



Levan, Larry (1954-1992)

by Victoria Shannon

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Larry Levan is regularly hailed as the world's greatest disc jockey and widely credited with changing the sound of dance music in the 1970s and 1980s. He was the driving force behind the legendary Paradise Garage dance club in New York City for the entire time it was open (1976-1987).

Levan made connections with the meanings and feelings of songs, often sending messages in music to the dancers. He had a heightened sense of drama and he wanted, more than anything, to control the clubbers at the Garage. He was the first DJ to understand the value of having a personal relationship with the dancers, and he knew how to read a crowd. He knew exactly what music to play to fire people up; visitors to the Garage never forgot the experience.

Lawrence Philpot was born on July 21, 1954, in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. His mother, Minnie, was a dressmaker. His brother and sister--twins--were eighteen when Lawrence was born, and he was spoiled as the baby of the family. His parents never married. In later years, he took his mother's name, becoming Larry Levan.

Levan met Frankie Knuckles at a Harlem drag ball in 1969 while they were sewing beads on a costume for a drag queen called The Duchess. They became inseparable. They hung out at The Loft, David Mancuso's home that he converted to a disco in 1970.

In 1971, Nicky Siano, owner of the new dance club The Gallery, hired Levan and Knuckles to decorate the club and prepare the buffet table for the opening. Siano taught the two teenagers the rudiments of disc jockeying.

Soon, Levan was working the lights for DJ Joseph Bonfiglio at the Continental Baths. After Bonfiglio walked out one day, the manager told Levan that he would be playing records that night.

In 1973, Levan started dating Richard Long, a sound designer, and together they turned Long's showroom into SoHo Place, described by Levan as "a very energetic black club." The SoHo, however, was too successful; it was soon shut down because of overcrowding.

From SoHo, Levan went to Reade Street, a club owned by Michael Brody. Levan and Brody began a long and mutually profitable relationship. In 1976, when Brody bought the Paradise Garage at 84 King Street in West Soho, he immediately hired Levan as the resident DJ.

The Paradise Garage had a massive, 10,000 square foot second floor above a huge parking garage. Michael Brody realized he had a star DJ, so he built the new club around Levan, providing his star with the best equipment money could buy.

Although Levan had no formal training in electronic engineering, he quickly learned and was soon designing "Levans," his own brand of speakers.

Long and Levan designed a five-way crossover system that allowed Levan to manipulate the sound so that he could pick out certain lyrics and omit or emphasize different voices to create records that spoke to each other and to the clubbers.

Levan's style of DJing became known as "disco evangelism," preaching through the mix. He focused on heavier black music--r&b disco--that attracted a mixed crowd to the Garage.

Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, as well as young white men, crowded into the Garage to hear Levan play, and the Garage became the first disco club to be completely integrated. It became a refuge for recently liberated gay men in the 1970s who looked for friendship and camaraderie amid the thrill of the dance floor.

Levan was not the greatest sound mixer; what made him famous was his choice of songs, sound effects, and live keyboards. He was not afraid to play different kinds of music in the Garage, and it was not unusual to hear Stevie Nicks, the Clash, Pat Benatar, Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Instant Funk, Yazoo, Loleatta Holloway, Chaka Khan, Talking Heads, Eddy Grant, and Gwen Guthrie over the course of Levan's 12-hour shows from Saturday night to Sunday morning.

The dark side of Larry Levan was epitomized in his constant drug use, which resulted in erratic and eccentric behavior at the Garage. At first, his outbursts only endeared him to his fans. Levan was a diva, and everyone knew it.

Among his eccentricities was his practice of turning off all the lights in the Garage, leaving everyone in pitch blackness, until he felt like starting a record. He even had a set of light controls mounted on his DJ booth so he could manipulate the lights.

As a remixer, Levan was sensational, and many of his recordings found their way to the national dance music charts. Among the songs he remixed are "Ain't Nothin' Going On But the Rent" by Gwen Guthrie, "Heartbeat" by Taana Gardner, and "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" by Inner Life. Levan's remix of "I Got My Mind Made Up (You Can Get it Girl)" went gold.

In addition, Levan created a series of classic productions on the Salsoul and West End labels. His band, the New York Citi Peech Boys, featured Michael deBenedictis and Levan on keyboards and Bernard Fowler as vocalist. Their song "Don't Make Me Wait" became a huge hit in the dance community. Other songs they recorded include "On a Journey," "Come On, Come On," and "Life is Something Special."

When the Paradise Garage closed its doors on September 26, 1987, Levan's drug use increased. He worked for awhile at Studio 54 and, in 1989, he became DJ at Richard Vasquez's new club Choice on the Lower East Side.

When Choice closed a few months later, and when his close friend artist Keith Haring died in February 1990, Levan's descent into drugs and other self-destructive behavior accelerated. During this time he lived with his mother and with Mel Cheron, Michael Brody's ex-lover. He began taking heroin and disappearing for weeks at a time. To raise money for drugs, he would sell his record collection, and his friends would buy it back.

Although his popularity in New York faded, Levan was still regarded as a star in Europe. In 1992, he went to England to design the sound system for London's Ministry of Sound nightclub and played there with Frankie Knuckles.

In August of 1992, Levan, Mel Cheren, and Francois Kevorkian, a fellow DJ and friend, went to Japan on Levan's Harmony Tour. The Japanese went crazy for Levan's music, and they treated him like a celebrity. Near the end of the tour, however, Levan's health began to fail.

He arrived home in New York in a wheelchair and checked himself into a hospital rehabilitation program for several weeks.

In November 1992, Levan again checked himself into a hospital. Four days later, on November 8, he died of cardiac endocarditis, a fluid build-up around the heart, no doubt exacerbated by his drug usage.

Mel Cheren, published a book about his memories of the Paradise Garage and his friendship with Larry Levan in 2000 called *Keep on Dancing: My Life and the Paradise Garage*. The book is as much a biography of Levan as it is a history of the Paradise Garage and the disco era. Cheren calls Levan "the father of house music," although that title now is commonly attached to Levan's friend Frankie Knuckles.

Also in 2000, West End Records released "Larry Levan Live at the Paradise Garage," a mixed two-disc CD set with a 36-page booklet.

In 2004, the documentary *Maestro* was released. Produced, written, and directed by Josell and Camera Ramos, the documentary traces the history of the underground dance music culture of the 1970s and 1980s. Not surprisingly, it focuses on Levan.

In 2004, Larry Levan was inducted into the Dance Music Hall of Fame. Each July on Levan's birthday, a remembrance party is held for him in New York with his DJ friends David Depino and Francois Kevorkian spinning.

On their 2006 album, *The Rose Has Teeth in the Mouth of a Beast*, the electronic group Matmos contains a tribute song to Levan called "Steam and Sequins for Larry Levan."

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