

Crying at the Discotheque:

AIDS, activism and house music

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Abstract

Queer nightlife is bigger than it has ever been before, but little seems to be known about its origins. Cemented in a history that has faced a lot of pushbacks, discrimination and even a plague in the form of the HIV/AIDS epidemic the younger generation of queer clubkids do not seem to know on which shoulders they stand. Although queer musicology is there to speak on musicology within the LGBT+ community; not a lot has been researched regarding the role of electronic music during the AIDS epidemic and its effect on the emancipation of the LGBT+ community at that time. This research, however, fills the gap left by other (queer) musicologists for it will not only look at the electronic music of that era, but instead aims to incorporate the lifestyle that surrounded it such as the nightclub scene of the US and the rise of genres such as disco and house. It also touches on the work of HIV/AIDS activist groups such as ACT UP and the voices of those in electronic music who stood up for the injustice done. Furthermore, this paper examines the role of electronic music in the fight against AIDS from the first publications on the virus (1981) to the discovery of highly active antiretroviral therapy (1997), which would provide HIV-positive people with the same life expectancy as those who are HIV-negative and therefore ended the epidemic as it was once known. The research will focus on the activist approach made within the field of electronic music to spread awareness during the most vital moment in the US HIV/AIDS history; thereby also indirectly supporting the emancipation of the LGBT+ community. Hereby directly conversing with Rachel S. Vandagriff's different modes of protesting in song (Vandagriff 2015, 337) and build on findings from queer musicologist such as Stan Hawkins and Philip Brett, but to build a solid historical foundation the thesis' primary sources will be *You Better Work!* by Kai Fikentscher and Philip Bohlman's "Musicology as a Political Act". It will highlight just how instrumental electronic music and its scene were in the cultural fight against AIDS and the function nightclubs had as a home for those who were struggling with either their disease and/or sexual identity and use the career and work of artists Larry Levan, Frankie Knuckles, Ron Hardy and Sylvester to illustrate that Vandagriff's arguments do not work when talking about anti-AIDS activism in the disco and house scene of the US during the 80s and 90s. Although nightlife activism mostly played out in the underground, the voices of the people involved must be amplified to broaden our understanding of AIDS activism within the field of (queer) musicology. These were the people for who crying at the discotheque was a reality and not just the title of a dance song.

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Introduction

Cemented in a history that has faced a lot of pushbacks, discrimination and even a plague in the form of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, academic research on the relationship between AIDS activism, electronic music and queer club life in the US during the 80s and 90s are a rare commodity. Although queer musicology is there to speak on musicology within the LGBTQ+ community, it seems as if one can find books and essays filled with personal anecdotes on the AIDS crisis, its activism and queer nightlife, but not a lot of texts written about that time and its music from a more scientific and historical perspective. Thus leaving a gap wherein there are hardly any publications on house and disco's protest songs during that time and next to none on DJs and artists of that time and their work as anti-AIDS activists. In order to change this it is necessary to not only look at the music itself, but also incorporate the lifestyle that surrounded it: the nightclub scene of the US and the rise of disco and house. Simultaneously touching on the work of HIV/AIDS activist groups and the voices of those in electronic music who stood up for the injustice done. This thesis aims to illustrate what anti-AIDS activism looked like in the disco and house scene of the US during the 80s and 90s by examining the role of electronic music in the fight against AIDS from the first publications on the virus (1981) to the discovery of highly active antiretroviral therapy (1997), which would provide HIV-positive people with the same life expectancy as those who are HIV-negative and therefore ended the epidemic as it was once known. Its research will focus on the activist approach made within the field of electronic music to spread awareness during the most vital moment in the US HIV/AIDS history; thereby also indirectly supporting the emancipation of the LGBT+ community. Hereby directly conversing with Rachel S. Vandagriff's different modes of protesting in song (Vandagriff 2015, 337) and build on findings from queer musicologists such as Stan Hawkins and Philip Brett, but in order to create a solid historical foundation, the thesis' primary sources are two works that dive into the cultural history of queer nightlife: *You Better Work!* by Kai Fikentscher (2000) and Tim Lawrence (2016)'s *Life And Death On The New York Dancefloor*. It will highlight just how important electronic music and its scene were in the cultural fight against AIDS and the function nightclubs had as a home for those who were struggling with either their disease and/or sexual identity and use the career and work of artists Larry Levan, Frankie Knuckles, Ron Hardy and Sylvester to illustrate that Vandagriff's arguments do not work when talking about anti-AIDS activism in the disco and house scene of the US during the 80s and 90s. Instead I will argue for two other modes of musical activism - namely active and passive

activism - to outline how music with little to no vocals, mostly endorsed by underground DJs/artists coming from minority groups created their own methods of fighting AIDS.

The thesis' structure is set up in one introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. To lay down the historical foundation of this thesis, chapter one will focus on the virus and the rise of anti-AIDS activist groups. Discussing stigmatization and homophobia, shame and the uncertainty felt by the LGBT+ community. In chapter two, active and passive activism are discussed by countering Vandagriff's arguments and carving out the atmosphere of nightlife in the US during that time. Deep diving into what the club scene was like in order to paint a devastating picture of how AIDS influenced it. Ultimately the life stories and work of Frankie Knuckles, Larry Levan, Ron Hardy and Sylvester are highlighted. Chapter three builds on this by explaining why the lived experience and work of these artists showcase the ideals of active and passive activism. By not only sticking to the lived experience and work of DJs and artists, but also elaborating on the anti-AIDS fundraisers held by club owners and goes the chapter aims to slightly broaden the argument and illustrate the idea of passive activism even more.

0.1. Theoretical framework: active vs. passive activism

To support its claims regarding active and passive (AIDS) activism within electronic music and nightlife during the 80s and 90s in the U.S., this thesis looks at how music is used as a tool for activism. Due to the fact that there are hardly any academic sources on this particular topic, I have chosen to combine multiple relating sources together and use them as the backbone for the arguments made in my thesis.

Vandagriff (2015) builds on Baldwin's claims on protest novels ("the avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed, but are forgiven on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility" (Baldwin 15, 1955)) in her text regarding protest music. While writing about musical activism, she argues that "we should look at what musics may be about, express or embody protest and carefully separate these from musics used as tools in acts of protest" (Vandagriff, 2015). The music examples that she uses are all "in the hip hop idiom" (Vandagriff 337, 2015) and solely involve incidents regarding police brutality against the black community, however, Vandagriff presents her argument as universal and applicable to all sorts of music. Therefore her argument is used as the basis for active activism: vocal activism through explicit words and actions. Since this thesis cannot built on the examples of Vandagriff, it uses examples of discosongs such as Gloria

Gaynor's 'I Will Survive' and Sylvester's life and work to illustrate how music helped create an atmosphere of hope giving energy to those struggling with HIV/AIDS to go on the barricades. Hubbs states that "disco constituted a coalition around shared experiences of difference, including stigmatisation, marginalisation and invisibilisation." (Hubbs 241, 2007), however, within active activism it is important to state that this coalition happens through explicit utterances (such as vocals).

Connecting the passive activism argument to the thesis' direct object: music and the LGBTQ+ community, its identity and shared struggle with HIV/AIDS, Brett (2006) defines the LGBTQ+ identity as "not subscribing to the straight world's tendency to project itself onto everything it encounters and to assimilate everything to its own idea of itself, but instead valuing, exploring, and trying to understand different things, people, and ideas, in terms that are closer to the way in which they [those who are LGBTQ+] perceive themselves" (Brett 10, 2006) and calls music "an enclave in our society - a sisterhood or brotherhood of lovers, music lovers, united by unmediated form of communication that is only by imperfect analogy called a language, the language of feeling." (Brett 18, 2006) Vandagriff's only analyzes songs containing lyrics. Music genres that do not contain lyrics, such as electronic music are disregarded in her research. Therefore it is interesting to look at Brett's take on music as a sister or brotherhood, which thereby lays the foundation for what passive activism looked like during the AIDS crisis in the U.S. during the 80s and 90s: activism through the creation of a sister and/or brotherhood united by the language of feeling.

Since sources on AIDS activism in U.S. nightlife and the electronic music scene during the 80s and 90s are scarce, the anecdotes in both Fikentscher and Lawrence's books are important sources to provide historical context and showcase certain examples from communal support given by clubs and event organizers. Unfortunately neither of the authors put forward any academic theories.

Chapter 1: How it all started

To explain why key figures within US nightlife in the 80s and 90s felt inclined to fight AIDS in their own way it is important to understand the impact of the virus, the shame, stigmatization and homophobia that entailed it and the history of anti-AIDS activism overall.

1.1. The rise of AIDS

The virus was first noticed in the US in 1981 when doctors discovered clusters of Kaposi's sarcoma and pneumocystis pneumonia in gay men in Los Angeles, New York City and San Francisco, a discovery that led *The New York Times* to publish an article stating that there was a "rare cancer" found in as many as "41 homosexuals" (Altman 1981). In the article it is said that "eight of the victims died less than 24 months after the diagnosis was made" and "doctors investigating the outbreak believe that many cases have gone undetected because of the rarity of the condition and the difficulty even dermatologists may have in diagnosing it" (Altman 1981). In a throwback by *New York Magazine* in May 2014, random New Yorkers are interviewed on their memories of the early days of AIDS in the US. Among them is a performance artist named Tim Miller who also recounts *The New York Times'* article from 1981 thinking that "this gay cancer" would "only affect older West Village mustached disco queens who went to the baths every day, not youthful smooth-faced East Village anarchist performance artists in skinny neckties" (Murphy 2014). Unfortunately, AIDS did not discriminate and therefore it soon turned out that not only the "West Village mustached disco queens" were affected by this new form of "gay cancer". Another person named Harold Levine recalls how he heard about the first two AIDS victims in his own social bubble and "then the floodgates opened and it was all we could talk about." (Murphy 2014) These testimonials are important references in sketching out the uncertainty around the virus and the impact its spread eventually had on the community, thinning out the American population with more than 700,000 fatalities since the beginning of the epidemic (Cichocki 2021).

Up until now, the origin of HIV/AIDS and the circumstances that led to its emergence remain unsolved. This uncertainty sparked speculation causing conspiracy theories to arise. One of them being Operation INFEKTION (also known as Operation Denver), which was a theory developed by the KGB in order to make people believe that the virus was man-made by the US government to wipe out minority groups such as the black and gay community (Boghardt 2009). Such theories were not hard to believe as homophobia and racism were still very prevalent in

America during the 80s. Homosexuality had just been decriminalized and although this sparked a (homo)sexual revolution, the majority of people - mostly religious and conservative - still deemed it to be vulgar and wrong. This made it hard for some to lead an openly gay life, and for those of who did, the AIDS outbreak became a weapon to scare and socially punish them with. AIDS became another reason for stigmatization and shame, leading to denial and sometimes even infection. An example of infection due to shame is found in *Love in the Time of ACT UP: Reflections on AIDS Activism, Queer Family, and Desire* where AIDS activist and ACT UP alumnus Stockdill meets his lover Noel in a Chicago based queer club named Berlin: “Noel was a very special, very beautiful man. Being with him made my heart skip a beat; I felt like I could run a hundred miles an hour and jump ten feet high.” (Stockdill 2018, 49) Although an AIDS activist, Stockdill was not yet infected with the virus. Out of shame Noel keeps quiet about his infection, which leads to him transferring the virus to Stockdill. He would later discover Noel was HIV-positive all along and turn out infected too. Unfortunately, stories like this were rule instead of an exception.

Next to personal shame and possible rejection from the outside world, AIDS also made the consequences of not having a legal relationship devastatingly apparent to LGBTQ+ couples. Rubenstein (1994) mentions that “a gay man whose partner is dying may have difficulty inquiring about his condition or visiting him in the hospital because the men have no legal relationship to one another.” And if the lover dies, “his surviving partner will not automatically share in his estate, nor enjoy the tax benefits of so doing, and may indeed lose control of property the couple purchased together” and “he may also face eviction from his home.” (21)

1.2 The rise of AIDS activist groups

Due to rapid infections and a neglecting US government the community started taking matters into their own hands. Sparking the rise of AIDS activist groups. These are best described by looking at the evolution of the three oldest (and biggest) AIDS activist NGOs: Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power/New York (ACT UP/NY), and the Treatment Action Group (TAG). These organizations occupy a distinct location in relation to the state, adhere to different organizational tactics and are recognized leaders among HIV/AIDS organizations within the public health arena. Next to that, they are also the most well-known HIV/AIDS organizations in the US.

Founded in 1982, during an informal meeting in writer and activist Larry Kramer's living room, Gay Men's Health Crisis focused on gathering and spreading information about HIV/AIDS. Its first members were Nathan Fain, Larry Kramer, Larry Mass, Paul Popham, Paul Rapoport and

Edmund White. The group's first hotline was an answering machine in the home of Rodger McFarlane who volunteered for GMHC. On day one, they already received 100 calls. Activities included the production and distributing of flyers and newsletters to doctors, hospitals, clinics, the general audience and the Library of Congress, acting as a sponsor for fundraising events and art auctions, initiating safer sex guidelines and production of events such as The AIDS Walk. While Gay Men's Health Crisis tried to act as an apolitical lobby group, it was fairly unsuccessful as the US government still largely ignored the existence of HIV/AIDS. It "established itself according to what its leaders perceived would win favor within the public health sector", however, "dissatisfaction with the lack of progress on all other fronts had generated a heated discussion in the gay press and in the community forums" (Lune 22), which eventually led its founding member Larry Kramer to resign from the board of directors in 1983.

Inspired by a speech of Kramer wherein he expressed his frustration towards the "politically impotent" stance of Gay Men's Health Crisis, ACT UP was formed. This happened during the same night that Kramer's speech was held, in March 12, 1987 at New York City's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. The action group counted approximately 300 members at its start. ACT UP made their debut at the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in October 1987. Inspired by its new radical approach, other participants of the march formed local chapters throughout the US and eventually it also gained traction in the rest of the world. In 1987 the New York City department of ACT UP demonstrated at Wall Street to demand greater access to experimental AIDS drugs and for national policies to fight the virus. It was two years later that members of the action group infiltrated the stock exchange building where they chained themselves to the VIP balcony to protest the high price of AZT (which was the only approved AIDS drug at the time). Whilst prolific and effective, the group faced internal struggles over its direction. This ultimately led to the establishment of the Treatment Action Group.

The Treatment Action Group is a non-profit organization and it was born out of ACT UP/ NY's Treatment and Data Working Group (Lune 25) in the early nineties that mostly focused on HIV/AIDS treatment research. It "introduced a new form of collective action, called treatment activism, which relied on the growing relationship between research experts in government and their counterparts in the community." (Lune 26) TAG wore multiple hats. Next to meeting with government officials, they also organized acts of civil disobedience. Founding members Mark Harrington and Spencer Cox combined forces with scientists, drug company researchers and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration officials to speed up the development of new HIV therapies.

TAG's mission statement described the group as an independent AIDS research and policy think tank fighting for better treatment, a vaccine, and a cure for AIDS.

As outlined later on in chapter 3 we will see that anti-AIDS activism in nightlife often is intertwined between the initiator and the activist group he/she/they supports.

Chapter 2: HIV/AIDS in US nightlife of the 80s and 90s

2.1. The emergence of LGBT+ club life in the 1980s

The emergence of clubs (or discotheques as they were called) in the 70s and 80s was the result of a fusion or overlap of three distinct types of social dance environments prevalent in the 1960s, all of which featured recorded music, with or without the presence of a DJ. One was based on the French model of the discotheque, which was a place where the high fashion and sexually fluid crowd would hang out. This form was most popular in the exclusive clubs of Manhattan such as Le Club and El Morocco. The second type focused more on a heterosexual clubbing experience, wherein DJs played records by rock bands such as Led Zeppelin and Santana or more rhythm and blues oriented music such as Rare Earth and The Supremes. These kinds of nights were facilitated by New York clubs such as Electric Circus and Zodiac. They attracted struggling musicians, poets, actors, working-class citizens, and other pre-dominantly anti-Establishment folks. The third one grew out of local clubs and bars that were in the neighbourhood, both legal and illegal undertakings focused on the social life of young gay men and women. (Fikentscher 2000) These places were owned by shady mafia-like investors (Duberman 1993, 122). To show how AIDS influenced club life it is this type of clubbing that is primarily used as referencing point, mostly due to its historical function as breeding ground for the gay emancipation movement and its mixture of people with a strong emphasis on the ethnically defined sections of New York, such as Harlem or the Latino portions of the Upper West Side and the Lower East Side (Fikentscher 2000). Music came from sources such as a jukebox or a DJ. Older men at these clubs or bars - who most of the time dressed in drag - functioned as initiators and sometimes even protectors of the 'twinks' (slang for younger gay men) in the establishment.

There is a historical function to these bars serving as the birthplace for the gay emancipation movement - one of them being the famous Stonewall Inn. This bar took centre stage in the emancipation struggle when riots broke loose at the bar, which would later be remembered as the 1969 Stonewall Riots. Frequent police raids of bars such as the Stonewall Inn were standard at the time although after 1966, "much of urban gay life emerged from the socio-political closet to become both public and legal" (Duberman 1993, 98). During the weekend that the Stonewall Riots occurred police tried to raid the bar, but instead of complying its visitors resisted and fought back. The protest would last several days, which inspired emancipation movements such as the Gay Liberation Front to initiate protests and meetups to discuss further steps to claim equal treatment

from heteronormative society. This eventually led to the yearly event celebrating the LGBTQ+ community in all its glory, also known as Pride.

It is not coincidental that discotheques appeared as a new type of social institution in the post-Stonewall period. Although there is still much uncertainty on whether or not the Stonewall Riots acted as a catalyst to assemble these dance venue types into one, “many commentators agree that after Stonewall dancing became not only a social pastime, but also a powerful means of building a sense of communal gay and lesbian identity” (Fikentscher 2000, 98). An example of this is the first meeting of gays to discuss this new social tendency created by the after-effects of the riots, which took place at the Electric Circus rock disco on St. Mark’s Place in the East Village. By the fall of 1969, and in the spring of 1971, the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activist’s Alliance, started to hold gay dance parties in lower Manhattan on a regular basis. By June 1971, the Gay Activist’s Alliance headquarters on Wooster Street in Soho - known as the Firehouse - had become one of the most popular gay dance clubs in New York. Initially, the DJs playing records at these parties were not professionals; rather, “they were often recruited from among the organizers” (Fikentscher 2000, 98-99). Gradually New York clubs became meeting spots where the marginalized people of the urban areas could come together in order to escape from life outside the club and where they got the chance to create their own world wherein they could celebrate their own and each other’s identities. Lawrence recalls these days by saying that those going to the nightclubs “often compelled to conceal their sexuality in everyday life” and therefore these venues (such as Better Days, the Paradise Garage, and the Saint, but more on that later) “celebrated gay identity as something positive, even during negative times” (Lawrence 2006, 436). It is the exact same atmosphere wherefrom the production and consumption of disco and eventually house music originates and would ultimately flourish.

2.2. Disco: mother to House music

Before there was house music, there was disco. While focusing on the marginalized nightlife crowd disco musicians and producers sought out sounds from music genres that were popular with those living in the urban areas; resulting in a mix of soul, funk en salsa music but with a higher BPM. Later on some disco tracks would even be embedded in electronic drums due to the use of a new music instrument: the drum computer. It was in the early 70s that the first disco records were released. Tracks such as Manu Dibango’s ‘Soul Makossa’, ‘Love’s Theme’ by The Love Unlimited Orchestra, MFSB’s ‘Love Is The Message’ and ‘Le Freak’ by CHIC defined the dancefloor. Music that was predominantly made by black artists played to a mostly black gay audience. Black disco

divas such as Gloria Gaynor, Grace Jones and Donna Summer were adored and celebrated. Unfortunately, “the fact that disco originated in black gay clubs did not stop white entrepreneurs from instituting racist door policies at many gay clubs” displaying that the “collective idea” of being a place where the marginalized of the urban area could come together did not extend beyond “the issue of sexual orientation” (Fikentscher 2000, 99). A hypocritical stance for by 1973 - just two years after the first disco track was released - disco music with a beat would drown out all other music liked by gay men on the dancefloor. Slowly it became clear that “a new era” was arriving in gay life and in pop culture (Fikentscher 2000).

One of the places one could hear the sound of the new era was the Continental Bathhouse. Hidden below the Ansonia Hotel on the Upper West Side of Manhattan was an abandoned swimming pool and set of Turkish baths. Rented out to an opera singer named Steve Ostrow and his wife Joanne in 1968, the two saw potential in creating a luxury bathhouse for the gay community. Intending to create a club that was welcoming and safe; they built palm fronds, opulent lighting, 400 private rooms, a waterfall pouring in the pool, and most famously, a discotheque and live entertainment room. Famous for its crowd dancing in their towels, bathing or birthday suits (bron toevoegen), the disco rooms at the Continental baths are where initiators of modern-day DJ culture Larry Levan (who went on to run the Paradise Garage, the birthplace of garage music) and Frankie Knuckles (who went on to run the Warehouse, the birthplace of house music) got their start for only \$25 per dj set (in comparison: a high-in-demand DJ can now rank up around \$1,000,000 per dj set).

2.3. Passive activism on the dancefloor by the Godfathers of House

To elaborate on passive activism - in contrast to active activism, which is discussed later on in this chapter - Brett’s (2006) argument that music is “an enclave in our society - a sisterhood or brotherhood of lovers, music lovers, united by unmediated form of communication that is only by imperfect analogy called a language, the language of feeling” (16) supports the work done by DJs Frankie Knuckles, Larry Levan and Ron Hardy and how it made their crowds feel as if they themselves were an enclave. Taking into account that all played at LGBT+ spaces in the 80s and 90s and were gay themselves, it places them right in the centre of this thesis and gives them a certain amount of shared lived experience with the crowds they DJ’ed for. When illustrating what kind of lived experience was present in the lives of each of them it is instrumental to look at how their careers catapulted a new music genre called house into the Bathhouses, eventually embedded this sound into American LGBT+ clublife and consequently got caught up in the rise of HIV/Aids.

Introduced by resident DJ Nicky Siano who also co-owned The Gallery club, Larry Levan entered the baths in 1973. After playing a few chaotic performances with bad sound, no airconditioning and faulty electrical wiring, his DJ sets eventually became an integral part of the entertainment at the Baths. After a few years, Levan grew tired of the faulty sound system and accepted a gig in a new club called SoHo Place. After SoHo Place closed, Levan bounced from venue to venue, eventually finding his home at the Paradise Garage where he would DJ during its entire run. During that time Levan created several remixes and edits for various artists. The Paradise Garage eventually closed due to the buildings lease ending and the death of its owner Michael Brody, who died of AIDS. Levan also dealt with an HIV infection, a heroin addiction and ultimately died in 1992 due to heart failure.

For Frankie Knuckles, the Continental Baths were a blessing in disguise. Although Knuckles was still in high school, Levan asked him to come and do his first DJ gigs at the Baths. In the documentary *Liquid Vinyl* the DJ recalls the moment Levan invited him: "At first I did not want to go anywhere near it, but Larry had already been working there about a year and he had asked me to come and play on Mondays and Tuesdays. I figured this was a golden opportunity for me to work on my skills, focus on the music and build my record collection." When Larry left the Baths, Knuckles took over his slot, however, declining conditions prompted him to seek shelter elsewhere. He eventually found it in Chicago at the Warehouse, which is the club that gave name to this new genre called house music with Frankie being its pioneer. He would later go on to win a GRAMMY award for his work as a music producer.

Just like Levan and Knuckles, Ron Hardy is considered an underground dance music pioneer. After Frankie Knuckles left The Warehouse to pursue career options elsewhere, Hardy took over. His style was quite raw, fast and experimental. For example, he created a mixing technique where he could play his tracks backwards. New producers were key in Hardy's world. They could test their new tracks to see how the dance floor would react and due to this approach *Acid Trax* by Phuture became a club hit - ultimately creating a wave of acid house. Unfortunately, HIV and heroin were also a factor in Hardy's life. Unlike Larry Levan, Hardy was never able to kick his addiction which - combined with a weak immune system due to AIDS-related complications - led to his death in 1992.

Defining what passive activism looks like is showing the essence of what DJ'ing is at heart. When done right, DJ'ing can be a transcendental experience wherein the DJ takes the crowd away from whatever they were feeling before they entered the club or the day to day struggles they will

have to face again when they exit the club. Therefore passive activism is not an explicit form of activism, but rather a feeling that is given to others to either escape their harsh reality or fire them up to go into the streets. Shared lived experience - as shown above in the life stories of Frankie Knuckles, Larry Levan and Ron Hardy - strengthened the bond between DJ and audience.

Fikentscher (2000) compares nightclubs to churches wherein “underground dance music”, such as disco and house, “provides the ritual through which collectivity and marginality can be affirmed and celebrated” (107). On first glance this might seem like an odd comparison given the fact that LGBTQ+ people mainly attended these nightclubs to escape from (mostly) faith-based homophobia (‘homosexuality is a sin and AIDS is your punishment’), however, “there are a number of conceptual links between the church and the underground dance club as institutions” for “both feature ritualized activities centred around music, dance, and worship, in which there are no set boundaries between secular and sacred domains” (101), a sentiment that turns into passive activism when projected onto those who enabled club nights.

2.4. The impact of HIV/Aids on US nightlife

In 1976, Ostrow closed the Baths for good. However, this did not mean the phenomenon of the gay bathhouse disappeared. Instead new baths were founded, such as the New St. Marks bathhouse in the East Village of Manhattan, New York. When in 1981 AIDS reached the US, the bathhouses were one of the first places to be targeted in order to stop it from spreading. This led to the San Francisco Bathhouse Battles in 1984, where political debates broke out over AIDS-related policies for bathhouses and sex clubs. Although banning ‘unsafe’ sexual activity at bathhouses (in hindsight) might seem logical during a time where people were dying after having casual, unprotected sex, the ban was seen as anti-gay and an attempt to put the LGBT+ community back in the closet. As the spread of the virus widened the opinion shifted and more and more homosexual men called for a closing of the baths. Policies were enforced and bathhouses now had to hand out condoms to its customers and distribute safe sex literature. Reportedly some of the bathhouses followed the guidelines, but did so “with a gun to their heads” (Gross 1985).

To understand and paint a full picture of gay nightlife, there are some other nightclubs that emerged during the same time and need to be named. One of them is Jewel’s Catch One (founded in 1973) being the first black owned and female led LGBTQ+ club in America. As a safe space that lasted over four decades, the club shows how a nightclub could help pioneer social change. To illustrate this, Catch One also functioned as a place where owner Jewel Thais-Williams and her wife Rue hosted a support group named Rue’s House. This group provided services for women and

children living with HIV and AIDS. Next to performances by pop divas such as Sheila E., Madonna, Gladys Knight, Patti LaBelle, Donna Summer, Janet Jackson, Tina Turner, Whitney Houston, Chaka Khan, and Grace Jones, one of Catch One's most prominent stars was disco legend Sylvester.

Last but not least, there is Studio 54. Infamous for its celebrity clientele (among others were artist Andy Warhol, actor Sylvester Stallone and singer Grace Jones), rampant drug use, and strict door policy largely based on how outrageous one would dress, the club cemented its place in pop culture. The original Studio 54 only ran for three years as its owners Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager opened it in 1977, but were forced to close again in 1980 when the two were convicted for tax evasion. Unfortunately, AIDS also targeted the closeted Steve Rubell. Although he was medicated with AZT, his illness furthered due to his drug use and drinking, which weakened his immune system. He died in 1989. The 54 got a restart after the arrest of Rubell and Schrager, however, with different owners and - during the 80s - also under a different name: The New Ritz.

Although not limited to nightlife, ballroom culture is a phenomenon that needs an honourable mention for AIDS and its culture shaped the LGBTQ+ community that went to the club (and in return influenced what the nightclubs were doing). Unlike discotheques, ballroom gatherings were not limited to the walls and floors of one particular building, but instead held contests in the form of performances everywhere they were allowed to, constantly transforming those places into their own short-term sanctuaries. They were exclusively filled with people who largely felt rejected from daytime society walking the balls in different categories such as runway (where participants are judged on their ability to walk like a supermodel), femme queen realness (the ability to blend in with cisgender women - mostly walked by trans or gender non confirming persons) and body (a category about body structure where judges look for someone who has a well-defined body). Contestants were judged using numbered paper plates to indicate scores ranging from 1-10. Invented to mirror the outside world, the categories critiqued its modern society at the same time. Many participants of these balls belonged to groups known as 'houses', where chosen families of friends lived in households together. The most famous dance style to come out of ballroom culture is voguing. Made famous by choreographer Willie Ninja in the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, it inspired Madonna to record the song 'Vogue'. Just like all the others mentioned above, the ballroom community was also plagued by HIV/AIDS, mainly due to the fact that many houses harboured trans people of colour and MSM (men who have sex with men).

2.5. Active activism in the art and life of disco phenomena Sylvester

Growing up in South-Central Los Angeles, Sylvester was an active member of the Pentecostal church. Born into a musical family he entered the gospel circuit when he was only a child. Known for his dramatic falsetto voice, gender fluid looks and his glamorous stage wear, Sylvester rose to international fame as a disco singer. During the late 70s he and his producing partner Patrick Cowley (who died of AIDS in 1982) produced hits such as ‘You Make Me Feel Mighty Real’ and ‘Dance (Disco Heat)’. Both singles were featured on Sylvester’s most successful album *Step II* and topped the American dance chart. The album became certified gold and received positive reviews from music outlets such as *Rolling Stone* magazine. He followed his success with albums such as *Stars*, *Sell My Soul*, and *Too Hot To Sleep*, however, these albums sold poorly. This largely had to do with the Disco Sucks movement that was initiated by rock music fans; a movement that also affected the sales of other disco artists. Before his death, Cowley would produce Sylvester’s second most popular album called *All I Need*. This album featured the song ‘Do Ya Wanna Funk?’ which was largely popular outside of the US.

During his life Sylvester was a fierce civil rights and anti-AIDS activist, partly due to being infected with the virus that would abruptly end his flourishing career as a singer in 1988, but also out of frustration towards the way gay and black people were being stigmatized by society. Not only did Sylvester use his disco sounds to distract his audience from the cruelty of the outside world, but he also physically attended Pride parades - even in his last days when he could not walk anymore. Along with Joan Rivers and Charles Nelson Reilly, Sylvester organized the first-ever AIDS fundraiser at Los Angeles’ Studio One nightclub in 1982. He dubbed his 1983 song “Trouble in Paradise” a musical AIDS message to the city of San Francisco and performed benefit concerts to raise awareness and money about the epidemic. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* three months before his death he hoped that “by going public myself with [his HIV diagnosis], I can give other people courage to face it” stating that “the black community is at the bottom of the line when it comes to getting information, even when we’ve been so hard hit by this disease.” When the singer died on December 16, 1988 at age 41 he made sure to have his body dressed in a deep red (the official color that symbolizes the battle against HIV/Aids) kimono and in his will, he donated all his future royalties to two AIDS charities.

Sylvester’s life and work is the embodiment of active activism. Whereas passive activism in the disco and house scene of the 80s and 90s AIDS era was more elusive, active activism was explicit and directly vocal. Sylvester was not only vocally creating awareness about AIDS in his

daily life, but also wrote songs to endorse the LGBT+ lifestyle and not be shameful of it despite the fact that HIV/AIDS - as is seen in chapter 1 - made the community feel as if they should. In fact, Sylvester even became more vocal about “facing” the virus as his illness developed.

As seen by its characteristics, active activism has more common ground with Vandagriff’s idea of protest songs needing to have a “direct call to action”, but it also shows the reason why Vandagriff’s research can hardly be used in the field of disco and house music and is only valuable when speaking about separate songs, not DJ sets. The most clear one being that Vandagriff only discusses songs that include vocals, which is something that is often found in disco music, but not in house perse. Sure, there are house tracks that use vocals, but there are also a lot that do not. If the house tracks without vocals (or DJ sets containing those tracks) incited action in people or consoled those who lost someone to the virus or were battling it, did that mean that they were inherently disqualified as protest songs because they had no vocal with a direct call to action? As seen in chapter 2.3. this was not the case thus putting forward the notion of passive activism; showcasing that DJs were activists in their own right without having to say a word about the virus. The upcoming chapter will elaborate more on active and passive activism and show how clubs played their own part in fighting HIV/Aids.

Chapter 3: Disco, house and AIDS

Passive activism through shared lived experience and the creation of a sister and brotherhood united by the language of feeling (Brett 18, 2006) as to make their crowd feel less alone in their struggle made DJs Larry Levan, Frankie Knuckles and Ron Hardy anti-AIDS activists. Chandler and Munday (2011) define lived experience as “personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people.” Except for Knuckles, all had the illness breathing down their necks.

Discos, bathhouses and clubs became the central point of where the above named DJs could carry out their passive activism. It were those places where visitors would go to feel alive when life was leaving many of them. The music resonated the agony felt by most people on the dance floor. Songs such as The Communards’ ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’, Joe Smooth’s ‘The Promised Land’ and Bronski Beat’s ‘Why’ exemplify the desperation. Harboured lyrics such as “Don't leave me this way / I can't survive / I can't stay alive / Without your love, no baby” (The Communards 1986), “Brothers, sisters / One day we will be free / From fighting, violence / People crying in the street / When the angels from above / Fall down and spread their wings like doves / As we walk hand in hand / Sisters, brothers, we'll make it to the Promised Land” (Smooth, Joe 1987), “You in your false securities tear up my life / Condemning me / Name me an illness / Call me a sin / Never feel guilty / Never give in / Tell me why?” (Bronski Beat 1984)

On Vandagiff’s terms these tracks would not be considered as protest songs for their lyrics have no direct call to action, but rather as songs used in protest. This distinction, however, has no value in the framework of passive activism for nothing within passive activism is a direct call to action.

3.1. Gloria Gaynor’s ‘I Will Survive’, The Peech Boys’ ‘Life Is Something Special’ & The Red Hot Initiative

One song that voiced the cruel emotions of the AIDS crisis like no other: Gloria Gaynor’s ‘I Will Survive’ (1978). A song recorded and released long before AIDS made its entrance, its topics (rage, pain and hope) appealed to those struggling. It begins in the realm of tragedy when Gaynor sings: “First I was afraid, I was petrified.” Then there is a sudden change of tempo at the second stanza that corresponds to a shift of tone in the lyrics and a new direction in the narrative, leaving tragedy behind. The protagonist has gone from abandonment and misery to newfound self confidence and perspective. It was the idea of turning misery to perspective that gave hope to those who danced to

the track. In a documentary on the song, drag artist and playwright Taylor Mac remembers those nights saying: “Getting together and moving your body with other human beings is a way that people [could] survive. You show up. (...) You dance to it. You practice the liberating feeling of I Will Survive over and over and over again until you believe it.” (Chermayeff 2017, 00:25:27) This is a prime example of active activism for it shows how explicit utterances within lyrics have an effect on those struggling with HIV/AIDS.

A music act whose discography was very different from Gloria Gaynor’s were the Peech Boys. Their link to HIV/AIDS was not only due to the fact that one of its members lived the experience, seeing as this was Larry Levan, but also due to the artwork done for their only album *Life Is Something Special*. Inspired by Larry Levan’s DJ’ing at the Paradise Garage the group formed and released one album and several singles. Embodying the garage and house sound, the NYC Peech Boys consisted of six men: Bernard Fowler, Steven Brown, Robert Kasper, Darryl Short, Michael de Benedictus and Larry Levan. Their 1982 first single ‘Don’t Make Me Wait’ was their most successful effort, mostly because Levan would spin it himself at the Paradise Garage frequently. Introducing thunderous storms of reverb heavy claps, an overdubbed bass and a soulful voice (performed by Fowler, who would later go on to do backing vocals for The Rolling Stones) its lyrics told a tale that was very different from the one seen in ‘I Will Survive’, here confidence and perspective made way for lust-fueled arrogance. Although HIV/AIDS was already prevalent, ‘Don’t Make Me Wait’ (along with other house classics such as ‘Baby Wants To Ride’ by Jamie Principle & Frankie Knuckles) showed that there were people out there (although sometimes closeted) who still wanted to get it on. This was also an act of active activism for it took casual sex out of the taboo sphere it was put in by HIV/AIDS.

Inspired by the activism of ACT UP and other groups such as TAG., writers Leigh Blake and John Carlin founded Red Hot (short for The Red Hot Organization) to (financially) support the activist groups. Red Hot, which is still active today, is a not-for-profit effort dedicated to fighting HIV/AIDS through pop culture. Starting out by releasing a Cole Porter tribute album named *Red Hot + Blue*, Red Hot raised more than four million dollars and helped reduce the stigma around AIDS. With the record mostly appealing to a much older audience, Red Hot felt like it had to make an artistic change to reach those who had “to be educated about safe sex” (Carlin 1992, 1): sexually active youngsters. *Red Hot + Dance* began as a series of live club events around the globe to commemorate World AIDS Day. London, New York, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Los Angeles, Toronto, Dublin, Dallas and Tokyo were linked together by frenzied, pulsating bodies grooving to the beat. Red Hot “wanted to prove not only that dance music was the international language of youth

culture, but that people cared about stopping AIDS” (Carlin 1992, 1). Its Red Hot + Dance featured pop artists such as George Michael, Seal, Lisa Stansfield and Madonna, but also electronic artists such as Crystal Waters, Joey Negro, Richie Rich and Brian Eno (under his alias The Hovering Feet). The album cover again featured artwork by artist Keith Haring. After releasing several follow ups wherein other genres of music had a prominent place, The Red Hot Organization released their compilation *Offbeat: A Red Hot Soundtrip* in 1996. This time RHO tried to expand its catalogue by not focusing on danceability, but on spiritual transcendence through electronic music. Ambient and techno heavyweights such as Moby, Talking Heads’ frontman David Byrne, DJ Krush and Meat Beat Manifesto supplied the songs and was the first Red Hot release to appear on CD-ROM. It sold over 10,000 copies.

3.2. Community efforts

When looking at the community efforts in the battle against HIV/AIDS there are two kind of events that are most prevalent: those that are initiated through the clubs themselves and the ones thrown by external promoters. This paragraph will highlight The Love Ball and Paradise Garage’s ‘Showers’ as two primary examples, showing the difference between club-based and promotor-based nightclub activism.

The Love Ball in New York was a promotor-based club night annex fundraiser that ran two editions (in 1989 and in 1991) and focused on the battle against HIV/AIDS by pairing celebrity and fashion with the eccentricity of Harlem’s ballroom culture. As *the New York Times* put it: “the evening had all the elements that make New York City night life remarkable: beauty, pageantry, celebrity and gender confusion” and “was to the typical charity affair what the Sex Pistols were to Mozart.” (Hochswender 1989, 5) Sponsors of The Love Ball included CBS Records, Swatch Watch and heiress Veronica Hearst. Among the judges were rockstar David Byrne and the designers Donna Karan, Carolina Herrera and Thierry Mugler. Linked to sponsoring companies like Paper Magazine and Barney’s New York, participants (or: voguers) were judged, among other things, on ‘realness’ and ‘overness’. Susanne Bartsch, one of the initiators of the event along with magazine editor Annie Flanders, created The Love Ball “out of pain” for all her friends that she had already lost to the disease. In a *Vogue* magazine interview she declared that “in 1988, [she] went to a ball, and (...) got another message about a friend who was dying of this horrible disease. It was do or die. I decided, I’m going to do. I’m going to fight. I’m going to celebrate life and celebrate the people that are still here.” The Love Ball’s success was huge. Its first night brought in \$400.000 and after the second edition the balls had raised over \$2.5 million in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Love Ball spread

internationally with independent nightclubs and organizations all over the globe presenting their own Love Ball. In The Netherlands - for example - Club RoXy raised money by hosting yearly parties under the same name (but without a ball or a competition attached to it) where dj's such as Robert Owens, Boy George and RoXy resident Joost van Bellen played house records and dragqueens performed songs.

Contrary to the Love Ball, club-based fundraisers were less glamorous and exclusive. Not aimed at celebrities and fashion people and open to all, its attendees were mostly activists, middle class queer people, the HIV-positive and/or their family and friends. This did not mean that there were no crossovers when it came to the audience, but the approach was different. The Love Balls were parties for a wealthier crowd; mostly aimed at having fun with a serious undertone. Although a party in their own right, Paradise Garage's fundraiser for Gay Men's Health Crisis was mostly aimed at using the dance floor to raise funds and create awareness, not as an opportunity to rub shoulders with the famous and fabulous.

Although there were many clubs hosting fundraisers for Gay Men's Health Crisis during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 80s and 90s (such as Studio 54 and The Saint), Showers at the Paradise Garage was special. Not only was it the first fundraiser ever held for the organization, but the bond between Paradise Garage and GMHC was exceptionally strong. Mel Cheeran, one of the Garage's founders and an AIDS activist himself, even provided office space for the organization and on his deathbed also exclusively handed the Paradise Garage trademark over to GMHC. Unfortunately not a lot of information about the club nights is preserved. Known is that the first edition of Showers was held on Thursday 8th of April 1982 and that its lineup featured a young Evelyn 'Champaign' King (who just had her breakthrough with the 1977 song 'Shame') and The New York Gay Men's Chorus performing Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive'. At the end of the night, Paradise Garage had raised \$50,000. It is vague whether there were more editions and if there were other ways in which the Paradise Garage might have raised money for GMHC. What is known, however, is that club nights such as Showers attracted the usual Paradise Garage crowd: existing mainly of people from marginalized groups dressed in simple outfits. It mattered "less whether the individual dancer" was "female or male, gay or straight" as long as "the collective spirit" focused on "mutual tolerance and goodwill." (Fikentscher 2000, 64) Compared to the fashion frenzy at The Love Ball, the average Paradise Garage visitor dressed themselves casually in Levi jeans and a plain t-shirt. A more sober approach aimed at functionality. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this was the crowd that went to the club to experience the transcendental effect of music and dance to it until the sun came up.

Conclusion

Active and passive activism are concepts wherein musical AIDS activism during the 80s and 90s in the US can be explained, however, the difference between them is that active activism is all activism that is explicit whereas passive activism is all activism done implicitly. Electronic music and its culture helped AIDS activism in the US during the 80s and 90s by providing a shelter for the LGBTQ+ community, the HIV-positive and their family and friends, a place where one could embrace themselves, the funds to fight and create awareness and provide a stage for artists to release their art made out of pain. Although it added to the painfulness of the situation, societal oppression (such as labeling AIDS ‘gay cancer’) strengthened a sense of community for those living with HIV/AIDS and/or people who identify as LGBTQ+.

Through the dance floor people gained self-acceptance. Not only of their own LGBTQ+ identity, but also of their HIV status. The reality of partying in times of AIDS sometimes meant that one was on the dance floor one day and in a hospital bed the next. It meant seeing your friends drop like flies. Being scared of the day that you might get the diagnosis. Having no other choice than accepting who you are. Knowing that your inner circle might not understand or even worse; shut you out. As most AIDS activists of that time, this form of lived experience drove those in electronic music to raise their voice and be an activist in their own way. There was no escaping the virus. If one was not infected themselves, they would see others around them struggle with their infection. Sylvester’s vocal activism exemplified the characteristics of active activism and showed that one could be infected and still contribute to public debate about HIV/AIDS. Although it is hard to say whether it Ron’s and Larry’s passive activism was a contagious act, it nevertheless helped those on the dance floor deal with the reality of HIV/AIDS.

Electronic music provided a shelter during this time of pain, fear and grief in a metaphorical and physical way. Electronic music provided a physical shelter through its spaces that one could visit. As discussed earlier, all clubs provided in their own way and by focusing on their own community they helped the community at large. In a metaphorical sense electronic music created a shelter by developing an environment where one can go to seek emotional support or a well needed escape; not through a physical space such as a nightclub or dance floor, but through the music itself. As stated earlier, the essence of the DJ is directly linked to the transcendental experience as felt by those who are in the club at that moment. During a time of chaos and fear, leaving your troubles at the door and just being in the moment - even if its for a little while - helped shelter the emotions of those living with HIV (either themselves or their friends). One did not have to deal with the reality

of dying in the near future, because they were distracted by the music provided by the DJ. Going to the club became synonymous to going to one of the last places where gay identity was celebrated, not punished.

Therefore the closing of the Baths was deemed disastrous by many. The San Francisco Bathhouse Battles were not only a revolt against the ban of 'unsafe' sexuality activity, but its sentiment went deeper. Closing the Baths also meant that some lost their shelter in order to comply with politics, symbolic politics, because the policies that were ultimately enforced showed that the Baths had the potential to turn into a place of knowledge on HIV/AIDS and thus create awareness. It had the potential to be a place where one could go to avoid isolation and endorse social control. In that sense, the bathhouse ban laid bare the US government's gross incompetence to skillfully react to the epidemic. It was this incompetence and ignorance that led to the urgency of AIDS activism and organizations such as GMHC and ACT UP. It created a need for grassroots initiatives and other ways of using community spaces such as the Baths and nightclubs. Jewel's Catch One's Rue's House is such an example wherein Jewel and her wife Rue repurposed their communal space.

Through club culture the funds were raised to create awareness and fight HIV/AIDS. Fortunately there were far more anti-AIDS fundraisers and events than are highlighted in this thesis, however, it was not possible to include them all and at the same time go in-depth on the nuances between them and how they defined nightlife's addition to anti-AIDS activism. Connected through music and dance, promotor-based and club-based fundraisers were all legitimate parties, but with a totally different approach. Without neglecting its cause or spoiling the party, The Love Ball presented awareness while extravagantly celebrating life, whereas Showers did so too in a simple, sober manner more focused on activism instead of eccentricity.

As antiretroviral therapy developed to treat those living with HIV, the urgency of activist groups weakened. Similar to what Gay Men's Health Crisis had experienced before them, there was building friction between members of ACT UP. Partly resulting in the establishing of TAG, it also had negative side effects. The combination of a weakened sense of urgency and frustrations with how the group operated led members to leave which immensely thinned out ACT UP. Although Gay Men's Health Crisis, ACT UP and TAG did not entirely dissolve and therefore are still alive today, their traction is nothing compared to what it was during their first years. House music suffered somewhat the same fate. In the 90s techno and rave music would develop out of the ashes of house music, but while doing so both genres eventually overshadowed its predecessor. Although these new electronic genres gained popularity during a time wherein AIDS was still very prevalent in US society (at the time this was written there is still no cure to the virus), it never connected to the HIV/

AIDS epidemic as much as disco and house had done in the past. After all, research on the virus had progressed and techno's originators were young straight black men who - unlike their idols who, as mentioned earlier, identified as gay - never had the same form of lived experience or sense of community. HIV/AIDS was not as mysterious as it was before and measures were actively taken to restrict the virus from making new victims.

This thesis purposely limited itself to the historical basis of HIV/AIDS in electronic music during the 80s and 90s as there has been little research in this area yet. Sources have shown that most of the writings on this topic is anecdotal and non-scientific. A big portion of the material viewed for this research focused on the experience of the writer or the stories of people who were there. With this thesis the writing goal was to lay down the facts instead of the anecdotes, but not lose the human side of the topic and paint a solid picture of AIDS activism in the US disco and house music culture. Due to word count requirements it was not possible to include AIDS bereavement into the thesis therefore an idea for future research could be further investigating the link between electronic music, AIDS, suffering and grief.

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