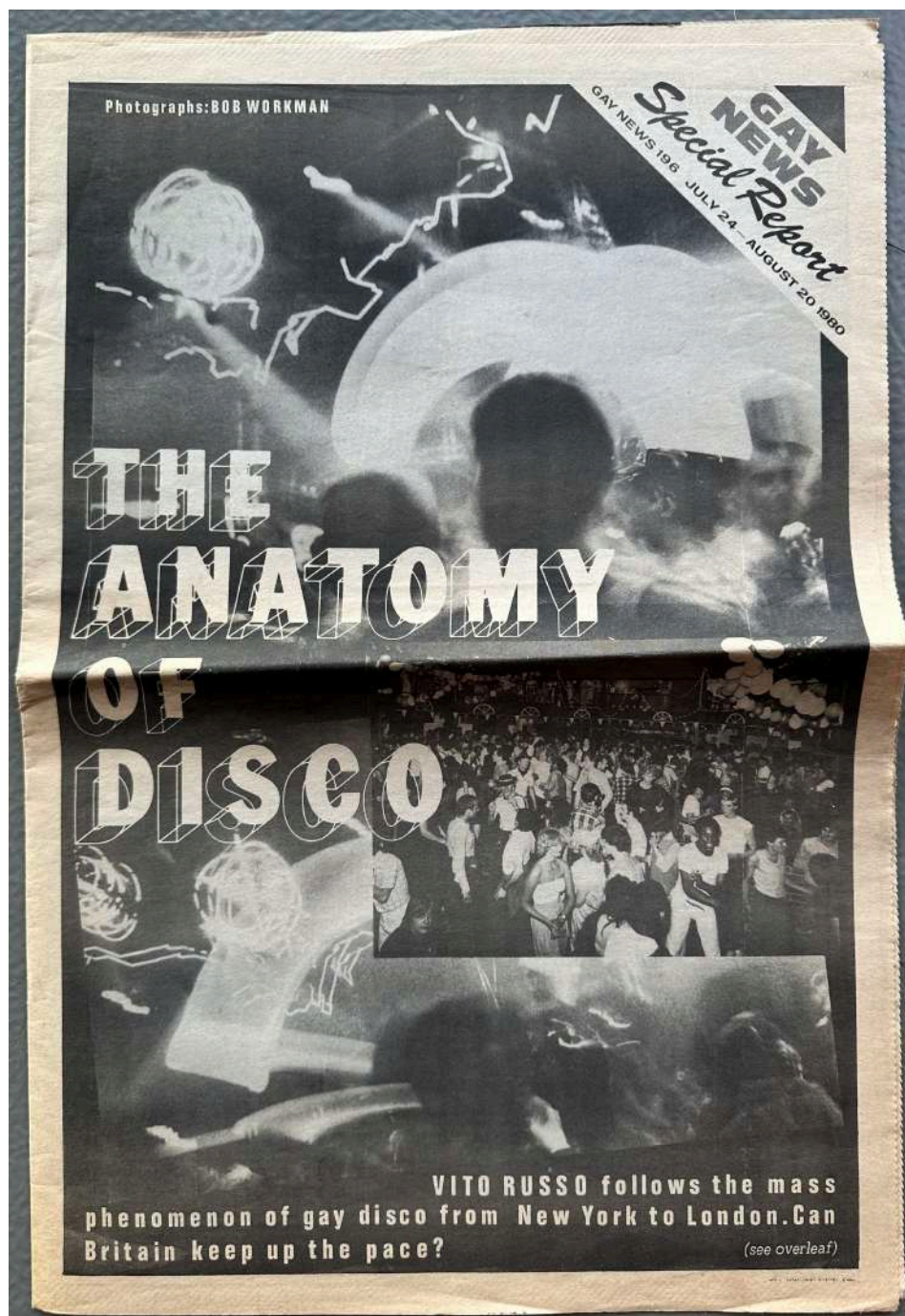


GAY NEWS SPECIAL REPORT - AUGUST 1980

THE ANATOMY OF DISCO - by VITO RUSSO

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vito_Russo

Vito Russo (July 11, 1946 – November 7, 1990) was an American **LGBT** activist, film historian, and author. He is best remembered as the author of the book *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, revised edition 1987), described in *The New York Times* as "an essential reference book" on homosexuality in the US film industry.^[1] In 1985, he co-founded the **Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation** (GLAAD), a media watchdog organization that strives to end **anti-LGBT rhetoric**, and advocates for LGBT inclusion in popular media.



THE ANATOMY OF DISCO



Garry London, DJ at Bang



Martin Allam DJ at Scandals

Diane Keaton: *"The Grammys are tonight. We have lots of records up for awards."*

Woody Allen: *"They give awards for that music? I thought just ear-plugs."*

— from Annie Hall

Disco has not been around since the beginning of time. It only seems that way. To most of the disco freaks in America this is big news as they can't even remember a time when people danced to something else. It isn't faulty memory, it's wilful ignorance. Disco the mass phenomenon as opposed to disco the music is largely predicated on forgetting the past (which nobody can do anything about anyway) and not thinking about the future (which doesn't look too hot and may never come in any case). The essence of a true disco existence has to do with seizing the moment. It's the here and the now and the omnipotent beat.

Just a few short years ago, in the mid 1970s, disco as a way of life and an all-pervasive media hype did not exist. It was a dance style restricted to the gay, black and hispanic ghettos of major American cities, especially New York. It didn't take long, though, before the producers of records, films and strobe lights saw a potential market and disco became a multi-million dollar industry. It's an escape into a world of glitter and glamour; of fantasy and excitement. It's the modern-day answer to Judy Garland's old exhortation to "Forget your troubles, come on get happy". It's inflation music, depression music, the music and dance for a world gone haywire. Going out to a disco pro-

vides all the things lacking in the daily lives of the people whose humdrum work-oriented existence makes this planet spin.

As with all sops to the little people of the world, disco is something shaped and enjoyed by the big people, the beautiful people, the trendsetters with nothing but money and time on their hands. Disco is their toy, their plaything. But for the masses who found it originally, it is salvation. Studio 54 in New York, now passed into legend, was the ultimate disco of its time. It was the place where everything jelled. The music was brilliant, the lights fantastic, the special effects astounding and the prestige of actually getting in to the place on any given night was enough to make a ribbon clerk think he had died and gone to heaven. The great attraction of Studio 54 was its illusion of democracy. You might have waited, pleading and hoping, in the rain outside for hours, but once you got in you could be dancing with Liza Minnelli or Mick Jagger. For them it was just a lark. For you it was the greatest night of your life. It was, in fact, out of this world.

'A good disco is more a state of mind than a room in which to dance.'

American discos were and are conceived along entirely different lines from their European counterparts with the possible exception of the fancier clubs in Paris. A good disco is more a state of mind than a room in which to dance. Ten years ago, at the Ice Palace

in Cherry Grove on Fire Island, the disc jockey found that by mixing tracks of certain records he could keep a crowd on the dance floor almost indefinitely. This discovery was no accident. Fire Island had the built-in requirement for such a birth. After nine o'clock in the evening the last boat to the mainland has left and the people on the narrow sandbar in the Atlantic are completely cut off from civilization. There is no way on or off the island until morning except by helicopter or hired boat. The very atmosphere becomes primitive and lawless, beyond the reach of any moral or cultural regulation. The situation cried out for something unique, almost creating it in spontaneous combustion. With the sound of the ocean roaring a few feet away and the stars for a roof, dancing became something tangible, something one could actually live inside of, like a sparkling womb.

By divining the mood of the crowd at any given moment, the DJ could intuit the state of the dance floor and, with turntable and lighting board, carry the dancers along at exactly the right fever pitch, bringing them again and again to a crest of excitement and mounting tension which often did not explode in climax until the sun began to rise over the ocean. After such an evening, sweat-soaked dancers would fling themselves down the sand dunes and into the sea, having shared a journey through the night unlike any being taken fifty miles away on the stone island of Manhattan.

This is the dance experience which was exported almost immediately to the mainland and eventually to the rest of the nation and the world. Great cavernous discos sought to simulate that experience of being taken off the planet, of leaving civilization and reality behind, escaping into a fantasy world

for as many hours as possible, enveloped in music and lights. Good DJs were at a premium. They began to tell record companies what the dancers wanted and the skyrocketing sales of disco music spoke in unison with them. DJs often became producers themselves, forming a tight network of spinners who designed the mixed music of the future on a weekly basis. They made stars of Grace Jones, Donna Summer and other singers whose strength was not in live performance but in studio production. Many of the DJs were openly gay, and disco may be the first mass phenomenon, not to say music, acknowledged as having a gay set of roots.

'It's common knowledge that ninety-five per cent of the people who run the national disco promotion departments of the record companies are gay.'

In an interview with writer Vincent Nicolosi in the New York gay magazine *Christopher Street*, Ray Caviano, the 29-year-old openly gay president of Warner Records explained the attraction of gays to the disco scene in the beginning. "It was an environment where birds of a feather could flock together. You must also look at it financially. Gays have large discretionary incomes, no families and lots of leisure time. They can stay out late at night

THE ANATOMY OF DISCO

DJ Chris Lucas at the Copacabana



Centre: DJ Ian Levine of Heaven

and don't have to worry about getting the kids off to school in the morning or whatever. It's common knowledge that 95 per cent of the people who run the national disco promotion departments of the record companies are gay." Implicitly, Caviano was also saying that disco is almost entirely a gay male scene, a fact which would become clearer as time went on.

But as this scene became more open and more accessible to the mainstream, new ways were devised to keep it exclusive as of old. Clubs opened and closed within a year, staying hot and popular as long as they were the 'in' place to be and dying as soon as the masses got wind that there was action to be had at a different spot. It isn't easy to maintain a closed environment once the word gets out. While disco was all about partying and dancing and escaping, it was also, according to Ray Caviano, "like being in church . . . a tribal ceremony. You have the ultimate kinship going on out on the dance floor and connecting with your partner. In a sense, when the whole floor is on, when they're up, you can feel that . . . and the DJ is putting that all together and you're connecting with him."

It's all but impossible to preserve such a level and keep it exclusive, especially when there's a balancing act going on between a successful commercial club and a place where gay men go to fulfil their wildest fantasies. A split developed between the clubs in New York where one went with straight friends for a night of traditional disco dancing and a *really* hot disco where one went to re-create Fire Island in the city — shirts off, poppers in noses and sex in shadowy corners. On the one hand there was Studio 54 and on the other there was Crisco Disco and The Cock Ring in Greenwich Village. Uptown versus the ghetto. It's common knowledge that Studio 54 has its own version of Crisco Disco in its basement. If the rich and famous want to partake of sleaze in total safety, they will find a way to do it. But the clubs which were based on sleaze continued to be found where they always had been, in the ghettos where they were born, and uptown people only slummed in them.

More and more, disco had come to mean fantasy in a big way, and here's where the American idea splits away from what Britain has accepted. The music is all the same, sooner or later. Yes, it takes a bit longer for some music to travel and there's a time lag between what New York and London are danc-

ing to at any given moment. But the real difference is in the venue. London has the respectable discos where one could conceivably bring one's employer for a fun evening, provided he 'knows', but there is no Crisco Disco counterpart although Heaven in London is certainly trying.

The enemy here, unlike in the States, is a combination of tradition and the fact that alternatives within the gay culture itself are few. A long time ago in New York there was a disco, one of the very first, called The Sanctuary. The place had actually been a Catholic church and the DJ booth was on the altar. There were pews situated along the walls and the sound came from behind gargoyles and statues. It was the hottest place in town, and if you're curious you can catch glimpses of it in the movies *Klute* and *A Very Natural Thing*, both of which used it as background. Eventually, though, it became the place to go for what has come to be known as the Bridge and Tunnel crowd, those hordes of teenagers, mostly straight, who come each weekend from the suburbs to rub elbows with the big city slickers. The 'in' crowd moved along, of course, and left The Sanctuary to these people. Places like Le Jardin, the absolute king of the early New York discos, lasted a few seasons and faded away for the same reason.

'If there's one single line of demarcation separating British and American discos, it's drugs.'

This sort of thing also happens in London. It happened to the Embassy Club.

Studio 54 escaped this fate by coming up with the most delicate of balances, the perfect success formula. It orchestrated the crowd, designing the people as well as the place. Steve Rubell, the owner of the world's most famous disco, would stand outside the club nightly and literally create the crowd as though he were tossing a salad. A little of this, a little of that and the very tone of the evening was carved out of the raw material standing on the pavement. Too many gays inside? Throw in a middle-aged couple from Iowa. Too

many teenyboppers? Get that leatherman standing over there and send him inside. Hey, you there with that surrealistic necktie! Inside! The drag queen and the freak on roller skates. The delivery boy and the socialite. Shake them all up with Truman Capote, Andy Warhol and Bianca Jagger and you have the hottest crowd in town.

But what of that original group from Cherry Grove, now overrun with gawking straights come in their speedboats to watch the fairies dance? Where would they go to be carried away for a night of thrills and spills? Enter the private party, something else which can't seem to survive in London. If there is one single line of demarcation separating British and American disco scenes, it's drugs. The private parties set up by American disco clubs are not given by a host for friends except in the broadest sense. They are enormous discos run for two thousand lucky members and their guests. But they function after hours and do not, with rare exception, serve any liquor at all. Flamingo and Twelve West, the premier dance palaces of the last few years in New York, cater to dancers from the dance, men who live only for the music from midnight to seven in the morning. Fruit juice is available and bowls of apples, oranges and bananas are placed around the room. But the main attractions are lights, music and the all-important drugs. Everyone is on something, and the choice of drug for the evening is as important as the music.

Newer places like The Underground and Bonds, larger and even more spectacular than their predecessors, and an old staple, The Paradise Garage in West Greenwich Village, are dedicated to timelessness and fantasy. They specialize in going with the moment and seek to give the most sophisticated and knowledgeable dancers in the world exactly what they want. Several times a year, especially on holidays like Gay Pride Week, Christmas or Halloween, there are special parties, nights of sleaze and sex mixed with drugs and dance. Thus, a party last year called *Maneuvers* featured all the trappings of the ultimate military fantasy. Men dressed in military gear arrived by the thousands and even the US Army was on hand with tanks, a cannon and a full recruiting booth. Soon after midnight, however, the army personnel realized it was a faggot festival and left in a huff. The party went on and nobody even noticed.

Such events are sexy and sleazy and could never happen in London. The laws

simply prohibit all the things which make them feasible. In New York, one doesn't begin dressing for a night out until between eleven and midnight, arriving at about one in the morning. Hardly ever will you see someone drunk. Drugs are all. London doesn't hold any options for this type of behaviour. There are

'There are laws against almost all the things which would help a club in London create a Disneyland experience for gay men.'

laws against almost all the things which would help a club here to create a Disneyland experience for gay men. Aside from the paucity (and the outrageous prices) of decent drugs, the liquor stops flowing at two in the morning, the tubes stop running at midnight, the buses shortly afterwards, taxis cost a fortune and almost nobody, it seems, has a car. It's an impossible situation. The managements of clubs in New York run their places as private parties and expect their guests to be on drugs. They pace their establishments accordingly. At London discos, especially places like Scandals and Bang where there are a lot of very young people, one can lose one's membership for possession of a single popper or for wearing shorts too brief. In many ways, London discos are just pubs which allow dancing. They'll allow you to drink just a bit too much and then remind you gently that the last tube is about to depart. It's all very homey but hardly the stuff that dreams are made of.

Talking to the big four DJs in London, Ian Levine at Heaven, Gary London at Bang, Chris Lucas at The Copacabana and Martin Allam at Scandals, one gets essentially the same answers to most questions. It's not that they are all friends, although that's true, it's that London itself constrains them to operate in essentially the same ways. Among them, only Ian Levine at Heaven is committed to a strictly American disco style of mixing sound. They all agree that their main objective is to keep the dancers on the floor all evening and they all mention essentially the same sure-fire music which varies little. It all depends on what's popular

(Continued overleaf)

THE ANATOMY OF DISCO

Centre: David Inches, general manager of Heaven



'It seems that in London the music is still just an excuse to cruise, while in New York it's an end in itself.'

'You have to remember that London is ten or fifteen years behind America when it comes to clubs and drinking and dancing.'



Mike Ely, the promoter of the Copacabana

(Continued from previous page)

'It seems that in London the music is still just an excuse to cruise, while in New York it's an end in itself.'

'You have to remember that London is ten or fifteen years behind America when it comes to clubs and drinking and dancing.'

(Continued from previous page)

at the moment. But they all do it differently according to the personal style and needs of their clubs. The eternal Motown Medley, for example, will turn up regularly at The Copacabana or Bang but less often, if ever at Heaven, which sticks to a New York beat of 128 to 134 beats per minute — pretty fast for London. The Copacabana will rarely exceed the standard 120 beats per minute and Bang and Scandals get away with things which would horrify the boys at Flamingo in New York, occasionally playing things which are distinctly bluesy and jazzy. You might get

away with that Motown Medley on one night in New York for a lark, but try playing it two nights running and the crowd will murder the DJ and burn down the club. Motown is *not* disco any more.

Chris Lucas seems to hit the nail on the head when he talks about London clubs in general and The Copacabana in particular. "The music is a bonus" he says, "It's our club they come to, mixing cruising with dancing. They won't just dance to anything you play, only what they like, and they're very vocal. But The Copacabana is a total club. People come here for all sorts of

reasons. It seems that in London the music is still an excuse to cruise, whereas in New York the music is an end in itself." Lucas can get away with things at The Copacabana that Ian Levine cannot at Heaven. "I can make an occasional mistake easier than Ian" says Lucas, "because he is *so* good at what he does, mixing tracks, that if he fucks up a mix it really sticks out and is noticeable. And he doesn't do it too often, either. The crowds at these clubs really know what they want and we give it to them."

Ian Levine, himself a successful record producer, travels back and forth

to the States often enough to keep a sharp eye on the latest trends in the music business and knows the market backwards and forwards. He sees disco as "evolutionary, becoming mixed with other forms of music while retaining the essence of what makes it good disco". What he is trying to do with the music at Heaven is what the club itself is trying to do with the disco environment in London. Heaven is open later than the other clubs, is larger than most of them and has consistently tried to create its image as one of a hot, macho disco where anything can happen. Its last two parties, the *Mud Wrestling* even-

THE ANATOMY OF DISCO

The members of staff at The Copacabana



that in London the
still just an excuse to
hile in New York it's
itself.

to remember that
s ten or fifteen years
merica when it comes
and drinking and



ing and *The All-American Jock Night*,
were in the tradition of the *Sleaze Ball*

Cass Mann, promotions manager of Heaven

ing and *The All-American Jock Night*, were in the tradition of the *Sleaze Ball* and *Maneuvers* in New York, raunchy sleaze mixed with dancing. Whether this type of disco will go over in other London clubs remains to be seen, but judging from the almost two thousand people at each of the Heaven events, it's inevitable that the scene will evolve to incorporate these things eventually. How long the other clubs can hold out is uncertain.

"You have to remember" says Cliff Bell, general manager of The Copacabana, "that London is about ten or even fifteen years behind America when it

Cass Mann, promotions manager of Hea

comes to clubs and drinking and dancing". He admits, however, that the gay market in disco is both more lucrative financially and less trouble than the straight market. "I've been associated with clubs for a long time" he says, "and they were always straight in the beginning. Then eventually we'd do gay nights occasionally and the figures were always phenomenal. The big difference in straight and gay clubs is that gays dance more. To get a heterosexual on the dance floor you have to take a whip

to them. I know, I'm one myself. We're not extraverts, we're introverts. Gays are outgoing. Also, on straight nights we'd need eight to ten bouncers and hardly a night would go by that we didn't have someone all bloodied up. The Copacabana has been a gay club for two years and in all that time we've only had one fight."

Neither Bell nor Mike Ely, the promoter of The Copacabana, would like to see a real New York style disco scene in London just now and it is a view

shared by almost everyone I spoke with at The Copa, at Bang and at Scandals. Only the people at Heaven think it's a good idea to change the laws to allow a club to stay open all night. Most owners think it would cause more trouble than it's worth. Also, the public transport system, the licensing laws and the city planning laws would have to change. And that's even before considering the problems of police harassment which would affect club owners and goers

(Continued overleaf)

THE ANATOMY OF DISCO



(Continued from previous page)

alike. "It just isn't a good idea" says Mike Ely. "two o'clock in the morning is late enough for people to be out partying. What are they going to do out until

'People in London have to get up in the morning to go to work. They're not about to change their entire way of life just to go clubbing all night.'

six in the morning? I for one wouldn't like to see an all-night scene. I just don't think the people here want it. The people in London have to get up to go to work in the morning. They're not about to change their whole lives just to go clubbing all night."

Jeremy Norman, the principal owner of the now defunct Embassy Club and presently of Heaven, seems to hope that this isn't the case. He thinks Heaven has all the potential to become the equal of the best New York gay clubs. "When I first went to New York in 1974" he says. "I found it tremendously exciting and so different from Britain in the area of clubs. I'd always found British gay clubs claustrophobic, unimaginative and depressing to be in. Suddenly I went to clubs in New York and found them filled with attractive, fun people — not pathetic, sad people — all having a wonderful time in glamorous surroundings. Le Jardin was the first club I visited and here was a club saying to the straight world, 'We are the best discotheque in New York and if you're lucky we might let you in'. Instead of in England where the clubs seemed to say, 'We're ashamed of ourselves, we're a little hole in the ground and please don't come near us or talk about us because we might get closed down'."

Norman thought that if it worked for New York it would work for Britain and opened the Embassy Club in Bond Street, a place which filled his primary requirements which were more dance floor than seating, a great sound system and enough space for exciting lighting. The Embassy Club was intended as a place where trendy people, both gay and straight, could gather in fashionable surroundings. It didn't work out as well as he'd have liked but it taught him a few things and enabled him to open Heaven, a club conceived from the very beginning as a strictly gay disco. "Heaven was always conceived as gay for a number of reasons" says Norman. "First, because of the problems I'd encountered with the smart set at the Embassy, which were mostly ego problems where everyone thinks they're a star. I've learned that it's much nicer to deal with a relatively anonymous large gay crowd than a small group of so-called beautiful people. Also, I perceive that Heaven is going where the disco market is going. People who go out to discos tend to be in one of three categories, as I see it. First they are gay; second, young freaky kids; or third, rich and social. That's the major market for nightclubs. Mr and Mrs Average who are married only go out dancing once in a blue moon. Heaven was a natural for the gay market."

'Lesbians don't have the money guys do and they don't drink enough to make it commercially marketable.'

The door policy at Heaven took a lot of criticism in these pages and elsewhere some months back and it needs to be pointed out that the policy on

women held by most discos is not a whit different from the one at Heaven. As Ian Levine and Chris Lucas both reminded me in separate interviews, disco is primarily a gay male scene and always has been. That is not to say that women don't dance — it's to say that men have always run the clubs, populated the clubs and chosen the music. The disco scene as it stands now is also inextricably bound up with cruising. In this respect, Heaven is no different from any other club in London. The Copacabana has two women members out of six thousand. According to Cliff Bell, "We won't have more than twelve to fifteen women on any given night". This is not unique. Bell has often discussed with lesbian women the feasibility of opening a women's club but the figures just don't show it making good. "In order to run a women's club and break even" he says, "we'd have to have 150 women minimum per night on weeknights and 300 on weekends — that's just to break even. It's not going to happen. Lesbians don't have the money guys do and they don't drink enough to make it commercially marketable."

For Jeremy Norman and Heaven, the problem is not lesbians at all but straight women. He watched what happened to all the chic gay clubs in New York as soon as they got hot and started attracting a straight clientele. They were no longer gay clubs. "A perfect example of this" he says, "was that I went to Le Jardin in 1974 and it was the hottest club in town. In 1975 I went back to New York and people said 'Where?'. It was all over because the straights had come in. On the way home to London on the plane, I sat next to a totally straight middle-aged American couple who were chatting away about what a good time they'd had at Le Jardin. It can disappear overnight. This again takes me back to my philosophy about discos and the history of them. Most of the smart discos, internationally, are gay owned or gay run and have gay

staff. It is the gay element that attracts straight girls because they like to party with gay guys. They can dance and have a good time asking men to dance without being accused of being overly flirtatious. They love that. And where you get a lot of straight women behaving in a liberated way, it's attractive to straight men. This tips the balance. So really, what I'm trying to say to the gay community is that either you allow us to operate the door policy as we now have it or it will lead to the club going straight. It's a stark choice, there are no two ways about it. We are doing at Heaven what we believe is best for the majority of gay people who are club goers — *not* for the highly politicized gay person who basically doesn't go to discos anyway. I hate giving women a hard time at the door. But I would rather give a few women a hard time than to have Heaven destroyed as a gay club and lost to the community as a whole. And I have only one thing to say to lesbians. If you join Heaven and you have a membership card and come in with a woman friend as your guest, you should have no problem. All you have to do is to persuade our membership secretary that you are in fact a lesbian and not a straight woman — you only have to do this once, mind you — we only want to know that you are genuinely gay."

The London disco scene, therefore, is rushing to catch up. In addition to Heaven being essentially the closest thing to a New York or a Los Angeles disco in Britain, The Copacabana is spending a lot of money to enlarge their dance floor and install new lighting equipment. They may even eventually take over the upstairs bar and outdoor courtyard, giving them a spectacular exterior bar complete with palm trees and exotic drinks.

Doug Lambert, the director of publicity for Heaven, would like to see the entire scene open up and relax a bit

THE ANATOMY OF DISCO ⁷

Right: Jeremy Norman, owner of Heaven, with his friend Derek Frost who designed the club



Doug Lambert, the director of publicity for Heaven



more and become friendlier. "I'd like to see less competition and more pulling together. I have recommended Bang and The Copa to a lot of people. In our last ad I sent a happy birthday greeting to Bang, which was celebrating its fourth anniversary, and they thought I was being sarcastic. I wasn't. I was very sincere. We have to work together more. There are enough people out there to fill all these clubs. There are nights when Bang, Heaven, The Copa and Scandals are all packed. It can only help for us to join forces. I hope the revamped club, Adams, is very successful; it can only help the entire scene. The Copa has contests and gives away prizes and trips, which is very community-minded. We have a theatre which seats 150 people upstairs from the disco at Heaven and are about to begin putting on plays. All this is great and necessary."

Lambert is right to think about branching out, for the winds in America have already begun to shift. A new club is opening this month in New York which won't even call itself a disco. It's

on the site of the old Fillmore East Theater and over eleven million dollars have been poured into it. It's called Saint and it has a fully operational Pla-

'Disco is no more. Disco was a room with four walls and lights flashing in people's faces.'

netarium dome for a roof and a glass dance floor. The owners, through Planetarium effects, have found a way to erase the floor, the ceiling and the walls so that dancers will literally be dancing in outer space with nothing but stars, planets and comets shooting around them. "Disco is no more" said the manager of Saint to me last week. "Disco was a room with four walls and lights flashing in people's faces. This is going to be a multi-functional entertainment

complex which will be a gay male disco only two nights a week. During the week we'll have private parties, films, video shows and spectacular events. This is the future."

Recently, sitting in the Troubadour coffee shop in Earl's Court one afternoon, talking to a group of gay men who had just left The Coleherne, it became clear just how much bottled up anger and resentment there is about the disco scene in London. "London is truly fucked" says one. "This town is operating under a set of rules left over from the fourteenth century. We do *not* want to go home at 2am. We *have* to go home at 2am. There's no other choice. The police here are pigs and the laws are obsolete. Everyone behaves as though they were doing us all a great favour by giving us a place where we are allowed to dance. I'd rather emigrate."

London is impossible. There were more police on this year's Gay Pride March than gays, and they reacted like animals, pushing and shoving people for no reason at all. No city as large as London should be so completely under the

thumb of such archaic rule. But one thing is certain. If you keep people down in their daily lives you must give them an outlet for their excess energy and a chance to blow off steam in harmless ways. If a society treats a significant portion of the population like garbage and then stops them from partying and dancing on top of it all, there's bound to be an explosion. Entrepreneurs with foresight and vision will see this and prepare for the future. Eventually something's got to give. If people didn't want to stay out all night, the dance floor at Heaven wouldn't still be crowded at four-thirty in the morning, long after the bars have closed down. Disco is about good times and escape from the dreary realities of the real world. London had better hurry along.

□

• *We would like to send our very best wishes for a speedy recovery to Heaven's Doug Lambert who was injured in an accident on the night of the All-American Jock Party. Get well soon, Doug.*

