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ANY GIVEN NIGHT

Foreword *by* **Peter Gatten**
as told to **Gabriel H. Sanchez**

I'm just a regular guy—who ran a few pretty high-level clubs in the States during the '70s, '80s, and '90s. The town where I grew up in Canada had 40,000 people. The horizons were sort of limited. Basically, if you went to university, you became a lawyer, doctor, or accountant. If you completed high school, you worked at the local mill, and if you didn't, you dug ditches.

There was a bit of sibling rivalry between my four brothers and me, but I just wanted to be successful in the eyes of my parents. So I started off with a jeans store when I was seventeen, then opened my first venue in my hometown at twenty-one. From there I went on to open clubs in Florida, Atlanta, New York City, London, and Chicago. In the '90s I was running four clubs in New York City—the Tunnel, Limelight, Palladium, and Club USA.

Between distributors, DJs, lighting personnel, security, office personnel, promoters, cleaners, and repair people, I had a thousand people working under me. On top of that, we were hosting somewhere between fifty to seventy thousand people a week.

I think there were two things about New York that appealed to me. The first was that I knew if I could make it in New York then you could make it anywhere. The other thing was that to do clubs at this level, having a creative community as a support system makes all the difference in the world. It's the only way you can do it. You need a creative community and New York City in the '80s and '90s was bustling with great energy.

Studio 54 at that time was pretty well dead and the city needed something new. The '70s was an era of neon clubs with spinning wheels and chrome. When I arrived in New York in the '80s, Studio 54 was the benchmark, but to really make a splash in the city, I couldn't just put in more spinning wheels and more chrome. The standard in the late '70s was to convert theatrical venues into nightclubs. I would have just been another Studio 54 wannabe if I had just gotten a bigger theater and more spinning wheels. So the church architecture of the Limelight was an opportunity that came from heaven, quite frankly. When that church became available, I moved on it immediately.

I have to say, the Limelight has to be my favorite club. I did it in London, Chicago, Atlanta, and it was my first in New York. It will always hold a special place in my heart. On any given night any number of celebrities would show up. If anything, I regret that we didn't document everything a lot better than what we did. We were creating history and we didn't even know it. Having these celebrities in the clubs was important in that it reinforced the public's view of us as interesting and unique. Celebrities have big budgets and the ability to basically go wherever they want to—and if they frequent your club then it builds the club's reputation as the place to be. Agree. But you have to deliver. It's not like you can have a couple of celebrities show up and all of a sudden everybody loves your place. It's one element of many that makes a night to remember.



Peter Gatien at the Tunnel
1995

Today, nightclubs often pay celebrities appearance fees of up to \$40,000, but we never, ever paid anybody to show up and hang out at our venues. Of course, if you performed on stage, then you got paid, but other than that, celebrities were there because they wanted to be. We did have VIP rooms, but a lot of the celebrities preferred letting things loose on the dance floor with the booming sound system.

The whole trick to success is to attract a crowd that's very diverse. Basically, a lot of the entertaining that's going on is people watching. The guy who's going in an Armani suit thinks the guy in sequins is a loser, while the guy in sequins is laughing at the guy in the Armani suit! They end up entertaining each other, especially in New York where it's so multicultural. You'll get a very interesting mix. There's nothing more boring in a club than when the entire crowd looks the same.

Through promoters and different styles of music we put a lot of energy into the events to diversify the crowds. In the end, you're hopeful that they'll all get along. For me, it was very gratifying to see a tough Italian-American guy from Bensonhurst dancing next to a shirtless guy dripping with sweat. In the neighborhood, the first guy would probably have beaten the second guy up, but in the clubs everybody had a good time.

The '90s was really the last of an era. I think clubs in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, even though the music and the fashions changed, for the most part it was all the same thing: if you wanted to find like-minded people, you had to get dressed up and go out into the city. Now, with social media, you basically sit in your basement and find like-minded people whenever you want. Back then if you wanted to see what people were wearing or what the current music sounded like, then you had to go out. You had to socialize. The '90s was the last of that era.

I was never a party person, *per se*. It wasn't like I hung out in the VIP room with Mick Jagger. My thing was, people came to the Limelight for a product and not to hang out with Peter Gatien. I was never that profile. I basically got home at five or six in the morning and

would be back in the office by eleven a.m. Unbeknownst to most people, the important work is done during the day when you're booking all your events and you're organizing the DJs, lighting, and everything else. It was a lot of hard work, but I enjoyed it.

I remember Shirley MacLaine's fiftieth birthday party where Marvin Hamlisch played a piano and Liberace was there. William S. Burroughs was a great night. A lot of the stuff we did at the Tunnel on Sundays with the hip-hop community was special—everyone from Jay-Z to Biggie Smalls. So many nights were organic. Jimmy Page jamming on that stage during Rock 'n' Roll Church at the Limelight. I mean, the first New York shows for both Guns N' Roses and Pearl Jam were at the Limelight. There were a lot of special nights. They were magical. I've had hundreds of employees over the years and every time I run into one, they always say those were the best years of their lives. The truth is that it was the same for me.

With New York, as I said, it was just a special time. New York in the '90s was a perfect storm of just the right energy, right place, right time, right buildings, and the right momentum. The early '80s was pre-AIDS and people were more decadent. But '86 to '90 was when the AIDS crisis really hit hard, and people were more dormant. We didn't know if we were contracting AIDS from drinking a dirty glass or kissing somebody. By the '90s, people were informed enough to return to the clubs and enjoy themselves.

Then I think Rudy Giuliani single-handedly destroyed New York City nightlife as we knew it. Then real estate in Manhattan became totally unaffordable. I have a friend who is still in the club business and was talking about their employees—ninety percent of my employees used to live in Manhattan, but today none of their employees live on the island. It's all unaffordable now. There used to be areas of Manhattan where a creative community could survive financially, but that doesn't exist anymore. What happened in the '80s and '90s, I just don't feel in New York anymore. —

THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

New York City nightlife in the early 1990s was a hot and visceral experience. Drenched in throbbing neon while whirling away inside the relentless, pulsating music, a simple passing glance and an open mind could lead to the journey of a lifetime. True freedom was something tangible—even addictive. Freedom from one's self. Freedom from society's expectations. Freedom from the politics and anxieties that dwell beyond the club walls. In New York after dark, life was indulged to the heart's content, and there was plenty to go around.

Bold experiments in music, fashion, art, and sexuality set the tone for decades to come and established a new paradigm of American culture, one that extends well beyond the realms of nightlife and entertainment. Sexuality was celebrated in all of its colorful forms and without judgment. In these clubs, every breed of New Yorker—from candy-eyed ravers

to Wall Street suits—intermingled with respect and longing for an unforgettable night.

A night in clubland wasn't lived vicariously through social media or filtered through an Instagram feed; these nights were experienced raw and unspoiled. Influencers wore their statements in bright and colorful expressions on the dance floor. What went viral were sentiments of peace, love, unity, and respect. Many of the clubs in Manhattan enforced a strict no photography rule, and because of this, the greatest nights were experienced one time and one time only. In '90s clubland, you just had to be there.

In the decade before this scene hit, New York City was a void waiting to be filled by a new generation. The AIDS crisis and its horrendous toll on the city had shuttered most of the adult playgrounds of the day. Mega clubs like Studio 54 had met their demise under Mayor Ed Koch's crackdown on illicit club activities,

while the punk rock ethos of downtown bands like the Ramones and Blondie had slowly sunk into plastic commoditization. In 1987, the death of Andy Warhol marked the end of an artistic era.

That same year, twenty-two-year-old Steve Eichner left his hometown of Long Beach, New York, with the dream of making it big as a music and celebrity photographer. As with most starry-eyed kids who ditch their hometowns for the Big Apple, Eichner was passionate and ready to work. He set up his photography studio at 27th Street and 10th Avenue and soon after landed a gig as a nightlife photographer for an independent magazine. An addictive routine ensued: late nights with camera in hand among the swirl of downtown clubs like Quick, Reins, and Glamorama, followed by early morning hours at the photo lab. Then repeat.

Eichner earned a reputation as a reliable and talented photographer and caught the attention of Gene DiNino, owner of the Roxy nightclub, and was granted access into the venue's exclusive VIP spaces. Located at 515 West 18th Street, the Roxy was loud and proud, featuring an erotic roller disco and a house drag queen that could be seen soaring above the dance floor on her suspended throne. For Steve Eichner, this was pure visual ecstasy, but the party didn't end there. Through word of mouth, he soon discovered the thrilling world of illegal raves on the streets of Manhattan known as "outlaw parties," and the outrageous Club Kids who threw them.

An "outlaw party" was, in essence, the glitter-bombed forefather to the flash mob—imagine a quiet, late-night dining room in a midtown McDonald's suddenly erupting into a stampede of drag queens, three-eyed trolls, and dancing yellow chickens. From when the first cup of spiked Kool-Aid was poured to the moment the police arrived to dispel the crowd of hundreds that had gathered to party, it was pure adrenaline-fueled ecstasy.

In 1991, Steve Eichner was hired by Peter Gatien, an uncompromising entrepreneur from Quebec whose

financial ventures in New York nightlife defined him as the undisputed "King of Clubland." As house photographer to Gatien's club empire, Eichner was granted exclusive access to some of the most iconic venues of the era: the Limelight, Tunnel, Palladium, and Club USA. In this new era of clubbing, every detail of the evening—from the neon ambience to the go-go dancing Club Kids—was coordinated to make each paying guest feel as if they were at the center of the universe. The parties would operate like amusement parks for adults and for twenty dollars at the door you were granted an experience like no other on earth.

In the shell of a nineteenth-century deconsecrated Episcopal church at the corner of Sixth Avenue and West 20th Street, the Limelight was the crown jewel of Gatien's pulsing empire. Under stained glass windows and religious iconography, subcultures thrived and crossbred with one another—everything from Goth and experimental electronica in the upstairs Gregorian room to Club Kid Michael Alig's notorious Disco 2000 parties hosted in the Library downstairs. There was a room filled entirely with foam and on the Limelight's main stage, the era's most buzzed about alternative bands broke new ground during the weekly "Rock 'n' Roll Church" event. Going to church had never been so much fun.

Further west in the Chelsea neighborhood was Tunnel, situated in an old railway station on 12th Avenue between 27th and 28th Streets. On any given night, the entrance line could stretch a full city block to 11th Avenue. The venue's long and dark railway design offered plenty of space to stretch out and indulge in any form of sinful activity, while each themed room offered its own unique experience: the Lava Lounge, Victorian libraries, a ball-pit room, and even an S&M dungeon designed as an adult playground for pleasure and excess.

Off Union Square was Palladium, a mega club located in what is today a New York University dormitory on 14th Street between Irving Place and Third Avenue. The building was built in the 1920s

as a movie palace and by the sixties was hosting bands like the Rolling Stones and the Grateful Dead. When Steve Eichner and his camera arrived, the bill featured music icons like Prince and Run DMC, as well as new acts like Naughty By Nature, LL Cool J, and A Tribe Called Quest—solidifying this venue’s reputation as New York’s premiere hip-hop scene.

Of all the spaces that Gatien held dominion over, perhaps the most fantastic representation of ’90s clubland was Club USA. Located in the heart of Times Square in what was once Broadway’s Central Theatre, its interior was designed to blend seamlessly with the barrage of consumerism right outside its doors. Gigantic neon billboards above the dancefloor stood as effigies to the old Times Square, along with porno booths and XXX adverts in every nook of the club. None of this was as shocking as the three-story slide from the upper bar to the ground level that saw club goers zipping down headfirst with their skirts upended. It was here that Eichner managed to document an incredible array of the era’s cultural figures—Joan Rivers, Steven Tyler, Kate Moss, Leonardo DiCaprio, Tupac Shakur, and even Donald Trump. Everyone who was anyone in the ’90s went out of their way to be caught on camera at Club USA.

With little warning, Club USA closed its doors to the public in 1994, after only two years in business. Following a bankruptcy filing by the building’s owner, all of the site’s tenants were unceremoniously evicted. As fast as Club USA had burst onto the scene with its over-the-top antics and ambitious vision, it too had become a casualty to the very thing it’s concept encapsulated—the passing of one New York City era to the next.

For Peter Gatien, the closing of Club USA marked the beginning of the end for Clubland; by the end of the decade, Gatien would be deported to his home country of Canada under charges of tax evasion. Many of the promoters, artists, and Club Kids who helped define the scene had succumbed to the lifestyle’s heavy

use of drugs and alcohol; and in 1996, the murder of Club Kid and purported drug dealer Andre Melendez by Michael Alig and his roommate Robert “Freeze” Riggs meant that the party was truly over.

For Steve Eichner, it meant new beginnings. In the years following his clubland escapades, Eichner was hired as a staff photographer for *Women’s Wear Daily* (WWD) and became a fixture of the New York fashion industry, documenting over forty fashion weeks and attending an incredible twenty-one Met Galas during his tenure. His pictures have since been featured in *Vogue*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *People*, *Vanity Fair*, *Cosmopolitan*, *W Magazine*, *Details*, and *GQ*.

As for his archive of thousands of images made as Gatien’s house photographer, the original slides were placed into a climate-controlled storage in Long Island where they would remain untouched for the next several decades. In 2019, Steve Eichner, along with myself, revisited this enormous trove of photographs and began the process of formally cataloging and archiving the original source material. More than a collection of party photos from the ’90s, what was rediscovered in those crates stand as a testament to the significant impact of New York City nightlife on today’s popular culture.

Each frame is like a snapshot from a fever dream that tingles the senses—the visceral heat of the bodies, the smell of the spilled liquor, the deafening bass. For the people frozen in time within these images—the starry-eyed kids from Long Island, the flamboyant drag queens and Club Kids, the entrepreneurs and the suit-and-ties, the eyes of youth, and the aged wisdom—the party never ended. It’s been raging for decades within binders collecting dust in a Long Beach storage facility. For all those who missed the party or who keep those memories stored away in the backs of their minds, these photographs capture a generation that shared an electric vision of the future and chose to make it their reality.

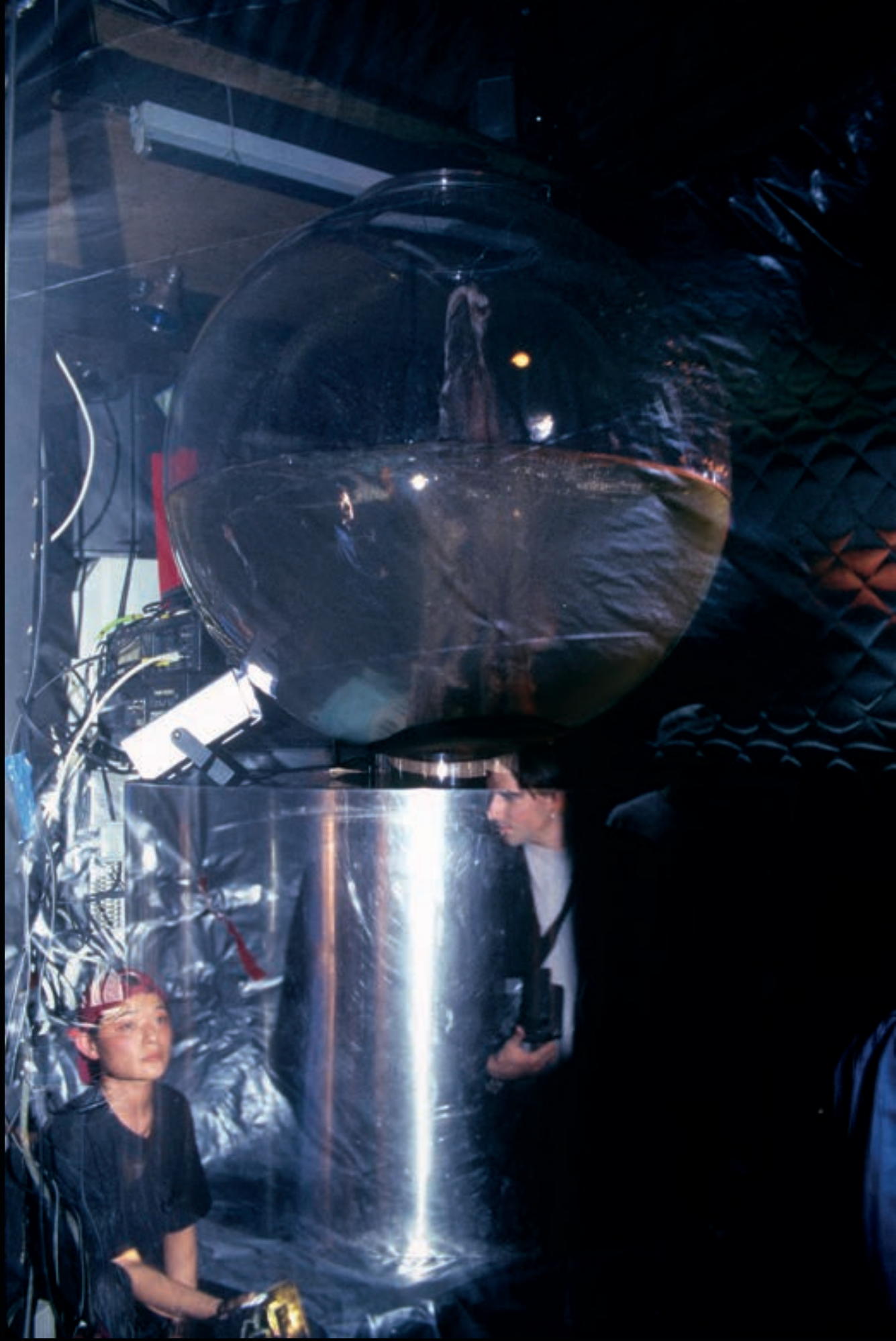








Inside Kenny Scharf's Cosmic
Cavern at the Tunnel 1996





Half pipe at the very back
of the Tunnel *circa* 1993



Caged inside the Tunnel 1993





Bar inside the co-ed
Tunnel bathroom 1993



Mark Wahlberg and
entourage at Club USA on
New Year's Eve 1994



(Left to right) Screamin' Rachael, Jane Thorvaldson, and others at an "outlaw party" on the steps of the James A. Farley Building, the main United States Postal Service building in New York City 1992



Leonardo DiCaprio (*left*)
and Dennis Hopper
at Club USA after-party
for the premiere of
Red Rock West 1994



