STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

noisey

MAYBE THE PEOPLE WOULD BE THE TIMES

By Lux Sante, November 7, 2017

Almost everything of interest in New York City lies in some degree of proximity to music. If you are in your teens or 20s—and who isn't—pretty much everything you do apart from your day job has something to do with music. And it isn't even just the permanent soundtrack on your stereo and in your head. The music is your spur. You were led to the city by music. You were 14 or 15 and wanted to crawl inside the music. The music was immense, an entire world immeasurably different from the sad one you were born into. If you could figure out how to get in, the music would suffuse you. You wouldn't even need an instrument: You would become one with the music, and it would pour from you like light through gauze.

The search led through record stores: the cavernous Times Square markets with their tens of thousands of titles, the little Downtown storefronts with inventories calibrated to the changing tastes of one local clique, the flyblown neighborhood shops where they might have back stock neglected since 1962, the doo-wop museums manned by savants in obscure subway arcades, the head shops purveying bootlegs from a curtained alcove in the rear, the oldies row on Bleecker Street where all the clerks are critics and the discourse alternates unpredictably between impassioned and sardonic. It wound past clubs that are just bars with a stage in the back, or lightly redecorated union halls, or resurrected chantoosie joints from another era, or ex-vaudeville palaces with paintings on the ceiling, or hotel ballrooms with a thousand conspicuous fire-code violations, or sawdust-floored folkie taverns with an aura of everybody having missed the bus a decade earlier, or jazz lofts in semi-industrial parts of Downtown so remote there's no place within a mile to buy cigarettes after dark. It flittered across underground newspapers and teen-gossip rags and lifestyle glossies and quickie paperback bios and radio interviews and industry-promo artifacts stacked near the cash registers and hazy orally transmitted lore of dubious provenance.

But 1975 is a new world, somehow. Everybody gets a haircut that year, and no one can say exactly why. Psychic emanations are big; you can feel change peeling off the walls but can't really name the form of that change. The year is a laboratory. Anything is possible. At stake is a future that might at least superficially look more like a past. Which is to say that the hippie order of knowledge has been overturned. The haircut is an affirmation of this. The time has come for us to assume our own place in the music, and that will involve an overthrow of what has come before. Life is suddenly black and white with a thin stripe of red running through.

The year begins when Marvin Gaye calls in sick and the Apollo gives us our money back. The alternative option is a rumor, really, although it's been going on for half a year. After a very long subway ride, we arrive at a tunnel of a bar under a bum hotel on the Bowery with a pool table and a stage in the back: CBGB. Onstage four guys in shirt jacs, conspicuous lack of overt theatrics, shaker bars on the guitars: Television (1). The poster has a blurb from Nick Ray (2), of all people—four cats with a passion—and another from someone named Scott Cohen: killers. sharp as tacks. they made me cry. This is something else, we think, as they blast into a cover of "Psychotic Reaction," by the Count Five. At first glance, they're channeling 1966: the clothes, the covers, and when they talk, they sound like Mitch Ryder or somebody, that not-quite-black hepped-up hoodlum corner talk affected by all the guys who wore winklepickers in 1966. The words to the songs likewise convey mod menace: "I look at you / I get a double exposure" or "Prove it / Just the facts / Confidentially." The bass player, who seems to enjoy jumping up and landing on his knees, has a ditty with a chorus that goes: "I belong to the [pause] blank generation." But it's also about how the twin leads snake around each other as if they are each holding knives, how lyrical passages turn without warning into dissonant slashing fury, how the drummer carves the beat out of flurries of paradiddles, like he's been absorbing Elvin Jones (3)—how the unstable field of noise constantly threatens to crash and burn.

And that makes the music right for the world outside: the persistent breakdown of all structures, the vacated certainties and the welcoming randomness, the retreating future and imminent prehistory. Tom Verlaine (4) sings about how "Broadway / Looks so medieval," and so it is, our moment the great shipwreck of time. All the contents of previous decades and centuries are heaped up on the sidewalks for us to pick through and select and repurpose or discard. Nobody else seems to want this lurching hulk of a city, headed to the honor farm like a former star given to paregoric and shoplifting, so it has de facto been ceded to us self-appointed guttersnipes, and maybe someday we will rule it, although for now we're content to pick at its scabs. The Bowery is our ancestral home, that broad empty boulevard running from nowhere to nowhere lined with pedigreed hovels inhabited by ghosts, where in one tiny establishment every night is New Year's Eve, and we're all contestants for Miss Hitchhiker of 1976.

But information flies in erratically from other parts of the globe. For a few years now, the strongest signals have been emanating from the unlikely island nation of Jamaica. Unlikely because we didn't know anything about it until a great mass of its seething cultural products appeared on our doorstep circa 1973, notably the desperado epic The Harder They Come—as tough and cheap as a spaghetti western, as taut as an epigram—and then its glistening soundtrack (nobody can make out the words to the Maytals' "Sweet and Dandy," and we only figure out it's about a country wedding long after we've given ourselves over to its perpetual-motion groove, like a Slinky if it could go up the stairs as well as down), and then a whole profusion of records. Much of it is mysterious at first, especially the style that involves poets possessed by spirits talking and chanting over a backing track mined with sound effects and giant echo and instruments dropping out and detached fragments of a sung melody drifting through like lost birds. Big Youth is splendid, and so is U-Roy, but it is thanks to Patti Smith (who has her finger firmly on the pulse of the moment) that we know about reigning Rasta surrealist Tappa Zukie, whose every recording sounds like the primal struggle of man versus radio. Zukie shouts from inside a room he has hewn himself from a bass line as tall and dense as trees, runs a zigzag course over a shifting terrain of percussion, summons phantom armies of brass instruments to come riding over the crest. In "Jah Is I Guiding Star," Horace Andy's plaintive "My Guiding Star(5)" is stripped down to glittering shreds as Zukie, transfixed, reaches the peak of his sermon: "Have mercy upon those who have mercy upon themselves / Don't get me mad y'all." Then his torrential rant, like one immense release of breath over three and a half minutes, trickles down into ellipsis: "The automatic clicker with remote control / The dennis / The menace / The mattress all / The dread dem sleep and the baldhead a-peep / And the dread dem wake and the baldhead creak how you mean…"

This is music that gives us seven-league boots to walk the streets in, loping 20-block miles faster than taxis, or else we dance in somebody's bare loft decorated with foil-sided insulation panels, with clamp lights scattered on the floor pointing up the walls, a single pole-mounted fan moving the air around the 1,500-square-foot oven, the turntable hooked up to a guitar amp and the music's echo redoubled by the cavernous echo of bricks and mortar. We dance to reggae, and we dance to soul, or disco, or R&B. Marvin Gaye's "I Want You" and "Got to Give It Up," the Floaters' "Float On," Chic's "Le Freak," James Brown for days but especially right now "Papa Don't Take No Mess," and it's also the inaugural year of Funkadelic's anthem, "One Nation Under a Groove." Someday they will swap out Francis Scott Key's Bavarian drinking song for this stepping march that gathers all the strands—it's a chance to dance our way out of our constrictions, on a national scale. The song already seems to be under way when the needle hits the groove, and it might as well never end, since we keep taking the needle back to the start when it starts edging near the run out. It's a whole circus parade of sounds and effects: brass band, clowns, aerialists, prancing horses, confetti showers, giant papier-mâché monster heads. It will teach you how to dance if you don't know how. You let your ass fall into the central bounce path carved out by the bass and the handclaps, and then the rest of your body can align with whatever you want for however long you want: the half-tempo crooner, the squeaking synth, the chuckling guitar monologue, the drum fills, the whistles, the calls and interjections by what sounds like two dozen different voices. It's maybe on the sixth reprise that those of us who aren't completely fucked up start to notice that the floorboards are visibly moving up and down on the one, and this is no joke when you're talking about century-old joists and beams. We start to edge toward the walls, where long tables are covered with empty bottles and cans. From there the crowd looks like one body with 400 limbs. The air, redolent of sweat and spilled beer and tobacco and cannabis and unnameable musks, is maybe a third of the way toward transmuting into a solid. Somebody screams along with the falsetto wail that turns into "You can dance away." Just then the fuse blows.

Because we are 19 or 22 or 24, and in the great city, we are living in the great moment, the very forefront of now. Nothing can happen that we won't know about at least a week in advance. There are no media to cover our scene—TV and radio and newspapers and magazines all equally indifferent—but we know everything anyway because we are plugged into the great invisible telegraph of youth. A club will open in some distant and untrafficked neighborhood; a 45 will come out that is for sale in just three stores; a band will form and rehearse but not yet have played out; a bar in far-flung Midtown will

change its jukebox offerings to include the few available records made by our people—we know all these things instantly. For that matter, there is no one on the scene with whom you don't have at least one mutual friend. We are in the heart of the great city, and yet our scene is a little village, where all the people we saw in the club last night, including those onstage, will be having breakfast in the same Ukrainian coffee shop this morning.

So we know that our now is the big Now, yet also that that conviction is shared by a scant few hundred people. Among those are some who think that it really is 1966 all over again, and that their band is just one lucky break away from permeating every jukebox and radio station and drive-in and high school dance across the land and across the sea. Some of us, though, see the ever-growing wreckage piled up at our feet, wreckage we cannot look away from, the detritus of so-called civilization, and we wonder if we are not being propelled instead toward the collapse of time. The end may be at hand, or it may just be going sideways. There are other cities within this city, and all of them are following different temporal routes. We see ours as a palimpsest of succeeding nows, like wheatpasted posters blithely and unendingly covering up yesterday's posters on boarded-up storefronts, while they measure theirs in workweeks or lunar months or fiscal years or a relentless thud of falling decades. The aged gingerly set forth from their residential hotels in search of bananas and condensed milk, braving all the dangers of the street, self-protectively oblivious of the dateline, still inhabiting a shimmery haze of 1937 within themselves, and as we pass them by, we are fleetingly pulled into their orbit. Or else we walk by a radio and hear the Jesters and the Paragons and the Flamingos and the Moonglows because a calendar next door or down the street still reads 1957. Julius McMichael's spectral falsetto lead on the Paragons' "Florence" casts us off the shore of the speculative present and maroons us in a pillowy intertime, all velvet and sateen and crushed corsages on the scarred basketball dance floor, a ballad that keeps falling into dirge cadence, hovering between the aurora borealis and the void.

We all paid heed to that English tatterdemalion's cry (6) of "no future" in different ways, and if the word "future" didn't portend a lifetime's career opportunity in the mills gone south, or a cracked vision of needle-nosed high-rises connected by space taxis against a bloodred sky with three moons, what mostly remained in our heads was no. Our fill-in-the-blank generation has had its blank filled by no. There is a No Wave, and it is coming to your town but not really. Your town could not take it. You want your big guitars and hummable melodies and never-ending teenage idyll. Those things look delusional from where we stand. They were washed away by wars and assassinations and riots long ago, and if you don't understand this, you are huffing stronger drugs than we possess. Our aesthetic is destroy, as the French say, who have converted the English verb into an adjective. Not for nothing are the faces of this instant those of Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader(7), lately deceased. Bands are forming of people who have never before picked up a musical instrument and aren't sure which end of it you stick in your mouth. They manage to produce sequences of noise that are two minutes long and have some sort of semi-consistent beat, but that's your only guarantee. It might be a lot better than that, but you can always count on a large quotient of rage and consequent distortion and lacerating atonal shrieks you can almost see graphically represented above the stage as cartoon notes with a shudder running through them. You climb the stairs to Max's (8) one night and find Bradly Field thumping on something with one stick and Gordon Stevenson emitting a two-note sine wave on his bass and in front is 16-year-old Lydia Lunch, producing circular-saw effects on some kind of junkyard guitar and squalling: Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. "Little orphans running through the bloody snow," she raves, evoking Victorian horror (although even after the record comes out you are convinced she has them rampaging through the Blarney Stone; you have done likewise in that chain of old-man bars). Lydia is small but she commands. She has everybody in the joint nailed to the wall. She could do anything onstage, and frequently does. Sure, she is just a teenage poet denouncing Mom and Dad and God and Society, but she has a force field of death-dealing noise to back her up and no one is about to get cute with her or deny a word.

Poetry is a thread that runs through this neighborhood, connecting the decades. Beat poets moved in back when it was an enclave of working families with zero flamboyance and few comforts—they liked that, and the fact that it was cheap. Through the hippie years and afterward more poets kept coming, filling the bookstores with side-stapled chapbooks mimeographed on typing paper, their authors lined up along the counter at Gem Spa, high on pills. Coffeehouses with reading series came and went, and then the Poetry Project, which cemented the connection between poetry and music: Patti Smith read there many times, Lou Reed read there, the Fugs performed, younger poets started their own bands—Television was one of them. Nowadays poetry still permeates the place, although the music has made it less conspicuous, which is crazy since poetry permeates the music. For that matter you walk around with a bass line in your head since that is your fuel, and then you naturally put words to that walking bass, words that come at you from stray talk or newspaper headlines or the memory of sentences that drift in unbidden. The mighty strophes of Linton Kwesi Johnson (9) (weirdly unnamed on his first record, simply attributed to Poet and the Roots) fly across the ocean from a place much more unsettled than our reasonably tranquil acres of ruins. "It's war amongst the rebels, madness, madness, war," he enunciates, the reggae band following his tempo—the inverse of the toasters who follow the riddims—and he is in no way engaging in hyperbole. "Five Nights of Bleeding" is a vast canvas of knifings and brawls and riots, where the music ("bubbling and backfiring, raging and rising") is a witness to both racist police violence and the propensity of victims to turn on their own. The words are hard, sculpted, scorched, three-dimensional, epic: "Inside James Brown was screaming soul / Outside, the rebels were freezing cold." That comma weighs as much as a wall. We can feel it from here, even though our lives are nursery school.

The beatniks called our neighborhood "the set," which is apt since that is where the strutting occurs. There are people who do not seem to exist except on the St. Mark's sidewalk between Second and Third, and that number has increased as the population has expanded.

The bass these days is often physically present, issuing from bars and passing cars and parked cars and pizzerias and record stores and clothing shops, but it is always in your head because it is indelible. On your rounds you are motored by Robbie Shakespeare on Junior Delgado's "Fort Augustus," and Bootsy Collins on Parliament's "Flash Light," and Lloyd Parks on Dennis Brown's "Equal Rights," and Jamaaladeen Tacuma on Ornette Coleman's "Voice Poetry," and Jah Wobble on "Swan Lake" by Public Image Limited (10), and so many others you can't name since you heard them in a club or on a 12-inch single with the most minimal information rubber-stamped off-center and half-inked. It's all about the body nowadays, and you fling yours to hell four to five nights a week. You are stepping and hot-dogging like a wizard, executing moves you amaze yourself with, sure that everybody around must be eyeballing you, master of the polyrhythms, freestyling to the lip of the world without ever falling off. You favor the clubs with the least number of people on the floor so you can truly strut, open out, work your arms, jack your footwork. You look over at your partner and you briefly synch on the chorus, and then you both spin off into separate waves again, honoring the high-hat or that guitar that sounds like a rubber band, clairvoyantly anticipating the next chord change or even the next item that segues in with a counterintuitive slow shimmer. You knew that would happen. You are omnipotent because you are so deep inside the groove you might have been born there. You are the one most like the music, and your inner being shines forth like a beacon slicing across the floor, illuminating the corners. Also you are high as fuck.

You have arrived where you once wanted to be, in the dominion of music, the kingdom of the groove, the empire of rhythm. For better or worse you are living in youthville, where nine-tenths of the people you register in your field of vision are your age and more or less on your team, even though the scene long ago fragmented into affinity groups—this one eternally rocking, that one given to costume parties, others to champion-level drinking or filming themselves naked or experimenting with electronics or drafting militant screeds or following everything that is going on in London with painstaking fidelity to detail. One day everybody on the street is wearing horn-rimmed glasses and businessman raincoats

buttoned up to the neck, the next they are all dyed blond and sporting cowboy neckerchiefs and big hats pushed back on their heads, and those go for all sexes. You go to clubs with polysyllabic names where all you can see is a strip of blue light at belt level. You find yourself in big-ass clubs with the ambiance of airports. You might be ushered into clubs with door policies so restrictive there are more people outside than in. You follow cryptic instructions to clubs on rooftops or in cellars or on the 17th floor of featureless office buildings, or to whoop-de-doos in public parks that might last an hour or five minutes depending on when the cops show up. You make your way to clubs that open at 4 AM and close their doors sometime around noon. There's the one in the alley far Downtown where you get yourself into a fistfight for reasons you can't begin to fathom, the one in the ancient condemned theater on 14th Street where jokers on line on the firetrap staircase start flicking lit matches at one another, the one in the decommissioned bar and grill where the personnel from all the other clubs go after closing, where you belly up to the counter and order not drinks but rails of Uptown.
You get your poetry in snatches now, because it shows up as croaked lines deep inside the groove or buried in the mix or mumbled through a sleeve. You might register them only subliminally, maybe pick them up in daylight sometime later and wonder where you caught that sentence. Mostly you recall single barked chorus phrases that rattle around your head while the rest of the number might as well consist of doos and dahs, "She's lost control again" and "The cassette played poptones" and "Tanz' den Jesus Christus." But lately poetry has been filtering down from the Bronx on stray 12s you can sometimes buy in that place on Union Square where they seem to rotate the stock every other day. "I was spanking and a-freaking in a disco place," says Spoonie Gee (11), who is the smooth talker, the midnight stalker, the image of the man they call the J.D. Walker, bouncing to the Patty Duke riddim as it shuffles from side to side, his voice track intermittently so flanged it hurts your ears, and that phrase takes on a power and significance you can't account for except by reference to its reminiscent tense, somehow a harbinger of how all of this will one day fade into sepia, since golden lads and girls all must, as chimney sweepers come to dust. But that won't come anytime soon, since you are young and have been young all your life and live in the land of the young and have made no arrangements to ever be anything but young.

But as fate would have it, forces are even now making arrangements for you, since you and everybody else you know have been steadily increasing your consumption of substances, primarily powders. There was a time when these showed up rarely, then irregularly, in the pocket of some cosmopolitan friend, or in the pages of a book mailed from Thailand, or purchased from a dapper gent who also traded in vintage men's shoes, or paid as commission by an acquaintance who wanted to use your kitchen table as a place to tap a vein. But lately you have surprised yourself outside a slot in a door in some ruin a couple of blocks over in the empty quarter and handing over cash in exchange for bags. You tell yourself you will never be one of those people who stand for hours in the rain being toyed with by the lookouts, shuffled from one side of the street to the other, made to show track marks at the base of the steps, suffered having the slot slap shut definitively just as you are finally stepping up to it. You like boy the best because it unties every knot in your nerves and fills you with a glow you can carry to every occasion, making you the nonpareil you think you are on the dance floor. But your friends all seem to have unaccountable piles of girl lying around, and you cannot in good conscience refuse hospitality, so you inhale line after line, even if it makes you kind of jangly and causes every cigarette to burn up in three seconds. "I'm a dyn-o-mite," states Dillinger confidently. "So all you got to do is hold me tight, because I'm out of sight. I've got cocaine running around my brain."

He also informs us that a knife, a fork, a bottle, and a cork is the way we spell New York, and that sounds about right. All around us property is being carved up. The unlucky are being turned out of their homes on technicalities. Storefronts are being unboarded so people can sell trinkets to inquisitive tourists. Clubs are catering only to the slim and the rich, or have ballooned into funfair malls with three stages and eight dance floors and 16 bars and V.I.P. rooms inside V.I.P. rooms. What was formerly given up to the street for common scavenging is now being put up for sale on flattened cardboard boxes on the sidewalk. People are flooding into the set just to gape. People are paying money to sleep in closets and backyard sheds and doctors' examining rooms. People are selling T-shirts advertising the neighborhood, or bands that

have already broken up, or telling one and all to go fuck themselves. Suddenly cops appear on foot patrol in select areas. Suddenly beggars are fighting for turf. Suddenly beggars have gimmicks. The weird are turning pro. The pros are moving to more discreet zip codes. We realize we are absolutely unprepared for any of this, which as far as we know was brought about by the music. We thought the music would change the world, and we were correct except in the matter of specifics.

You check out the people on the street and note the year when they stopped: this one with the death's-head rictus 1973, that one in the Perfecto jacket 1977, her friend in the vinyl T-shirt 1979, those people looking like drunken ballroom dancers on an ocean liner 1980—and that's when you realize you have a year written on your own forehead and it's not the one that tops the current calendar. You have aged out of the struggle just in time for the struggle to be done with you. You will never again inhabit the great now, only a small and fragile instant that flips over every time you blink. Music will keep happening and you might like some of it or even a lot of it but it will no longer be yours. You will never be a star if you have failed to achieve that goal by now. All you can do is head to the dance floor in the burning disco where Chic is playing on an endless loop. These, the singers assure you again and again, are the good times.