

# THE DOWNTOWN POP UNDERGROUND

**New York City and the literary punks, renegade artists,  
DIY filmmakers, mad playwrights, and rock 'n' roll  
glitter queens who revolutionized culture**

**KEMBREW MCLEOD**

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## CHAPTER 27

### Mercer's Mixes It Up

After Andy Warhol discovered Eric Emerson dancing at a 1966 *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* show, he was promptly cast in *The Chelsea Girls* and several other Factory films. By 1971, Emerson had become the frontman of one of New York's earliest glam rock bands, the Magic Tramps. He would wear giant glittery angel wings and other eye-popping accouterments onstage; when he chose not to wear clothes he just showered himself in gold glitter dust that flaked off when he flexed his muscles—lasciviously staring at some of the boys in the audience.<sup>1</sup> “Eric Emerson was this beautiful blond boy,” said Jim Fouratt, who used to see him in the back room of Max’s Kansas City. “First of all, he was working class. He wasn’t a rich kid. And he was very pretty, but he was also very strong—handsome, sexy, sort of masculine.”

The Magic Tramps started a residency at Max’s in early 1971 after owner Mickey Ruskin gave them access to the upstairs room, which had largely gone unused since the Velvet Underground played their final gigs with Lou Reed a year earlier. The Magic Tramps outgrew Max’s as the city’s glam rock scene flowered, so Emerson scouted for a new space to play and stumbled across the fledgling Mercer Arts Center. It was the brainchild of air-conditioning magnate Seymour Kaback, a theater lover who turned an old downtown building into a large maze-like arts complex with several theaters and concert rooms. In addition to two three-hundred-seat theaters and two two-hundred-seat theaters, Mercer’s had an art-house cinema, jazz lounge, bar, restaurant, two boutiques, and the Kitchen—an experimental film and performance venue housed in the hotel’s old kitchen.

All the rooms in Mercer’s emptied into a central gathering space that had an all-white design, which some people called the Clockwork Orange Room. “Whatever you were going to see,” Tony Zanetta recalled, “you would run into other people who were going to see something else. That’s what made it more

interesting. So maybe you were going to see *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and I was going to see Wayne County or the New York Dolls. We would be sitting in the same room before or after the show, but we might not have been in that room otherwise." On some nights, David Bowie could be seen slouched in a bright red plastic chair next to a massive antique mirror, absorbing the atmosphere.



New York Dolls set list on the back of Mercer Arts Center flyer  
COURTESY KRISTIAN HOFFMAN

Emerson helped fix up Mercer's in exchange for rehearsal space, and when it officially opened in November 1971 his band performed regular cabaret sets in the venue's Blue Room. "I met Eric when I went to see the Dolls for the first time," Blondie's Chris Stein recalled. "The whole scene was very accessible, hanging out backstage and all that. Eric was a great character." Stein became the Magic Tramps' informal roadie after he booked them to play a Christmas party at the School of Visual Arts, where he was a student, and the two became roommates in a welfare apartment on First Street and First Avenue. "Eric was very dynamic and there was something very lovable about him," Zanetta said. "Everyone was drawn to Eric—men, women—and he was pretty much an equal opportunist."

Debbie Harry, for instance, recalled making out with Emerson in a phone booth at Max's.<sup>2</sup> "He was such a big flirt and he was such a madman who was a lot of fun," Harry said, "but he was a complete maniac, just sort of raging all the time." Emerson wreaked all kinds of havoc, but for the most part he was harmless. "Eric



would just walk around in those shorts and nothing else except glitter on his chest," recalled Lisa Jane Persky. "He would bump up against you and kiss you, and you would get it all over you." *An American Family's* Kristian Hoffman had a similar experience. "Eric just ran up to me and gave me a great big tongue kiss for no reason," he said. "I thought it was quite an accomplishment until I found out that since he was high all the time he would French kiss anybody."

"The Magic Tramps were fun enough," Hoffman added. "It seemed like a campy drag show, but then you kept waiting for a song to arrive. It wasn't really about music, but with the New York Dolls, it was really solid music. It was exciting." Emerson invited the Dolls to open for the Magic Tramps at Mercer's, and they sent a jolt through the downtown scene by reminding folks that enthusiasm trumped technical proficiency. For drummer Jerry Nolan—who started out playing in Wayne County's Queen Elizabeth before joining the New York Dolls—David Johansen and company returned rock 'n' roll back to basics. "I fell in love with them right away," Nolan recalled. "I said, 'Holy shit! These kids are doing what nobody else is doing. They're bringing back the three-minute song!'"<sup>3</sup>

The Dolls first threw rent parties at their downtown loft on 119 Chrystie Street before hitting the DIY concert circuit. With Jackie Curtis as the opening act, they played their first proper show in early 1972 in the Hotel Diplomat. The group also had a short residency at a gay bathhouse, the Continental Baths, where Bette Midler regularly performed with Barry Manilow (who sometimes blended in with the patrons by wearing nothing but a white towel). Underground rock, Off-Off-Broadway, and the cabaret scenes converged in the early 1970s, cross-pollinating each other. Midler, for example, had appeared at La MaMa in Tom Eyan's *Miss Nefertiti Regrets* before she leveraged her act at the Continental Baths into pop stardom.

Roberta Bayley, who later worked the door at CBGB, noted that the Dolls' glittery, feminine clothes stood in sharp contrast to their masculine swagger. "That's what was interesting," Bayley said, "because these real guy-guys were wearing off-the-shoulder blouses and being very confident in their heterosexuality." The Dolls had several ties to the fashion world; guitarist Sylvain Sylvain, for instance, was a designer who had a successful clothing company called Truth and Soul. "There were lots of people who wore colorful clothes or scarves or what have you," said Agosto Machado. "It wasn't unusual to see a more masculine man with a pink scarf, or have a few of their nails painted different colors." Lisa Jane Persky added, "Growing up in the Village, everybody already dressed like the New York Dolls. And everybody was dressing like that in theater."

drums, and guitars altogether—opting instead for synths, drum machines, and vocals. “We weren’t interested in rehashing the same rock ‘n’ roll,” Vega said. “We wanted something new, and we weren’t even necessarily thinking musically, but theatrically.”

Suicide tried to bring Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty into music by breaking down the boundaries between performer and audience. “We wanted to make them participants in the performance, whether they liked it or not,” Vega said. “People found that threatening.” As he physically and psychologically terrorized the audience, a rigid Rev produced a wall of sound from behind a bank of primitive keyboards and other crude electronics. “As you were leaving Mercer’s, you would hear something,” Zone recalled. “You would open the door and it would be Suicide, with no one in there, and of course we would go in. Alan would be in silver makeup and wearing a blond wig.”

Vega wasn’t that crazy about the New York Dolls’ songs, which to him sounded like backward-looking 1960s party music. “The Dolls’ audience definitely didn’t like what we were doing,” Vega said, “but when we played the Blue Room their audience had to walk through it when they exited, because it was like a central corridor. If the Dolls’ room was like a party, our room was like a scene of carnage. Sometimes I would block the exit if people tried to leave. People thought I was fucking insane, and I guess I was, but I never, ever tried to hurt people. Myself, yes, I hurt myself. I would cut myself with a switchblade. I would always do it so that I got the most amount of blood with the least amount of pain.”

Vega spent the first three years of his life on the Lower East Side before his family moved to a more middle-class area of Brooklyn (his father was a renowned diamond setter). At the age of sixteen, he got involved with a collective named the Art Workers’ Coalition, then started working with the Project of Living Artists. “It was basically this group of about a half dozen people that got money from the New York state government,” Vega said. “With that money we got a huge loft, a big open space, by Broadway, where anyone could wander in off the street. I was basically the janitor there.” This job allowed him to pursue a career as a visual artist and sculptor, creating large light paintings with colored fluorescent tubes. “I incorporated some glass things later on,” Vega said, “and also TV sets, subway lights, electrical equipment, and anything, really, I could get my hands on.”

His interest turned toward music after seeing the Stooges in 1969, when Iggy Pop enthralled him with his confrontational theatrics. Vega had never considered going onstage, but he wanted a challenge. “I wanted to evolve as an artist, because what I saw Iggy do was so futuristic and so new,” he said. “If I stayed a sculptor,



a visual artist, I would have stagnated." Vega had already been experimenting with electronic sounds, and after he saw Marty Rev play at the Project of Living Artists, the two formed Suicide. One of their earliest shows was in 1970 at OK Harris, one of the first galleries to open in SoHo. It was owned by Ivan Karp, an art dealer who played an early role in promoting Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg.

"I told him Suicide should play at his gallery," Vega said, "and to our surprise he said yes, and they printed up postcards and everything saying Punk Music by Suicide. It was a pretty intense show, but we got invited back, even though we freaked everyone out." The OK Harris show flyer contained the first use of the word "punk" by a band, one of the many ways in which Suicide was truly cutting edge. "I remember seeing Alan Vega around the scene very early on," said Chris Stein. "Suicide was so groundbreaking, it's hard to convey how far ahead they were in relation to what was going on at the time." Debbie Harry added, "As a performer, Alan was sometimes a baffling struggle of danger, drama, pathos, and comedy. He held nothing back from us, and the interaction with audience hecklers was fundamental."

Not only was their music radically different from the New York Dolls, so was their look. "We were street guys, we took what we could get, sometimes from the garbage," Vega said. "I remember Marty went through the trash and other thrift store or Salvation Army type stuff, mainly out of necessity. We didn't have any money, so what became the punk look was born out of necessity. I cut holes in socks so that my fingers went through and I stretched the socks up to my elbows and had a cutoff pink jacket. That was really something, man! Basically, I just wore what I could afford. I'm not sure really what the fuck I was thinking."

Several of the bands that played at the Mercer Arts Center came out of theater—like Ruby and the Rednecks, which straddled the glam and punk eras. "I formed a band out of the musicians who played with the Play-House of the Ridiculous," recalled Ruby Lynn Reyner, "and I said, 'Why don't we play these songs from the shows?' I asked John Vaccaro's permission and he said he didn't care." Ruby and the Rednecks' staple, "He's Got the Biggest Balls in Town," was a favorite from Jackie Curtis's *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit*:

He's got the biggest balls in town, even upside-down.  
You ain't seen balls till you've seen Paul's:  
Round, firm, and meaty; You could write a treaty on those balls!  
He's got guts in those nuts! When Gabriel calls they'll blow his balls.







“Ruby sang quite a few songs from *Heaven Grand* and *Cock-Strong*, and some original material,” said Play-House of the Ridiculous actor Michael Arian, a backup singer for the group. “All of her songs were not so much singing as little theater pieces, like Bette Midler did. Ruby was just extraordinary and was very, very entertaining.” Reyner often acted out the lyrics while contorting her rubbery face or shaking her glitter-slathered breasts like maracas to a Latin beat. Ruby and the Rednecks were one of the staples of the Mercer’s scene, appearing on the bill at a legendary New Year’s Eve 1972 gig with Jonathan Richman’s Modern Lovers, Suicide, Wayne County, and the New York Dolls.



David Johansen, Kristian Hoffman, and Jonathan Richman (left to right)  
COURTESY KRISTIAN HOFFMAN

“Patti Smith was an opening act at Mercer Arts Center for a couple of shows when I played with the Dolls,” Reyner recalled. “She went on early, reading her poetry, so not that many people were there. She didn’t have her musicians yet, but she picked up the music pretty fast.” Reading poems to an unruly audience that was waiting to hear the headlining rock ‘n’ roll act schooled Patti in the art of crowd control and stage presence. “I read my poems, fielded insults, and sometimes sang songs accompanied by bits of music on my cassette player,” she recalled, and by the summer of 1973 she was hitting her stride. “I took to ending

each performance with 'Piss Factory,' a prose poem I had improvised, framing my escape from a nonunion assembly line to the freedom of New York City."<sup>5</sup>

Lenny Kaye described these early shows as being very loose; they were still not thinking in traditional rock band terms and instead just followed their instincts after he began playing with her again later in 1973. "You're right next door to where the loft jazz scene is taking place, you're in an area in which experimentalism is encouraged," Kaye said. "That experimentalism was so far off the mainstream that you didn't really worry about it—you didn't think you're going to suddenly have a hit record. You're doing it for your peer group, essentially."

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The Kitchen was founded by Steina and Woody Vasulka, two immigrants who wanted to create an alternative arts space at Mercer's that programmed everything from video to electronic music—though they also made room for rock 'n' roll. "The New York Dolls started in the Kitchen," Steina said. "They rehearsed in the Kitchen and then they performed there, and it got very wild. Their audiences were very out there." She recalled one night when she saw a bag of heroin on the floor during a Dolls show; Steina ran over to hide it from the police just outside the room, but an enterprising audience member snatched it up first.

The Vasulkas also helped incubate an all-male ballet troupe founded by Larry Ree. "Les Ballets Trockadero started in the Kitchen, after he performed his dance in *Vain Victory*," she said, referring to Ree's interpretation of Anna Pavlova's famous dance, "The Dying Swan." "I knew Larry through Jackie Curtis, and he asked if he could rehearse there." Steina gave the Kitchen's keys to Ree, who used it as a rehearsal space for his troupe, which was originally named Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet Company (some members eventually branched off and formed the well-known Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo company). Many other contemporary dancers also performed at the Kitchen, including Shirley Clarke collaborator Daniel Nagrin, who asked the composer Rhys Chatham to accompany him in 1971. "I saw these Slavic-looking people that Daniel also invited to come play, and it was Woody and Steina," Chatham recalled. "Steina was on viola and Woody had his synthesizer. So we hit it off."

They asked Chatham to organize some concerts at the Kitchen, which he began staging on Monday nights. The room was a big rectangular box with high ceilings, so they installed baffling insulation to flatten the sound and improve the acoustics. Folding chairs allowed them to move the seating around to fit a musician's needs.



"It was great presenting at the Kitchen," Chatham said. "We programmed dance from time to time, but mostly it was electronic image and electronic music." The young composer extended an invitation to La Monte Young, whose musical collective the Theatre of Eternal Music deeply influenced him. Chatham regularly attended Young's concerts as a teenager, and later joined his group in 1973 when experimental musicians Jon Hassell and Terry Riley were also members. "We just wanted to open the place and see what would happen," Steina said, "and it was really fun for two years." But running the Kitchen became something of a grind for the Vasulkas, as well as for Chatham, so they stepped down from their duties to focus on their own art.

"I was the music director from '71 to '73," Chatham said, "and then we all got tired—Woody, Steina, and me—because we were all working for free." They turned the Kitchen over to Robert Stearns, a solid administrator who was good at fundraising. "He hired Arthur Russell as music director from around 1974 to 1975," the composer continued, "and Arthur did something that raised a lot of eyebrows. He invited Talking Heads to play, along with the Modern Lovers." Footage of that Talking Heads show at the Kitchen is among the earliest videotaped documentations of New York's punk scene.

Like Russell, Chatham also played a role in the convergence of underground rock and experimental music. This connection began when he was talking to his composer friend Peter Gordon, who asked, "Have you ever in your life been to a rock concert?" No, the twenty-four-year-old replied. Gordon laughed and told him about a great neighborhood club where a cool local band was playing, and asked him to go. "So this was me in 1976," he said, "the band was the Ramones, the place was CBGB's."

Chatham had never seen or heard anything like it, and it was utterly romantic to him. "The music was complex," he said, perhaps the only time "complex" was used to describe the Ramones—a group best known for its short, fast, and sweet bubblepunk songs. "I was playing one chord, and they were playing three, but I felt something in common with that music." He got an electric guitar and began developing a new compositional style that led to his first major breakthrough, "Guitar Trio." Informed by both classical minimalism and punk rock, Chatham's landmark instrumental piece carved out a hypnotic, dissonant template that influenced 1980s post-punk groups such as Sonic Youth.

The Mercer Arts Center's aesthetic was wide open enough to make room for glam groups, avant-garde composers, and even funk bands like Dance—which regularly played with the New York Dolls. "What was popular at that time was

a kind of non-rhythmic pop music," said Dance frontman Marion Cowings, one of the handful of African Americans in that scene. "A lot of audiences back then weren't conditioned to dancing, but the Mercer's crowd was great." The band's guitarist, Nestor Zarragoitia, grew up in Greenwich Village and in the early 1970s was living in SoHo in the same building with Cowings and Dolls frontman David Johansen.

"SoHo used to be a garment district," Cowings recalled. "All of a sudden the factories started folding and moving out, and the artists came in and fixed them up and became a community." Only a few galleries like OK Harris dotted the area, along with the occasional bodega, martial arts studio, and what was left of the industrial sector. "The workers would come out of the factories," Zarragoitia said, "so you'd see them sitting outside eating their lunch." Cowings was friends with Johansen, which led to Dance playing at Mercer's with the New York Dolls. "We opened up for them a lot," Zarragoitia said, "and the last gig we did at the Mercer Arts Center with the Dolls was that night before the collapse."

On August 3, 1973, the Mercer's walls—which were structurally linked to a neighboring derelict hotel—had been ominously groaning all day. At 5:10, just twenty minutes before the first scheduled Friday evening performances, the hotel "fell like a pancake," said fire chief John T. O'Hagan.<sup>6</sup> The Magic Tramps were in their rehearsal space when the building began shaking, so Emerson and his bandmates ran for their lives.<sup>7</sup> Alan Vega happened to be walking down Mercer Street about an hour after the hotel fell, while the dust was still settling. "It looked like a bomb had been dropped on it," he said. "You could see the Blue Room, where we used to play, and it was just surrounded by rubble." Only part of the Mercer Arts Center building came down with the hotel, but the rest of it had to be torn down for safety reasons.

The fall of the Broadway Central Hotel epitomized New York's precarious condition in the 1970s, when the city was on the brink of bankruptcy, its infrastructure was crumbling, and crime was rampant. Those who witnessed the collapse recalled seeing rats fleeing the scene and fanning out into the streets; likewise, the artists and musicians who frequented Mercer's scrambled to find new places to perform. During the dying days of glam rock, many of them began populating a Bowery bar that became known as CBGB, where the final act of this drama played out.



## CHAPTER 28

### DIY TV

The Mercer Arts Center's many rooms provided a home for underground rock, contemporary dance, Off-Off-Broadway, and even Shirley Clarke's video experiments. The former filmmaker embraced the egalitarian potential of video as an alternative to broadcast television, a mass medium that encouraged passive media consumption. "It was very important for her that it should go back and forth in a two-way type of communication," recalled Andrew Gurian, her longtime assistant. "She was very democratic and ahead of her time in that way. And I think she really was excited by the fact that all this equipment was getting smaller and smaller and more accessible to everyone."

Clarke also found creative ways to subvert the masculine-coded domain of electronics. "One day Shirley just painted all the equipment pink," Gurian said. "You associate it with six-year-old girls and their dolls, which I think was the point. She constantly would refer to what we did as being 'playful.' We were adults playing around. So if you wound up with a pink screwdriver, there was something lighthearted about that. It desterilized the equipment so it became an extension of your eye and your hand." Clarke's aim was to make the hardware feel more user-friendly, so that no one felt excluded.

The Kitchen, cofounded by Steina and Woody Vasulka, provided a testing ground for Clarke and others to imagine these new modes of electronic communication. "Shirley's idea was to have video always going, constantly there," Steina said. "So the first programming we had was video on Wednesdays, an open house where anybody could come in and show stuff." In addition to the Tee Pee Video Space Troupe and Videofreex, several other downtown video groups had formed by the early 1970s—Raindance, People's Video Theater, Global Village—most of which made use of the Kitchen. "People would be coming with a tape, which was at that time reel-to-reel, just totally hot," she said. "They ripped it off their equipment and ran as fast as they could down there to show it."

Steina was born in Reykjavík, Iceland, and at age nineteen received a classical music scholarship to the Prague Conservatory in Czechoslovakia, where she met Woody Vasulka. "He had a very hard time getting out of the country, because behind the Iron Curtain, you couldn't move," she said, explaining why they eloped and eventually moved to the United States in 1965. Woody had been working in Prague as a television engineer, and when they arrived in New York he began working for a firm that produced multiscreen video projections. "They did a project in Montreal for the '67 World's Fair, and Woody was involved in two of the projects that were shown there," Steina said. "That was our first introduction to video."

That was the same year that Sony introduced the Portapak video camera to the consumer market, and the couple soon began documenting the scenes that surrounded them. "The Vasulkas videoed everything," recalled *Pork* actor Tony Zanetta. "They didn't just videotape theater, they did it all. They have an incredible archive of everything that went on downtown." The couple could be seen shooting a Fillmore East underground rock band or behind the video camera at an Off-Off-Broadway show. Steina taped her friend Jackie Curtis's first play, *Glory, Glamour, and Gold*, as well as *Femme Fatale* and *Vain Victory* a few years later. "That's how I discovered that this was what I should do, shooting video," she said, "and then after that, Jackie would always call when she thought we should be there."

In 1970, the Vasulkas got an opportunity to fix up the Mercer Arts Center's old kitchen, which is how the venue got its name. "Everyone thought the Kitchen would sound mystical," Steina said, "like we were going to cook art in there."

By the time the Kitchen opened its doors, the Videofreex were preparing to leave New York. When their CBS funding ran out, the group reassessed their options. "We didn't have any income," Mary Curtis Ratcliff said, "and all of us were trying to live in Manhattan, but there was no real market for this stuff we were doing." So the 'freex did what many in the counterculture did at the time: moved to the country and lived communally. They found a huge twenty-seven-room boarding house called Maple Tree Farm located in Lanesville, New York, about a three-hour drive north of the city. "In Lanesville, we had visiting artists all the time," Nancy Cain said. "Like Twyla Tharp's dance company, she would come up and they would do things out in the meadow—just amazing, amazing choreography."

"Shirley Clarke would come to stay with us in Lanesville," Skip Blumberg recalled. "There was the 'Shirley Clarke Memorial Guest Room,' we called it,



because she decorated one of the rooms." She painted it entirely with a glossy red hue, and it was like a playroom—which was fitting for a childlike middle-aged woman. When Ratcliff asked Clarke for advice about getting married, she said, "Oh, when you get married, I'll bring a cake and a case of champagne to the wedding." But when that day arrived, Clarke brought only her video cameras. "She produced what she called a Marx Brothers movie," Cain recalled, "with a background being the wedding that was taking place in Lanesville." Shirley played the part of Groucho—her favorite—and recruited others to play Harpo and Chico. "I could've strangled her," Ratcliff said. "But it didn't matter. It was all kind of funny."

When the Videofreex arrived in 1970, Lanesville was a rural hamlet whose townsfolk didn't know what to make of them. "But the long-haired hippie types turned out to be very friendly and quite interesting," Ratcliff said. "We would go into town and videotape what was happening down at the bar, or talk to pig farmers, or whatever was happening." While there, the Videofreex also set up America's first pirate television station, thanks to Abbie Hoffman. He had known David Cort from their college days, and the activist met the rest of the Videofreex during their time downtown. When Hoffman wrote *Steal This Book*, his subversive how-to guide published in 1971, he paid the 'freex to build a transmitter to test out for the chapter on pirate broadcasting. "We realize becoming TV guerrillas is not everyone's trip," he wrote, "but a small band with a few grand can indeed pull it off."<sup>1</sup>

"Abbie had tried to get us to broadcast guerrilla television all over Manhattan," Ratcliff said, "but you couldn't broadcast from a VW bus, and you couldn't get a signal with all those huge buildings all around." In Lanesville, this wasn't a problem, so the Videofreex used the equipment to build a little broadcast tower atop their farmhouse. "We turned on this little transmitter that Abbie had given us," Cain said. "We took a TV set down to a bar about half a mile down the road, Doyle's Tavern, and we turned on the TV set and the signal was there!" The local community—which previously couldn't get network television signals because of the surrounding mountains and foothills—started tuning into these wildly illegal broadcasts, which were never shut down by the government.

It turned out the Videofreex had an ally in Federal Communications Commission commissioner Nicholas Johnson, who promoted independent media through his strong advocacy of video technologies and public access television. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Nicholas Johnson to the FCC, where he

served as a rabble-rouser for media democracy until 1973. "We were inspired by Nick Johnson and those other authors who were challenging the status quo," Blumberg recalled. "He was part of a group of people like Marie Winn, who wrote *The Plug-In Drug* and did boycotts of watching TV. These people were heroic because they were smart, they were tough, and they worked inside the system, but they were doing something entirely different than us. We were creating a new world and we were having a lot of fun doing it."

The Videofreex weren't the only video artists who moved upstate. At the time, the New York State Council on the Arts was heavily funding work in video, which was originally concentrated in New York City. Because those funds were required to be distributed evenly across the state, video artists migrated from the Lower East Side and SoHo because they had a better shot of getting arts funding elsewhere. One video hub developed at Syracuse University, which founded a video-oriented visiting artist program called Synapse. "The people who started it were interested in Buckminster Fuller and Portapak and the *Whole Earth Catalog*," said Paul Dougherty, a college student who later documented the early punk movement in New York City. "You can imagine a whole matrix of things, long-haired hippie video-freak-type folks."

There were few places to present video in the early 1970s, aside from screening venues like the Kitchen, Synapse in upstate New York, and the pirate broadcasts of Lanesville TV. Into this vacuum emerged public access channels on cable television. In the early 1970s, public access stations began popping up around the country, channeling underground culture into people's living rooms. There weren't many options to choose from on cable television back then; HBO was still a small-time operation, and only three television networks existed, plus PBS. "Public access got fabulous exposure," recalled Dougherty, who began working at one of New York's first public access channels. "So you're channel surfing Channel 11, WPIX, Channel 13, WPBS, and then the next channel that you come to is public access. So location, location, location."

Before Chris Stein cofounded Blondie with Debbie Harry in 1974, the guitarist collaborated with some former members of the Cockettes on a public access show called *Hollywood Spit*. "It was the four of them—Fayette Hauser, Tomata du Plenty, Gorilla Rose, Screaming Orchids," he said. "They considered themselves kind of the Drag Beatles. We just edited in the camera, carefully in sequence, as we were shooting, and it was just a weird, ahead-of-its-time drag situation comedy. Unfortunately, the tapes were destroyed in a fire in my friend's loft."



*Interview* magazine contributor Anton Perich—who documented the scenes at Max's Kansas City and the Mercer Art Center with his Super 8 film and Portapak video camera—also began making his own public access show, *Anton Perich Presents*, which debuted in January 1973. "Video was the freshest flower in the machine garden, fragrant and black and white," he said. "The Portapak was this miraculous machine in a miraculous epoch. It was truly a revolutionary instrument. I was ready for revolution." In one infamous episode of *Anton Perich Presents*, downtown scenester (and soon-to-be Ramones manager) Danny Fields acted out a scene in which he tried to cure a television repairman's hemorrhoids by inserting a lubricated lightbulb into his anus. "The show was censored during the cablecast," Perich recalled. "They inserted a black screen and Muzak. It was the biggest scandal. Every major media outlet did a story about it."

By the early 1970s, many downtown artists were taken by video—including playwright Harry Koutoukas, who turned 87 Christopher Street's fire escapes into a staging area captured by Global Village's trusty Portapaks. Koutoukas's neighbor, James Hall, had acted in some television shows, commercials, and theater—including *Back Bog Beast Bait* in the ill-fated Sam Shepard double bill that included *Cowboy Mouth*. One day in October 1972, Koutoukas knocked on Hall's door to see if he had anything to eat or drink. "We didn't have regular jobs, so we were just riffing on our usual 'what to do today?' back-and-forth," Hall recalled. "And while we were eating breakfast Harry said, 'Let's do a play! I'll write it, and we'll perform, and you cast it. We'll call it Fire Escape Theater!'" Koutoukas ended up naming the play *Suicide Notations*, and he conscripted his neighbor Lisa Jane Persky in her New York debut as an actress.

If Off-Off-Broadway opened its doors to nonprofessionals, *Suicide Notations* was more like Off-Off-Off-Broadway. Persky's mother let Koutoukas use the fire escape on the front of her apartment for the actors to shout their lines, and other scenes took place on Hall's fire escape directly above them. Persky played the Girl in Gown—wearing her own exotic long yellow dress with red moons and stars—and Hall was the Sleepwalking Poet. Koutoukas stole the show as Louis XIV, wearing a crown and a gaudy silk bathrobe, complemented with feathers, beads, and glitter. "I didn't think about *Suicide Notations* as being in a play," Persky said. "It was just an off-the-cuff kind of thing—like a Happening, really. We had a dress rehearsal, which was a performance for the street, because we knew we were going to shoot it on video."

It was taped by Rudi Stern, who cofounded Global Village and had previously produced light shows for LSD guru Timothy Leary. When Stern shot it at night, he

# FIRE ESCAPE THEATRE

## "SUICIDE NOTATIONS"

by: H. M. KOUTOUKAS

director: J. S. HALL

Production:

GLOBAL VILLAGE

RUDI STERN

### CHARACTERS:

JACKIE CURTIS — AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL  
BALLERINA

H. M. KOUTOUKAS — LOUIS XIV

TAYLOR MEAD — TATTER MUFFIN

RON TAVEL — MAN IN TUXEDO

JAMES HALL — SLEEPWALKING POET

RON WHYTE — CRIPPLE

JANE ROBERTS — MAD PRINCESS

LISA PERSKY — GIRL IN GOWN

87 CHRISTOPHER ST. ▲ OCT. 22, 1972

Mimeographed Suicide Notations poster  
COURTESY THE ARCHIVES OF LISA JANE PERSKY

lit up the fire escapes on all six floors and ran the master switchboard in Persky's apartment. "My friend on the street," Hall recalled, "he threw his crutches in front of a bus to stop the bus so we could shoot a scene." Taylor Mead, Ronald Tavel, and Jackie Curtis were also cast for the video production, but like many early video pieces, the *Suicide Notations* tapes were lost years ago. All that remains is a faded mimeo flyer.