

Night Fever

By: Julie Rekal Rickerd



A new exhibit celebrates the wild nights of Studio 54

Iconic, unforgettable nightspots appear once in a blue moon, and Studio 54 was one of them. To celebrate the founding of the celebrated disco more than 40 years ago, Matthew Yokobosky, senior curator of fashion and material culture at the Brooklyn Museum, curated and designed the exhibition *Studio 54: Night Magic*. Co-founded by Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell, who met while students at Syracuse University, Studio 54 was 1970s' reigning club, a celebrity magnet known for its outrageous staging and state-of-the-art lighting and sound.

The disco on 54th Street in New York City was rebuilt in six weeks from the former Gallo Opera House, which, after many incarnations including a stint as the nightclub Casino de Paris, was taken over by CBS for radio and television studios. Studio 54 opened on April 26, 1977, thanks to the extraordinary work of a group of young designers and artists: Richard Bernstein, Antonio Lopez, Richie Williamson, Dean Janoff, Tony Walton, Jules Fisher, Paul Marantz, and Ron Ferri—plus architects Scott Bromley and Ron Daud. Williamson and Janoff designed the notorious crescent moon sculpture that occasionally flew in from the

ceiling with an 8'-long coke spoon under its “nose.”

From the moment it opened, Studio 54 was a phenomenal success. Masses gathered outside looking to get into what those who passed the red velvet rope called a “palace of drugs, sex, and rock and roll; an adult amusement park.” Some of those left outside referred to it as a den of iniquity. The requirements for admissions were beauty of any gender or sexual persuasion, celebrity, wealth, and/or connections in high places.

The exhibit displays hundreds of objects, memorabilia, vinyl records, cameras, 40 mannequins wearing the era's couture gowns and platform heels, VIP drink tickets designed by Andy Warhol, and innumerable photographs and artworks of regulars like Liza Minnelli, Halston, Calvin Klein, Tina Turner, Bianca Jagger (seen on a huge white stallion indoors celebrating her 30th birthday), and Truman Capote, passed out with a hat over his face.

The fashion guru and former creative director of *Vogue*, André Leon Tally, recalls partying at Studio 54 with his friend Diane von Furstenberg, at least three times a week: “It was the music and the mix of people that was the suc-

All photos: Courtesy of A.G.O.

cess of Studio 54. It was very eclectic, very liberal. On any given night you might find yourself dancing next to New York socialites, artists, drag queens, or possibly a leather man from some sex dungeon on the Lower East Side. Even Henry Kissinger might turn up.”

Ron Galella, one of the very few photographers allowed access, captured many of the more scandalous images such as former Canadian First Lady Margaret Trudeau tripping the light fantastic with Mick Jagger. “The atmosphere was like a Hollywood set,” Schragger says. “The guests were the actors. Any celebrity who came into New York made a stop on *The Tonight Show*, then made a stop at Studio 54.”

Many young creative hopefuls honed their skills working all facets of the Studio 54 team, 24/7. Among them was Marsha Stern, a noted lighting designer and special support person for Acclaim Lighting, who was an adviser to the exhibit. (See LSA’s interview with Stern in October 2016’s People Worth Knowing column.) A music promoter at the time, she became part of the Studio 54 family through her best friend Roy Thode, the Club’s DJ on Thursday and Sunday nights. Thode’s headset and notebook, the latter of which lists the 100-odd records he played per week, are among the exhibits.

Stern was seconded into helping out at the club wherever there was a need. She eventually left the music business to work at other clubs “pushing buttons and doing

lights,” she says. “Studio 54 was a rare, non-judgmental, queer, and transgender-friendly nightclub that insulated and equalized us,” she remembers.

Created for traveling, the exhibition arrived at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada in three enormous tractor trailers met by the AGO’s deputy director and chief curator Julian Cox, lighting designer Paul Mathiesen, and chief of media technologies Gregory Baszun. “We altered the exhibition design slightly to suit our galleries at the AGO while adhering closely to the thematic structure and presentation of the artwork that was devised by the Brooklyn Museum. This is always an exciting creative process,” says Cox. He adds that the New York-centric show was meaningful “because the culture of freedom, inclusion, and self-expression that was encouraged at Studio 54 in the late 1970s is something that Canadian audiences can identify with. It is also very relevant to the values we hope to see in our society today. That said, the exhibition includes a timeline at the beginning of the show which includes information that links Studio 54 with contemporary events in Canada.”

By sheer coincidence, Mathiesen is a Studio 54 veteran. He was hired by the club as a fly man but ended up doing anything and everything, living in one of the venue’s old dressing rooms for a while. He was eventually promoted to production manager, working 18-hour days with a team of 20 technicians “fixing the destruction and breakdowns of

