

1. beginnings

*House Parties
and Discotheques*

David Mancuso was born into an unhappy family on 20 October 1944. Ten days later he was whisked away and placed into a children's home in Utica where a nun called Sister Alicia looked after him. Mancuso's memory of the period is hazy, but he recalls one aspect of the orphanage with absolute clarity—Sister Alicia's party room. "It had balloons, crepe paper, a refrigerator, a piano, and a record player with records lying on top," he says. "We would wear party hats and play games around these little tables." Sister Alicia organized a party at every opportunity. "We were kids and we were bubbling with energy so she would get us together and have these parties. She gave parties as often as possible. I wouldn't be surprised if it was every day, or at least every Saturday night."

The orphanage was an unorthodox experiment in social engineering. With twenty children from a variety of social backgrounds cast together under one roof, their original parents a fading memory, domestic life assumed some unusual patterns. The steady flow of arrivals and departures meant that the combination of brothers and sisters changed continuously, and as a result the children grew up with a perception of families as extended, diverse, and precarious rather than nuclear, homogeneous, and stable. "It was a different head," says Mancuso, "another plateau." Bedtime was especially unusual. "What must it have been like at night to get twenty of us to sleep? The crying and the laughing and the noises that we made in that room must have been very interesting, very *tribal*."

Mancuso returned to live with his mother when he was five years old but remained a "runaway from home" and at the age of fourteen went to reform school. "The dormitory where we slept was this old wood building, and the acoustics were incredible," says Mancuso. "The night supervisor



David Mancuso in the orphanage with Sister Alicia in the background. Courtesy of David Mancuso

was a little man, real cool, and he would sit there and listen to WKBW all night. The room was very ambient, and I'd just lie in bed and listen to the radio fading in and fading out. Nobody complained. We were just happy that the supervisor liked R&B." At the age of fifteen Mancuso returned to his family home, although he didn't stay long. "My mother had a lot of problems with the person she was married to so they allowed me to move out. I went to live in a room for \$7.50 a week. I got a little financial assistance from the state, which paid for my room and two meals a day, and I earned some extra money by shining shoes." Mancuso quit high school the day he turned sixteen, got a job washing dishes, saved some money, and then traveled to Manhattan for the first time on Labor Day 1962. He returned a month later and rented an apartment on the Upper West Side, embarking on a career that encompassed fast food (sandwich preparation in a Grand Central Station kiosk), Holt, Rinehart and Winston publishers (typist and then head of the Xerox department), Restaurant Associates (personnel manager), and finally freelance antiques (the office routine having become too tedious).

It was during this period that Jimmy Miller, a friend from Brooklyn Heights, introduced Mancuso to the possibilities of "really good" sound reproduction. "He invited me into his living room and there was this

beautiful music, but I couldn't see any equipment. I asked him where the sound was coming from and he pointed toward his windows. I said, '*What the hell have you got behind those curtains?*' He drew them back and I saw my first-ever Klipschorns. I said, 'Wow!' I'd never heard anything like it." A fortnight later, Miller told Mancuso that an audio hobbyist called Richard Long was selling two of the speakers. "Richard was working for GE in New Jersey, and he looked like someone who would work for GE. He was replacing his Klipschorns with Bose speakers so I bought his Klipschorns from him. He was a hi-fi guy, and I decided to stay in touch with him. It was a hobby for him, and it was a hobby for me."

Aural inspiration didn't descend only from Brooklyn Heights. In the mid-sixties Mancuso traveled to Trinidad, and, when his stay at the Hilton was "discontinued" after he invited some locals to hang out in the hotel, he went to visit a friend of a friend, who took him on a trek. "We were walking through these really thick woods and all of a sudden I heard this music," says Mancuso. "We came into this opening and there was this steel band practicing for the carnival. It was the first time I had heard this kind of music, and it completely blew my mind. The rhythm was awesome." The experience was a formative one. "It was like being in a jungle and coming across a tribe having their own little party and making music. It was a real rough form of musicianship—very resourceful and very pure.

David Mancuso and friends praying by their bedsides. Courtesy of David Mancuso



Remember, I had come from Utica to New York and didn't know too much about anything, so this was like discovering Utopia."

Mancuso returned to New York and continued the festivities. "I would go to the Village, I would go to Harlem, I would go to Staten Island, I would go to wherever I heard there was a party going on. I've always had all sorts of friends, which probably has something to do with growing up in the orphanage." Mancuso's favorite form of entertainment was the rent party—a central feature of black nightlife ever since one million African Americans migrated to northern industrial centers between 1900 and 1920 only to face exorbitant housing costs set by greedy absentee landlords. "I used to go to bars that were open to the public, but I preferred rent parties because they were a little more intimate and you would be among your friends. I wanted to get to know people and develop relationships. I wasn't so much into the transient side of things."

Not that the club scene was exactly flourishing, the Peppermint Lounge, home of the Twist craze, having closed in 1966. Nor were the clubs that remained particularly accessible, with Le Club, Le Directoire, L'Interdit, and Il Mio Club unblushingly marketing themselves as chic and sophisticated Parisian nightclubs that enforced elitist door policies. True, Arthur offered some sort of respite, touting itself as a democratic alternative to these phony French funhouses, but entry was restricted to young professional straight couples, and the discotheque's dress code was finally too formal for anyone to build up a serious sweat. Max's Kansas City, a restaurant-discotheque on Union Square, provided live music interspersed with the selections of DJ Claude Purvis and was significantly less conservative, but dancing didn't drive the space.

When it came to public venues, Mancuso preferred to go to the Electric Circus, which opened in June 1967, and the Fillmore East, which opened in the spring of 1968. Both of these psychedelic haunts were situated in the East Village—the Electric Circus was located in an old Polish workingman's club on St. Mark's Place, the Fillmore East, in the words of the *New York Times*, on "freaky Second Avenue"—and both hosted live entertainment.¹ "I went to the Electric Circus at least once a month," says Mancuso. "Everybody was having fun, and they had good sound in there. It was very mixed, very integrated, very intense, very free, very positive." The Fillmore East showcased some of his favorite artists. "I heard Nina Simone perform there. I went with my friend Larry Patterson. The Fillmore East

would often be noisy but that night everybody was very focused. She was wonderful.”

Mancuso didn’t go to the Fillmore East just to listen to music. “That’s where I also first heard Timothy Leary. He gave a series of lectures backed by the Joshua Light Show.” The ex-Harvard academic was already an important figure for Mancuso, who had first taken Sandoz when he was twenty and the drug was still legal. An early trip coincided with a snowstorm (“each flake was like a universe”), and ten tabs later he came across Leary’s *The Psychedelic Experience Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which argues that psychedelics can provide a shortcut to enlightenment. “The book blew me away. It became my bible and I started getting involved with him.” The young acolyte met the acid guru at his LSD (League for Spiritual Discovery) headquarters in the West Village, went to his Technicolor lectures, and became a regular at his private parties. “People were tripping but the parties were more social than serious. There was food and music. I knew we were on a journey.”

Mancuso’s personal voyage took a vital turn in 1965 when he moved into 647 Broadway, just north of Houston, and started to pay a monthly rent of \$175. Like SoHo, NoHo (as the north of Houston area would be nicknamed) had historically functioned as a manufacturing district, drawing on New York’s immigrant population as its low-wage workforce, and, when industry relocated to the cheaper terrain of New Jersey and beyond, New York’s artists moved in, delighted to exchange their cramped Upper East Side apartments for a range of stunningly expansive lofts. The influx triggered a sophisticated experiment into the relationship between art, space, and living that might have seemed to exclude the likes of Utica-born Mancuso. Nevertheless, he quickly established himself as a key player within this creative population, intent as he was on reintroducing *art* back into the *party*. “Everyone loved my space,” says Mancuso. “There might have been a hundred people living like this so it was very new. A lot of people would just come and hang out there. There were all sorts of activities going on.”

Some of the activities were influenced by Leary. “I would organize these intimate gatherings where we would experiment with acid,” says Mancuso. “There were never more than five of us when we did this. One person would take nothing, another would take half a tab, and the rest would take a whole tab. It was all very new, and we took it very seriously.

We used *The Psychedelic Experience* as our guide.” Leary also had a bearing on the decoration of the loft space. “I built a yoga shrine, which I used for yoga and tripping. In the beginning it was three feet by five feet, and it eventually grew to fifteen feet by thirty feet. As you walked into the loft you were immediately drawn to this area. It was gorgeous.” Music—which, like LSD, can function as a therapeutic potion that “deprograms” the mind before opening up a mystical trail to spiritual transcendence—was also introduced into the equation. “Leary played music at his lectures and parties, and I went in the same direction. I bought a Tandberg tape recorder so that I could play tapes. The Buddha was always positioned between my two speakers.” That was the perfect position from which to hear the homemade compilations, which drew on a diverse range of sources and were structured to complement the hallucinogenic experience. “I made these journey tapes that would last for five hours. They drew on everything from classical music to the Moody Blues. They would start off very peacefully, and the reentry would be more about movement, more jazz-oriented. Somebody might get up and start dancing around the room at some point, although they weren’t dance sessions.”

The dancing became more sustained when Mancuso started to hold “mixed-media” parties in which different activities would go on in different parts of his loft at the same time, and when the boogying intensified the host decided to reorganize his space in order to maximize the dance floor. “At the end of 1966, I decided to throw a really big dance party,” he says. “I took down this three-foot wall to open up the main part of the loft, and I rearranged the shrine. The Buddha stayed in the same place but the rest of it became more wall-based. In the end the dance area measured nineteen feet by forty-three feet.” Having already added a McIntosh amplifier and an AR turntable to his system, Mancuso now went out and bought a couple of Cornwalls (Klipschorns that could fit into the corner of a wall) especially for the dance fest. “The sound was very intense. It was the best thing out there for dancing. My whole space was configured for the party.” Invitations were sent out, about a hundred revelers showed up, and the dancing ran from around ten until two. “My tapes followed the same geography as before, but this time the trip was different. They started off slow but then progressed into something that was more dance-oriented than psychedelic. The purpose of the party was hardcore dancing.”

The bimonthly bashes came to an abrupt halt when Mancuso gave away his stereo, stopped throwing parties, and went on an inward journey at the beginning of 1969. “I wanted to find myself so I gave up all material possessions. I went on a monk trip.” In an attempt to peel away the various layers that had come to make up his personality, Mancuso quit drugs, smoking, and cooked food. Having disposed of his money, the ascetic started to shoplift his minimal diet from the local grocery store, and as part of his protest against the world of property he took his apartment door off its hinges (when Mancuso returned one night to discover a homeless person on the sofa he just “went with the flow”). As the journey into essence intensified he stopped wearing clothes in the home that was no longer his own, passing the day in various states of yogic meditation. “I kept asking myself, ‘Who am I?’ I wanted to see where this journey was going to take me.”

The next stop was a psychiatric ward in Bellevue Hospital, visiting doctors having determined that Mancuso was catatonic—in a state of inertia or apparent stupor often associated with schizophrenia and characterized by purposeless excitement and abnormal posturing. The treatment got off to a slow start: when a doctor asked the new arrival his name he said nothing, unable to confirm that he *was* David Mancuso, and at medicine time he would slip his pills under his tongue and spit them out in the bathroom in order to maintain his strict drug-free diet. For the rest of the day the silent and now bearded patient was happy to take up the lotus position in the tv room and watch the world drift by on the flickering screen, and this routine only came to an end when a nurse uncovered his tongue ruse and forced him to swallow twenty-five milligrams of Thora-zine. “I went to bed and stayed there. I felt like I was lying at the bottom of the ocean. It was then that something finally snapped, and I told myself that this was not where I wanted to go.”

Having side-stepped the various day trips organized by the hospital, Mancuso went on the next outing and, when an opportunity presented itself, slipped away and headed to St. Mark’s Place, where he stayed with a close friend called Haryuro and reflected on his experience. “During this whole episode I knew exactly what I *didn’t* want to do,” he says. “I could have pulled back at any moment, but I waited for as long as I could because I thought that something would present itself. When they took me to the hospital I wasn’t worried because I thought it could be the key.”

Progressive and experimental as it might have been, downtown New York wasn't ready for Mancuso. "The problem was that I tried to shed my ego in the center of the capitalistic world where any kind of deviation looks weird. If I had gone to a monastery in the mountains they would have welcomed me with open arms. They would have considered me to be *normal*."

It was during his stay with Haryuro that Mancuso learned that another friend, anticipating his return to the corporeal world, had sold the key to his abandoned loft for \$1,800. The cash enabled the otherwise penniless escapee to buy back his beloved apartment and, drawn to the idea of dancing his way out of debt, he retrieved his sound system and decided to start holding regular rent parties. In keeping with the dissident philosophy of the era, the NoHo resident invited Long (general collaborator) and Purvis (featured DJ) to participate in a special organizing collective that was dubbed Coalition, and the two of them agreed, confident that the Broadway gatherings would take off. After all, regular rent parties relied on a common console and were normally held in cramped apartments, whereas the Coalition evenings were going to be built around a high quality sound system and a spacious loft in which the bedroom and kitchen were conveniently hidden from view (the landlord having ensured that a visiting inspector wouldn't be able to see that the industrial property was being illegally put to residential use). Yet the parties failed to generate any momentum—in part because Purvis didn't adapt his DJing style to the Broadway venue, which required a different rhythm than the one that motored the bar scene at Max's Kansas City—and, faced with dwindling numbers, Long and Purvis joined forces and voted to start selling alcohol in order to convert Coalition into a full-fledged after-hours venue. Mancuso, however, vehemently opposed the plan on the grounds that he would be the one who went to prison in the event of a police raid, and, unwilling to accept that his partners should finally be able to decide what went on in his own home, he disbanded the collective, which "was a little too idealistic from the business point of view."

With Valentine's Day approaching, the irrepressible reveler decided to rekindle the intimacy that had attracted him to the rent party scene in the first place. Out went the open-house policy and in came the time-honored method of individual homemade invitations, which Mancuso embellished with Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" and the words *Love Saves the Day* (you didn't need to be an army intelligence offi-

cer to spot the reference to acid). The personalized invites worked out perfectly, with about a hundred people turning up, and as the party slipped into gear Mancuso's only regret was that he might not be able to speak to his guests, given that he had reluctantly decided to take control of the music. "No way did I want to be a disc jockey," he says. "I only did it because I used to hang out with these people all the time so I knew what kind of music we liked." However, as the dance floor began to respond to his selections Mancuso realized that he could communicate with his guests after all—through music—and as his apartment started to steam up he ripped off his t-shirt, abandoning himself to the psychic stream of the party. "We were on the same wavelength," he says.

In Mancuso's terms, a "third ear"—the aural equivalent of the all-seeing "third eye"—had started to beat, directing the path of both the music selector and the crowd according to sonic trajectories that had acquired a supernatural momentum. "There was neither the DJ nor the dancer. Someone would approach me to play a record and I would already have it in my hand or it would already be on the turntable. We would look at each other in recognition. It got very psychic because we knew we were following a sonic trail." The path manifested itself with a bewildering kinetic energy. "When a plane takes off there's a moment when the pilot decides that the speed is right, he pulls back and—boom!—you leave the ground. The party was like that. There was a point at which it just went up. It didn't happen right away. It took time. But it happened." The experience was enlightening. "*Om* is the source of all sound—it's a Buddhist chant where voices gel together and vibrate—and I felt as though we had returned h-*om*-e. It was very childlike, very peaceful, very liberating. It seemed to be correct. It reflected what I thought the world was supposed to be about. Everybody was there and we were like a family. There didn't seem to be any conflicts. Music helped us reach that place. Music was the key to get back h-*om*-e." The musical journey had begun.

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In an uncanny act of synchronicity, a discotheque on West Forty-third Street called the Sanctuary matched the evolution of the Broadway parties beat for beat, opening as a straight venue around the time that Mancuso initiated his ill-fated Coalition nights before reinventing itself as Manhattan's first explicitly gay-run discotheque within a week or two of the foundational Love Saves the Day party. Yet, while the life cycles of the two