

I'm a Clubber

by Alissa Bennett

on MTV's *True Life: I'm a Clubber*
(First Aired in 2003)

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MTV, *True Life: I'm a Clubber*, 2003, (still).

Image description: A black-ink drawing of a man with a deep widow's peak wearing a shirt with the initials JP. The drawing creator's hand is visible, holding a black-ink pen.

BIG WINDOW

It was just one year before the Drug Enforcement Administration put a permanent "Sorry, We're Closed" sign on the front door of New York's Sound Factory that MTV aired an episode of *True Life* devoted to the after-hours super-club. Originally broadcast in November of 2003, *True Life: I'm a Clubber* documented a group of young-ish techno devotees who were eager to share with the world their dancing, their outfits, their favorite drugs, and the life-destroying pleasures of a party that never stopped.

I'd never been to Sound Factory in 2003, though I'd certainly heard of it. Located at 618 West 46th Street, the club had somehow survived Giuliani's draconian "quality of life" purge and had become a weekend afterhours mecca for thousands of people who were slavishly devoted to cargo pants and a house DJ named Jonathan Peters. Known for marathon sets that began Saturday nights and crept into the small hours of Monday mornings, *True Life* presents Peters as a figure who is worshipped, lusted after, resented and revered in equal measure. Because he simultaneously occupies the roles of pied piper and totally unremarkable floating signifier, Peters' skill as a DJ is rendered absolutely meaningless. He is instead turned into a reflective surface on which we can examine the mental illness of a pair of Long Island club rats, a spikey-haired night owl more interesting for the insane arc of emotions he inspires in strangers than for the music he plays (of which we hear exactly 0 minutes and 0 seconds).

Among Peters' most insistent admirers is Patricia, a Polish transplant who threw herself into 24-hour partying after life revealed to her its bottomless buffet of disappointments. Divorced, addicted to plastic surgery, lonely for the meth pipe and increasingly alienated from her stressed out family, Patricia found love on the dancefloor at Sound Factory when no one else seemed to understand anything at all. "I love Jonaton Peetairs," she tells us, recumbent and ashing a cigarette into a giant clam shell that she has customized with the letters J and P (in Sharpie), her room strewn with drawings of her dream man that alternate between barely competent teenage love doodles and frighteningly photo-realistic charcoal portraits. "He is the best fucking DJ in the world," she says, the camera panning from her oversized lips to the "JP" pendent she wears nestled in her thrice enhanced breasts. "Nobody does the job like JP."

Patricia goes on to explain that she has oriented her life around staying away from the home she shares with her cat as much as possible. If she stops too long, the full chaos of her life will overtake her, and so she instead she hunts Peters. "People don't understand," she tells us,

ashing again in her special shell while supergluing plastic gemstones to her nipples, "how you could love someone you don't know. But if I like someone, then that's the person I want to be with." Like all amphetamine addicts who have accidentally devoted themselves to going "all the way," Patricia sees the blinding light of destiny where the rest of us find only the grubby fingerprints of coincidence; she hears the clanging of wedding bells when the rest of us hear the jingle jangle of the jailer's keys. "I cannot get away from this man," she squeals when happening upon a handful of discarded Sound Factory flyers dumped on an unidentified sidewalk. "He is haunting me!"

Peters' himself does not mince words when he appears briefly on screen to discuss his relationship with his Number One Fan. She scares him, he tells us after reading a stanza of poetry she wrote to him and explaining in pressured words that he worries she will kill him. Her insistence has begun to read as threatening, her devotion edging perilously close to stalking. Loitering outside of Peters' Manhattan home in a lowcut sundress and wide brimmed hat worthy of Barbie, Patricia hisses into her cell phone when her would-be lover sends her directly to the purgatory of voicemail. "Fuck you, JP," she says before laughing in her good-natured way and inhaling a cloud of smoke off of an abused looking square of tin foil. "I don't think he deserves to see me today."

It's a strange thing to write down all of Patricia's quirks and transgressions, to see the bizarre alchemy of her vulnerability and aggression collapsed down into mere words. I cannot possibly convey to you the affection I feel for her, nor adequately explain her charm in the face of her dysfunction. At the center of Patricia's illness is a fantasy that the simple act of staying out all night will insulate her from the grotesque realities of life, that to be at Sound Factory is to become someone else, at least for a little while. "Home is the last place I want to be now," she says after JP's most recent rejection, resplendent in last night's sunhat and looking fresh in the way that only professionals can. "Home is the last place, man. Who goes home?" She says, taking a sip from a McDonald's cup as she rounds into the 150th hour of her day. "I don't feel good," she says, and we all know that she is telling the truth.

There are, of course, other characters of note in *I'm a Clubber*; a tanned woman with hair like a stuffed lion named Genaire, who helps dress Patricia for some hellish after-after hours club despite proclaiming to the cameras and the world that she herself has not slept in 85 hours. Poor Pete from Ronkonkoma, who dreams of being a DJ, but is also so tired

from going out to worship Jonathan Peters that he is completely unable to be on time for anything in his real life. They're alright, I guess, but they're no Patricia.

I watched a seemingly homemade documentary about Sound Factory to see if it could tell me what *I'm a Clubber* could not, if it could possibly begin to explain the appeal of a place that always seemed to me as though its floors must be sticky with Red Bull, its bathrooms a graveyard of carelessly discarded angel wings and miniature Ziplock bags. A pigtailed young lady named Angela tried her best. Looking to all the world like a down-market Chloe Sevigny, Angela chewed an invisible piece of gum while intoning "the mood is like, so intense, and the balloons and stuff make it really festive." The camera panned to semi-nude person draped in tinsel, and I guess it seemed festive enough. A man named Danny in a Zorro mask banged two light-up plastic balls together. "I come here every week dressed as Zorro," Danny says, "just CHILLIN'. I do crazy things here. I do flips, I roll around just doin... I play with my toys, yo, just havin' a blast and that's the way it goes. You'll always see me here dressed as Zorro," he says, eyes flashing beneath the wavy brim of a bucket hat. "For real, though." It was old fashioned and stupid, and it made me feel ashamed for everyone.

Part of the thrill of first watching *I'm a Clubber* was that it appeared a beat too late. No longer cloaked in the synthetic costume of transgression, all-night partying suddenly looked exhausting and antique—it looked like a pile of damp bandanas, like an overflowing garbage can flickering with the anemic light of 4,000 dying glowsticks. It seemed a strange thing that people in 2003 still bothered to snort piles of K off of communal bathroom vanities or enjoy a 7am candy flip with strangers. I'd moved to New York in 1996, and had spent hours reading and re-reading Michael Musto's column in the Village Voice in which the writer first intimated and later confirmed that clubland's crowned prince of bad behavior was officially a murderer. By the time the full details of Michael Alig's crime made it to the likes of me, it appeared as though New York nightlife had been eclipsed by the drama of its own notoriety; places like Sound Factory suddenly became depressing architectural relics, obsolete pleasure centers that represented a moment of American culture that was permanently wedged—tchotchke-like—between the Gulf War and September 11th.

I often think of poor Patricia often. I think of her in a compact car, driving over bridges and hurtling through tunnels in outfits made of

crepe paper and double-sided tape. I think of her drawings and her seashells, of her collection of ketamine bottles and of her unrequited love. I hope the 2003 message boards are right, that she left club life and turned her back on Jonathan Peters forever. She was right: he didn't deserve to see her. Probably none of us did.

