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GigLife.NYC: Blood, Sweat, Tears and Glitter.

by

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Abstract

In New York City there's a community of artists who have rejected the obvious choices that the world has offered them and pursued a life of performance and glitter, of bright lights and fire and sensuality.

These performers are extraordinarily compelling. They're artists with lives crafted to entice and delight our gaze. *GigLife.NYC: Blood, Sweat, Tears & Glitter* is an observational documentary film that invites the viewer, drawn in with the promise of titillating spectacle, to discover the object of their desire is engaged in artistic, romantic, political and economic struggle.

Project Description

GigLife weaves the stories of three New York City Nightlife performers, moving back and forth between them.

After a brief montage of the artists from the film performing, we're introduced to Madame Vivien V., the *nom de guerre* of Scott Dennis, one of New York City's premiere drag queens, hosting "madhouse" a variety/burlesque showcase performed in New York's lower East side. In Scott's Bushwick home, we see him transforming into Madame V. while sharing with us some of his metamorphic process.

Next, we meet Catherine Widdifield, New York Cat, an aerialist and nightclub performer. We first see her dancing on the crowded bar at Henrietta Hudson's, a lesbian bar on New York's west side. She's wearing a mohawk, some strappy lingerie and nothing else. The crowd is

seething. Interviewed in her home in 2017, Cat shares with us a little of her performance history and why she prefers the safety of queer spaces.

We then move to the (now closed) nightclub Cielo where we join the fourth anniversary party of "The Get Down." Leading this massive sea of undulating bodies is the DJ Tasha Blank and the MC, the third subject of our film, Akil Apollo Davis. Akil's initial interview was filmed in 2017 and he traces some of his history of performance and residence, leading to his arrival at the collaborative workspace, the House of Light (now closed).

Scott recounts his employment history with the House of Yes, the venue widely considered to be the epicenter of Bushwick nightlife, starting as a door queen, and then eventually becoming an indoor resident artist. When he speaks of being hungry, it is not metaphorical.

Next, Cat talks about some of the challenges of maintaining a relationship in a small apartment while dancing for tips. She shares some of the ways this relationship supports her. She then speaks to the value of the Bushwick/Burning Man community.

The Get Down is a cornerstone of Akil's community. He breaks down the Get Down and introduces us to the concept of *Sangha*, which in a Buddhist context means a community of monks, nuns or laypeople. Akil uses the word to define his community, on the dance floor and in his life, as those "who agree with us in our heart and in our head," The first act ends with Akil, fanning the embers of a smudge stick used for a ritualistic cleansing.

We then jump ahead 3 years and find Akil in a new home, attempting to light a flame. The apartment is crowded with cardboard boxes and feels claustrophobic and dark. He briefly

touches on the demise of the House of Light and does a brief catalog of his tools and accoutrement, in storage boxes, before a segment that highlights Akil's last Get Down as MC.

We join New York Cat in December of 2019 in her Bushwick sublet. She describes some of the wonder and physical challenge involved with being an aerialist and some of the physical danger. This leads into the critical set piece of *GigLife*, New York Cat's performance of "Ice Age" at the Mermaid Lagoon benefit at the House of Yes in August of 2019. While she performs, she recounts her history of trauma and spells out for us how her work as a creative artist helps her to heal from the pain in her history... particularly the pain caused by men, mostly white men.

Akil then speaks to the whiteness of the Bushwick/Burning Man community, how his presence is commodified and how his full expression triggers black people, particularly black men.

Akil shares his philosophy on the nature of relationships and sex and the necessity for each of us to understand our own nature. Scott picks up the thread and muses upon his own sexual nature and how that relates to his work as a drag queen. Cat has now left her previous relationship and revels in the freedom and ease she experiences living a creative life on her own terms.

Scott launches into the concluding thematic beat of the film: the effect of the performer on the audience. Akil speaks of this energetic dynamic as crossing the veil from the mundane into something elevated and transformative. He brings the message home (accompanied by the track *Home* by Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes) at "The Get Down" and Cat caps off the 2nd act with an explanation of her compulsion to live a GigLife.

Act Three of the film is a brief reflection from each of the three artists about how they've lived their lives during the pandemic. They have appreciation for the space and time that lockdown has given them and they leave us with a possibility for better days ahead.

Performance, Precarity and the Pandemic of 2020

Before the pandemic eviscerated the New York nightlife scene, performers lived with well-documented precarity. In a rare two part cross-journal issue, in 2012 and 2013, *TDR* and *Women and Performance* published essays curated from a “concerted call to critical thought and political action regarding contemporary neoliberalism and the scene of performance-based art.” (Ridout and Schneider, 6) They ask the question “How do we pay attention to precarity—economic precarity and the sheer vulnerability of a body in tenuous relation to modernity's "human rights"—through a consideration of the performing body, in all of its multitude?” (Ridout and Schneider, 6) While not a multitude, the artists at the center of *GigLife* have been considered in these terms, to the best of my ability.

Performers whose work deals with sexuality, even those working in accepted heteronormative or transactional environments, have always been under additional stress. Louise Owen describes exotic dancing as “a particularly extreme scene of precarious labor conditions.” (Owen, 85)

The three artists featured in *GigLife* are part of New York City’s larger community of creative workers, a major driver of the economy.

Altogether, New York City’s creative sector represents about 5.4% of private employment in the city, and 6.7% of wages paid. The creative sector accounts for 13% of total economic output. In total, one out of every eight dollars of economic

activity in the city – USD 110 billion in 2017 – can be traced directly or indirectly to the sector. (Stringer, 1)

This community and the economic activity it generates has been devastated by the pandemic. While individual artists like Scott, Cat, and Akil have seen their livelihoods disrupted, even large-scale productions with massive institutional support, such as the Broadway Theaters, have been shut down.

While these are tough times for unionized artists, those at the fringes of the entertainment world are even harder hit. Worldwide, nightlife venues are shutting down at an unprecedented rate (Nyshka). New York has been hit especially hard. *Curbed* recently published a heartbreaking list of 500 restaurants and bars that closed forever in NYC. (Swanson).

While shuttered, New York's night clubs are still faced with having to pay pre-pandemic rents. As of September, less than 20% of nightclubs have been able to negotiate any relief from landlords (Short).

Just because the nightlife supply has dried up, doesn't mean that the demand to party has been quelled. The party scene still exists, including work for performers, but the party has moved underground where safety is often an afterthought. Like many public facing workers, economic pressure has pushed artists into working in unsafe conditions. Artists represented in *GigLife.NYC: Blood, Sweat, Tears & Glitter* have accepted, then walked away from work because adequate Covid-19 protections were not enforced.

With physical closeness restricted and venues closed, nightlife performers have turned to online performance to eke out a living. All of the *GigLife* performers have online presences that are now responsible for most of their income. As noted in a recent issue of *Wired*, "DJs,

comedians, drag queens—entertainers across the country are livestreaming performances to reach audiences and raise money.” (Knibbs)

Many venues have tried to build a successful online presence and party scene but there are substantial challenges, particularly monetization. Bars and clubs never made money from performances; it was always about selling drinks. The New York Times wrote about the producer’s pivot from physical to online for the show *Eschaton*; “a fancy theological term for the end of the world, (which) fits the broad theme: the performer’s existential need for an audience, and the precariousness of a life in the spotlight.” (King)

The House of Yes kept their doors physically open, attempting to comply with New York's Covid-19 regulations. When the House of Yes opened in its most recent location, there was an attached restaurant, the Queen of Falafel. Later that restaurant moved a few doors down and was renamed Queen.

Because clubs were required to serve food, the House of Yes continued to feature the full menu from Queen. Regulators decided this was not compliant with the requirement that all bars serve food and the House of Yes had its liquor license revoked in late August of 2020. (Coleman and Kupfe)

The House of Yes continued to have a significant online presence, including hosting a number of virtual parties, and reopening House of Yes University, which featured a full slate of weekly classes featuring their artists.

Night life will return to New York City but until then, the community depicted in *GigLife* faces an uncertain future, and there's no guarantee that the House of Yes will survive. (Carmel and Sadek)

Because nightlife and the arts are such a large part of worldwide economic life and particularly in New York City, there have to be policy decisions that address this economic need.

In September of 2020, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development published an in-depth policy document that highlights some of the challenges facing creative communities and artists. The document notes how smaller arts organizations and individual artists are an essential part of the Cultural and Creative Service ecosystem.

"The crisis has sharply exposed the structural fragility of some producers in the sector... Cultural and creative sectors are largely composed of micro-firms, non-profit organisations and creative professionals, often operating on the margins of financial sustainability. Large public and private cultural institutions and businesses depend on this dynamic cultural ecosystem for the provision of creative goods and services." (Travkina and Sacco)

In response to this existential crisis to the New York arts community, Governor Cuomo recently announced the "New York Arts Revival Initiative" to launch on February 4th, 2021, but it focuses on well-established and traditional performers and organizations.

"Already on board for the initiative are 150 artists, including Amy Schumer, Chris Rock, Wynton Marsalis, Renée Fleming and Hugh Jackman, and organizations such as Ballet Hispanico, Ars Nova, Albany Symphony Orchestra, National Black Theatre and Pendragon Theatre in Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks." (Nightlife Exchange Editorial Board)

Large arts organizations have clout, but the smaller organizations, that often work as feeders into these massive institutions, traditionally have not had the ability to meet political challenges or compete for government funds.

Recently over 3,000 Venues aligned together to form NIVA, the National Independent Venue Association. Together they were able to pressure Congress to pass the "save our stages act." (<https://www.saveourstages.com/>). This bill provides direct support to smaller venues, like the House of Yes.

However, even cultural programs like these, that support venues and producers, do not focus on getting help directly to artists like those profiled in *GigLife*. For them, the pandemic has only exacerbated what was already a precarious economic position.

Aesthetic Development and Production in the time of Pandemic.

GigLife.NYC: Blood, Sweat, Tears & Glitter has undergone two major transformations, one from within, cultivated in the academic space of the Integrated Media Arts program, and the other change caused by the pandemic.

For years I have wanted to tell the story of the House of Yes/Burning Man/Bushwick community. This is a community that's truly at the vanguard of consent issues, LBGTQ rights, and the creative power of the feminine. I have always found these performers compelling. So compelling that at the age of 48 I began aerial training in earnest. I married my wife at the epicenter of this fascinating community, the House of Yes, and we performed our first dance, flying high, on aerial silks above the bar.

At one point I was interested in creating a reality television series, in the vein of "The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills," but my concept of representation and storytelling has been transformed radically by my time in the IMA program, which has shaped the kind of stories that I want to tell.

Stuart Ewen's class opened my eyes to the history of patriarchy, the use of documentary as a force of cultural domination, and the systemic racism of the country I live in. To make the most of my work at Hunter, I had to evolve both my practice and my personal awareness.

I have often used my fast wit to gain energy in conversations and social groups, but I wasn't aware of how much my personality was built on privilege that was invisible to me.

Humor, like most forms of interaction, is hierarchical, highlighting the disparities in social capital. As a straight, white, cis, able bodied man, I was almost always shooting down. I noticed that in class, an interesting or compelling point might be made and I would feel a need to top it. I noticed that I am more likely to interrupt women than men.

GigLife has evolved in parallel with my personal growth and the evolutions of discourse, on personal and national levels, over the last four years.

The progenitor of this work was originally titled "The Circus Girls of New York." I envisioned it as a reality television show that focused on the lives and loves of nightlife performers. Not just women/girls but a wide range of performers across the human spectrum. I loved the title and that attachment left me blind to the mischaracterization of my subjects.

I used "Girls" as a stand in for women and men, trans, cis, straight and gay. I was on the outside looking in as surely as Flaherty was outside of the Inuit culture he documented. I didn't understand the cost. I was attracted to the community. I saw it was fascinating. I participated. I felt like I was on the right side of history.

I was unaware of the exploitive quality of the work I had been doing and envisioning. I was unaware that there was a long history of men who had made films who were unaware of the exploitive quality of the work that they were doing.

“Circus Girls” evolved into *GigLife*. And I began production in earnest in November of 2019.

I had gathered years of footage. Much of it, quite spectacular. I had worked with many great artists but I had narrowed my focus to six: Akil Davis, Scott Dennis, Blaine Petrovia, Darryl Thorne, Cat Widdifield, and Fran Sperling. I did a round of interviews in December of 2019 and January 2020. I was looking forward to a couple of weeks of shooting some of New York's most spectacular nightlife, getting new beautiful shots with an exciting new camera to support my story.

Sadly, it became clear in February of 2020 that would not be possible.

The pandemic destroyed the world in which this film lived and was born. *Gig Life: Blood, Sweat, Tears & Glitter* has a sadness to it that I never envisioned as the core of the piece when I began. A work that once celebrated the rise in New York City nightlife of a sensual pleasure, not defined by a hetero-normative gaze, darkened with the lights of the city's performance spaces into something more somber, bathed in nostalgia.

I fled the pandemic to Eugene, Oregon. Gigafire smoke drove my family to Portland. We returned to Eugene when the entire coast was thick with smoke and the sun was red at noon. Our house caught fire just before Thanksgiving and this film was finished in a series of Hotels and Airbnbs.

When I shot my interviews in December of 2019 and early 2020, all of my participants had gigs planned and life was moving forward in much the way that it always had. The places that I'd like to shoot no longer exist, not in the same way. I have to rely on what I've already shot. To finish this work, I've had to make some difficult decisions. I chose the three characters who had the most compelling stories based on the interviews I have. Instead of *GigLife* being an entirely new work, I have done my best to convey the dynamism of the performance scene using footage from my archive. In some cases, I have used footage provided by the performers.

I decided to do new interviews early this year as an upbeat coda to the tome of loss this document had become. These have become a somewhat redemptive third act.

Theoretical and Historical Roots

GigLife occupies an expanding space of queer and nightlife documentary. Early films in this lineage are often heartbreaking in the exclusion and isolation the subjects face. *Portrait of Jason* (1967) by Shirley Clarke is a film of tragic portraiture. The pressure Jason lives with is intense, real and unending. The people portrayed in *GigLife* stand on the shoulders of the activists that came before them.

Akil echoes some of the main themes in Marlon Riggs' essay film *Tongues Untied* (1989) in particular, the way that Black Men are sexualized for their bodies, but not necessarily given a voice in the room, even when that room is LGBTQ friendly.

Not to be confused with Stan Brakhage's *Pittsburgh Trilogy*, Peggy Ahwesh's *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1983) deals with much of the same ground as *GigLife*; private, intimate portraiture of people living on the sexual and economic fringes of society. Although *GigLife* feels to me less

intimate and observational than Ms. Ahwesh's film, I believe that both reveal hidden truths of their subjects.

GigLife and the culture it portrays is strongly influenced by the LGBTQ ballroom culture, first brought to a (relatively) wide audience in Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990). There is a strong argument that the Burner/Bushwick/House of Yes community has its roots in the Voguing culture spotlighted in Ms. Livingston's work.

More recently, John Manning's *Burlesque: Heart of the Glitter Tribe* (2017) played in much of the same space as *GigLife*. The Portland burlesque scene has substantial overlap with the people who live the gig life. There are also substantial similarities in the style of filmmaking; like Manning's film *GigLife* intercuts performance with the emotional history behind it.

Technology of production

I planned to shoot the entirety of this film on the Panasonic S1. I have a long history with Panasonic cameras. In 2004 I acquired a DVX100a. The DVX100a was the first camera that I used that was able to shoot in 24 fps. I strongly prefer 24 fps for film storytelling. Almost every great film ever made has been shot in 24 fps and I believe the visual, rhythmic tie to Film history outweighs any temporal advantage other frame rates might have. I've owned multiple Panasonic cameras since that time and they've all supported 24 fps.

The S1 has a full size sensor and is able to shoot internally in 4:4:2 10 bit color at 150mb/s. The panasonic s 24-105mm f4 lens gave me a wide range of reliably great looking footage and the potential for truly cinematic imagery. This camera feels like an extraordinary tool.

The high-resolution image required a new (to me) workflow. Shooting for the V-log LUT produces images that look flat, but they're encoded with a tremendous amount of visual information. When the V-log LUT is applied to the footage, it has a rich, vibrant look that has substantial flexibility in post with up to 12 stops of dynamic range. As it turns out, most of the footage that I've shot is well exposed and no shots in the final film required any extraordinary correction.

The 2017 interviews and some of the earlier performances were shot on the FZ1000, a modern bridge camera (smallish chip massive zoom range) that I got in 2014. Fortunately, the color space, though shallow and noisy, compared with the S1, matches well with the footage from the newer camera. Some footage is shot on cell phones, primarily the Pixel 3XL.

Audio was uploaded to the Temi.com servers where artificial intelligence systems analyzed and transcribed my interviews. I used these transcriptions to make my paper cuts of my film and to give a searchable database of my material.

Audience and Exhibition

GigLife.NYC: Blood, Sweat, Tears & Glitter is meant to appeal to a broad audience. I intend to enter multiple festivals, focusing on queer film festivals.

Music licensing issues will prevent most commercial screenings in its present form, but much of the content can be recut into new stories for episodic streaming services.

GigLife.NYC: Blood, Sweat, Tears & Glitter will have its physical world premiere in Bushwick, when the House of Yes reopens.

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