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LOCAL FEATURE

How the Roxy became the Roxy
From truck warehouse to roller rink to biggest gay dance space in NY.

By [MATT KALKHOFF](#)
Friday, April 08, 2005

In a post-nuclear world, it's comforting to know that at least the cockroaches and Cher would have a place to call home: The seemingly indestructible nightlife institution known as the Roxy.

Whether unleashing an inner Olivia Newton-John atop eight wheels or dancing to the world's most famous DJs for eight hours, the Roxy is a rite of passage for gay New Yorkers, an essential stop on any gay tourist's agenda, and a second home for its most loyal devotees.

Yet these revelers know probably little or nothing about the owners of this monolithic dance emporium. Nor do they know its storied past. Yet nearly everyone, gay, straight or otherwise, seems to have had at least a few wildly colorful experiences in one or another of the Roxy's corners.

So with the help of owner Gene DiNino, his sister Rosalie Schupp, Scott Aguiar, John Blair and several of the club's current and former DJs, I've attempted to piece together a timeline and history of the Roxy's 25-plus years serving the community.

Constructed in 1920, the building located between 10th Avenue and the West Side Highway spent most of its life as a storage warehouse for trucks. The steps now leading up to the box office used to function as a driveway into the facility.

The space was converted to a roller rink at the height of the disco craze in 1979, by, among others, financier Steven Greenberg (of Palladium fame, and now Cobalt Club and the lobby bar at the Gramercy Park Hotel), one of the original co-owners.

Referred to by many as the "Studio 54 of roller rinks," it thrived as such for several years. Then, as the popularity of skating began to fade, Pat Fuji revamped the space into a dance club in 1982. The Roxy soon became hip-hop central (before the term was even coined). Rappers, DJs and break-dancers from all over the country converged on the venue to perform and hang out.

The Godfather of Hip-Hop, Afrika Bombaattaa himself, began to DJ there, and the club started sponsoring break-dancing competitions. One of Bombaattaa's Roxy performances was captured



DJ Manny Lehman premieres his latest CD, 'Freedom,' on Saturday, April 10.

MORE INFO

THE ROXY
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on celluloid in the 1984 film " Beat Street."

The venue has also been featured in other movies as well, most notably in a scene from the 1993 film "Six Degrees of Separation." It even once served as the backdrop for a Pepsi press conference featuring Michael Jackson.

But times were tough, and in 1984 the club went into bankruptcy. At the same time, an entrepreneur from Syracuse was scouting Manhattan for his next big venture. Gene DiNino first cut his teeth in the business in 1970 with the Madhatter, a little bar in the suburbs of Syracuse that he inherited from his family. As disco emerged in the mid-70s, DiNino opened his first dance club in Syracuse called the Gin Mill. Club 37 and Suburban Park followed — all successful.



DiNino moved to Texas and then Los Angeles to do "market research." Eventually a friend convinced him to move to New York and open a club here. Admittedly scared at first, his real-estate agent took him to see the Roxy. "You'll never find another space like this," he told him. DiNino agreed. He leases the venue in 1985, the same year the drinking age was raised to 21.

Initially apprehensive to embrace a gay clientele, DiNino opened the space as 1018 (named for its cross streets) in 1986. That incarnation attracted a mostly ethnic straight crowd and lasted about three years, but was marred by violence and the negative publicity that followed.

Pressured by the local community board, DiNino decided to change the venue. "We definitely want to keep it gay," DiNino says of the Roxy today. "The gay market is faithful. But they also like variety, so they will move around from time to time to new places when they open. But my plan is to stay right where I am and cater to the gay market."

The 'Chelsea boy' is born

With the help of promoters Lee Chappell, David Lee and Chip Duckett, gay Saturdays at the Roxy arrived in 1989. DJ Larry Tee helmed the first gay Saturday night party at the club, followed by such luminaries as Frankie Knuckles, Merritt and Billy Carroll.

Meanwhile, the gay skate party that began back in the '80s under the direction of a promoter named John Blair was in full swing on Wednesdays (and remains so today). Max Rodriguez was the king of the booth — a title formerly held in the early '80s by a little-known DJ named Manny Lehman.

The Suzanne Bartsch-inspired drag queen-heavy crowd began to wane, as did the carnivalesque atmosphere (complete with a swing over the dance floor). Rather than continue to compete against Blair's booming party at a club named Parallel, DiNino brought him back to the club in 1990.

Six months later, he was the sole promoter on Saturday night. With a new marketing campaign focused on the muscular, body-conscious crowd that was moving en masse from the Village north, Blair helped cement the "Chelsea Boy" phenomenon both in his nightclub and the American lexicon.

The mid-'90s presented more challenges, though, including Blair's brief departure in 1995 for Twilo and then Palladium. The Roxy lost its stronghold on Saturday nights.

After persuading Blair to return to the spot where he remains today, DiNino brought in another famed promoter, Marc Berkley, who had cultivated a relationship with up-and-coming DJ Victor Calderone.

Calderone was hired as the club's new resident DJ following his success remixing singles for Madonna and his growing reputation spinning at Liquid in South Beach. On Valentine's Day, 1998, Madonna sang from "Ray of Light" on the Roxy stage. Bette Midler and Cher appeared at the club later that year, as did Beyoncé in 2004.

The presence of these gay icons solidified the Roxy's status as the hottest gay club in town, and probably the planet.

But in 2001, Calderone left. Grammy Award-winner Peter Rauhofer, who was already spinning there monthly, stepped in as main resident DJ and subsequently released four "Live @ Roxy"

compilation CDs on his Star 69 Records. Blair had previously launched his own CD series entitled "NYC's Best DJs" (Logic/BMG), featuring remixes by David Knapp, Monty Q and James Andersen. All have spun at the club.

When Rauhofer abruptly left his residency earlier this year, the DJ roster was shuffled again to include current monthly residents Manny Lehman, Tony Moran (who had also performed at the club years earlier as a member of the Latin Rascals), Chad Jack and Los Angeles DJ Paulo (whose first gig is on April 23).

In order to remain competitive with clubs like Crobar and Spirit, the Roxy's sound was upgraded to a Phazon system in 2002, and much of the furniture and carpeting was replaced. Next on the agenda is the upstairs '80s lounge, which will be completely redesigned by Red Bull, making it only the third official Red Bull lounge in the U.S.

The back lounge will be used for corporate events, including the Cruze Mobile launch this Saturday in conjunction with Lehman's release party for his new "Freedom" CD (Tommy Boy Records).

Monthly theme parties, like the upcoming Rites of Spring event with Moran on April 30, will bring more elaborate decorations and special effects. Some may ask why they don't do that every week, but as Aguiar points out, Blair has fought hard to keep Roxy Saturdays' cover below \$25.

So while other special events around town may offer more bells and whistles (including certain one-offs at the Roxy itself with DJs like Danny Tenaglia, Paul van Dyk, and Junior Vasquez), they do so at a higher cost.

DiNino says he still has another five years left on his lease, so barring any unforeseen sale of the property or condemnation by the city, the Roxy should be here for a while. But that doesn't mean DiNino's waiting around for the inevitable.

He's got Eugene, an upscale restaurant and lounge where he just kicked off a Sunday morning after-hours party called Gypsy Tea. He's currently renovating the old Joy space into a two-story "heaven and hell" gay lounge.

Then there's the hush-hush deal that involves a possible joint venture with one of New York's former gay club owners that may result in a new venue being built from scratch specifically for the gay community. "Kind of like XL," DiNino offers, "but much larger and with dancing."

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