

Disco

Better Days. GG Barnum.

Words Andy Thomas **Portrait** Janette Beckman
Photographs © Bill Bernstein/Reel Art Press

“THESE SHOTS CAPTURE the very essence of what going out was, is, and should be all about. They showed the true democracy of the dance floor where anyone could be a star, as long as they had the right attitude and flair,” writes James Hillard, of London DJ collective Horse Meat Disco, in the foreword to *Disco: the Bill Bernstein Photographs*.

In 1979, *The Village Voice* sent Bill Bernstein to cover an awards dinner for Lillian Carter, mother of US president Jimmy Carter. The venue was Studio 54, and as the presentation finished the real party started. Bernstein was mesmerised as the famously decadent and flamboyant crowd arrived. “Over the next five or six hours my world was metamorphosised [sic],” writes Bernstein in the introduction to *Disco*. “Had I been suddenly transported back to a pre-war Berlin cabaret? Who were these people of the night and what was their other, real life like?”

The 12 rolls of film Bernstein shot that night began a journey into the many corners of New York nightlife. But it wasn’t the excesses of the famous at Studio 54 that most interested him. “It had never been my interest to shoot celebrities at these clubs and there are very few in this book,” he writes. “My attention was caught by the unknown guy in the corner, probably a waiter or messenger, in the black leather T-shirt and silver cap, posing for hours upon hours, talking to no one.” While he is best known for his photographs of the glitz and glamour at Studio 54, his most enlightening disco shots were taken at clubs such as Paradise Garage and Better Days. It was here in the

predominantly gay, black and Hispanic clubs that disco’s most radical advancements were made. “The disco was a place of great acceptance and diversity,” writes Bernstein. “Only years later, when we look back and study this era, do we see that many of the advances in social liberation got a great push in this period.”

“As I go through these images years later I find photographs I barely remember taking jumping out at me,” he writes. “Roseland, where people went to show off their serious new clothes and dance moves. GG Barnum, which had the Latin transvestites and trapeze artists above the dance floor.”

It wasn’t just Manhattan that Bernstein took his camera to. His photographs of Brooklyn’s Empire Roller Rink and 2001 Odyssey (where *Saturday Night Fever* was filmed) are reminders of the different faces of disco in the outer boroughs. They are also some of the only pictures of the lesser-known spots that played an important part in the history of disco.

Over recent years, books such as Tim Lawrence’s *Love Saves the Day* and Peter Shapiro’s *Turn the Beat Around* have documented this uniquely creative time in New York. But this is the first time we have really had a fitting visual tribute since Bernstein’s disco pictures were published in the 1980 book *Night Dancin’*. While there have been subsequent books from other photographers, such as *Disco Years* by Ron Galella, none have captured New York disco in all its glorious diversity quite like Bernstein.

How did your interest in photography come about?

When I was a kid, watching my father develop film in the basement darkroom. He was a really good amateur photographer. And I used to agitate the chemicals for him when he was processing his negatives. I was very interested in watching the images coming up on the enlarger.

So it was the whole magic of it?

Exactly. My dad had also been into it since he was a child because his mother bought him a darkroom back in the 1920s. So he turned me onto it and it was always something I would do on the side while I studied graphic design. I did that for a couple of years thinking I was going to be a graphic designer. But I knew I didn’t want an office job.

Did your background in graphic design help when you got serious about photography?

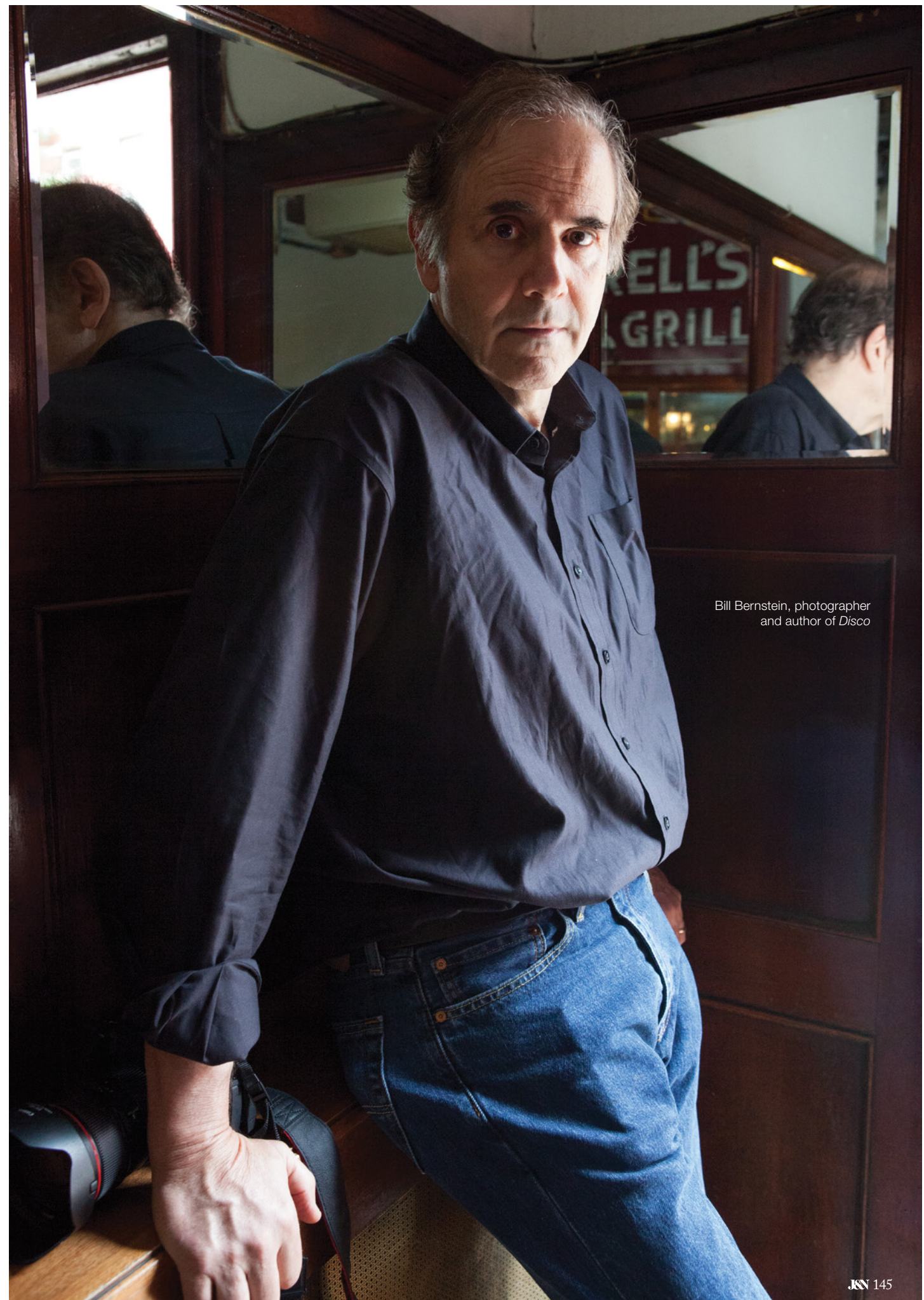
I always had some sort of an attraction to composition, lighting etc. And I think it’s all part of the same thing in many ways. So it was an easy switch from graphic design to photography.

How did you start working for *The Village Voice*?

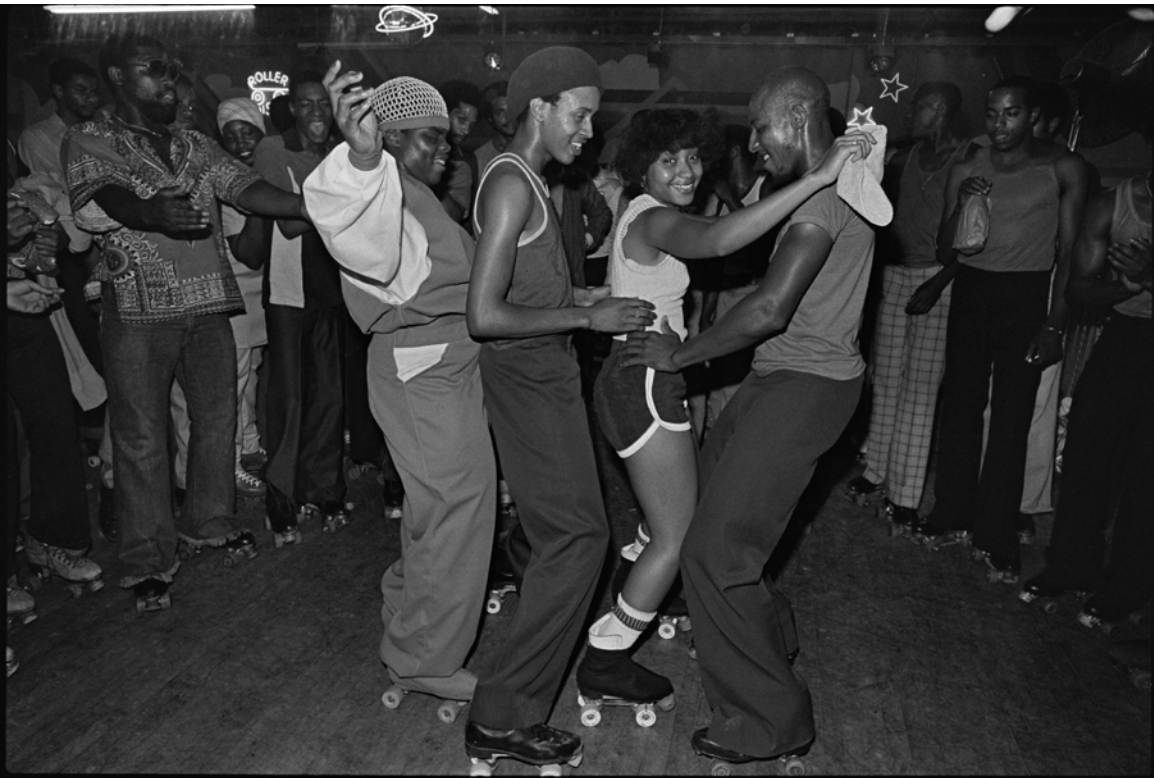
I had started shooting some pictures on the side for them and then I got offered an internship for a few months. I did that and then became a regular contributor. That was in the mid-1970s.

How did the Studio 54 assignment come about?

They sent me there to photograph >



Bill Bernstein, photographer
and author of *Disco*



Empire Roller Disco #1, 1979

“The Empire Roller Skating Rink in Crown Heights, Brooklyn opened in 1941 and finally closed its doors in 2007. It converted into a roller disco in the 70s and then the roller rink organ was replaced with a sound system and DJ booth. Empire was usually packed with an African-American crowd but top skaters of all races and creeds also came. It was a great place to shoot with good vibes all around.”

Lillian Carter receiving an award for some humanitarian work she had done. I think Studio 54 used to look for those kind of events before they opened up the club to make extra income.

Had you planned to stay behind after the event to shoot those first pictures?

No I didn't plan that at all. I had intended to cover the event and then go home. I was curious about Studio 54 but I wasn't thinking of shooting in there. But then when I saw the regulars starting to come in I decided I wanted to stay. So I quickly shot all my film and then went to a couple of other photographers and bought some [Kodak] Tri-X film. And I just stayed there and took all these shots, because honestly I didn't know if I would get back in there again. I thought, this has got to be my night to get some shots.

How many good shots did you get on that first night?

A lot. Maybe it was just a good night but it was really rocking. It was all so new to me and I felt like I had found a diamond mine of imagery. I really wondered who all these people were.

What were your favourite shots from those first rolls of film?

There's one shot in the book of a transgender woman sitting on a chair on the dance floor. There are people dancing all around her and she's looking

at the camera posing. There's also a shot I took at the top of the stairs going up to the balcony level. There were two African American guys and a woman. One guy's dressed like he is in the military and the other looks like a dandy, and the woman looks like a Hollywood starlet from the 1940s. I saw them standing there in this threesome and I wondered what they were conspiring. It was just fascinating.

‘IT WAS ALL SO NEW TO ME AND I FELT LIKE I HAD FOUND A DIAMOND MINE’

Was it usually these stories you were imagining that drew you to the people you shot?

That was a big question I had during the whole shooting. Who are these people who would stay up until 7am? A lot of them would come in at 2am, so I used to presume they were waiters or waitresses who could then sleep the

rest of the day. They would come out at night and take on this whole other persona. And this is what I became interested in. The book doesn't actually have many celebrities in it because that was really what all the other photographers were doing. I thought there was this whole other story – these regular people and their lives. To me that was far more interesting.

What were the main challenges of shooting in the clubs?

Good question. I was shooting with Tri-X film and a Vivitar 273 flash. By today's standards it was primitive. You didn't have the option of bouncing the flash into the ceiling because there was no ceiling to aim at. So you had to use a direct flash, which is problematic a lot of the time. The flash will read the light and it will adjust to the amount of light. For example, if there is some big subject in front of you that is very bright, the flash will shut down. Therefore the guy in the white shirt or woman in the white dress will come out fine, but everything else will be dark. So there were a lot of challenges. But I just tried to shoot a lot. And I also learned after a while and it got easier.

Another challenge I guess was getting people to trust you to take their picture when they were up to all sorts. How were you received?

There was a general sort of acceptance

of photographers walking around at most of those clubs. I actually found that people liked it and I wasn't given a hard time at all. They were there to be seen as well as to have a good time. So the photographer kind of became part of the scene. I definitely never felt like I was intruding.

After Studio 54 you started to shoot at lots of other clubs. That's one of the most striking things about the book – the variety of places you went to.

The important thing for me was to cover the whole gamut. The point I like to make is that there were a huge variety of discos in New York City at that time. And it was important to me to show the whole breadth and extent of it. So I tried to cover them all.

One of those clubs that hasn't been documented so much is Better Days, where Tee Scott used to spin. What was it like?

It was young, black, mostly gay and inexpensive. But it was a great club and had an amazing sound system and DJs.

Was it more difficult to shoot there being a white photographer?

No, not at all, they were really welcoming. I also went to Empire Roller Disco. It is basically walking distance from where I live in Brooklyn and is now a really nice area. But back then it was really rough. It was pretty much all black and I walked in there with my white shiny face and people were very happy to see me. That was a great place with a really nice vibe.

Was there a particular DJ you really got into?

It was the whole thing that interested me, but I do know that Larry Levan was very highly regarded at that time. So I went back to the Paradise Garage a bunch of times. Sometimes I would just watch the crowd and listen to Larry play, just to take it all in. But generally I was watching more than listening.

Did you plan or was it instinctive?

Oh totally instinctive. I was always drawn by the imagery – and what it was I couldn't really put my finger on until much later on. I would just show up at these places and keep my eyes open for things that I found interesting or unusual. At a very instinctive level, I would just shoot what attracted my eye.



Studio 54 and Cadillac, 1979

“Marc Benecke called the shots outside Studio 54, along with Steve Rubell. This was the scene most nights as people waited for hours to be chosen to enter the grand party. Sometimes pulling up in a Bentley or Cadillac helped, but not always. Nobody was interested in getting into Shufflebottoms next door.”

Did you start going to these places as a clubber?

No, it was always as a photographer. This was my subject and my thesis and I felt like it was my job to capture the whole variety and the freedom of personal expression.

It was interesting that you shot at GG Barnum. Was that the most extreme place you went to?

GG Barnum was perhaps the most extreme just because of the number of transgender people and transvestites. This was a new world for me. And I ended up getting to know a few of these transgender women and I found them to be very open. It was absolutely life changing for me. These were such places of self-expression and nobody was judging at all.

So how do you feel now the legacy of disco is finally being recognised? And how proud are you to be part of that?

I feel great about it. These negatives were sitting in a box in my studio for years and years and my wife used

to say I should do something with them. And I'd say, “Why?” because in America, to a large extent, disco is still looked on as a joke – an era where everyone was on cocaine with celebrities getting trashed. But when I started to put these images together, and then doing further research, it reminded me that it was much more than that. The glitzy stuff was just the surface of it. If you dug beyond that there was an amazing sociological and cultural thing going on that nobody really looked at back then.

How did the new book come about after all these years?

Back in the late 1970s I started to work with a writer and we looked for a publisher. And we did eventually find one for the book. It was called *Night Dancin'* but it didn't work out the way we had hoped. However, it did lead us to a guy in London named David Hill who knew the book. He called me up in New York and asked if I wanted to publish a coffee table book. So I'm very happy about this coming out now. >



2001 Dancefloor, 1979

How did you decide which pictures to use from your vast archive?

There were a handful of pictures from that original book, but we've picked out a lot more that have never been seen before. I was kind of shocked when I looked back because I don't remember taking a lot of these pictures. Not because I was drinking or taking drugs, just because there was so much material. I'm quite often surprised when I see some of the pictures.

Could you talk about some of your other work as a photographer?

I was always interested in popular culture and documenting the times, but actually I have spent most of my life as a portrait photographer. I would say my heart lies in documenting popular culture. That would include being Paul McCartney's tour photographer. My original draw was to street photography – my heroes were Henri Cartier-Bresson and William Klein. They are documenters of the moment, as I am with these photos.

When did you change to digital and do you miss anything about film?

I changed in 2002. I had been working with Paul McCartney since 1989. It was very difficult to shoot film on the road. Stuff had to be processed and contact sheets had to be made, and of course

you were in a different city every night. The logistics made it very difficult. When I was asked to go on the road in 2002 I jumped on digital as it made my life so much easier. I actually ended up liking digital much more than film.

‘WHO WERE THESE PEOPLE OF THE NIGHT AND WHAT WAS THEIR OTHER, REAL LIFE LIKE?’

Is there one thing you want people to take away from this book?

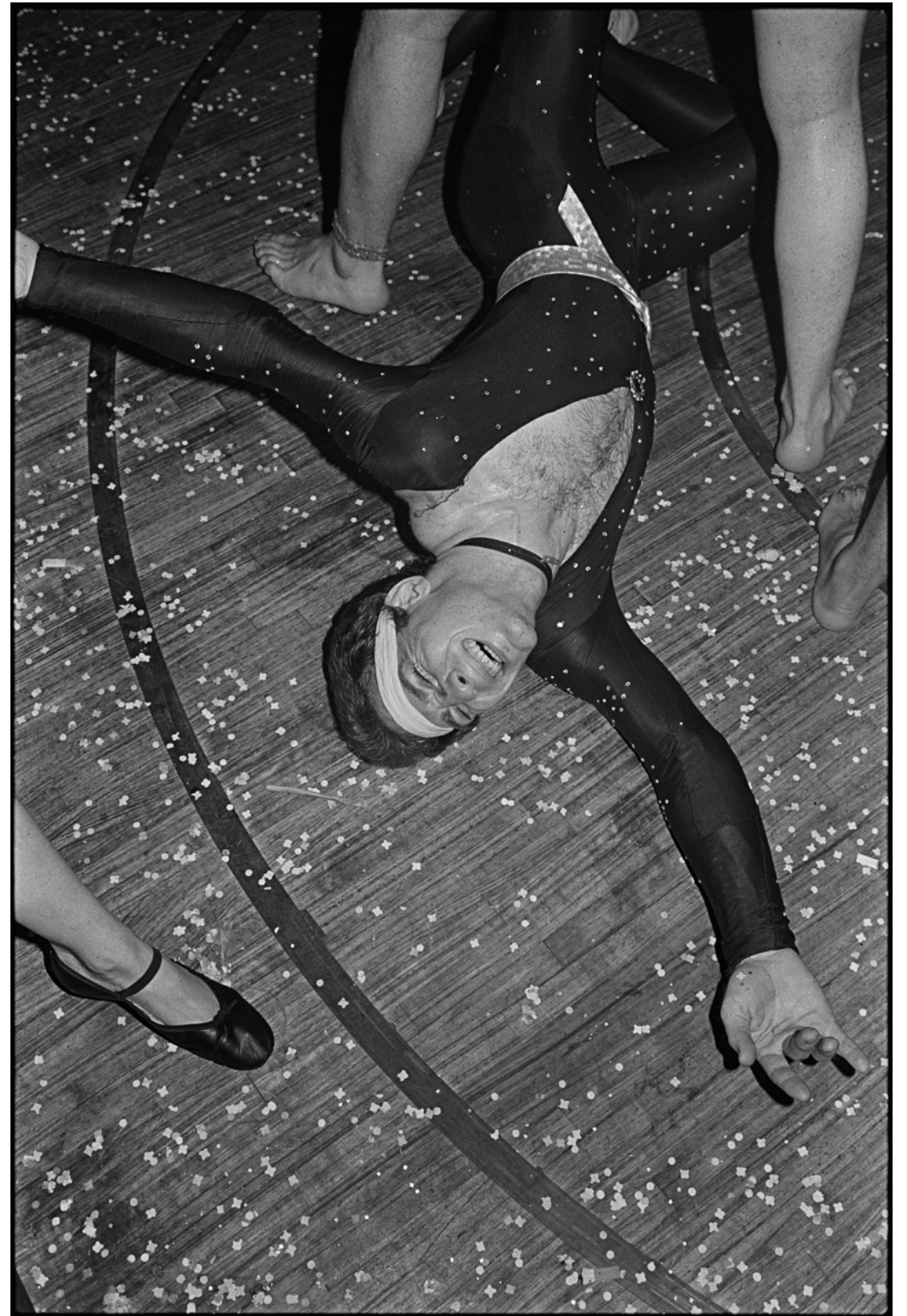
Right now in America there is a sea change in terms of lesbian, gay and transgender. We have the Supreme Court ruling on equal marriage and the military accepting transgender people. So there is a complete change in outlook. This period that my book covers gives a glimpse of what we

are about to see in the United States today. And that is absolute freedom of expression and acceptance. These clubs showed that everyone can have fun together – it didn't matter if you were gay or transgender or whatever, you were all part of the community. It was possible to have a place with no judgement and you could be who you wanted to be. And then in the early 1980s, Aids was declared the gay cancer by the medical profession. People thought if they talked to a gay person they could catch it. At the same time you'd just had the Disco Demolition at Comiskey Park in Chicago, when they blew up all the disco records. And then Ronald Reagan was elected president – so really the door was slammed shut to what was going on that I was shooting. It's taken another 35 years for things to start opening up. So I do look at this book as a sneak peek of freedom of expression that is now starting to happen in the world today. ■

Disco: the Bill Bernstein Photographs is out in October
reelartpress.com

'Disco: the Bill Bernstein Exhibition' opens at Serena Morton Gallery, 343 Ladbroke Grove, London W10 on 3 December
serenamorton.com

"2001 in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn was famous for being the location for the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, and featured the classic illuminated disco dance floor. It was pretty much a local and bridge and tunnel crowd and advertised the movie connection with a couple of posters in the lobby. The owner of the place complained to me that after several years he was still waiting to get paid his location fee."



"Le Clique was a roaming disco that popped up in different locations throughout Manhattan. Its creators, Marlene Backer and Stewart Feinstein, conjured outrageous parties with acrobats, actors, dancers, special effects and staging."

Le Clique #1, 1979