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GOOD NIGHT MR. LEWIS

Midnight Cowboy By Steve Lewis July 28, 2010



I don't travel well. Plane, train, or automobile, it doesn't matter. Once I cross a bridge, or hop on some instrument to take me away from Manhattan—I simply collapse. My wives say I'm strapped into the city. The streets and sounds are as much a part of me as my blood. I just don't like small towns, and for me, Chicago is a small town. In the classic flick *My Little Chickadee*, W.C. Fields is being dragged to the gallows. His character, Cuthbert J. Twillie, a

con man who had become sheriff of Greasewood City, begs for a customary final wish as the noose is tightened. The mob grants it and Fields deadpans, "I'd like to see Paris before I die." The crowd jeers and he lessens his demand with "Philadelphia will do." For me, Philadelphia just might do, and maybe San Francisco, but other than that, it's all Greasewood City to me. Oh, I did spend a year in Los Angeles one night, and I can absolutely tolerate Miami for 3 or 2 days, so long as nobody talks to me, or takes me to a club. America offers places I can get away to, like Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Death Valley National Parks, but the cities and towns on the way are just truck stops or ghost towns to me. Tom Starker, one of the most infamous doorman in this town, moved away a long time ago to a place called Columbus. I looked it up. It's in Ohio, which is a big left if you somehow end up in New Jersey. I am told it is a very pleasant place. It sounds like the kind of place those NIMBY's on community boards would just love, but that's another story.

Back in the day, there weren't as many clubs as there are these days, but there were many more really big ones. They were fabulous malls where as many as 7 DJs played different music in different rooms to different crowds. People thought different was more interesting than the same. That sums up the problem with today's clubs in a flash, but that's a different story. It was one stop shopping, as the gays and the straights and the house heads and rockers all got along, and exchanged thoughts and, often, DNA. Now it seems like that mall was ripped apart, and sections of it form mini clubs, each with its own patented vibe.

Neighborhoods are club malls, but diversity is an elusive commodity. The doormen of these current joints are generally looking for one type of patron, looking for "their" crowd. Who or what is fabulous and VIP'd at Kenmare may not get hustled inside at 1Oak. The doorman may kiss the cheeks and the ass of one dude at Avenue but the same fellow might enjoy more of the night air than he is used to outside The Box. In times of yore, doorman needed to know or be able to recognize players from all sorts of crowds. Tom Starker was a superstar doorman. He worked at places that are legendary, such as Area, the World, Palladium (Rubell/Schrager incarnation), Heartbreak, Saturday's, the Saint, Save the Robots, Limelight, The Red Zone, Palladium (Peter Gatién edition), Tatou, and Club USA. His 6-foot (and a lot more) frame was topped with a massive, trademark cowboy hat. Everybody had to be nice to him. Suddenly, he was gone and living and working in the hinterlands of self-imposed exile, far from any main street. I chatted with Tom as he contemplates a return to New York.

After many years in the wilderness, you showed up at a Danceteria reunion. Where have you been, and what have you been up to?

Good analogy, wilderness can be good. It can impart wisdom if you stand still enough to listen. Leaving NYC for a time was exactly that for me. I returned to Columbus Ohio where I grew up, with hopes to take some of my industry knowledge and open a club here.

And I guess you did. What is Spice and BoMA?

BoMA was my baby. It was a project 10 years in the making. I turned a 19th-century stone church into a 4-star restaurant, night club and art gallery that was named #1 for food in the city and a club that was nominated for 3 international club world awards, including best new club, where we were up against Circa (Peter Gatien's club in Toronto-Winner), Tao Beach (Vegas), Set (Miami) and LAX (Vegas). I eventually sold BoMA and opened Spice Gastro Lounge, another high-end concept restaurant, 3 stars, that was inspired by the gastronomy movement that was happening at the time.

You were a doorman in NYC for years. Tell me about the clubs you worked for.

I was fortunate enough to be a part of a whole life cycle of entertainment in NYC that we now can look back upon as a golden age of clubs. I started my career at Aria in the early 80's; the brilliant club that changed its theme every 6 weeks: Arthur Weinstein then brought me over to do the door at The World. Arthur and Frank Roccio used to do a Rock and Roll night at the Palladium, based around the music scene with bands like Love and Rockets. They asked me to do the door, probably because of my Rock/Biker persona. Palladium was a star-studded icon. The venue was mind boggling, and the Michael Todd's (VIP) Room was actually a club within a club. How do you describe a room that has a massive Michele Basquiat painting over the bar? Steve Rubell asked me to do the door on a full-time basis, how do you say no to Steve Rubell? It was an honor to work for him.

A lot of other great clubs sprung up in the scene during that time, and many times I would be asked to do a particular night, and the job description would grow into something bigger. I went on to work at venues like Heartbreak, the Saint, and Save the Robots. In a classic move, Peter Gatien asked me to do the door at the Limelight on Sunday nights, which was Rock n' Roll Church, and a few weeks later, I'm full time. But that's what the clubs were like, it was a scene, and being versatile, and moving around, was so much a part of the energy of the business.

In the mid-80's, in the heyday of the mega clubs, I opened my own intimate space called Saturdays. It helped that I was a part of the scene because the regulars and the celebrities followed me there for a time, and Andy Warhol described the club in his diary:

"Saturday August 16, 1986... and then we walked up Church street to a new place called Saturday's... We got there and it was all beautiful straight models dressed to the hilt, accessorized with jewelry and T-shirts torn just the right way, like Weber photographs, and they all look like they just fell out of a magazine. And the right age, like 28-30. They park their motorcycles out front... and beautiful girls too. This place overflowed onto the sidewalk, it was so chic. "

The co-op board of the Saturday's building eventually shut us down, because the crowds became too unwieldy, with people pouring in to the streets and waves of motorcycles firing up at 3am, waking up the entire neighborhood.

In the late 80's and 90's I did the Red Zone, another mega club and eventually went back to the Palladium under Peter Gatien, who I worked for at the Limelight. Eventually, I did the door at an uptown club called Tatou, and then Club USA. The Red Zone and Tatou, interestingly, were venues that were also restaurants, a concept that really struck me, and eventually inspired me to realize that there can be more to a nightclub than loud music and massive crowds.

Why did you leave and what were you seeking? Did you find it?

I actually never intended to leave for so long. I came to Columbus (my hometown) to open the Easy Riders flagship venue for Paizano Publications, publishers of Easy Rider Magazine. When you leave home at 21 and live the life I did in NYC for 15 years, being around family again reminds you of the things you are missing from your life. Next thing you know, you buy a house, and 17 years has gone by. But, as I take a breath in between projects and take stock of what I've seen, and what I've done, I'm experiencing the same epiphany, but in reverse. It all come full circle, as things should, and I desperately miss the city, its energy, and all my friends I met in that life, that are also like family to me. To ask if I found "it," since being away, I discovered part of myself back home, but now I'm realizing that some part of me is also indelibly NYC.

You wore a trademark cowboy hat for eons. Why? Are you a for real cowboy, or does it mean something else, or do you think you look good in it?

All of the above, and don't forget, I ride an iron horse. Steve Rubell did say after all, my country western party in the Michael Todd Room was the coolest party he had ever seen.

Clubs are made of people. What did you glean from the many club personalities you worked with?

The club people of those days were reflective of every aspect of NYC, which in turn is a snapshot of every walk of life. I have to say that being in that environment at 21 probably was instrumental in becoming who I am today. I learned from the best of the best in an industry filled with unique minds and outrageous creativity, including you Mr. Lewis.

You're contemplating a return? Why and what would you do.

Yes, I have a concept I would like to open in the city that is along the lines of what we accomplished with Saturday's. Having build, designed and owned large venues I don't think this is the time for mega anything. People are valuing their relationships, their time, their money and quality experience is king. I would return not as a former self living in some pale limelight but as an evolved industry veteran who wants to again plug into a bigger picture and community of fantastic people.

Do the fundamental things apply as time goes by? How do you think the NYC club scene has changed?

he fundamentals are creative genius, and the right time and place. I think we have all watched the club scene change over time. My "era" is now looked upon as an iconic time when large clubs, celebrities, exclusivity and glitz were everything. But we started to see politics and money play into the gentrification of every aspect of the city which took the life out of the club scene because we silenced the creative voice in exchange for highly controlled development. As we lost the grittiness that was the source of NYC's scene we simply had to wait for the new time and place. What has developed are smaller venues with distinct concepts that have style and panache. I love what I'm seeing in this new evolution because its has brought Manhattan back to herself and it's the kind of environment I can see myself being creative in again.

Do the fundamental things of the NYC club business apply in Columbus?

NYC is unique, and the rules in the Midwest are completely different. Concepts do not play here the same way as they play in NYC so there are inherent differences in the approach.