

# CLUBLAND

*In the late 70's and early 80's, New York's party scene moved downtown to gritty TriBeCa.*

*by Matt Kapp*



**STAR POWER:** The Music Club regularly attracts street-level lit-wire dancers (seen by the photo by Bob Gruen, which includes Amy Ramone, Little Steven, David Byrne, Dee Dee Ramone, and Danny Fouts [standing])

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF JEFF GORDON



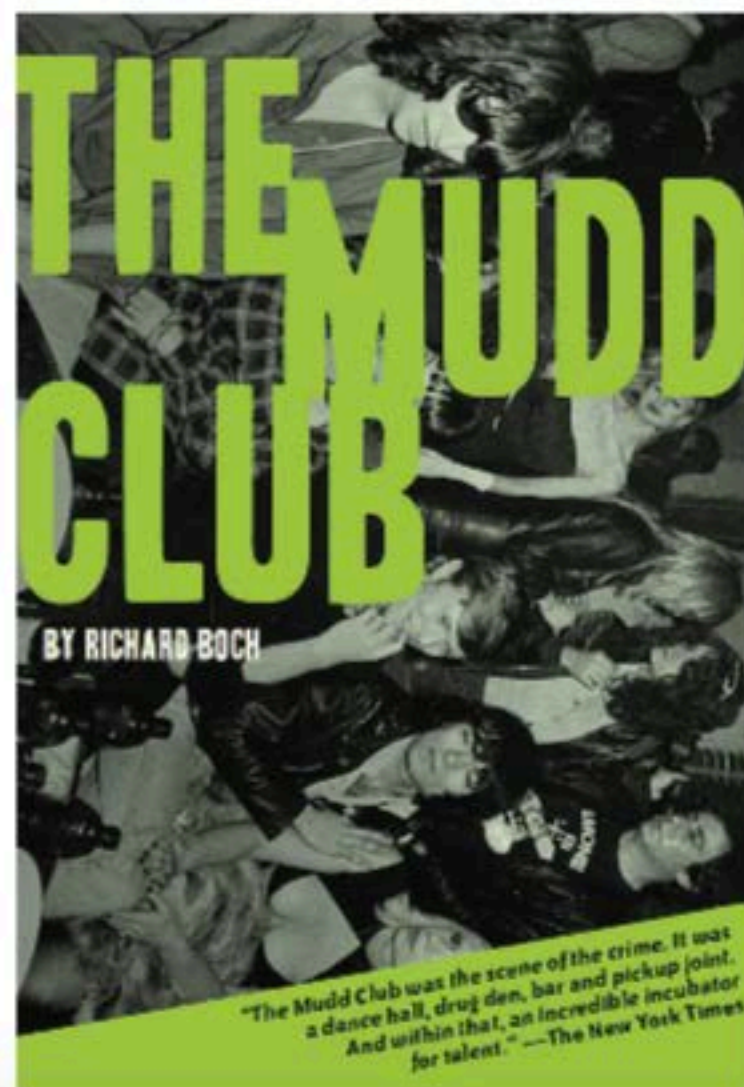
**WHEN DANNY FIELDS MOVED INTO A** Tribeca loft in the early 1970's, his upstairs neighbor was professional daredevil Philippe Petit. "He would look out the window plotting his act," recounts Fields of Petit's exalted 1974 high-wire walk between the Twin Towers. Back then, Tribeca would empty out after dark. There were few amenities, not a single grocery store, and just one (Greek) restaurant. "I had to ride the subway up to Sheridan Square to do my laundry," recalls Fields, who was managing the punk-rock band the Ramones at the time. The city was on the edge of bankruptcy, crime was rampant, and the subways were far worse than they are today.

The upside? Rents were cheap, even in places like TriBeCa, where painter Todd Stone moved into a sprawling loft in the late 1970's. His upstairs neighbors were the punk-metal clan the Plasmatics. "They were the worst neighbors in New York," he says. "It was World War III every afternoon. And when they weren't practicing, they were weight-lifting." Nonetheless, he has fond memories of lead

singer Wendy O. Williams ("she was a gutsy girl, fearless") and gives the band some credit for his own creative path, too. "The reason why I am an artist in Lower Manhattan today," he says, "is because I could stand living underneath them."

After a long day (or night) of practice, the Plasmatics' bass player would often retire a few blocks over to the Mudd Club, at 77 White Street. Aspiring filmmaker Steve Mass and a few friends had opened the Mudd Club on a shoestring budget on Halloween, 1978, as an "antidote" to uptown's glitzy Studio 54. Leased from artist Ross Bleckner, the humble 2,400-square-foot space included a bar, art gallery, performance space and, as the story goes, was named after the notorious Samuel Alexander Mudd, the doctor and alleged co-conspirator who had treated John Wilkes Booth's fractured leg after Booth shot President Lincoln.

It quickly became a home-away-from-home for local artists, musicians, drag queens, fashionistas—long before that word was invented—and all other manner of the avant-garde. "I didn't feel at home at other



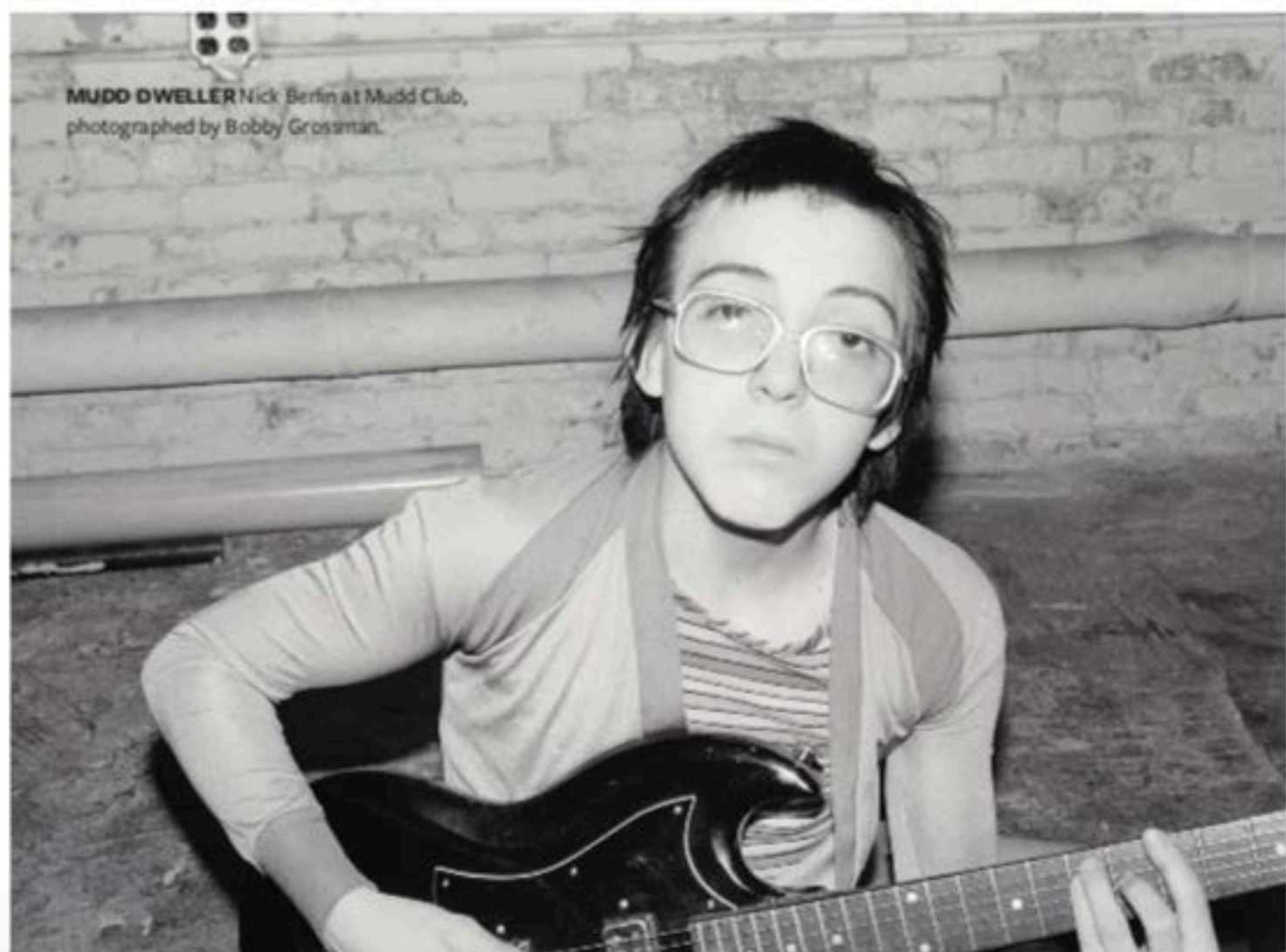


**DANCE THE NIGHT AWAY** Area, created by brothers Eric and Chris Goode in 1983, was downtown's answer to Studio 54. Photographed by Allan Tannenbaum.

clubs, but I felt at home at the Mudd Club," recalls photographer Bobby Grossman, whose first exhibition was in the club's second-floor gallery. Steve Mass warned Grossman his prints might get stolen, but Grossman was skeptical. "Who'd steal them right off the walls?" Sure enough, two vanished shortly after the exhibition opened. (The prime suspect was "It Girl of the Year, '80 or '81," says Grossman, but never mind that).

"Mudd Club was the downtown Studio 54," says Fields, but while it may have been yin to 54's yang, doorman Richard Boch laid a gimlet eye on any errant 54ers. "The kiss of death was 'Studio 54 lets us in,'" he says of the low-stooping disco rejects who tried to pull uptown rank. Danny Fields never had a problem getting in. "I don't wait on line," he declares. "If I'm not wanted, I don't want to be there." He likens the Mudd to "a private club in London in the 19th Century." In other words, he chuckles, "you could carve out a little niche of snobbery."

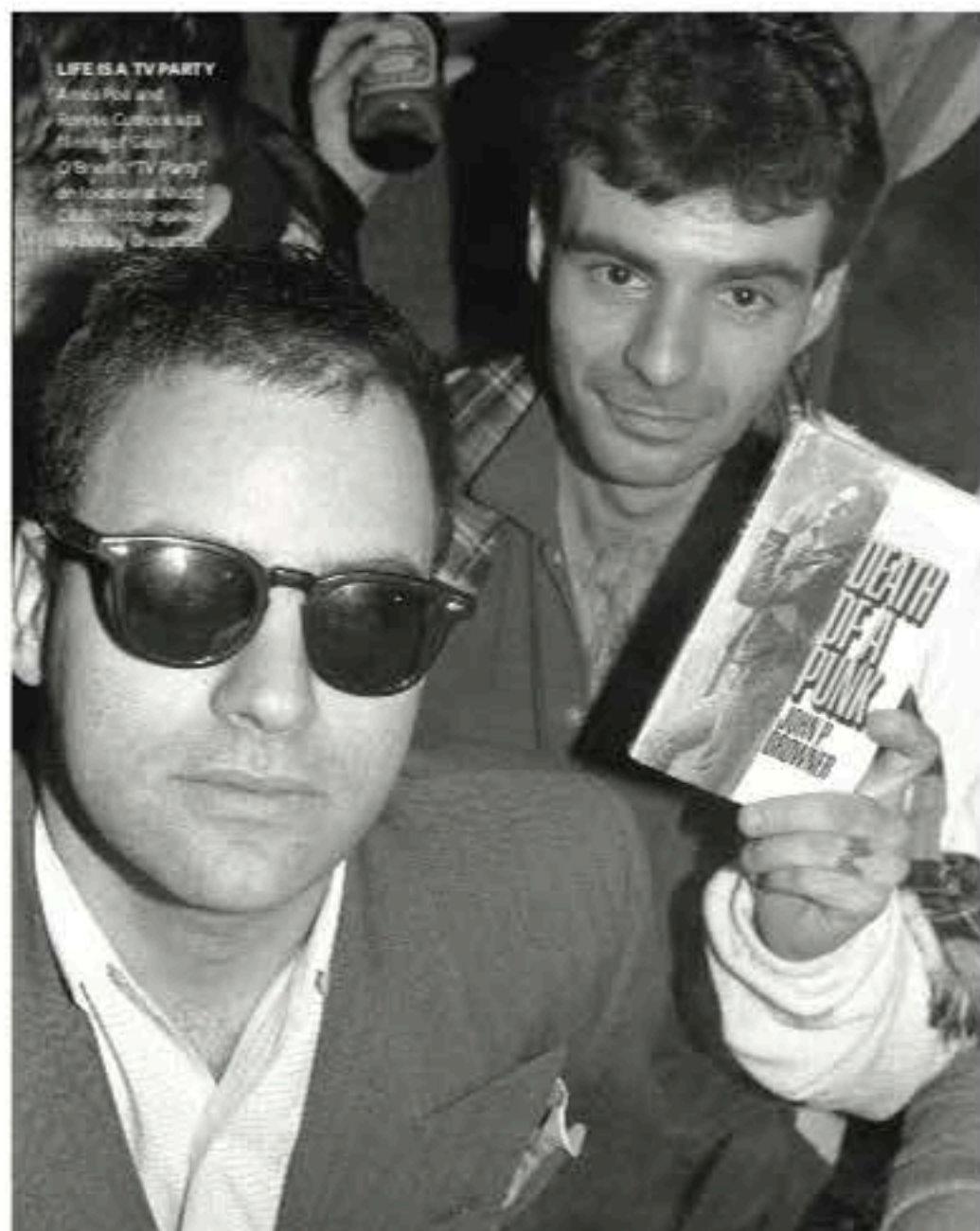
On any given night at the Mudd Club you might have found Debbie Harry, David Bowie, Dee Dee Ramone—not just in the same room, but on



**MUDD DWELLER** Nick Berlin at Mudd Club, photographed by Bobby Grossman.



**A LIST** Francis Ford Coppola, Vincent Spino, and Matt Dillon at Area, photographed by Alan Tanenbaum



**LIFE IS A TV PARTY**  
Area's Rod and Silvio Cuticola at a party at Area, an occasional Mudd Club photograph by William Drescher

the same couch. "There was a great sense of freedom and creative energy," recalls Boch, who wrote a 2017 "personal history" of the club. Jean-Michel Basquiat was "there from the get-go, only 18- or 19- years old at the time" but he eventually got "dragged out" after spray-painting the bathroom stalls. "Two years later he was a superstar," recalls Boch. "Back then the drinking age was 18," he adds, "there were no wrist bands or checking IDs."

"After all, the Mudd Club meant something: freedom, opportunity, subversion," wrote former regular Tim Blanks in *The New York Times* in 2001, "all cosseted by the nurturing insularity of a genuine underground scene, perhaps the last real one New York had." Fields paints it in simpler, starker terms: "If I wasn't able to get in I would have killed myself." Seriously? "Well I would have at least had to change towns. I mean, without Mudd, what was the point of living here?" By 1983, the Mudd Club could no longer sustain itself, perhaps a victim of its own success. "At the end, it was not much fun anymore. I mean, it had just become kind of like the hangers-on to the hangers-on," lamented a former patron.

Where the Mudd Club left off, Area picked up. Opened in 1983 by brothers Eric and Chris Goode, it soon became the place to watch "bohemia, money and the underworld mix and combust," as one *New York Times* reporter later described it. Noted for its revolving themes—"Childhood," "Confinement," "Sex," "Suburbia," you get the idea—it soon attracted the likes of everyone from John Waters to Don Johnson to Andy Warhol whose diary entry from Friday, May 3, 1986 read: "There was a big Area party. Jean Michel [Basquiat] picked me up and we went down there... And [Studio 54 co-owner] Steve Rubell was walking around saying, 'Great, great,' being so jealous, wishing it were his club."

At its apex, Area's "dramatics spilled out onto Hudson Street, where desperate crowds surged behind a velvet rope," recalled Joshua David Stein in *New York Magazine*. "Inside, bonked-out celebrities mingled, Bianca Jagger watched Ed Koch work out, and Sting partied with Donny Osmond. Grace Jones refused to use the coatroom—someone followed her, coat in hand, instead." Well, then.

"It was essentially a pre-AIDS, anything goes world," recalls Richard Boch of the era. "It didn't matter if you were male, female, straight, or gay, there was little fear, despite the dirty, dangerous streets." It was also a pre-cell-phone world, and places like the Mudd Club and Area weren't just clubs, they were communication hubs. "Once you left your house, you were completely disconnected," he recalls, with a tinge of nostalgia, "until you got to the club."

"Less touristy than SoHo, with fewer boutiques, TriBeCa has maintained its raw quality," observed the *New York Times*' Andrew Yarrow in October 1985. "Thanks to the arty crowd that colonized TriBeCa in the late 70's, the neighborhood has gained a reputation as an outpost of new-age urban cool." Despite its urban-cool magnetism, Area, like the Mudd Club before it, would soon fade to black. "People always measure the success of a thing by its longevity," Eric Goode told *New York* in 2013, "but the entire point of Area was its impermanence." **DT**

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY BOBMY GROSSMAN (ALL PHOTOS)

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**STEP UP**  
Photographer Bobmy Grossman's early work at the Mudd Club



**NIGHTCLUBBING** Area's Steve Rubell and Jean-Michel Basquiat in the Mudd Club for the Downtown 8 party