light. That was how I learned all about timing, because you are jumping between panels. Now, the boards have everything in one and it’s not the same. Also, back in the day, I could always see what records the DJ was putting on next because I could see the label on the vinyl. So I’m already preparing the consoles for the next track. Now, with digital, that is much harder. So, yeah, I like the old way better.” ●