



MoMA Magazine

Visiting the Loft, Where Music and Dancing Are Sacred

**Members of the original Loft community in New York City
describe how the glorious, ongoing party moves them.**

May Makki

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On Valentine’s Day 1970, David Mancuso began hosting regular, invitation-only dance parties at his home at 647 Broadway in New York City. Initially started as a way to make rent, these weekly gatherings came to be known as the Loft. Their status as house parties allowed Mancuso to circumnavigate the city’s harsh cabaret laws, which he campaigned against throughout his life, and contributed to the unique spirit of the Loft as a space free from a commercial agenda, where music and dancing are sacred.

A self-described “musical host,” Mancuso was renowned for his taste and distinct style of playing songs on vinyl from beginning to end, without mixing. He fostered an atmosphere that celebrated ideals of inclusivity and emotional uplift amid the turbulent backdrop of the 1970s and a rapidly changing New York. The Loft’s vibrant community cut across race, class, and sexual orientation, bringing together people united by a deep love of music and dance. To this day, 30 to 40 volunteers continue to come together four times a year to host the party and carry on Mancuso’s legacy.

Acquired by the Museum in 2022, Martin Beck’s film work *Last Night* (2016) revisits the records that Mancuso played on June 2, 1984, at one of the last parties at the Loft’s second location, at 99 Prince Street. On June 2, 2024, *Last Night* will be presented, for one day only, on the 40th anniversary of the evening it references. Installed in MoMA’s Kravis Studio, the presentation will create the conditions for remembrance, contemplation, and celebration—highlighting the communities and exchanges of ideas that develop alongside works of art.

In honor of this occasion, I spoke with five caretakers of the Loft—Sandy Moon, Ernesto Green, Luis “Loftkid” Vargas, Edowa Shimizu, and Douglas Sherman—who shared their memories of Mancuso, his glorious parties, and the tight-knit community he fostered.

—May Makki, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance Art

Tell me about your relationship to music and discovering the Loft.

Edowa Shimizu: My interest in music drew me to connect with other like-minded people all my life. I’m originally from Tokyo. When I moved to New York, I started going to various clubs and experiencing different kinds of music. And when I went to the Loft for the first time, it was unlike any other place. The way music was presented and enjoyed was very unique and it opened up my mind to how music can be experienced.

Over the years David brought me more and more into it, starting at the door, then setting up the sound system and eventually hosting music. I am grateful now to be in a position to keep it going and continue moving it forward as one of the “caretakers.”

Luis Vargas: It was very visual walking into the Loft as an eight-year-old boy. Actually being part of the decorating crew, that’s where I cut my teeth. On Wednesdays, David

would just throw on random records, and we would pull down the dead balloons from the ceiling and start preparing the new balloons to go up.

One of my fondest memories of the Loft was walking in and the impact of all the balloons, and the lights, and the smell of the baby powder, and being this dumbfounded young kid, eyes wide open. I don't know who came up with the idea, but there used to be a canopy of parachutes and old sails hanging from the ceiling, and they made this billowing effect.

I'm still a very visual artist, and I consider the Loft my palette, my canvas, and my brush. Every opportunity we get to do a party, I get to paint a masterpiece. My relationship to music has always been that way. Whenever I go to events, I appreciate the people who do production, who paint the picture again and keep my love of music going in the art form.

Ernesto Green: My relationship with music began in the mid '70s. I was a teenager living in New York and it was the disco era. There were so many discos in New York. We had a place to go basically every night and most of the time felt safe. But in 1976, I had the pleasure of being invited to a Loft party and that just changed my whole perspective on going out, dancing, because the sound was amazing. Closing your eyes while you're dancing, you could actually visualize the band in the room with you. I've never heard clarity like that. From that point on, the Loft was our church on Saturday night for about 14 years.

The Loft opened eyes to different cultures. I grew up in Bed-Stuy [Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn]. The only interactions I had with white people or different cultures was basically on the subway. But coming to the Loft and stepping out of my comfort zone, I found a new world and became friends with people from all different cultures and became a music lover.

When you went to the Loft, once David put the needle on, you might stand there for a couple of seconds but then all of a sudden you would find yourself in the group. Everyone's moving to the same beat at the same time. And we were all part of that, you know?



David Mancuso with Sandy Moon's daughter, Lara, and son, Michael, at 99 Prince Street. Image courtesy Sandy Moon



99 Prince Street when it was first leased by David Mancuso, before modifications to accommodate the Loft parties. Image courtesy Sandy Moon

Whatever I thought I knew about music as a DJ was completely transformed from that first experience.

Douglas Sherman

Sandy Moon: My mother played piano and organ, and each of her five children had an instrument. We all played in a band or an orchestra. She also had a record player and would bring home different kinds of records. So we grew up with a lot of music.

When I came to New York, in 1965, you could go to five different places in one night. I had a motorcycle and would go uptown, to the West Side, to the East Side to hear live jazz, rock and roll, whatever was going on.

The first time I went to the Loft, I'd been at a place called the 82 Club, which was a drag queen place where I'd gone to hear the New York Dolls. And after their set, somebody said, "Let's go to the Loft." So we went over to Broadway and we climbed up all these stairs. I walked in and on my right was a table piled with fruit and strawberries and cantaloupe all cut up ready to eat, and in the far corner was David playing records. And the music, it moves you. David had a gift for getting you on your feet and keeping you moving without you even noticing it.

Douglas Sherman: Like Sandy, I was exposed to music at an early age. I grew up in Washington Heights and my parents were folk singers, so music was always present. My father composed, and my mother was a vocalist and they performed around New York City.

I first heard about the Loft when I was 15 years old, while DJing at small house parties and outdoor events, but it wasn't until I was 19 and in college that I attended my first party at 99 Prince Street, thanks to a friend who had an invitation. Whatever I thought I knew about music as a DJ was completely transformed from that first experience. It was an epiphany for me. David played things that I didn't think could be played at a party, a gathering, or a club. I had never seen or experienced anything like it. As Ernesto said, everyone moved in unison. There were moments where the music reached peaks and crescendos creating a euphoria on the dance floor. It was amazing.

What I find to be the common thread among us is our shared love of music and dance. It's what brings us all together.

Whatever you did Monday to Friday, you came to Loft on Saturday and just freed yourself and forgot about your troubles during the week.

Ernesto Green



The Loft. Image courtesy Edowa Shimizu

99 Prince Street was the Loft's second location. After that, the Loft was in various locations that weren't literally David's home. What do you remember about that transition?

DS: At the second-to-last party at Prince Street, I remember watching François Kevorkian setting up a reel-to-reel to record David's set live [which is what Martin Beck's *Last Night* references]. I asked David, "How come you're recording this party and not the very last one?" David replied that the last party would be a deeply personal experience for everyone, and he didn't want to intrude upon or exploit that intimacy. He understood that for a lot of us, it was going to be an emotional transition to leave that space, which had become a home to us. I'm reminded of when I first went to Prince Street, and someone said, "You know, this is someone's home." It wasn't until I went to the bathroom and saw a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste on the sink, I thought, "Wow, somebody really does live here!"

At the last party, I stayed until closing when David played the final record, and the hardest thing to do was to put on our jackets and say goodbye.

LV: We were crying.

DS: Yeah, we were crying.

EG: But we knew there were going to be difficulties because of the Loft moving to Alphabet City. That's where I started working with David, and we had to get creative to bring people over to that location. People were terrified of that neighborhood. A friend of mine had a bus, and we hired him to come down on Saturdays. We put a balloon on the antenna of the bus and it picked people up from the subway until 6:00 in the morning. We were trying to get everyone to feel comfortable with that area. Then we had to start expanding our food menu because no one wanted to go out. So, then we started serving hot food. It was really a big transition.

You describe yourselves as the "caretakers" of David's legacy and the Loft. Tell me what this word means to you.

EG: David envisioned the Loft going on for generations. He never considered himself to be the so-called owner. It was there for everyone to enjoy.

Whatever your background is, your profession, it's left at the door. And that was one of the main reasons why it was such a special place, because whatever you did Monday to Friday, you came to Loft on Saturday and just freed yourself and forgot about your troubles during the week.

LV: It had a certain anonymity to it.

ES: Being at the Loft brings out the inner child in you—the kind of childlike spirit that emerges when you are in a safe place.

LV: Not just the children, but the misfit children, the outcasts, all of them.

EG: Right, they all had a seat at the table—Black, white, female, male...everyone.

ES: I remember David saying that the party was bigger than himself, that it didn't belong to anyone, but to everyone. In some ways we are all caretakers, and responsible for continuing to nurture the party and keep it going.

DS: I believe for David, the Loft was a way of life. It was how he juggled his finances to cover rent and other obligations. He began his parties in 1970, during the turbulence of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. David wanted to contribute in a meaningful way to social progress, by bringing together people from different backgrounds and identities on common ground and fostering lasting friendships. That was his way of opening things up, his vision of social progress. And for us, as caretakers of his legacy, that's a big part of our drive.

SM: When David passed, the obituary in the *Guardian* called the Loft "an egalitarian utopia." One of David's prime motivations was social justice. That's the thing that really always appealed to me. And everything you need is there. You got fed, you got wonderful music, you saw your old friends. You didn't have to carry stuff around. People left their cameras or phones on the table. No one would take it.

DS: It's such a simple thing that David did. But, wow, what an impact it had on all of us. He had an amazing ear and a deep love and appreciation for music. He just knew how to put it together in a way that created these intense moments. David would reference the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in creating what he called "the three bardos" of the party: calm, circus, and reentry. It was his blueprint for the party, guiding the trajectory of his musical selections. He created an amazing night of music.

EG: Some of the dancers could be intimidating.

DS: They could be, but they would encourage people to join them on the dance floor. They never excluded or made anyone feel unwelcome. There was always a feeling of inclusivity.

LV: This was a very different dynamic than at a lot of the club scenes in New York at the time. As soon as you walked through the door, you were just a guest at the Loft, and

you were a friend of David's.

EG: We're in 2024. At the Loft, we've never searched a bag. We don't do any of those things, because when you come into the Loft, it's like you're coming to someone's home and you're a guest. And it's also always a place to feel free. That's why we do not allow people to take pictures on the dance floor. Though it's very difficult these days, because everyone has a camera in their phone.

ES: We try to keep the dance floor the sacred space that it is.

LV: Yeah, it's a private event and the important thing is the privacy of the people that are in the room. It has become a problem for us in general, because in order for us to go above ground, we have to expose ourselves to all of this. And in order for us to stay below ground, we try to fight that push to be public, so it's an ongoing battle.

SM: I think David wouldn't have minded if Loft parties popped up all over the world. I mean, he did participate in parties in Italy, Russia, Turkey, England, Scotland, Japan. I think he would have loved it if people everywhere started saying, "Oh, we should do that," and do their best to put together a Loft party.

LV: But come up with their own version.

SM: I think the whole idea of by invitation—it's not advertised, it's not open to the public—I think that's very important to the way the party runs. And having food, and the balloons, the music, it's all like...

EG: Home.

SM: It's home.



Douglas Sherman and Martin Beck setting up balloons at the Loft. Image courtesy Douglas Sherman



Luis “Loftkid” Vargas taking down balloons after a Loft party. Image courtesy Martin Beck

Martin Beck: Last Night takes place at MoMA on June 2, 2024.

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