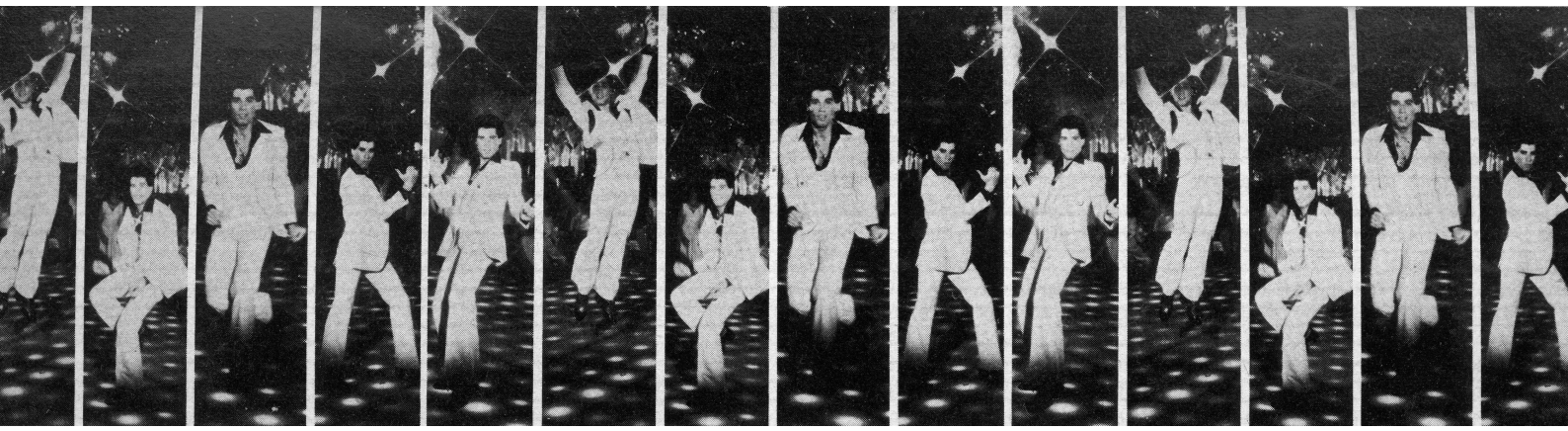
UK HARPERS & QUEEN MAGAZINE - EMBASSY NIGHT FEVER - 3.1978

EMBASSY NIGHT FEVER

Mr Jeremy Norman has taken over the Embassy Club with a sense of timing that's born not made and has turned it into Ultradisco for London's midnight ramblers …….. just as John Travolta leaps to fame in the disco movie Saturday Night Fever which opened last week. The Embassy Club opens on April 4 or when the inside is finished (you know how it is - Jeremy Norman the perfectionist)

PETER YORK reports

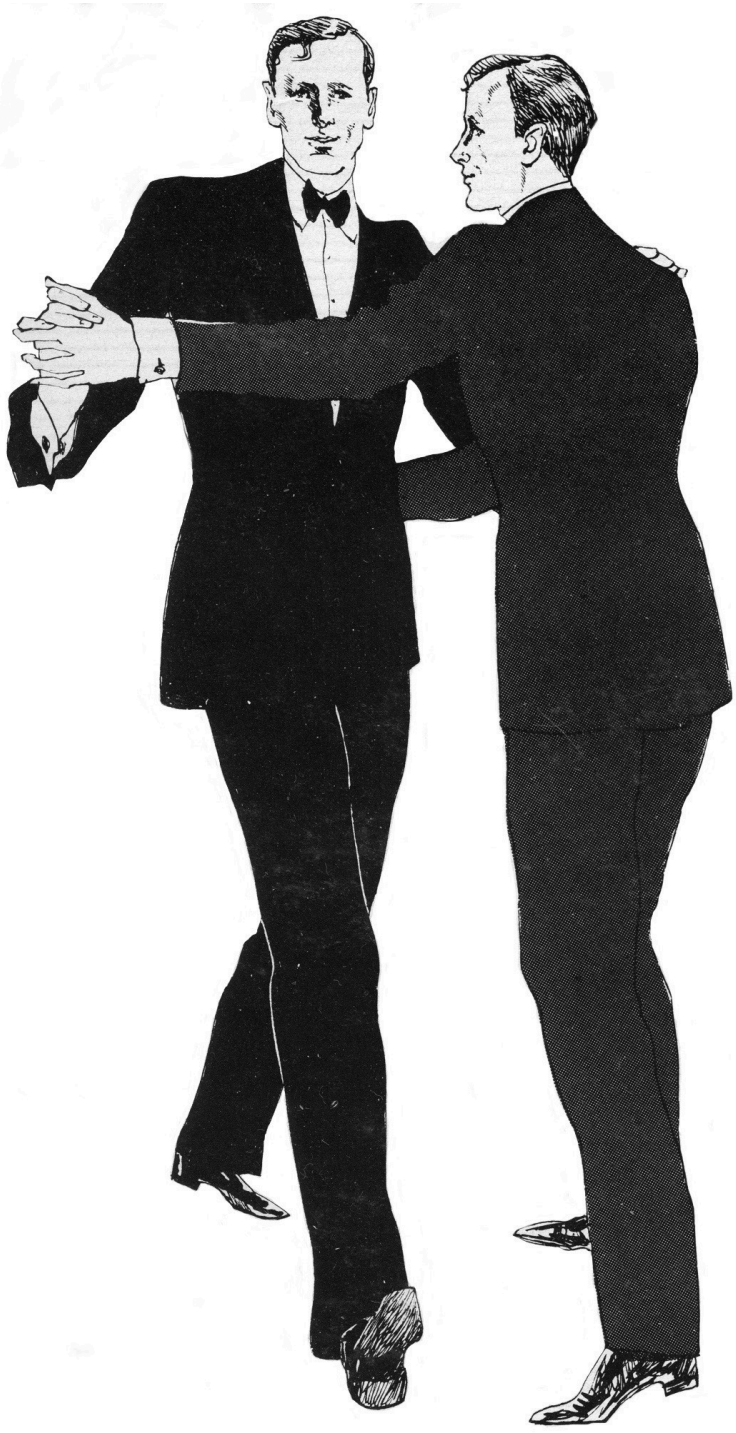


So far, Ultradisco hasn't really hit London. The disco component of London's allegedly smarter clubs is pathetic - the floor-spaces minute, the music banal, the dancing a geriatric shuffle. You have to go further out to see anything - to Haringey and Tottenham and, of course, way up there, Northern Soul persists. But nowhere in England do all the elements of the Ultradisco package come together.

Which is where Jeremy Norman, owner of Burkes Peerage comes in. He, together with Derek Johns, Sotheby's youngest ever Old Master Picture Director, are owners of a new club called the Embassy Club at 7 Old Bond Street (the Piccadilly end) which opens on April 4. Together they have made a brilliant move by appointing Michael Fish as the club's front of house maestro. The ground floor space will be given over

entirely to Ultradisco. In the offices above, conveniently for them, are the headquarters of the Noise Abatement Society. The equipment for the new Embassy Club has been specially flown in from New York - *three* turntables will be manned by twenty-one year old Greg James, a New York Ultradisco person. The manager with be Steven Hayter, who worked at Le Jardin, New York's hit place of 1975.



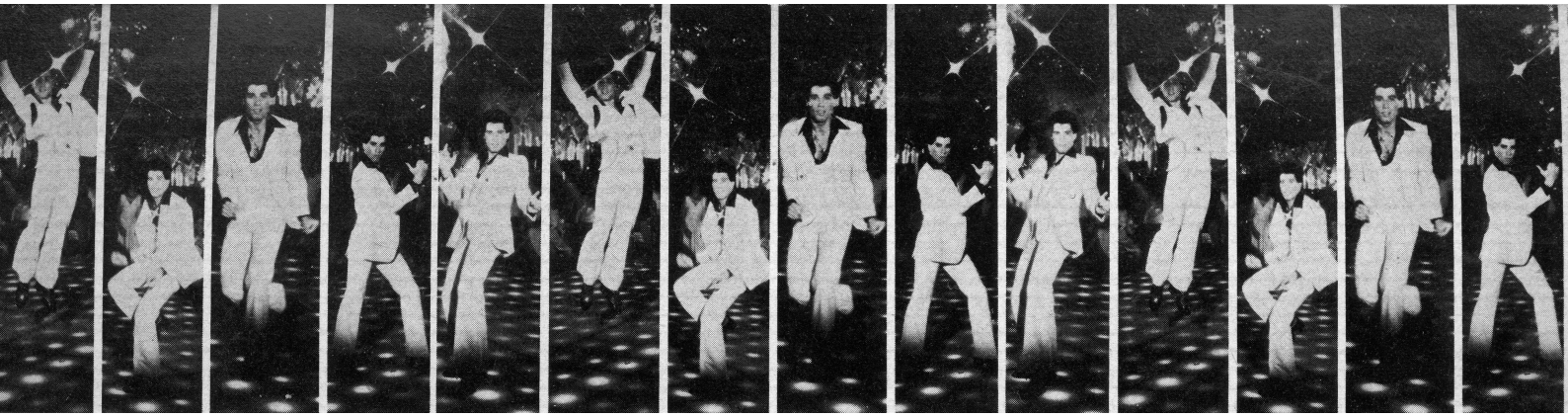


To return to Mr Fish. Yes, that Michael Fish, the most publicised gent's outfitter of 1968. The cutting edge of upper-class dandyism, maker of the white minidress Mick Jagger wore with a Cockney accent to mourn Brian in 1969.

There is more to Michael Fish than one has any right to expect from his public history. Maureen Cleave writing one of her *Evening Standard* profiles in 1968 caught him precisely: 'He is packed with charm, generosity, nervous energy and complications.' Nick Cohn, of whom more presently, caught Fish's surreal speech patterns to a T in his menswear book *Today There are No Gentlemen* in 1971. 'What do you call a native with a spear who comes into the shop?' …… "You call him sir"'.

Drawing by Angela Landels

Me and My Shadow ……. Mr Fish takes a turn with Mr Fish

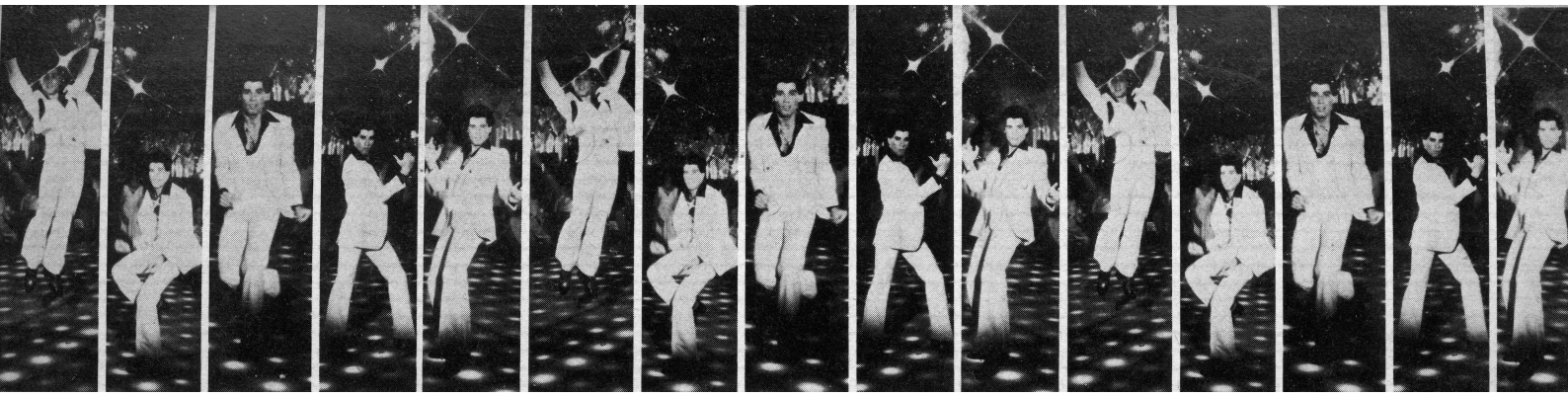


Michael Fish's success is *personal*: people like him. It's not surprising that much of the initial membership for the club will be drawn from his address book, a long and surprising list. Who well-connected Jeremy Norman and Derek Johns, will add to that list is a moot point. London clubs tend to breed the wrong kind of exclusivity. The word is that they're going to keep it balanced, no one let in because he's in a Rolls-Royce, no sub-groups taking the place over. Alvaro of Aretusa once told them that when you have 75 percent of one group and 25 percent of another you have problems.

The Embassy Club is a remarkable place. It has a history: a smart club from 1919 onwards, the Prince of Wales and the Aga Khan frequent visitors; not so smart recently, but a name to get instant recognition from any taxi driver over forty. It is huge - or at least huge compared with London competition. The dance floor is what Jeremy calls 'a domestic-size ballroom' which means easily 150 - seemingly Jeremy knows plenty of people with ballrooms to call their own.

There is a restaurant and a bar downstairs and a host of odd rooms, stairways and catwalks..

Doing it up was like refitting the *Queen Mary.* The ballroom rises through two storeys and is glassed over. At one end is what Jeremy calls a mezzanine - a raised bit with dramatic stairs up. Very suitable for, say, Grace Jones or Amanda Lear (whose every waking moment is now spent proselytising for the disco religion) to make an entrance. Also a perfect locale for fashion shows, starting with one of Ossie Clark's in April. The fittings that remain from the old club, what Jeremy calls 'the built-on gauze' have some charm. A Festival-of-Britain style guard rail

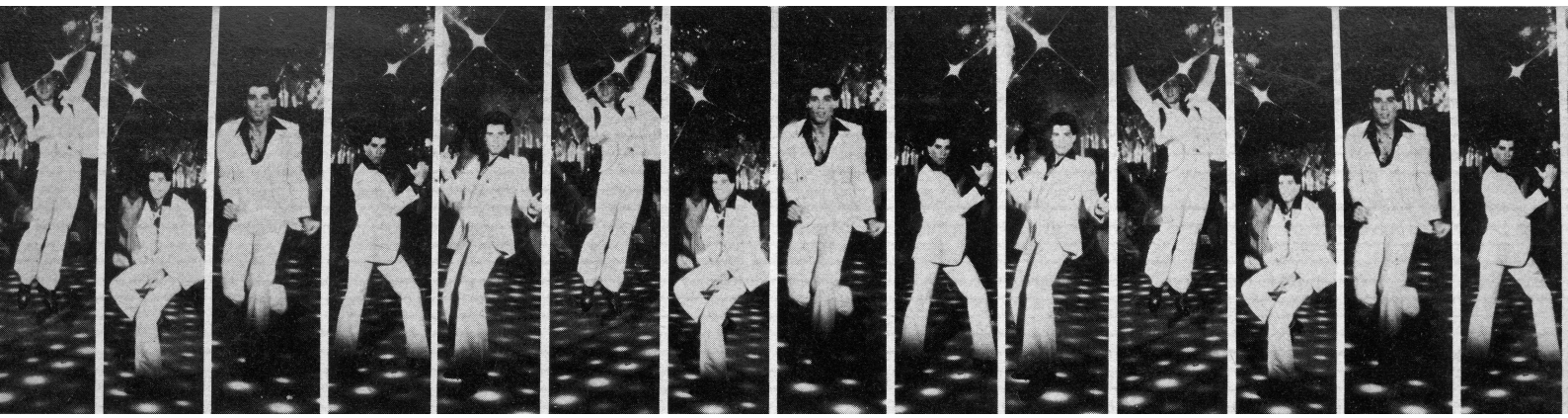


at one end of the dance-floor, heavy wrought-iron and gilt main doors in the ‘Paris’ manner, asymmetric plaster swags here and there, beams and carvings downstairs allegedly from Nelson’s *Victory,* and outside, beyond the marbleised entrance, a small resilient sign in hand-written red neon announces ‘Dancing Cabaret’. New decoration includes a major Andrew Logan piece called *Tree of Life.*

In America there is a persistent and sustained boom in the disco industry. The new discos they build there are to the old kind as are 747s to Viscounts. The new discos are, arguably, the Fun Palaces that Joan Littlewood used to be on about, and the sound within them, from Grace Jones to the Bee Gees, is Ultradisco. Ultradisco will be for the Eighties what a cinema like the Finsbury Park Astoria (now the Rainbow) represented for the Thirties - the total mass fantasy. Ultradisco is a multi-media show, drawing on hippie tricks, movie house technology (Sensurround), black music and participation theory to make a new and genuinely popular synthesis that everyone - except the kind of intellectuals who never watched Hollywood movies until they were revived at the National Film Theatre - will like.

One knows an institution has progressed to mythic status when it becomes the subject of a novel in the Arthur Hailey mode. Americans can now buy *Discotheque,* copyright 1977 Steven Gaines, in paperback at their supermarket checkout. This, according to it’s cover, is ‘a sizzling sex-intoxicated novel of the mad, mad whirl of the DISCOTHEQUE.

Then, of course, there is *Saturday Night Fever*, a movie starring a discotheque, and part of a package put together by Robert Stigwood, who knows a good thing when he sees it. *Saturday Night Fever* aims,



with fair success, to be the *Star Wars* of disco. The whole thing ties in with a sound-track album, heavily featuring the Bee Gees, long-time protegés of Mr Stigwood's, who appear to have undergone a complete refit over the last four years and are, as I write, number one in the American singles chart with a lead song from the album 'Stayin' Alive' (the commercial rapprochement of the movie and record businesses is a subject in itself; we are going to see a lot more of this kind of thing over the next few years).

Nik Cohn recurs throughout. Cohn it was who wrote the piece in *New York* magazine which - much dressed up - forms the basis of *Saturday Night Fever.* Prescient Cohn saw the point of Jeremy Norman and team. Better still he wrote the Pop Scene (that was what it was called then) column in *Queen* throughout the Sixties. Five minutes for Nik Cohn.

Ten minutes for Jeremy Norman and team at the Embassy Club.

