

THE ALLURE OF THE NIGHTWORLD



© TULLIO FARBOLLA/COURTESY ERIC MANASSE, CT, AND SERGE SOROKKO GALLERY, NYC

In photography, the light of day is no match for the dreams after dark. **By Anthony Haden-Guest**

accident plays a critical part in photography—more, perhaps, than in any other medium. So it seems fitting that chance rather than strategic planning played a crucial part in the origin of the exhibition that inspired this special issue of *American Photo*.

It began when I was gathering pictures for a book I was working on about the last two decades of New York's nightlife. I found myself delving through the archives of Manhattan's nightlife photographers—paparazzi who had come of age with the opening of Studio 54 and continued to

Actor Paul Douglas (left), his wife Jan Sterling, and Charlton Heston at the Stork Club in New York, 1954.

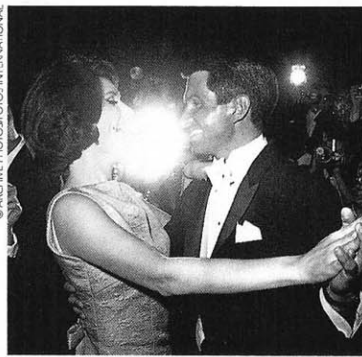
document the evolving club scene as the 1970s turned into the frenetic '80s.

I was struck by the way their photographs, which had once seemed as transient as a smile, a one-night stand, a tabloid headline, or a tear, still resonated with nuance and mood. The paparazzi—Robin Platzer, Sonia Moskowitz, Ron Galella, and others—were looking for celebrities, and they found them at the clubs. Mick and Bianca, Calvin, Andy, Liza, Halston, and Liz—they stared back at the camera's flash for brief, shining moments, like deer caught in headlights. The resulting pictures are the photographic equivalent of found objects, images of sudden familiarity, haunting pathos, voyeuristic insouciance, or startling, often spooky hilarity.

There was the making of a fine exhibition here, and I said as much to a few people, including my friend Serge Sorokko, who,

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First daughter Lynda Bird Johnson and actor George Hamilton dance at the Oscar Ball, 1966.



PHOTOFEST

unknown to me, was building a new art gallery in New York. He quickly decided to do an exhibition—the gallery's first—on the theme of nightlife. This was chance number one. A curator was duly hired—Helen Varola, who set to work with some ideas of her own. Chance two.

My original notion was a show that would focus on photographs that had been made by the paparazzi of Manhattan's club land, which is to say images that are shamelessly artless, commercial in conception and execution. Sorokko and Varola took a much wider view, looking back to the early days of photography, to pictures by the famous

as well as the brilliant lesser-known—photos that are redolent of history and were often made with deliberate artfulness, each inspired in its own way by the lure of the night. Aside from an occasional telephone call to a photographer, I kept my nose out of the hassles of the curatorial undertaking. But privately I worried whether the exhibition might not be turning into a hodgepodge, what the Brits call a dog's dinner.

It was interesting to see how very wrong my original idea had been. Combining images made over the decades only reinforced the fundamental role that the nightworld plays in our lives—in both our experiences

This being the nightworld, the sexuality of the work is strong.



Swimmers



COURTESY HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY/NTC

Left: Jessie Tarbox Beals's image of the Webster Hall Ball, circa 1910. Below: Elizabeth Taylor and Aristotle Onassis at the Lido in Paris, 1964.

and our imaginations. The nightworld is one of those concepts, like childhood, perhaps, or war, or the human body itself, so basic that it can impose a wholeness on widely disparate visions.

The photographs of Robert Doisneau do not occupy the same world—geographically or historically—as those of Tina Paul or Patrick McMullan. But the celebration and liberation that Doisneau captured in the nightworld of Paris in the 1950s is emotionally connected to the nightworld of New York in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. Looking at the pictures as they were framed and hung on the gallery's walls was a bewitching experience, a movement in both time and space, from Paris in the '30s to New York's Stork Club in the '50s. In a few seconds you could walk from Jessie Tarbox Beals's prints made in New York's Webster Hall some 80 years ago to pictures taken by Harry Benson in 1996 at the Kit Kat club in Berlin, Germany. Both photographers have documented the palpable excitement and energy, the layering of reality and illusion, that is the provenance of the nightworld.

This being the nightworld, the sexuality of the work is strong, like the fragrance of a nighttime garden, and it comes in every variety—not all of which can be shown in *American Photo*. There is the abundant presence of *La Dolce Vita*'s Anita Ekberg, caught by Tullio Farabola, whoop-



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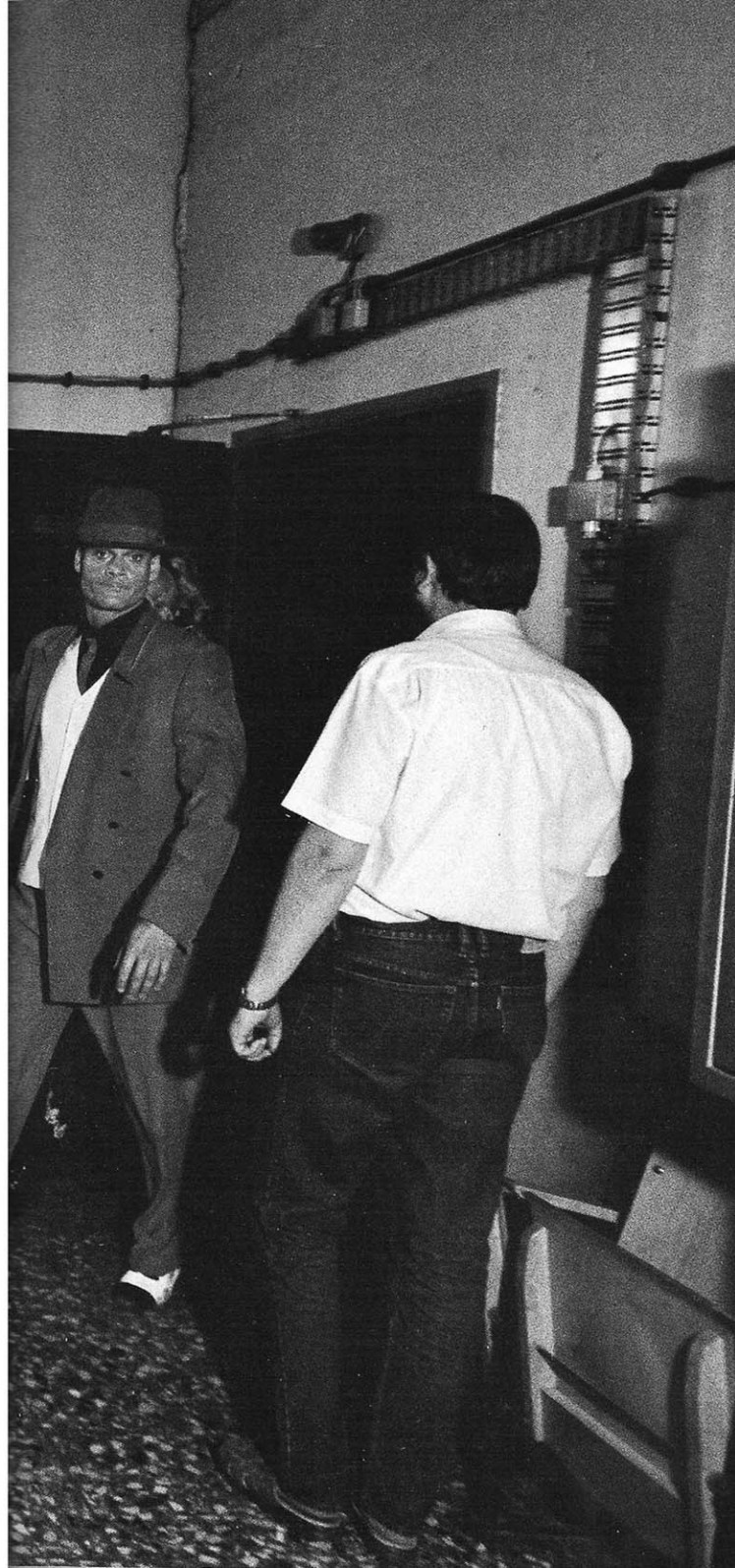


PHOTO BY HARRY BENSON FOR VANITY FAIR



© ANNE PHOTOSHOP/GETTY

The night-life scene in pre-Hitler Germany.

In the nightworld's delirious **social life**, one can glimpse melancholy.

ing it up in a Roman nightclub in 1959. There are the reveries of Helmut Newton, whose naked women, like the one in "Laura Walking on the Avenue George V, Paris," seem as entranced as the nudes of the surrealist painter Paul Delvaux, carrying their bodies and their sex like bouquets of (certainly dangerous) flowers. There is rawness, like Charles Gatewood's 1970 image "Woman Masturbating in Front of Crowd." There is the over-the-top exuberance of Lynn M. Grabowski's "Untitled," in which a well-muscled fellow struts his stuff. And there is the gleeful postadolescent cheesiness of the club kids of the '80s, caught by photographers like John Simone in "Triumph of Titties," made at the Manhattan club Mars.

This being nightworld, there are also plenty of images of wondrous strangeness, like Volker Hinz's spectacular scenes from New York's Area. And of course there are images of nightworld's sometimes delirious social life, in which one can sometimes glimpse forced gaiety, or

Dancers at a music hall in Berlin, Germany, 1996, by Harry Benson.

Robin Platzter's 1977 image of Bianca Jagger (left) and a fellow partyer atop a horse at Studio 54.

even a touch of melancholy, but mostly sheer human neediness, as when Marcia Resnick caught Studio 54's Steve Rubell and his crafty lawyer, Roy Cohn, embracing on a downtown visit to the Mudd Club in 1979.

Rubell, who died of AIDS in 1989, after serving time in prison for skimming profits from the famous disco he opened with Ian Schrager in 1977, was the first to admit that Studio 54 was not always the brilliant social epicenter it is now often recalled as being, not even in its glory days. But it was one of those places, like San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury in the '60s, where fluid, random, and abstract energies focused for a moment in time. Studio 54 occupies a niche in history, and like most niches it is full of shadows. Those shadows can be glimpsed in the photographs made there. In a sense, those same shadows can be seen in all the

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nightlife pictures in this issue. There is a mystery at the center of them all.

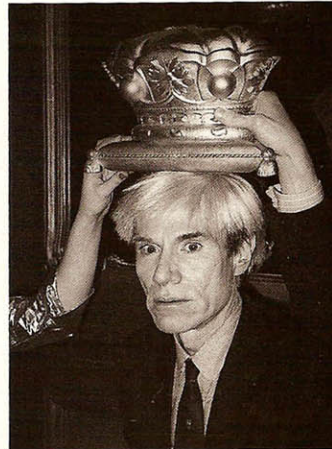
Perhaps it's the mystery that draws photographers to the nightworld and transfixes them so thoroughly. Photography is made with light, so it is understandable that the night, when natural light is rare and environments are created by artificial light, has always been alluring to the people behind the cameras.

Nightlife has its own rhythms, too, completely separate from the rhythms of the daylight hours; Wordsworth's phrase "the light of common day" suggests that difference. We can't have changed that much since we sat huddled around cave-mouth fires that warded off natural terrors. The day is prose, the night, poetry. The night is the time for dreams, love, sex, violence, and celebration. It is a time for fantasies and heightened realities. It is so in pictures too. ■

ROBIN PLATZTER/TWIN IMAGES



Clockwise from right: Larry Fink's party image from the American Photography Association Awards, 1991; Christopher Makos's shot of Andy Warhol at a Paris club, 1982; stylist and club groupie Kate Harrington (left), Truman Capote, and Gloria Swanson caught by Ron Galella at Studio 54 in 1978.



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