

The Pyramid's Scheme Dan Cameron

One of the leftover myths of 1970s and 1980s New York nightlife that still retains a grip on the collective imagination is that of the supposedly restrictive door policies at the hottest clubs. From Studio 54 and the Mudd Club to Nell's and Limelight at their late-80s peak, what all the legendary clubs shared was a policy of only admitting those who could pass muster with whomever was minding the front door. From that perspective, the Pyramid Lounge's door philosophy was emphatically the opposite of exclusive, and more a matter of ascertaining whether the would-be entrants were sure they really knew what was taking place on the other side of the door. Queen or butch, twink or bear; stoner, popper, boozier or straight edge—all were welcome, along with a smattering of geeks and the occasional skaters and post-punks. The only folks who seemed out of place were the ones who had come to be seen in a cool spot, since the Pyramid in its glory days was the diametrical opposite of cool. Oddly, even the Pyramid's identity as a gay bar was relatively opaque, in the sense that not a lot of cruising went on there, at least in comparison to The Bar or Boy Bar. It seems in retrospect like the Pyramid served primarily as hangout and laboratory for the lunatic fringe of the downtown music, theater, art and performance communities of the 1980s and 1990s, becoming in the process a New York cultural institution whose impact, in retrospect, towers over more than a few of the more upscale artistic venues—the ones whose revenue stream was not entirely based on pouring drinks.

I didn't really consider myself a Pyramid regular, yet when I think back on some of the indelible performances I witnessed, it sometimes seems like I was there every other night. A slashing 3 Teens Kill 4 performance, with David Wojnarowicz holding a transistor radio up to the microphone between verses, is still a recurring motif in my dreams today. The foul-mouthed, sharp-witted Hedda Lettuce, brilliantly lampooning gay-straight/drag-butth dichotomies, seemed to have been transported to Avenue A direct from an off-color Catskills club act of the post-Lenny Bruce era. If a time machine was invented tomorrow, I would use it to go back and witness every installment of John Jesurun's obliquely surreal serial *Chang in a Void*, a new chapter of which was showcased monthly (as it is I'm fortunate I was able to have seen two episodes). I'm also fairly certain that the one occasion I was able to experience a slide projection of Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*—before the images became pricey framed photos—as at the Pyramid, and I have a very distinct memory of chatting with Pat Hearn while waiting for Leigh Bowery to come onstage. . . or was it John Kelly performing as Joni Mitchell? Depending on the night, one of a regular procession of musical acts that preferred the Pyramid's intimacy might tear through a set, but at its heart the club served as incubator for a new generation of drag artists. The quintessential event at Pyramid was the evening-long revue, often a benefit for which a \$5 cover was forked over at the door, and in which some combination of Lady Bunny, RuPaul, Mistress Formika, Lypsinka, Tabbooo!, Sherry Vine, Anita Greencard, Ethel Jean Merman, or International Chrysis would emerge onto the stage and deliver a polished gender-bending spectacle, often in under 10 minutes. I often envisioned the backstage dressing room as a military-level operation, considering the sheer volume and quantity of wigs, gowns, props and effects that followed one another onstage in a series of impressive feats of synchronicity. When I finally did make it behind the curtain one night, the darkness, clutter and claustrophobia permanently shattered that fantasy, while dramatizing the artistry of the illusion.

Like much of underground NYC in the mid-late 1980s and early 1990s, the mood at the Pyramid was one of unflinching, purposeful defiance. AIDS was very much a part of everybody's world by the time the Pyramid reached its peak, ca. 1984-1986, and although it would hardly be accurate to

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suggest that anybody left their suffering at the door, what prevailed inside was driven by a kind of gallows hilarity, a feeling that with so many of us already gone or marked for death, the only thing that truly made sense was the assertion of the vitality of the sexual outlaw, the experimental queer, and the gender rebel. 'Celebratory' isn't precisely the right description of the ambiance, despite the fact that everybody did whatever was necessary to maintain high spirits and a light touch. In truth, fury was barely concealed beneath some of those sequined headdresses, but ingenuity remained the byword for transforming the helplessness generated by the barely concealed homophobia of Reagan's second administration into a force to be reckoned with: wicked, all-enveloping glee at the seemingly illicit knowledge that the truly indispensable minorities will always have the last laugh. With the culture war raging around us, both clientele and talent at Pyramid Lounge were in the front lines of envisioning a future in which sexual identities can be mutable and fluid, so long as the core identity remains crystal clear.

In the interest of full disclosure, it should be added that, like so many other downtown denizens of the period, I too had a band in the late 1980s, and sometimes it seemed that all would be well if only I could secure a booking for Infra-Dig at the Pyramid. I dropped off demo tapes, wheat pasted flyers, made phone calls, and tried to be as gently wheedling as I could whenever I saw Brian Butterick—all to no avail. In retrospect, there were any number of reasons why my band would never fit on a bill at the Pyramid, but the fact that Infra-Dig did play bigger clubs around town, not to mention every other dive in the neighborhood—8BC, Limbo Lounge, CBGB, Cat Club, Kamikazee—made the Pyramid's resistance that much more bewildering. What I came to understand, however, was that not unlike its door policy, Brian's philosophy about booking talent seemed to grow naturally from the idea of exclusion: if no other place knew what to do with you, then maybe you had a decent shot at getting your foot in the door. The stranger and more outré your gift, the more likely it was that you would fit into the bill at 101 Avenue A. In fact, before that fevered decade had come to an halt, I'd already set the wheat paste aside, bid farewell to rented equipment vans and rehearsal rooms, and happily joined the ranks of those Ethyl Eichelberger and Wendy Wild fans who appeared on the Pyramid's doorstep at regular intervals, ready to experience the next chapter of our initiation into a brave new world where queens are universally beloved and drag is high art. It all happened in such miniscule increments that today it's nearly impossible to recall just how thoroughly disenfranchised we really did feel. It was so much easier to keep those feelings at bay when year in and year out, the only thing that seemed reliable was the unspoken understanding that by stepping into the Pyramid's inner sanctum, even for an hour or two, that future belonged to us.