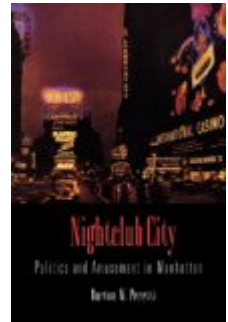


**Burton W. Peretti.** *Nightclub City: Politics and Amusement in Manhattan.*

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The idea of the nightclub--those liminal social spaces of possibility replete with contraband gin cocktails, jazz orchestras, and transgressive sexuality, all housed within rooms of gilded art deco--is a captivating vision of American urban culture between the wars. The nightclub in particular remains a marker of the so-called Roaring Twenties and the dynamic social and sexual cultures that emerged into greater public consciousness. U.S. scholars of this period are fortunate to have a rich archive of cultural and social histories that recount the importance of dance crazes, cheap amusements, slumming, and sexual subcultures that animated the nightlife of major American cities in the 1920s and to a lesser degree, the 1930s. As our understandings of the social worlds of leisure and consumer culture have deepened and become more nuanced, the relationship between the public culture of urban nightlife and political culture has remained opaque.

Burton Peretti's *Nightclub City: Politics and Amusement in Manhattan* is a bold attempt to trace the complex relationships that existed between New York City's nightclubs and municipal

governance. Here Peretti seeks to integrate both political and cultural history, arguing that any analysis of city hall of this period requires an understanding of the dynamics, economics, and the social meanings of nightlife within Manhattan. Not surprisingly, the regulatory and repressive reach of municipal government, as well as New York state and federal authority, is of course a major theme in the book. After all, much of the period the author examines--the years between 1930 and 1940--are continuous with the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution that prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol. But Peretti is careful not to draw a simple story of an edgy, experimental world of evening entertainment and adventure contrasted against an emerging regulatory state. Rather the author argues that the relationship was more complex, at times intimate--"the impact of prohibition on the city's culture would reoccupy the center of civic discussion, and debate about the value or detriment of the nightclub to the city's culture" (p. 72). Here the ambiguous relationship between nightclubs, municipal politicians, organized crime, re-

formers, and the consuming public's delight in these venues ebbed and flowed.

Peretti organizes the book around significant figures from city hall and Manhattan's myriad of nightclubs. In particular club owners and impresarios such as Mary "Texas" Graham, Larry Fey, and Billy Rose are profiled along side the leading political actors of the day, mayors Jimmy Walker and Fiorello LaGuardia, as well as Judge Samuel Seabury and Robert Moses. This biographical and personality-driven approach is both a strength and at times a weakness of the book. The attention to important actors does provide insight into the overlapping fields of urban nightlife and urban politics, but it also has the effect of reifying Peretti's analysis and personifying shifts within the political economy and political culture of Manhattan.

According to the author the first real interwar nightclub in Manhattan was Club El Fey, established by Larry Fay, a New York taxi cab driver and bootlegger. In terms of style and concept, the nightclub was an amalgam of pre-Prohibition drinking establishments, particularly cabarets, which were themselves a fusion of the massive and ornate restaurants and working-class saloons, music halls, and resorts. Club owners were quick to utilize floorshows taken from vaudeville, as well as more spectacular entertainments borrowed from the Broadway stage. New expressions and displays of sexuality were key to the social ecology of these establishments. "Nightclubs in the 1920s," writes Peretti, "played host to a volatile combination of crime and the near-seduction of male customers by female performers that sometimes skirted the edges of prostitution" (p. 212).

The politician most closely associated with Manhattan nightclubs and the urban culture of leisure and entertainment of the 1920s was Mayor Jimmy Walker. Walker, the son of a politically connected Irish-American family, had close ties with the entertainment world, cutting a public fig-

ure as an enthusiastic participant in the city's nightlife. Nonetheless, as Peretti points out, it was Walker who launched a number of moralistic campaigns to limit and regulate lewd performances and immoral conduct in nightclubs. "As with their efforts to promote decency in theaters," writes Peretti, "Walker and Tammany Hall regulated nightclubs both to cultivate an image of traditional, censorious rectitude and to encourage longtime friends and business partners to reform their ways" (pp. 63-64). Here the author misses an opportunity to delve deeper into the social and political distinctions between vices such as gambling, prostitution, alcohol consumption, and transgressive sexuality. Why were certain vices at least privately legitimate among Tammany politicians, while other emergent forms of sexual subjectivity—not to mention interracial socialization—were a greater cause for concern? In any case, while the economy boomed during the 1920s Walker was able to successfully navigate between a celebration of Manhattan's nightlife and attempts to regulate and restrict it. However, with the stock market crash, and investigation into Tammany corruption led by Samuel Seabury, Walker was forced from office.

If Walker's attitude toward nightclubs was ambiguous and at times contradictory so was that of his most notable successor in city hall, Fiorello LaGuardia. LaGuardia came to office in 1934 at the head of a Fusion ticket that brought together Republicans and Reform Democrats opposed to Tammany. As such LaGuardia was politically associated with anti-vice elements and the tradition of Progressive Era urban reform. In coordination with his 1937 re-election campaign, LaGuardia launched an anti-burlesque initiative, speaking out against what he termed "commercialized filth" that saw many of the city's theaters closed down. Nonetheless, Peretti contends that La Guardia shared with Walker "a love of urban leisure and the performing arts" and thought seriously about cultural politics (p. 152). Though many of the old nightclubs of the late 1920s had shut their doors

with the onset of the Depression, by the late 1930s nightclubs were once again emerging as an important and significant part of Manhattan nightlife. Here Peretti's explanation for the roller coaster fortunes of nightclubs would have been aided by the use of financial documents such as bankruptcy records, and more quantitative data on the numbers of nightclubs opening and closing between 1922 and 1940.

Though Peretti utilizes a number of archival materials for the book, most of his sources come from periodical literature and other published sources. Much of what Peretti has to tell us is not new but he does a very fine job of connecting political scandal with the dynamic social milieu of Manhattan in a detailed and insightful way. As such *Nightclub City* is an important addition to the literature on New York and the social world of leisure and entertainment that emerged between the wars.

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