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Work carried on at a punishing rate at the Paradise Garage. “I went in there with Michael Brody, his lover Fred, and Larry Levan,” says Nathan Bush. “We had sledgehammers, and we gutted the place ourselves.” The owners of Chameleon had put down additional concrete and a parquet floor, all of which had to go. “We broke it up and dumped it outside. I went there quite a few nights a week after work. After a while Michael had construction guys come in to do the job.” Brody, meanwhile, maintained the ground floor as a parking lot. “He worked there during the day. I’d come by and we’d go upstairs. Different walls were going up and areas were being created. You could see the space being transformed little by little.”

The Paradise Garage officially opened in January 1978 to an ominous seasonal greeting: a snowstorm delayed the delivery of some sound equipment from Kentucky, and as a result the thousand-plus crowd was left standing in line for more than an hour in subzero temperatures. “I remember being there that morning and asking Michael, ‘Do you think you’ll be able to open tonight?’ and his eyes just filled up with tears,” says Mel Cheren. “There was a downstairs area where you parked cars, and he could have brought the people in there to keep them out of the real cold, but there was so much confusion he didn’t think of it. The opening was a complete disaster, and it took Michael a couple of years to win those people back.” Others, however, have a less cataclysmic memory of the night. “I remember there was a snowstorm but people *did* come out,” says Bush. “Maybe we didn’t pass four thousand people through the door that night, but we did have a decent turnout.” Michael Gomes, wearing his trademark white cotton suit, surveyed the scene at eight o’clock in the morning and, referencing the presence of Richie Kaczor, David Rodriguez, and Nicky Siano, noted that “there are many familiar faces.” Nobody, it seemed, had communicated the severity of the “disaster” to Levan who, according to Mr. Mixmaster, was happily drinking champagne and “playing the part of freaky DJ, sounding like thunder.”⁷²

The main room did nevertheless require further modifications—the sound needed reinforcement, the space cried out for acoustic treatment, and the floor had to undergo further work—and so Brody went back into the smaller room and held weekly gatherings that were interspersed with official construction parties when the club was ready to unveil a major

structural development on the main floor. “The sound system from Reade Street wasn’t really enough,” says David DePino. “When they put it in the big room they realized that it didn’t sound quite right so they put everything back in the small room and continued the construction work until more speakers were built and the room got treated. They threw parties to raise money for the work and keep the interest going. They didn’t want people to think it had closed.”

Successful construction parties in April (“Night of the Bats”) and June (“Fire down Below”) indicated that the strategy had worked. “I remember the first time I saw the main room I was pretty impressed, and when I went back with a friend I was re-impressed,” says Danny Krivit. “From the outside it looked like nothing, like a truck garage, and clubs weren’t like that then—they always looked like something from the outside. You entered via this ramp that was flanked by these purple runway lights and you could already hear a faint ‘bom, bom, bom.’ As you walked up the ramp it became louder and as you paid you could hear an occasional scream from the crowd. You just felt the energy that was behind the wall and sure enough when you walked in through this small doorway—small compared to the size of the room—the lights were going and the arms were in the air. I remember all of these tall black men, and I just felt so short. It was *very* high energy, and it was *very* happening.”

The vast majority of the opening night crowd had returned some twenty months earlier than Cheren had forecast, which was just as well given that the “Fire down Below” party showcased one of the West End mogul’s new signings. “I was at West End, and Mel Cheren told me that there was going to be this club,” says Krivit. “He said it was going to be the biggest this and the best that and that West End was going to get priority. He said, ‘All of our records are going to get pushed there and this is going to be the place to hear them. They’re going to make it—through the Garage!’ Everything he said turned out to be absolutely true.” Cheren remembers the process well. “Way back in the beginning Larry would get so excited he would put the record right on the turntable.” Which is exactly what happened at the “Fire down Below” party, during which Levan cross-faded images of a warehouse blaze and naked porn stars while hammering Karen Young’s debut single “Hot Shot” like there was no tomorrow. “‘Hot Shot’ had a definite Garage sound,” says Krivit. “There was a definite feeling there.” There was also a definite leg-up for Young and her

nascent label. “The Garage and West End,” says Cheren, “were a winning combination.”

Sound system designer Richard Long was another industry insider who managed to form a profitable alliance with the Garage. Following his run at the SoHo Place, Long had installed systems at clubs such as the Enchanted Garden, 15 Lansdowne Street, Studio 54, and the Warehouse, and, backed by JBL, he also designed a new mixer called the Urei that effectively displaced the Bozak. “The Urei was the result of demands being made by DJs, and Richard was already known for designing his own electronic crossovers and mixers,” says Bob Casey, head of Virgo Sound. “The Bozak came from the factory with two phono inputs, two auxiliary inputs, and two microphone inputs. This means that with special conversion cards a DJ could convert an AUX input into a third phono input. But the two mike inputs were monaural, and so they couldn’t be used for anything other than microphones. The combinations could only be two phono and two tape inputs or three phono and one tape input, and that was it.” The new machine—which David Mancuso maintains was effectively “a distilled version” of the mixer he designed for the Loft—was significantly more flexible. “The Urei 1620 had six inputs, and all of them were stereo,” adds Casey. “This meant that by simply adding or changing a few internal cards, a DJ could come up with an infinite number of combinations.”

Having become friendly with Michael Brody, Long displaced Alex Rosner just as work was about to begin on the main room. His greatest challenge soon followed: how to build a system that was capable of filling the expansive Garage without compromising the sonic excellence with which his name had become interchangeable. There was a clear need for unprecedented power, but power also risked distortion and so the sound enthusiast set about assembling some of the finest boxes to ever house a speaker. “Sixty percent of a speaker is the box it’s playing in,” says Casey. “Richard Long was a master carpenter, and his boxes were a work of art. He used the best of birch plywood, and all of the joints were meticulously measured and glued together.”

Levan was equally determined to augment force with the quality that had swept him away at the Loft, and, with one eye on Mancuso’s notorious Koetsus, he insisted that his console be equipped with moving coil cartridges. Brody agreed but quickly changed his mind when the DJ deci-

mated five hundred dollars worth of the delicate technology in a single night. The owner delivered an ultimatum: either Levan had to give up the fundamental yet fatal practice of back-cueing or he had to start using some hardier gear. Back-cueing went out of the back door and, in order to continue the practice of mixing, the DJ started to line up incoming records by gently tapping his hand on the side of the Thorens belt-driven T125 turntable, a precarious strategy that was complicated by the technology's tortoise-like pitch control, which made it virtually impossible to keep two records running at the same tempo. "The Thorens weren't designed for DJ use," says Joey Llanos who, having been introduced to the club by fellow drum-and-bugle band player Mark Riley, was quickly hired to work on the security team. "It was an excruciating art form that was never duplicated. Other DJs wanted to grab a record and bang it on, but Larry aimed to recreate David's quality. He was always asking the engineers how the Garage compared with the Loft."

With the sound system in place, a special "Tut, Tut, Tut" party was organized to coincide with the touring Tutankhamen exhibit and mark the completion of the extended construction phase in September 1978. "You couldn't get near the place," says Mark Riley. "There were 3,500, 4,000 people there." The party was a spectacular affair. "It was like forty dollars a ticket, which was a lot of money at the time," says Bush. "We dressed a lot of people up as Egyptians, and there were mummies hanging from the ceilings. Stirling St. Jacques was carried in as King Tut." When the evening climaxed with a live performance by First Choice, the response of the crowd suggested that the Garage was already generating a significantly more intense atmosphere than its headline-grabbing midtown rivals. "I remember we were at Studio 54 when 'Hold Your Horses' came out," says lead singer Rochelle Fleming. "It was a big publicity show, and Frankie Crocker came in on a white horse. We were so excited but, ohhh, there was *no comparison* between Studio and the Garage!" Studio could be wild, says Fleming, but it was "very subdued" compared to the Garage. "Those people! *Oh my God!* At Studio they were into the show, but at the Paradise Garage they were screaming and sweating and having a ball. It was pure energy coming off the walls. At the Paradise Garage we had our five thousand most dedicated fans, whereas at Studio 54 people generally went there to be seen."

For some the Garage also confirmed that Richard Long, and not Alex

Rosner, had become the premier discotheque soundman. “You got better equipment from Dick Long,” says Francis Grasso. “Alex Rosner was well known for using ALTEC Lansing Voice of the Theatre speakers. They would constantly blow, and he made a fortune replacing the horns, which weren’t on a fuse system. Rosner’s talent was limited.” Casey agrees. “Alex Rosner wasn’t an innovator. He was a conservative. David Mancuso had to persuade him to do what he wanted to do. When he said that he wanted bass, Alex Rosner went out and bought bass. But Richard Long built bass, and it was far superior. He gave the crowd what it wanted. He put your balls up your ass.” That experience wasn’t as painful as it might have been. “Michael Brody installed wooden floors and walls that could move with the bass and help sustain the dancers,” says DePino. “You could feel the floor moving up and down.” Yet there could nevertheless be no distance from this type of sound, which vibrated across the skin and through the bodies of dancers. “The Garage,” says François Kevorkian, who was introduced to the gargantuan location by Joey Bonfiglio in September 1977, “was the Loft on steroids.” The steroids proved to be popular: when Long started to use the Garage as a workshop-cum-testing-ground, inviting potential clients to hear the system in action, commissions flooded in, and while every space required a different setup, pride of place was always given to Long’s custom-built speakers that, in either a generous tribute or a sharp marketing exercise, were dubbed “Levan Horns.”

The soundman, however, wasn’t without his critics. “I went to the Paradise Garage once, and I could only stay for a few minutes because Larry Levan played so loud,” says Rosner. “Anybody who went to the Paradise Garage must have been a masochist because it was so uncomfortable. I walked in there, and I saw people sitting with their legs and arms crossed. Their body language was saying, ‘I’m defending myself against this onslaught of sound.’” Siano was also unsure about the King Street setup. “The Gallery and the Loft sounded like a beefed-up home stereo, but the Garage was too big for that kind of system so Richard built these special speakers. The sound wasn’t warm, though. It was almost fake. You could hear the bass and you could hear the midrange and you could hear the highs, but a bunch of frequencies that make the sound warm were missing.” Mancuso, too, had his reservations. “The sound was very good—it was up there—but it wasn’t all the way. Larry always wanted Klipschorns, and at Reade Street he got them, but at the Garage Richard Long plagia-

rized the Klipschorn and lost a couple of octaves. He didn't have to do that. The Klipschorns were powerful enough to fill any room." There was also a problem with the volume. "Harry Muntz measured the sound level in the middle of the dance floor, and it was 135 dB. Another ten and you would never hear another sound in your life. Ears can start to bleed at those levels."

Nevertheless the Paradise Garage became the venue where the dance music industry's power brokers, shunned by Mancuso and embraced by Brody, chose to hang out. As Gomes recorded in *Mixmaster* in October 1978,

After dark, *Pam Todd* is sitting in the DJ booth at the "Garage" on King Street, NYC. Casablanca recording artist, *Pattie Brooks*, has just come up from the dancefloor where she's showcasing tonight, singing "THE HOUSE WHERE LOVE DIED" (!), to the musical accompaniment of DJ *Larry Levan's* playing of the record. Flashbulbs explode when Casablanca's *Marc Paul Simon*, bearded, flown in from Los Angeles, hugs the President of the "FOR THE RECORD" distribution service to the discotheque disc-jockeys, *Judy Weinstein*, outfitted in basic black. A chorus of the promotion corps steps out of the shadows to applaud the event. The long rectangular DJ booth transformed into a hospitality suite. There's *Kenn Friedman* and *Howard Merrit* [sic] from the New York Casablanca office, *Alan Member*, Salsoul Records, *David Todd*, RCA Records, *Jerry Bossa*, Buddah Records, *David Steel*, Polydor Records, *Starr Arning* and *Roy B*, Prelude Records, on and on, *Vince Aletti*, RECORD WORLD's discotheque editor making visual note of this walking "disco" social register. DJ, *Larry Levan* oblivious to it all, caught up in the effervescence of creation, until *Patrick Jenkins* comes to escort *Pam Todd* away.⁷³

Frankie Crocker was another influential operator who enjoyed spending time in Levan's expansive booth. "I probably went to the Garage the first week it opened," says the WBLS DJ, who had lost his job when he was indicted over a payola scandal only to be reinstated after the station's ratings went into freefall. "I went with a date, and that was the only time I stayed downstairs. After that I was always invited into Larry's booth." Crocker would always accept the offer—and not just because the hospitality was so good. "Whatever Larry was playing would go on Frankie's

radio show the next day," says Cheren. "Frankie said that *WLS* became number one because of the Garage." Yet for all of the Garage devotees (and there are many) who witnessed Crocker take a peek over Levan's shoulder, the *WLS* maestro maintains that his relationship with the Garage DJ was one of mutual respect. "I wasn't in awe of Larry. I treated him like my friend. It was an exchange. We turned each other onto records." Crocker acknowledges a certain debt. "If people danced I'd find out what the record was, and more often than not I'd play it the next day." Yet he insists that Garage floor-fillers didn't necessarily translate into "secret weapons," and that ultimately it was his taste and sensibility that made *WLS* such a success. "I had to take it record by record. Larry had a club to entertain, I had a city."

Crocker claims that if he "went on a record," it could sell an additional 250,000 copies in New York alone, which was more than enough to convince even the least numerate dance music promoter to place him at the top of their DJ hit list and Levan at number two. "Everybody wanted Larry Levan to play their records because if Larry Levan liked the record then Frankie Crocker might play it on the radio," says Warners disco promoter Bobby Shaw. "That was the bottom line." Along with a host of other promoters, Shaw maintains that he was "like this" (crossing his fingers) with the *WLS* DJ's musical muse. "I knew my records would get listened to because Larry was a friend of mine. A lot of people could never even get a record to Larry, but he trusted me and he trusted my taste. Sometimes I would take him some records before the club opened. We would listen to them on the system and smoke a joint."

As a result Levan had a clear edge on his contemporaries. "Larry was so far beyond any of us," says Kevorkian. "He would get records six months to a year ahead of time." Keen to ingratiate themselves with Levan, or simply hear their studio work on what was widely considered to be Manhattan's most spectacular sound system, rival DJs also scurried to get their freshly pressed acetates to the King Street DJ. "Prelude didn't really have an in-house promotion person who was into the downtown scene, and I already had an entry point because any member of For the Record could automatically present their card and get in for free," says the New York, New York resident. "I was going to the Garage every weekend so I gave Larry 'In the Bush.' He was very excited. He said how wonderful it was and all of that."

Larry Levan*Select Discography (Paradise Garage 1977–78)*

Roy Ayers Ubiquity, "Running Away"
Bionic Boogie, "Risky Changes"
Hamilton Bohannon, "Let's Start the Dance"
Brainstorm, "Lovin' Is Really My Game"
Brenda and the Tabulations, "Let's Go All the Way (Down)"
Peter Brown, "Do Ya Wanna Get Funky with Me"
Bumble Bee Unlimited, "Lady Bug"
Martin Circus, "Disco Circus"
Double Exposure, "My Love Is Free"
Lamont Dozier, "Going Back to My Roots"
Ian Dury, "Hit Me with Your Rhythm Stick"
First Choice, "Doctor Love"
Loleatta Holloway, "Hit and Run"
Loleatta Holloway, "I May Not Be There When You Want Me"
Jimmy "Bo" Horne, "Spank"
Thelma Houston, "I'm Here Again"
Instant Funk, "I Got My Mind Made Up (You Can Get It Girl)"
General Johnson, "Can't Nobody Love Me Like You"
Evelyn "Champagne" King, "Shame"
Gladys Knight & the Pips, "It's a Better Than Good Time"
Kraftwerk, "Trans-Europe Express"
Bettye LaVette, "Doin' the Best That I Can"
Lemon, "A-Freak-A"
Cheryl Lynn, "Star Love"
MFSB, "Love Is the Message"
Idris Muhammad, "Could Heaven Ever Be Like This"
New Birth, "Deeper"
Teddy Pendergrass, "The More I Get, the More I Want"
Teddy Pendergrass, "Only You"
Teddy Pendergrass, "You Can't Hide From Yourself"
Phreek, "Weekend"
Don Ray, "Got to Have Loving"

Don Ray, "Standing in the Rain"
The Rolling Stones, "Miss You"
The Salsoul Orchestra, "Magic Bird of Fire"
Sylvester, "Dance (Disco Heat)"
Sylvester, "You Make Me Feel"
Third World, "Now That We Found Love"
THP Orchestra, "Two Hot for Love"
Andrea True Connection, "What's Your Name, What's Your Number"
Lenny Williams, "Choosing You"
Karen Young, "Hot Shot"

Of course the most effective method of securing unique access to a record like "In the Bush" was to become its producer or remixer, and by the end of 1978 Levan had started to develop such a role. "Tommy Baratta, who works at West End, was my friend," Levan told Steven Harvey. "He used to collect money at the door at Reade Street. One day he said to me 'you want to mix a record?' So I went to this engineer named Billy Kessel, who was my age, which was great, because it wasn't intimidating. There was this song from Sesame Street called 'C Is for Cookie,' and I mixed it, not serious, not getting paid for it or nothing."⁷⁴

Levan's second remix—the altogether more significant "I Got My Mind Made Up" by Instant Funk—arrived a couple of weeks later at the beginning of December 1978. Ken Cayre had signed up Bunny Sigler's band the previous November, and by the summer their first Salsoul album—engineered by Bob Blank, a partial owner of Blank Tapes Studios—was being lined up at the pressing plant. "I knew Larry Levan from the Paradise Garage," says Ken Cayre. "He heard an advance copy of the single and asked me if he could do a remix. I never approached DJs to do a remix—they always had to ask me." Rodriguez played a key role in the commission, encouraging both Cayre and Levan to strike a deal. "Larry did a masterful job and helped to create an immediate buzz," says Cayre. "We released the twelve-inch and the seven-inch simultaneously. The single went to number one on the R&B chart and number twenty on pop."

That didn't stop Sigler from getting into an instant funk when he heard Levan's stripped-down interpretation, all crackling percussion and title chant. "I hated it," he says. "I first heard it in Ken Cayre's office, and I

gave it the MFSB response—motherfucker son of a bitch. I wasn't into remixes. I'd worked on that song for five months. But Ken Cayre liked it and persuaded me to give it a chance. I wasn't listening with an ear for what worked in the clubs." Sigler changed his mind when he went to the Garage. "It sounded good. I was standing in front of the speaker, and it was then that I could appreciate what Larry Levan had done. *But it was my version that made the money!*"

It was my version that made the money. They might have been Sigler's words, but as far as Mancuso was concerned they could have just as easily come from the mouth of Brody: the Loft sounded good, but it was the Garage that made the money. "The Garage violated the underground," he says. "They called themselves underground, but they weren't." Mancuso was particularly galled by the distortion of his cherished invitation system and the private party ruling that he had won in his battle with the Department of Consumer Affairs. "You walked into the building, and there was a sign up on the wall that said, 'This is a private party by invitation only,' which was exactly the same sign I had on my door. But when you walked a little further you were asked to produce your *membership card*, which you had to *pay for*, so it was a membership club disguised as a private party." This wasn't just a matter of semantics—it was also a matter of economics. "Once you start selling your invitations they're no longer invitations. It's not a gray area. They used this method of getting around the law to put more money in their pocket. Larry told me, 'David, before they put on the *light* they already have \$150,000 from the membership fees!' Now to me that's not a private party. They used the word *invitation* and it was a lie."

Mancuso maintains that the Garage was a social club and that Brody should have sought the appropriate legal charter rather than appear as if he was running an extension of the Loft. "If you entered the Garage you would be under the impression that you were going into a similar situation, but you weren't, because the only way you could go in without a membership card, which you had to pay for, was as a guest of someone and *then you paid more money*, which was economic discrimination. What you saw was not what you got. All you got is you had to pay extra." You also had to pay an additional fee when there was a special show. "The artists were willing to play for free as a gesture of thanks to the people who had made them famous, and we didn't charge anything for these shows at the Record Pool. But at the Garage they made you pay to see these groups.

They commercialized everything to the fullest. They went through the loopholes, and they exploited the underground scene.”

Even if the Garage was more commercial than the Loft, it still retained many of the core principles of Mancuso’s party aesthetic. The crowd was largely built around ethnic and sexual minorities and the music was determinedly non-chart (at least until Crocker got hold of it). Dancers were made to feel at home as soon as they entered the venue by doorman Noel Garcia, and, despite the cavernous quality of his space, Brody managed to create a surprisingly intimate atmosphere. “The Garage was ten times bigger in scale than the Loft or the Gallery,” says DePino, “but Larry still talked about the importance of creating a party, not a club.” Crucially, the dance remained uncompromisingly central. “There was a sexual undercurrent at the Garage but no one was picking up,” says Garage regular Jim Feldman. “Sex was subsumed to the music and was worked out in the dancing. It was like having sex with everyone. It was very unifying.” While Brody might have made money, this was hardly his singular aim: he was too much of a perfectionist and too deferential to his DJ’s demands to be single-minded about the pursuit of profit. With regard to the membership charge, insiders maintain that the fee simply covered the cost of administering the system and that members also enjoyed compensatory financial privileges, including the right to go to four free parties a year. As with the Loft, once you were inside the food and drink were free.

Despite its sheer size and audibility, the King Street club was also relatively inconspicuous. “Larry ducked the press,” says DePino. “Larry was underground. Whenever the radio talked about Larry and the Garage we used to call up and stop it. Whenever anybody came with cameras to do interviews we stopped it. That was the school Larry came from, and that was where he wanted to stay.” Brody also avoided publicity at all costs. “When the *Post* reported on page six that five thousand people showed up for First Choice, the IRS called Michael Brody the next day. He didn’t want *any* promotion. No shape, way, or form. That was why there was no sign outside the club until the last year or two. People used to walk around in circles looking for it.” The mogul’s motivations, however, weren’t simply financial. “He wanted it to be underground because that was the school we came from, those were the clubs we danced in, and that was the way to control something without getting lawsuits. You could turn somebody away for not being a member if you were underground, but you couldn’t turn somebody away from an off-the-street club without being discrimi-



Larry Levan in the booth at the Paradise Garage. Photo by Nick Baratta. Courtesy of West End Records

natory. When it was underground you knew who was coming through your door, and if something went wrong you could call the person up and ask them, 'What happened?'" Even WBLS had to be kept in check. "When Frankie Crocker used to say, 'At the Garage last night . . .' Michael Brody would call and say, 'Please, Frankie, stop talking about us!' He just didn't want people hearing about it and showing up. He wanted that Loft feeling, only on a larger scale."

Certain tensions were unavoidable. "The atmosphere at the Garage was like an expanded version of the Loft, although it was definitely a little colder," says Vince Aletti. "The doorway was more professional, and the club as a whole was a more obviously commercial venture. With David you really felt like he was throwing a party every week, and that was much less easy to convey in a place as big as the Garage." Sporting so many powerful and prominent music industry connections—dubbed the "disco Mafia" by Mancuso—the Garage was hardly subterranean. "The Paradise Garage was a showplace," says Gomes. "It became the Studio 54 for blacks and Latins." Yet the sheer presence of these movers and shakers (many of whom did most of their moving and shaking off the dance floor) also suggested that the once marginal downtown party network was finally on the verge of contesting the cultural center, and the DJ to whom they were

drawn made the most of the industrial scale of the King Street venue in order to take the art of DJing to the next level.

Levan was resolutely eclectic, spanning rock, dub, jazz, R&B, and disco. “The cliché is that Garage music had to be a falsetto or some woman screaming at the top of her lungs along with certain types of keyboards,” says Tony Humphries, who thought that the Loft was the ultimate party until he visited King Street. “That’s totally wrong. Larry Levan played everything from Herbie Hancock to Mick Jagger to Talking Heads to Sylvester. He would also vary the tempo from 98 bpm to all the way up. If it was danceable, he played it.” Ultimately Levan couldn’t match the range of music that was being presented at the Loft—playing in his own home and answerable to nobody, Mancuso enjoyed a longer non-peak period and therefore a wider experimental berth—yet he also knew that when everyone was starting to collapse with cramp he could switch into education mode, delivering a mixture of less conventional sounds. “Larry was so in tune with different types of music,” says Kevin Hedge, who started to slip into the Garage as an underage dancer in the late seventies. “He was the first guy I heard who played records that you wouldn’t consider dance records, and they became dance records.” Levan spun records for as long as his dancers would dance. “There would be just ten people on the floor, and Larry would be playing something very serene,” says Llanos, who went on to become head of security and would invariably be the last person to leave—sometimes as late as midday. “We would get into fights. I would turn the lights on, and he would turn them off. Then he’d go to Mike Brody and complain.”

Eclecticism didn’t, however, result in chaotic programming. As Levan told Harvey: “Of all the records you have, maybe five or six of them make sense together. There is actually a message in the dance, the way you feel, the muscles you move, but only certain records have that.” Levan provided an example. “Say I was playing songs about music—‘I Love Music’ by The O’Jays, ‘Music’ by Al Hudson and the next record is ‘Weekend.’ That’s about getting laid, a whole other thing. If I was dancing and truly into the words and the feeling and it came on it might be a good record but it makes no sense because it doesn’t have anything to do with others. So, a slight pause, a sound effect, something else to let you know it’s a new paragraph rather than one continuous sentence.”⁷⁵ As with Mancuso, the mix was secondary. “Larry was capable of mixing as well as anyone, but he often didn’t give a shit,” says Kevorkian. “He wanted to create an effect on

the dance floor, and it didn't matter if the mix was sloppy. He was beyond technical." Beat-mixing perfectionists such as Dan Pucciarelli were also unfazed. "Larry Levan mixed as badly as David Mancuso. He was terrible. But once the record was in he was the best."

That didn't mean Levan was a straightforward crowd-pleaser. If the DJ sensed that his dancers thought they knew what was coming next, he would deliberately clear the floor with a "non-Garage" record—effectively a twist on an old David Rodriguez game. "I loved it when he did that," says Feldman. "Sometimes we left the dance floor. Other times we just stopped dancing, crossed our arms, and stared at him. But Larry would rarely give in. Not only would he leave the record on until the end. He would also start to play it week in, week out, until finally everyone wanted to dance to it." Then again there were also times when Levan (again like Rodriguez) simply wanted to clear the floor for the sake of it. "Sometimes Larry would be in an awful mood," says Jorge La Torre, who had given the DJ his first job. "When he was like that he wasn't very good." Yet Levan also had a knack of breathing new life into songs that were clearing other dance floors. "Lots of times I would hear a record, and I would say, 'I don't care what you say, I'm just not into this record,'" says Krivit. "Then I'd go to the Garage, and I'd hear it, and I'd go, 'I was definitely mistaken. I'm very much into this record. Now I don't care if I hear it on AM radio, I can still hear it the way I heard Larry play it.' The Garage was the only place I got that."

If Levan liked a new record, he would rotate it like no other DJ. That was certainly the case with "Weekend" by Phreek, a studio agglomeration headed by Patrick Adams and featuring Christine Wiltshire on lead vocals. Remixed by the head of disco promotion at Atlantic, Izzy Sanchez, the twelve-inch was only issued as a promo, but Levan loved its disco-funk aesthetic and party-oriented message so much he turned it into one of his ultimate signature tunes, often playing it several times a night, and popular demand led to the record's eventual release in the early eighties (although not before Levan himself had recut the record with Christine Wiltshire under the name Class Action). "He would play a record twenty times," says Judy Weinstein. "I would walk over to Larry if he was playing a record forever and look at my watch and say, 'What time is the next record?' But if you hated it you were going to love it by the time you left. That was the power of Larry. People would leave the Garage and go right to Vinyl Mania on Carmine Street." Situated two blocks away from

King Street, Vinyl Mania was opened by Charlie and Debbie Grappone as a small rock-driven record store in October 1978. "People were coming in on a Saturday morning and asking for the records that Larry Levan had played," says Charlie Grappone. "I thought I knew everything about music, so I was like, 'Who the hell is Larry Levan?'" Garage-heads weren't put off. "They kept coming in even though I wasn't selling what they wanted. I ended up doing more business out of a small box of twelve-inch records than the rest of the store."

The fact that Levan peaked at the Garage led some to argue that the real talent was in fact Richard Long. "The sound system at the Garage was the only reason that Larry Levan was so idolized," says Casey. "As a DJ he was good, not great." Many who thought that Levan *was* great still recognize the advantage of working in such an environment. "Larry controlled a huge club so if he did something special then you heard it in the best possible situation," says Krivit. "If he did something with an a cappella as opposed to some guy somewhere else it was Larry who got the acclaim." As such, the relationship between Long and Levan was finally symbiotic. Just as Long's electronics enabled Levan to become the most revered DJ of his time, so Levan's daring talent invariably drew attention to Long's unparalleled equipment.

Yet, if it was difficult to separate Levan from the system on which he played, that was also because the DJ helped engineer the sound. "I remember times when Larry delayed the opening for an hour or two because he just had to rewire all the speakers," says Krivit. "He was constantly revamping the system." Because the room's acoustics were in a state of constant flux, Levan would also tweak the system as the night progressed, introducing modifications to take account of an additional two thousand bodies on the dance floor, subsequent shifts in humidity levels, and eventual ear fatigue, and this remorseless quest for perfection meant that Long had to re-equalize the system every Friday and Saturday.

Levan also worked the sound system for fun, playing with the equalizer to provide imaginative accents and draw out understated nuances. "You could hear seamless mixing at other clubs," says Manny Lehman, who started dancing at the club in 1978, "but at the Garage the people *experienced the music*, especially when Larry worked the crossover." Accompanying his friend Frankie Knuckles on a trip to the Garage, Bret Wilcox recognized important similarities between the two DJs. "Larry and Frankie both manipulated the sound via the mix and the EQs. I could tell

Larry and Frankie came from the same place.” That place was the Gallery, and the result was an unrepeatable reinterpretation of a record that would often appear to be better than the original. “DJs would go and buy a record that they had heard Larry play,” says DePino, “and they would end up thinking that they had bought the wrong record because he had worked the sound system so much.”

Working the sound system included turning off the music altogether—a Siano trick that Levan took to new levels of theater. “He would stop the music in the middle of the night, and he would put on a little a cappella,” says Kevorkian. “The crowd would start to scream, and then he would stop it, and he would wait. I’m not saying he waits ten seconds. He waits five minutes until the entire room is stomping on their feet, and you can feel the entire building vibrate. Then he puts on another little thing, and they scream even more. Then he takes it off, and he just waits. Then, finally, a couple of minutes later, he puts on the new record he’s been playing five times a night and the entire room *just explodes*—a thousand people all trying to grab the ceiling at the same time.”

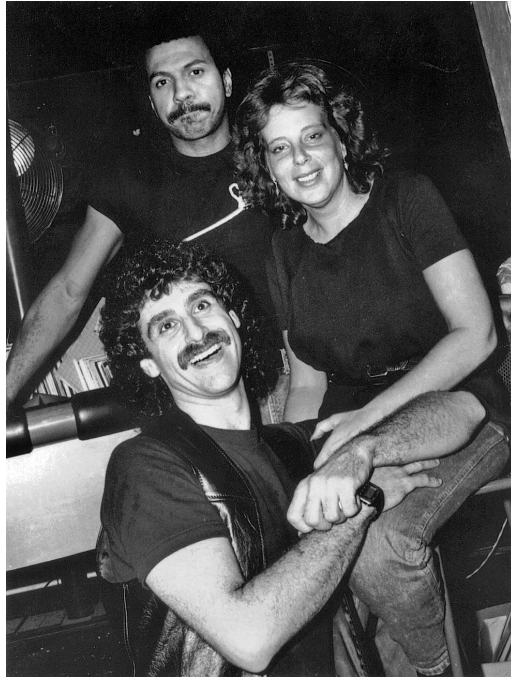
While the intimidating scale of the King Street setup combined with the knowingness of the crowd would have reduced most DJs to a quivering shell, Levan thrived in his new habitat. “Larry told me, ‘When you play for an audience you’ve got to have *attitude*,’” says Hippie Torales, a young DJ from New Jersey who started going to the Garage toward the end of 1978. “‘You’ve got to show them who’s in charge!’” Indeed Levan’s confidence grew in proportion to the size of the crowd. “The more people there were in the room, the better he was,” says Kevorkian. “He wasn’t a good DJ for forty, but if there was a crowd of a hundred then he was good, and if there was a crowd of a thousand he was extraordinary. The peaks at the Garage were so much more intense than they were at the Loft. Larry was an incredible showman.”

However the King Street DJ didn’t just manipulate the crowd—he was also closely connected to the mood of the dancers. “I would watch certain people on the dance floor,” Levan told Lehman. “Since I always went out dancing, I would use that as my guide. I knew who went out, who used to dance, what songs people liked. That’s what I used as an outline of choosing what to play.”⁷⁶ The DJ’s knowledge was encyclopedic. “Larry knew everybody’s favorite record,” says Judy Russell, who started dancing at the Garage in 1980 and became a key figure within the relatively small coterie of core women dancers thanks to her position behind the counter

at Vinyl Mania and her friendship with Levan. “If a group was leaving, Larry would say, ‘That’s the ‘Sentimentally It’s You’ crowd!’ He would put on the record, and they would come rushing back onto the dance floor. It always felt like he was playing the song for you—and he was.” The lights—normally operated by Robert DeSilva—became an additional means of communication. “With some of the most memorable records he felt like he had to make this an emotional moment,” says Krivit. “He managed to reinvent the lights every time he worked them.”

The Garage DJ left nothing to the imagination when he described his main influences. “Nicky Siano, David Mancuso, Steve D’Acquisto and Michael Cappello, David Rodriguez from the Ginza—this is the school of DJs that I come from,” he told Harvey. “David Mancuso was always very influential with his music and the mixes. He didn’t play records unless they were very serious.”⁷⁷ Like his mentors, Levan was more interested in the way records could speak to each other than the minutiae of the mix. “He would take you on a voyage with the message,” says Krivit. “If you heard a bunch of records about love you knew that he was in that mood.” Levan also carried his most important guides to work. “Larry had a specific crate of records that were David records and another that were Nicky records,” says Kevorkian. “He had both at his disposal.” Larry Levan, aka David Siano. “He took David’s ideas, and he took my ideas, and he took them a step forward,” says Siano. “He definitely improved upon it.”

Levan’s sense of his own importance was also escalating, and the dimensions of his King Street booth revealed all. Whereas Mancuso had finally decided to keep his feet on the ground, Levan opted for a towering nerve center, and while in some respects this was a logistical necessity—how else could the DJ keep his eye on his boundless dance floor—Levan was also a downtown diva who loved the regal authority that his heightened throne conveyed. The booth was also huge—an ocean liner compared to the rubber dinghies that most other DJs worked in—and this meant that Levan could virtually host his own (private) party within a (private) party. The consequences weren’t universally welcomed. “The Paradise Garage cultivated the cult of the DJ,” says La Torre. “I wasn’t fond of this VIP room for Larry’s cadre of friends. It became another boring thing about the disco scene. He was the star of the show, and unless you were willing to conform you were unwelcome.” Club and DJ had nevertheless come together: the booth became a magnet for attracting both promotional records and invitations to remix records, which in turn helped



David DePino
(front), Judy
Weinstein, and
Joey Llanos.
Courtesy of
David DePino

Levan generate a formidable reputation. “It was at the Paradise Garage that Larry Levan came into his own,” acknowledges La Torre. “When he was at the Baths he was just another good DJ, but at the Garage he really blossomed.”

Realizing that power requires protection, Brody hired DePino to police the stairway to heaven. “I controlled the booth,” says DePino. “That was my job. And if Larry was late I used to put on a record.” Levan, however, didn’t have to be late in order to forget about his responsibilities. “The DJ booth would hold seventy-five people, and Larry would sometimes get into a conversation with two or three of them. The record would end, and he’d go, ‘Oooh!’ and run and get another record.” The dancers didn’t mind. “The crowd learned to respect that with Larry. They were fine with whatever he did. Nobody was there for the mixing. They were there for the whole situation—and it was human.” It was left to Weinstein to keep the infectious DJ in check. “I was a disciplinarian figure to a certain extent,” she says. “Nobody ever really saw me trashed on the dance floor or falling down stairs because I never really got that involved in drugs.

When I walked into the booth, everybody would stand still because they weren't sure how I would affect Larry's mood, or if I would want the booth cleared for Larry. I was a mother figure, even at the age of twenty-five. I had the power."

The combination of Levan's talent and the sheer scope of the Paradise Garage project provided the DJ with an unprecedented profile, for while there were other big clubs it was only the downtown party network that maintained the DJ as the central attraction. "If Nicky was the first name," says DePino, "then Larry was the first huge name." Yet was Levan as innovative, charismatic, and influential as his teacher-gurus? Aletti didn't think so. "David was better because he had more variety. I loved David's warm-up music—trippy, jazzy stuff that would gradually percolate into more of a beat. Larry was more technically adept, but his range was more limited and a little more commercial." Gomes also thought the Garage DJ fell slightly short. "Larry had it but he didn't have the magic of David and Nicky." Weinstein, however, rated Levan as the best. "Larry was more creative than anybody I have ever heard. He would do things, and you would just wonder where it came from. He was so far beyond everybody else."

Thanks to his ability to switch between a Loft-like dream and a Gallery-style frenzy, Levan developed an unparalleled capacity for surprise, and, by combining Mancuso's sense of environment with Siano's sense of theater, he also introduced a new level of drama into New York's nightworld. "Larry was torn between the Loft and the Gallery," says DePino. "David Mancuso entranced people, whereas Nicky Siano was all about excitement. Larry could do both." Operating in highly competitive conditions, Levan possessed the Darwinian intelligence to absorb, reformulate, and flourish. "Animals that survive are the ones that adapt to different diets, and Larry had the ability to take something and make it his own," says Ke-vorkian. "He appropriated both David and Nicky. He was our boy wonder. While the rest of us traveled by plane, Larry took the space shuttle."