

## postcard from new york

Apr 20, 1997 by Liesl Schillinger

CLUB DEAD: the Seventies have been back for so long that it was just a matter of time before someone started demanding to move on to the Eighties. But, this being New York, the rationale for the move had to be far grander and more noble than any simple, nostalgic yen for conspicuous consumption, spirit-boosting white powders, or the shameless exhibitionism and horseplay induced by the spirit-boosting white powders. It had, of course, to be about freedom.

Looking to the heavens, someone noticed a gigantic comet, which looked not unlike a massive, hovering, dance-floor glitterball, and the omen revealed itself - freedom could only come through a disco revival, the sooner the better. In Italy, couturiers panted, racing to trot out halter- neck tops, satin shirts and leather pants for the Bryant Park fashion shows. In the world press, medically concerned reporters began to speculate that the hours of Aids might be numbered, while in sound booths and dance studios, the rhythm set began to ponder whether Hale-Bopp had more to do with Hip-Hop or the Hustle, and if it was to be the music or the dance of the neo-Eighties. All of these steps were necessary, it goes without saying, but they were not the Rationale.

The Rationale arrived earlier this year, when someone declared that work was the drug of the Nineties, and that workaholicism was turning its addicts into listless and dispirited automatons. Its sapping pull, sociologists reckoned, could only be counteracted by the immediate administration of dance clubs. The problem was that there weren't any. And without dance clubs, New Yorkers could not wean themselves off their overtime. On weekends, well-intentioned workers would resolutely drag themselves to downtown bars such as Don Hill's, Bob's, or Bar Bouche, where, after several drinks had lifted the spell of the office, some of them would heroically rise to dance. But when they did, packs of precinct cops tended to rush in, batons raised and dogs baying, suppressing the revel, and fining the owners. Once, Manhattanites danced without fear in clubs such as Tunnel and Limelight, but lately these refuges had been closed down by city officials. Dance- minded liberals began to murmur that club owners were being targeted by a McCarthyist smear campaign; with or without the ACLU, New Yorkers of good conscience could not let the persecution continue. And so, this month, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the founding of Studio 54 - the pleasuredome where Liza Minnelli, Diana Ross, John- John Kennedy, Andy Warhol, Brooke Shields and everyone else whose name has ever been writ in bold, pranced for a decade or so - the rehabilitation of the disco whirl was inaugurated. It took the form of a strobe-enhanced, three-gun salute, with the launch of a book by Anthony Haden-Guest called *The Last Party: Studio 54, Disco And The Culture of the Night*; the "Last Party"-themed debut of a dance-club called Cheetah ("The Fastest Club in the World"); and the "Last Party"-themed opening gala of the Serge Sorokko Gallery in SoHo, which was so crowded that even Spike Lee cooled his heels on the sidewalk rather than brave the crush. The gallery featured an exhibition of hundreds of photographs of the club scene by Diane Arbus, Weegee, Irving Penn, Helmut Newton and assorted paparazzi, serving as photographic crib sheets for the thousands of guests at the opening, who no longer recalled where they had been during the murky decade of Studio 54's prime. There were photos of Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall; of Cher and of Eddie Murphy; of bare-breasted teenage club-girls with glitter on their faces; of deeply stoned couples in hotpants and afros, goosing each other in front of punk clubs; and of fashion-world luminaries staring at naked, writhing performance artists. Lean men dressed in paintbox colours sidled along the walls, trailed by women with vinyl- vivacious faces, who shrieked as they spotted themselves inside the frames. "It wasn't just about drugs and dancing," mused a girl in a low-necked, bare, black, chiffon dress. "It was better than that, people weren't just about the bottom line, they were more open. . ." Then, noticing herself in a photograph on the wall, her teenaged nipples peeking out of her décolletage, she recognised the author of the photo, orbiting unluckily nearby, and collared him, wailing, "I want this back, this was a mistake! This has to come down!" The paparazzo winked, and said, "Honey, it was the time of fabulousness, and you were fabulous!" The girl grinned and melted back into the crowd. The time of fabulousness, he then confided, is over. "This is the funeral for the club scene," he said brightly, and resumed his tour about the room. It may be that the first party for the "Last Party" will mark the beginning of the cure for work-worn Manhattanites. Or it may be that the party is now more over than ever, and some other as yet undetermined cure was intended by the mysterious Hale-Bopp. The latter eventuality seems more likely; after all, Haden-Guest himself admits he now prefers dinner parties to clubbing and leaves his disco shoes at home.