

Chris Nicols

Introduction to MIAP

Instructor Howard Besser

Go Nightclubbing

The Go Nightclubbing Archive at Bobst's Fales Library was assembled over three decades by Emily Armstrong and Pat Ivers, pioneering video artists who were heavily involved in the 1970s New York punk scene in the hope that their collection will serve as one of the most significant recordings of a short lived but vibrant and influential artistic community located in the East Village of Manhattan. In my interview with the two artists many background details about the recording, preservation and restoration process were revealed to me, including their basic goals for the archive, how their views on it have changed over the years, how they have curated it and restored it as well as the general provenance of the all the complex and varied forms of media in the collection.

The Go Nightclubbing archive consists mainly of over 100 performances from over 70 bands that took place from 1975-1980. These performances occurred almost exclusively in the dingy but highly productive punk scene in Manhattan's East Village. These bands, singers and artists performed in a number of clubs famous, or infamous, for their experimental atmosphere. Such venues included Max's Kansas City, Hurrah's, the Mudd Club, the Rat Club, CBGB's and Danceateria. Although some of these clubs were short lived, Danceateria not even open for a full year, some stayed around for decades and became legends of punk music, like CBGB's. Although frequently rife with illegal activities like drug use, public nudity and

sometimes even lacking liquor license, these venues provided the space for American punk music to first flourish.

For the most part, the collection has remained almost entirely intact and in high quality. Though kept in the apartments of Ivers and Armstrong without climate control, the tapes have all survived totally intact, Bill Seery at Mercer Media working with Fales Library to restore all the tapes and ultimately digitize them for easy access and research. Much of the collection also consists of paper ephemera, photographs and videos from art installations towards the end of the most productive period of the collection.

Emily Armstrong and Pat Ivers met each other for the first time in their mid-twenties while working at Manhattan Cable's Public Access Department, each interested in documenting the growing subculture that seemed to be welling up in New York in the 1970s. They believed this was more possible than ever before because of the relatively recent advent of not just portable and relatively cheap video tape cameras, but because costs in color tape had been drastically reduced as well. Though massive and cumbersome by today's standards, their cameras allowed them to make significantly longer and higher quality takes of bands performing at their favorite clubs.

Of course, none of this would have been possible had Ivers and Armstrong not been already so integrated into the New York scene of the time, particularly their friendships with technicians and club workers who made the shows possible. While the underground scene in New York was notorious for hard partying, Ivers and Armstrong found comradery with the sound and light technicians of the many venues. This really shows in the recordings as all of the

sound is taken directly from the local sound systems and the lighting is increased specifically for videotaping of the performance, sometimes in the case of Bad Brains to cause the bands to sweat profusely. Although not at first, Ivers and Armstrong would come to find regular artistic work for one of the most famous but short lived venues, the original Danceteria.

They became employed at Danceteria in 1980, the year it opened. For their grand opening, Ivers and Armstrong, by this point well-known video artists, were commissioned to set up what would become another large portion of their Go Nightclubbing archive, the Video Lounge. The Video Lounge would become a permanent part of Danceteria on the second floor and consisted of a number of monitors mounted in columns surrounded by comfortable, even living room style furniture. Initially made to shock club goers out of their usual partying mood, the Video Lounge was hugely popular. Among the Japanese giant monster movies and strange commercials, Ivers and Armstrong also showed what they called Narrative Videos matched with music from some of their favorite bands. They are now largely credited as some of the first music video artists and club VJs.

Additionally, Danceteria had them make another series of videos called The Come-On's. Each of these 2-4 minute clips consisted of artists and friends of Ivers and Armstrong trying to seduce the camera in a number of ways. Some of these clips were very genuine in their approach to seduction, while others are clearly more of a joke. The clips would play inside what appeared to be photo booths inside the club. Ivers and Armstrong hoped once again to shock the systems of the average club goers by presenting them with bizarre sexual images while isolating them within the booth away from the rest of the patrons.

With the closing of Danceteria at the end of 1980 due to a laundry list of illegal activity, Ivers and Armstrong felt that an era had come to an end and that the alternative and punk scene of the 1970s was quickly giving way to a more soulless dance music of the 1980s that simply did not appeal to them. They had always seen their videos as vital tools to preserve a fleeting culture, but now with the Reagan years beginning and the AIDS crisis severely hitting many of their social circles, Ivers and Armstrong stopped recording any new shows for a very long time.

As early as 1975 when they first began recording, Ivers and Armstrong had been exhibiting their work in one form or another in New York, around the country and even internationally, going as far as Paris. In 1980, with the recording work done, they compiled their videos with Anthology Films into a television show that aired late at night also called Go Nightclubbing. Anthology screened the series in house, but because of the huge number of rights concerns, it is extremely impractical to make Go Nightclubbing into a widely available documentary film or series ever again.

In 1982 Ivers and Armstrong stopped exhibiting their work. It wouldn't be until 2000 that they would not only start showing their work at various venues and museums once more, but also start doing a series of retrospective interviews with many of the artists they recorded and several others who were prominent in New York at the time. These more recent videos, all shot with Betacam, stand in very stark contrast to the original recordings. Unlike a lot of the more experimental videos from the Video Lounge or the Come-On's, these videos are mostly straightforward interviews made to color and add commentary to the images already captured. People like Marky Ramone or Joey Arias recall performances either recorded or alluded to in

earlier items in the collection and go over how their careers evolved in the 1980s and 90s.

Furthermore, some of the performances are shot by third party camera operators that Ivers and Armstrong admit are not up to the standards they would like to see *Go Nightclubbing* live up to.

When first going over the archive myself, I was struck by not only how large and varied its contents were, but by their relatively high quality considering most of the tapes are 40 years old now. Although they haven't been kept in controlled environments until very recently, it shows how protective of the tapes Ivers and Armstrong were, noting that they were more meticulous than some other video artists they knew at the time. This is especially surprising considering how clearly few resources they had at their disposal. Many of the videos begin with a random news broadcast of the day, or something taken off a commercial. Although tape had become much more accessible in the mid-1970s, it was still so expensive that Ivers and Armstrong were forced to use old discarded tapes that had already been recorded over to capture these performances. Tragically, they were sometimes even forced to record over bands they had already seen if they believed a more important band was about to perform and they were unable to afford new tape.

I was also interested in how the categories of the collection were maintained, or what the accession policy was. Although Armstrong insisted *Go Nightclubbing* was meant to be a history of punk, there are a number of items in the collection that either stretch the definition of that genre or are completely outside of the punk sub culture, like Sun Ra and his Arkestra or Japanese giant monster kaiju films. Talking with Ivers and Armstrong, it seems that to them that the word punk was never very stable to begin with and has only changed even more drastically

over time. Now, says Armstrong, it is more of a convenient label that encapsulates a certain era for her, rather than a fashion statement, politics or even a genre of music.

When we began discussing media formats and migration I found myself surprised in two ways. First, Ivers and Armstrong couldn't seem to have cared less about what format their material was viewed on. Whether 3/4" U-Matic, DVD or streaming, they did not feel there was anything of real value lost in the migration from one format to another. What was more important was the venue or room it the videos were viewed in. Second, they were both extremely distraught over the archival limitations of digital files, saying multiple times that they had no faith whatsoever in the ability of digital files to properly preserve anything and greatly preferring magnetic tape. Its more that the two sentiments were expressed side by side that really surprised me. I would have thought a dedication to analog formats would have gone hand in hand with a revulsion towards digital files as an archival medium, but clearly that is not the case.

I was particularly impressed to see that despite the huge cost of this equipment to Ivers and Armstrong personally, they were still willing to bring their cameras into the crowd itself to get a very personal view of the performer, helping to recreate the feeling of an average patron. I was surprised to hear, though, that the highly kinetic atmosphere that pervades punk shows today was actually a later and west coast phenomenon that they were not a part of. This is consistent with what I saw in the tapes and really explains away a lot of confusion. I could not imagine being able to take even a half decent video if the case had ben otherwise.

Ivers and Armstrong also maintained a blog during the restoration process of their tapes at Mercer Media. Before reading it, I had thought it was going to be a technical log of how the video tapes were processed and restored. Instead, Ivers and Armstrong seem to have chosen one of the performances from each batch being restored and offered commentary on it. The result is a great companion piece to the rest of the archive, offering very personal details about the performances and the performers themselves.

Furthermore, it really shows just how deeply involved Ivers and Armstrong were in the local community they were shooting. Of particular interest was a story of meeting a twenty year old Jello Biafra at an airport in California and letting him crash on their couch while he stayed in New York. The story also goes on to comment on the poor promotion by the venue of the Dead Kennedy's for that performance, explaining why the crowd seems so small. I was delighted to hear that while a movie is almost definitely impossible, Ivers and Armstrong are considering turning their restoration blog into a book- one that would surely aid any researchers on the subject.

The Go Nightclubbing collection is a fantastic guide to the underground punk scene of New York in the late 1970s, giving you a sense of both what it was like to go out and see shows by now legendary bands from a legendary era, but also to see what it was like to be an integral part of the community supporting these artists. Ivers and Armstrong with the help of Fales Library and Mercer Media have assembled a uniquely personal perspective and made it not only easy, but fun and engaging. With the tapes digitized and now professionally preserved, the Go Nightclubbing collection will be available for many years to come.