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Intro to Moving Image Archiving and Preservation

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Our Sequined Heritage: *A Night at the Gallery* and the Audiovisual Record of New York's Underground Dance Clubs

In the popular consciousness, at least among those who lived through the era and into the following generation, the word "disco" registers in the mind as something ersatz, plastic, disposable, chintzy, and, as the implication of such labels suggests, ultimately insignificant. A certain set of signifiers are automatically associated with discotheques: John Travolta's character in *Saturday Night Fever*, suited all in white with gold chains adorning an exposed, hirsute chest; glamorous celebrities engaging in unspeakably decadent behavior; and of course, the omnipresent music that seemingly refuses to die, falsetto male voices (save for Barry White) and belting divas over bouncy, string-laden, and percussive pop songs that are more often than not described as "guilty pleasures" by the very people who sing along to them at karaoke bars or dance to them at weddings. It is telling that on Wikipedia, disco belongs to the subject category "1970s fads" (its arguable spiritual descendant, new wave, is similarly listed as a "1980s fad"). Punk, on the other hand, which emerged roughly simultaneously with disco's ascendance to the pop culture stratosphere, manages to escape this vaguely derogatory classification, perhaps because it was never embraced to quite the extent that disco was and cannot technically qualify as a "fad."

However much these archetypes have persisted, it should be stated that little of it

was rooted in reality: *Saturday Night Fever*, for instance, was based on an article written by Nik Cohn for New York Magazine that, while not too far off from the truth vis-à-vis the Italian-American inner-city working-class preoccupation with disco, was mostly fabricated (Laurino 137). And while Studio 54 did erect a façade of celebrity-driven exclusivity, where glamour and connections were what made you instead of vice versa, many of the world's most famous nightclub's predecessors concerned themselves with community, not exclusivity, and marginality, not notoriety (though the demarcations between these oppositions, as will be later explained, were not so rigid as that).

Underground dance clubs such as the Loft, the Gallery and the Paradise Garage, all based in downtown New York City (contra Studio 54's Midtown) were largely frequented by disenfranchised members of society - blacks, gays and Hispanics - who carved an identity and a social space for themselves in the warehouses below and above Houston Street.

This political dimension of disco is largely overlooked in favor of the easy fallback of the more tangible aspects (namely, the fashion) that one typically associates with the music.

Vince Aletti, who covered the burgeoning club scene in the early '70s for Rolling Stone, laments that “[d]isco is characterized as an empty-headed, mechanical, hedonistic thing, but for many of us involved, it was not that at all... These records were steeped in social consciousness, they were about community and music, about loving one another. I think all those kinds of messages were important to the experience of going out and dancing” (McDonnell F5).

Rather than frequent the increasingly taken route of writing a total history of the scene, this paper focuses on the audiovisual heritage of discotheques, with particular focus on Nicky Siano's The Gallery which operated from 1972 to 1977. While

underground dance clubs have been extensively written and talked about over the years, by journalists and increasingly by scholars, there is precious little actual filmed or videotaped documentation of the New York discotheque scene. I offer a number of theories as to why this might be the case, citing the actual physical space of discotheques providing a number of logistical difficulties in shooting as well as the conflicts between a primarily DJ-based culture versus the visually more interesting world of live performance. I choose to focus mainly on the Gallery for the primary reason that there recently has surfaced several hours of film shot at the Gallery near the end of the club's existence in 1977, which is currently being edited into a feature-length film, tentatively titled *A Night at the Gallery* and due for theatrical release in 2009. In providing a brief production history of the film elements, I note that the film is unique in that, at a mere four hours' length, it is perhaps the most extensive moving image document of the underground dance club scene yet unearthed, and for this reason, it is historically important as a living record of underground culture.

Disco's ascendance as a popular movement has much to do with its particular historical moment. As Peter Shapiro notes, disco emerged out of the political upheavals of the 1960s - the civil rights movement, Stonewall, and the National Organization for Women had created some measure of visibility for blacks, homosexuals and women respectively, but at the same time, the conflict in Vietnam was still raging, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were still fresh in the public mind, and the economy was precipitating rapidly downwards. Disco's roots lay in this hotbed of political unrest. Dance clubs such as the Sanctuary, a predominantly gay club located in the Theater District, paved the way for discotheques both in terms of musical

selection and, to employ a euphemism, the range of extracurricular activities. As befitting a deconsecrated church, there was a copious amount of both real and simulated sexual activity both on and off the dance floor, set to a soundtrack of heady psychedelia, percussive pan-African drums and chants and Motown records (Shapiro 27), all spun by a DJ named Francis Grasso. Grasso is credited as being the first DJ to not just mix records, but to mix them in such a way that the DJ set could be treated as a coherent whole instead of just a patchwork collection of songs. This idea of a narrative behind one's song selection would prove influential for the incoming wave of disco DJs.

In February of 1970, David Mancuso opened what would be come to be considered the first disco, The Loft, at 647 Broadway. His parties were initially invite-only with a \$3 admission fee that entitled one to refreshments (of a non-alcoholic kind) and a dance floor decorated with colored streamers and balloons (Shapiro 31-32). Mancuso's musical selections tended to split the difference between the friskier, upbeat funk of James Brown and the lush orchestration of the Philadelphia International sound that was popular in black musical scenes in the early 1970's; tracks like Eddie Kendricks' "Girl, You Need a Change of Mind" and Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango's "Soul Makossa" would become the precursors to the disco sound as it is known today.

Among the regular attendees was a young man named Nicky Siano, who, moved to make his own mark in the world of nightlife himself, used his connections and ample collection of records to bankroll his own nightclub venture, all before turning eighteen. With the help of his brother Joe and friend/ex-lover Robin Lord, Siano opened his nightclub, the This & That Gallery - popularly known simply as The Gallery - on Twenty-second Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues in Manhattan in February

1973 (Lawrence 102). Entrance into the Gallery, much like the Loft, was \$3 with an invite, and the strict entrance regulations were laid out in mailings to invitees (including rules about not sneaking in friends, procuring a card for entrance, etc.).

Sheila Weller of the *New York Sunday News* writes about a typical evening at the Gallery (as quoted in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*):

The wildness is exquisitely wholesome...Furious dancing. Gentle laughter. Crepe paper and tinsel. Body energy shakes the room, yet sex is the last thing it calls to mind – except, perhaps, hostility. In darkness pierced by perfectly timed bursts of light, Labelle’s rousing “What Can I Do for You?” takes on a frenetic holiness. The floor is a drum to the dancers - many of them gay, most of them black - whose extended fists and tambourines lob the balloons and streamers above at what seem to be collectively chosen intervals (152).

Despite the all-around good vibes, the NYC Fire Department shut down the Gallery at its Twenty-second Street location, due to "inadequate fire exits." This was only a matter of months after Mancuso had been told to evacuate the Loft for building code violations (Lawrence 126). The club eventually reopened 172 Mercer Street (at Houston) in the East Village in November 1974, somewhat to the city's chagrin (the City Planning Commission actively campaigned against dance clubs opening in SoHo, preferring instead to allot rental space to artist spaces and galleries) (Lawrence 134).

While the argument was made by the CPC that there was no "art" involved in the nightclub scene, there were, arguably, artistic practices of a different strain happening inside the clubs. Siano, in many important ways, expanded the craft of the club DJ,

turning it into a veritable art form unto itself. Where the standard setup usually involved two turntables fed through a mixer, Siano incorporated a third (inspired by a dream he had one evening) turntable into his sets. The third turntable would often be used to play a sound effect, such as a jet engine, while he looped two records on the remaining two turntables. The end result would be, according to Siano, nothing short of pandemonium (Lawrence 125-6). Another favorite trick of his was to have one record going, then to sync up the same record on the other turntable, mix the track into itself, and then repeat the process, going back and forth, essentially taking a single song and stretching it out potentially infinitely (Shapiro 37-8). It was largely due to DJs like Siano, who favored long percussive breakdowns and who used this "endless" mixing style, that record companies began to put out 12-inch singles. Typically, up until that point, record companies released singles on a 7-inch vinyl format. The 7-inch format did not work particularly well for DJing purposes due to their comparably tighter grooves on the record which wore out faster with repeat plays, their size making them difficult to handle in the middle of a DJ set, and their somewhat muddled sound quality not translating well when piped through speakers in a large room (Shapiro 39).

Throughout the 1970's, several discotheques were fully operational in NYC, the most famous being Studio 54, which opened in 1977. Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager, formerly of the Enchanted Garden nightclub in Queens, opened their club on West 54th street in Manhattan with the intention of catering to a better-off clientele than that of the downtown discotheques. Studio 54 was like one of the downtown clubs blown up to palatial proportions, its look and feel guided by lighting specialists and set designers plucked from Broadway and world-renowned interior designers and architects (Lawrence

271). The party antics were a good deal more visible there than at the Gallery and the Loft, as well; for Bianca Jagger's birthday party, the Rolling Stones singer's wife rode into Studio 54 on a white horse, and Liza Minnelli, Andy Warhol and Brooke Shields were among the famous regular attendees. Studio 54 shared its moment in the spotlight with *Saturday Night Fever*, an urban melodrama starring John Travolta as Tony Manero, a young Italian-American living in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn who tries to hit the big time as a disco dancer to escape the pressures of his family, his dead-end job, and Brooklyn gang culture. The movie, which in a sense piggybacked on the success of the Bee Gees by including six of their songs on its soundtrack, proved to be tremendously popular and disco became a pop phenomenon. By the end of 1978, discotheques in the United States numbered approximately 15,000, and two hundred radio stations had adopted an all-disco format (Lawrence 315).

By 1979, however, the phenomenon had reached a boiling point, and every phenomenon ultimately suffers a backlash. The most visible retaliation against disco happened on July 12, 1979, when Steve Dahl, a radio DJ for Chicago's WLUP, who had lost his previous radio gig at WDAI-FM after they switched to an all-disco format, orchestrated a massive burning of disco records in Comiskey Park's center field between two games in a double header. The event was advertised as "Disco Demolition Night," and in many capsule histories of disco, the night is recorded as disco's death knell. An article on the 10th anniversary of "Disco Demolition Night" in *Billboard* points out the unsavory subtext of the event; here was a largely white, working-class crowd publicly decrying – in a baseball field, the site of traditionally heterosexual male leisure activity – a popular movement which afforded a measure of visibility to disenfranchised minority

groups (10). Dahl's defense of the event as an attack not on gays or blacks, but "because [disco music] was banal" (Lawrence 374), is rendered somewhat disingenuous by the ferocity of his attack. Nevertheless, by the end of the following year, disco's status as a runaway commercial success had begun to slip. Truth be told, many disco records of poor quality were beginning to flood the market by 1979 (Siano contends that "in a sense, I was right there with the 'disco sucks' people (Lawrence 378)), and interest in disco decreased all around. While it never really "died" - it merely lay dormant for awhile and reincarnated itself as Hi-NRG, Chicago house, and new wave - Comiskey Park spelled the end of the genre as far as the proponents of "Disco Sucks" were concerned.

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With regard to the film shot at the Gallery, the following account of its germination and execution was pieced together from conversations with three people directly involved in the film's creation. Siano's cousin, Gary Turzilli, contacted him with the idea of shooting a film showcasing a typical night at the Gallery, recognizing, with some prescience, that the Gallery represented a significant social event. Turzilli was at the time enrolled in Arnold Eagle's film class at the New School for Social Research on West 47th Street, and as such had access to Bolex cameras, lighting equipment, and fellow students who would be willing to assist in shooting the film. Siano readily agreed and the two shortly began to seek out someone willing to assume the mantle of director for the project. Siano and Turzilli took on the role of producers, financing the film with money out of pocket. Turzilli asked Eagle if he knew anyone who might be interested in spearheading the film shoot, and Eagle put him in touch with his friend James Bidgood, who had in 1972 directed - anonymously - the notorious gay cult film *Pink*

Narcissus. Bidgood agreed to the idea and the filming began in the summer of 1977.

Eagle had likely surmised that Bidgood would have been a perfect fit for the Gallery film shoot. The concept of the discotheque – an exotic urban utopia densely populated with young gay men – fit nicely with Bidgood's own photographic aesthetic, which employed copious use of vivid, colorful lighting, gaudy costuming and exaggeratedly masculine figures to realize a type of male erotic fantasy reminiscent of gay paperback pulp novel covers from the 1940's and 1950's. To this end, Bidgood took some creative licenses with the interior of the Gallery. As the resident DJ and "creative director" of the Gallery, Siano made use of streamers, balloons, and of course, the ubiquitous disco ball, but Bidgood wanted to take things a step further and adorned the interiors with tinsel and glitter, thereby increasing the silvery reflectivity of the dance floor. He also employed a good deal more luminescence than the Gallery crowd was used to, with sometimes disastrous consequences. Bidgood, in an e-mail interview, recalls one particular incident when he was filming the line to get in outside of the Gallery:

Gary said he was going to try to plug into the street lamp somehow as I remember---maybe he had finished and told me to switch on the last fixture...or maybe he was still messing around under the street lamp...when suddenly the whole street flickered and went dark. No, not just the street...it looked like the whole city had blacked out. I think I muttered "Oh, fuck, Bidgood, what have you done now!" It was the evening of July 13th, 1977. It took me a while to realize---the city HAD blacked out---and in no way due to my needing more light---but for a split second there or two or three--- I thought

I had fucked up big time.

Bidgood and Turzilli did not see entirely eye to eye on the project, though a kind of fruitful tension emerged as a result of their clashing viewpoints. Bidgood's stock in trade was fantasy, and he wanted to present the Gallery as a sort of urban dream world. Turzilli, perhaps taking a cue from Eagle, envisioned a more naturalist, *verite*-style depiction of the Gallery. The dialectic of the discotheque, as one might call it, is embodied in the Gallery film in one humorous, uncomfortable segment. Siano, sitting on a couch, strung out on heroin with a couple of friends, talks to Turzilli (positioned off-frame) about his status as one of the city's best DJs. He is barely coherent throughout the segment, and a close listen reveals one of Turzilli's assistants expressing the wish to stop rolling. While *A Night at the Gallery* is still in the editing process as this paper is being written, Siano insists that this scene will be featured in the final product, as it represents to him an honest reflection of the nocturnal lifestyle him and his friends practiced in the 1970s. Indeed, as Peter Shapiro notes, disco "was at once about community and individual pleasure, sensation and alienation, orgy and sacrifice; it promised both liberation and constraint, release and restraint, frivolity and doom. Disco was both utopia and hell" (30).

Bidgood withdrew during the middle of the film shoot, citing both artistic differences with Turzilli and a lack of funds to continue shooting. Filming resumed shortly with a new director named Ron (Turzilli was at a loss to remember the director's surname), who continued on in Turzilli's *verite* style. What emerged in the end was a captivating document of a typical night at the Gallery, with guests who all enthuse greatly over Siano's DJ stylings and wax rhapsodic over the atmosphere of the club.

Refreshments are laid out on a table for partygoers, guests are greeted at the door by Siano personally - two things you would be hard pressed to find in many nightclubs today. Siano's friends and accomplices, many famous DJs in their own right, are featured; Frankie Knuckles, by this point a respected NYC DJ who would earn his own stripes later as one of the figureheads of the Chicago house music scene, is shown blowing up balloons on the dance floor before the crowd arrives, and the late Larry Levan discusses the Gallery's door policy with Siano. And of course, there are the dancers, writhing in ecstasy to Loleatta Holloway and Double Exposure on Bidgood's hyper-reflective dance floor, bathed in blue and pink light and drenched in sweat, embodying the very essence of the discotheque: communality, indulgence, and, at the very least, implied sexuality.

Approximately four hours of footage (roughly equivalent to 8640 ft.) of the Gallery was filmed over the course of the shooting. The film was shot on 16mm color stock and languished in Turzilli's attic for years afterwards. In 2007, Turzilli took the footage to DuArt, a film and video lab in New York City, where they transferred the original film elements onto MiniDV. I was unfortunately not able to handle or inspect the original film elements, as they currently reside with Turzilli, who lives in Connecticut, but Siano was kind enough to allow me to view the transferred film elements in his own possession at his apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn. I was not able to view all four hours of footage in my brief session with Siano but he selected clips that demonstrated the various techniques employed in the filming and provided personal anecdotes about the characters that populate the film.

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Considering how ubiquitous a phenomenon disco eventually proved to be, when even suburban homebodies who had never set foot in New York City were doing the hustle and a film like *Saturday Night Fever*, couched in specific urban references and archetypes, became a nationwide box office smash (raking in \$85.2 million in its initial theatrical run) (Gray), there is surprisingly little actual audiovisual footage shot inside of discotheques. While visual effects, such as strobe lighting, added greatly to the overwhelming sensory experience of going to a disco, much of the history of disco has been transmitted orally from DJs and partygoers to journalists and younger people. Since the 1990s, serious scholarship on the subject of underground dance music has emerged, with tomes by Tim Lawrence, Peter Shapiro and Kai Fikentscher devoted to the subject, as well as an exhibition at Seattle's Experience Music Project from 2003 entitled "Disco: A Decade of Saturday Nights," which included original artifacts and memorabilia from the era.

There are a number of reasons why footage shot inside discotheques is somewhat difficult to locate. One of the simplest explanations is that there is not much footage in the first place. Discotheques were by nature dimly lit and somewhat private, crowded affairs, and Siano was fortunate enough to have connections to friends and relatives who could both access and use film equipment. Bob Casey, in an interview with Bill Brewster, even attributes the success of the Gallery to the fact that "they began with the basic color BLACK!...There was no neon. There was no automated anything, there were a few light switches, a couple of light pedals, that's all it was" (Brewster 152). Given the premium that many DJs placed on atmosphere, it would have seemed somewhat intrusive to introduce bulky film equipment and lights into a dark space packed with bodies. (The

Night at the Gallery film crew did not seem to have such a problem, however; even if some of the interior decorations were slightly staged in a deviation from the norm, the dancers on camera appear to be genuinely enjoying themselves. In point of fact, one of the more astonishing dance sequences in the film is a sideways pan across the dance floor, with dancers gyrating in the foreground. Bidgood had laid down tracks on the floor of the Gallery to accomplish this feat.)

The presence of so many people in a crowded space presents another hurdle for documentarians of disco, one that has more to do with issues of representation than sheer logistics. Discotheques, even at the height of their ubiquity, routinely advertised themselves as a means towards escapism, of forgetting the troubles of the working week (or perhaps your lack of a job thereof), and spending leisure time with friends and lovers, indulging in desires that would offend people of a "delicate" constitution. Creating a hedonistic environment such as this might lead one to engage in activity that one would prefer not to be committed to celluloid or videotape. It was not unusual for people who ordinarily worked straitlaced, white-collar-and-tie jobs to attend discotheques, viewing it as a safe space to treat themselves to an illicit same-sex affair or to pop a couple of pills.

As far as these hurdles were concerned, Siano and the film crew managed to circumvent much of them. Siano made everybody who entered the Gallery that evening sign a release form granting the crew permission to use their likeness in the film. Turzilli claims that he still possesses the release forms, but as of my conversation with him from October 2008, he had not yet discovered their exact whereabouts. Since 1977, Turzilli has moved house a couple of times, and loose papers tend often to get lost in the shuffle. Without having the actual form handy it is difficult to recall the terms laid down

as regards the use or distribution of the partygoers' likenesses in future film productions, but the case could definitely be made that the camera does not exploit or cast aspersion on the partygoers.

Another legal issue is presented by the soundtrack. Discotheques were, more than anything else, about the music, which, as many documentary filmmakers know well, presents a number of legal hurdles. While it clearly would not suffice to create a documentary on disco without including any of the music that was routinely played at discotheques, the financial toll for licensing clips of music to documentaries, which includes both general licensing, songwriting, and synchronization costs, is often devastating to filmmakers working largely out of pocket or with insufficient budgets. I asked Siano about whether or not the rights to the music he had planned on using in the film had been cleared yet, and he was reluctant to discuss the issue. His silence on the matter implied that the process had been somewhat difficult or costly, but from what I could gather, he had used a license clearing house to track down the pertinent information for obtaining rights to use the music in his film. While I am not certain of what songs will be featured on the film's soundtrack, the trailer, which is currently available on Siano's personal website, www.nickysiano.com, uses MFSB's "Love Is the Message", a seminal early disco record and one of Siano's DJ set staples. To obtain this or any other song for use in a documentary requires the acquisition of both a "sync" license and a "master" license. The "sync" license, which is usually cleared with the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), is issued by the publisher or copyright owner of the song. The "master" license, meanwhile, guarantees the filmmaker the right to the *recording* of the song, and this usually needs to be cleared with the record label

through which the recording was released. The costs of these licenses vary according to the level of distribution the film will receive, but more often than not they dig deep into the pockets of the documentary filmmaker.

Some of the Gallery footage was licensed out to documentary filmmaker Matt Wolf for his 2008 portrait of the musician Arthur Russell, *Wild Combination*. In 1977, Siano met Russell through Arthur's lover at the time and invited him to the Gallery, where the cellist and composer reportedly grew enamored of disco. Russell expressed the desire to make a record that would move people to dance, and so Siano agreed to produce some material for him. Their musical partnership yielded the tracks "Kiss Me Again," recorded under the moniker Dinosaur (and featuring David Byrne of Talking Heads on guitar), and the "Tiger Stripes" b/w "Move" 12-inch released under the name Felix (which Siano also co-wrote). Wolf expressed to me that while making *Wild Combination* he had a frustrating time finding any kind of footage of discotheques. A search for "disco" in Getty Images, one of the largest licensors of stock footage in the country, turns up less than 300 results, only a smattering of which were even shot in the 1970s, let alone having anything to do with underground dance clubs. There are several examples of reenactments of archetypal dance clubs, complete with all the typical signifiers of disco (swarthy men in white suits and buxom women in strapless dresses doing the hustle underneath a disco ball, etc.), footage shot within clubs from recent years, many examples of individuals dancing, a couple of clips of the exterior of Studio 54, and footage of well known artists like the Jackson 5 and Donna Summer performing on *American Bandstand*. What this would seem to suggest is that in lieu of an actual representation of a discotheque, the replication often has to suffice for documentarians

wishing to represent discotheques in their films.

Apart from Siano, Wolf had explored two other avenues for obtaining '70s dance club footage. The previously mentioned exhibition at the Experience Music Project in Seattle, curated by Eric Wiesbard and Ann Powers and which later toured to the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts in Lincoln Center, displayed some moving image material. However, the majority of the exhibition was devoted to paper-based ephemera and most of the moving image material consisted of newly recorded interviews with famous club personalities, not archival footage. Additionally, in 2004, the documentary *Maestro* by Josell Ramos, which explored the early NYC underground club scene, used archival footage of the Paradise Garage that had been licensed from a private collection. According to Wolf, who had planned on researching this footage for his own film, ARTrution Productions, Inc., the film's producers, told him that the licensing had expired and the rights to the footage was out of their hands. Some of Siano's own footage was again used in *Maestro*; the existing copyright on the film covers the entire motion picture "excluding preexisting footage (40 seconds) created by Nicky Siano" (www.copyright.gov). ARTrution Productions, Inc., according to the film credits, owns the copyright to the Paradise Garage footage featured in the film, which appears to be transferred from a VHS and includes archival footage of artist Keith Haring and DJ Larry Levan. Ramos himself, around the time of the film's release in New York, responded to an interviewer's question about the legal and ethical issues of using found footage in his film:

The footage in the film is very rare and the people that gave me the footage held on to it for 10 years. They said "I didn't want to give it to just

anyone but I didn't want to die with the footage. It is the time for people to know what really happened because there's been so many stories about Studio 54 and the real story was never told." This documentary is significant. You see a place in time where these people lived and died. The audience experienced total jubilation when they saw the film (www.fest21.com).

The evidence gathered here suggests that discotheque footage, while already rare in the first place, would mostly lie in people's private collections. As discotheques functioned as social spaces where friends gathered to dance and have a good time, it is likely that such footage, if it exists elsewhere, carries significant emotional value for whomever possesses it, which might make it more difficult to access for researchers should its existence become known.

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The legacy of the audiovisual record of discotheques is ultimately a unique one. Underground clubs are, as the name implies, secretive affairs. It is very likely that not much footage was ever shot, and that which was lies in personal collections or, to an uncertain extent, in television station archives (and in the latter instance, it is more reasonable to assume that such footage would focus on celebrity-laden Studio 54 and not with the relatively "unimportant" crowds at the Loft or the Paradise Garage). Couple this with both the natural passage of time and the untimely death of many involved in the scene from either drug overdoses or the onset of AIDS and it becomes patently clear that this kind of footage is not just rare but endangered. For the moment, however, we can glimpse for sure from the footage that Siano and his cousin have recently begun to

rehabilitate the personal reaction of the crowd to the atmosphere of the club. The footage captures the sublime tensions between fantasy and reality that made discotheques such heady experiences. Though only four hours in length, the footage captures both the rapturous highs and the tawdry lows that epitomized discotheques. The dancers surrendering themselves to the DJ's set are of a piece with the heroin users driving their bodies to a different (and ultimately more dangerous) kind of euphoria.

I did not address with Siano the potential for the film elements to be preserved and kept in the custody of an archive or a library, as I did not wish to speak on behalf of any particular institution and because editing the film is already consuming much of his free time. As it stands, the film footage looks fine transferred to MiniDV but the film bears noticeable artifacts relating to its age. The dyes have faded somewhat since 1977, there are a number of visible specks and scratches, and at certain points a very noticeable vertical line runs down the center of the frame. Siano told me that DuArt had encouraged him to keep some of the dirt and scratches on the film. The resulting patina of age does lend an additional layer to the film, a sheen that makes the movie seem even more like a relic, a snapshot of a bygone age from before the historical memory of my generation. Siano has, in fact, kept many of the artifacts from this time period that, I believe, have potential use-value for music historians, including flyers, ephemera and correspondence from his days as the resident DJ at the Gallery. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, which hosted the Experience Music Project's disco exhibition, seems well-suited to handle such a collection, owing to both its strong collection of gay and lesbian materials and to its Dance division at the Lincoln Center branch for the performing arts (bearing in mind that, while the "dance" aspect of Siano's materials is

operating in a different mode than the classical and indigenous forms of expressive dance collected by the NYPL's Dance division, that Siano is a pertinent figure in the culture of dance music in New York City).

Because the most well-known films that attempt to capture the disco era are fictional feature-length narrative films – i.e. *Saturday Night Fever*, *Can't Stop the Music*, *The Last Days of Disco* – much of the popular perception of discotheques lies in a representation of the era that is not necessarily grounded in truth. I do not personally suspect that the uncovering of Siano's footage will do much to alter the popular mindset of disco as something that needed to be purged from the country for the sake of musical quality, or of the music's perpetual status as a “guilty pleasure”. It will, however, help to provide another glimpse of a time before Studio 54 cemented the discotheque in the national consciousness as the realm of the glamorous, the den of iniquity for those who were lucky enough to get in, that flaunted its excess in the face of the American working class. The Gallery footage grounds disco in its political roots, its post-civil rights, post-Stonewall context of racial and sexual liberation. As such, this footage, wherever it may be found, carries untold social and historical value as a document of an era that attempted, however paradoxically, to merge the exclusive and the inclusive towards the pursuit of free love and self-expression.

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