



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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A vibrant history of the artists and performers of downtown New York in the 1960s and 70s draws on interviews with notables ranging from Debbie Harry and Yoko Ono and is complemented by several previously unpublished photographs.

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From Reader Review 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 for online ebook

Alisa says

This book was information-packed and very interesting. While I don't usually read scholarly works during my vacation, learning about the history of Andy Warhol could hardly be considered a "drag."

Bob Schnell says

The most comprehensive book on the downtown NYC cultural scene, from the beatniks to the punks, that I've read. Much about the Off-Off Broadway scene was new to me, yet such an essential piece of the puzzle. If I knew in 1980 what I know now from reading this book, I would have not spent so much time looking for, and often not finding, the "in" places.

The author, Kembrew McLeod, spent 17 years researching this book and it shows. His craft is trying to include as much as possible without making it read like a list of names, places and dates. He even managed to add some details to stories I thought I already knew in depth. The main gist is that every downtown artist, no matter the medium, was influenced by everyone else and this book puts it all in perspective.

Highly recommended.

Julie says

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* by Kembrew McLeod is an Abrams Press publication.

The storied creativity, the bohemian lifestyle, and the open sexual freedom and expression of Greenwich Village beginning in the late 1950s and continuing well into the late 1970s may have been underground, but the art, theatre, movies, magazines and music influenced the country in ways that may only be fully appreciated in hindsight.

I'm a little too young to have known much about how this area in New York blossomed into such an artistic community, and with my conservative upbringing and regional location, if it wasn't making headlines, I remained largely uninformed. While I was always fascinated by the Sixties decade, and the bulk of my childhood memories stems from mainstream 1970s pop culture, the influence of the underground didn't start to sink in for me until I was much older. I knew the main players- Andy Warhol, The Velvet Underground, Deborah Harry, and the CBGB-OMFUG club and of course, "The Village Voice". But, that's about it. Although, I have always studied the sixties, and to some extent, the seventies, the bohemian lifestyle of

Greenwich Village didn't interest me as much as all the other huge happenings in music and politics, and other avenues of pop culture.

So, while some may be well versed on the major contributors, inventors, pioneers- or in some cases, 'populizers', I have never scratched too far beneath the surface to get a clear picture of Greenwich Village, and honestly didn't know many of the influences mentioned in this book or the extent of their contributions to pop culture.

I did get a good sense of location and atmosphere which transformed art, stage, film, and journalism, and music in ways we never dreamed. Some of the people, places, events, and publications crossed over into mainstream consciousness, while other areas were contained within "The Village" or lower east side.

There are some infamous landmarks and notorious figures from this time who have gone down in history like Jackie Curtis- who Lou Reed immortalized in his most famous song, "Walk on the Wild Side," and may have influenced David Bowie's pansexual persona.

La MaMa and Café Cino theatres, coffeehouses, folk music, then Patti Smith, Deborah Harry, Glam rock, The Ramones, The Mumps, and a continual regeneration, reinvention, and sense of community radically changed and inspired pop culture not only in America, but all over the world.

While many may view this book as a homage to the gay community for their unrequited contributions and influence on mainstream pop culture, it also captures the essence of New York and the raw atmosphere that paved the way for the emergence of this community. It was a place where outsiders, artist, and other nonconformists could feel at home, and free to express themselves, something that would be very hard to do in this way, in most other places in the country at that time. Thus, a sexual revolution was born, spawning the counter -culture, in an explosion of vivid colors, sights and sounds that has never been matched since.

The layout of the book is a little scattered, in my opinion, and not as cohesive as I'd have liked, but those who are more informed on this subject than I, may find there is a method to the madness. The dark side of these times is not studied or mentioned a great deal, as this is more of a celebration of the pioneers, artists, and trailblazers, who may not have gotten the credit they deserved.

It is kind of ironic that just as I picked this book up it was announced that 'The Village Voice' was ceasing publication, with John Wilcox passing away shortly thereafter.

This book is one I recommend to those who are pop culture enthusiasts, fans of nostalgia and history. It's an eye popping, mind boggling experience for sure. I can't say that I always understood or was effected by the cutting-edge art or performances, nor was I able to conjure much of an emotional response to some of the material highlighted in this book, at least not in the same way I would with the pop culture I'm more familiar with, but this was still an interesting book, giving credit to the pop underground which is perhaps overlooked and rarely remarked upon in comparison to Woodstock or Haight Ashbury, and other places and people we tend to associate with pop culture.

4 stars

Steve Erickson says

There have been many books about the '60s counterculture and the beginnings of the New York punk scene.

THE DOWNTOWN PUNK UNDERGROUND doesn't break completely new ground here, but it approaches the area from a different POV, both in terms of the artists it focuses on and its structure. It covers a period of roughly 20 years ago, from the late '50s to the late '70s. Most of the artists it centers on are gay men or women; while some of them are famous, like Andy Warhol (whom it depicts mostly through unflattering remarks from actors and playwrights in his circle), Patti Smith and Debbie Harry, others are relatively unheralded. Rock bands like the Holy Modal Rounders, Silver Apples and Fast don't get as much focus as the Velvet Underground. Blondie and Ramones, but McLeod doesn't let the (ultimate) winners dominate this history. The point of all this is demonstrating the continuity from one counterculture to another and emphasizing the contributions of women and/or queers to a scene that often gets reduced to straight male rebellion. The way the book is organized into short, jumpy chapters isn't always effective, but it does cover a lot of ground in a relatively short space. (McLeod says that he spent 17 years working on it in some form.)

Jenny says

3.25. I especially enjoyed learning about some of the off-off broadway pioneers that I had not heard off. Otherwise, I feel like I was already familiar with most of these stories.

Tena says

I won an ARC edition in a GOODREADS giveaway.

Sara says

I read this in ARC, and I truly hope it has a good index in the final version. This is a very dense book, dealing with the influences and interconnections of a small town's worth of characters, and it traces their personal and artistic relationships through a couple of generations, from the late 1940s to the early 1980s. It doesn't cover everything and everyone, but I haven't seen a book that did more, and it includes a substantial bibliography. A lot of it radiates out from the influential and prolific theater, La MaMa, founded by Ellen Stewart in 1961. Plenty of famous names appear, certainly, but I was much more interested in the people I hadn't heard all about before, such as the Harris family, who moved from Florida to get into the theater, parents and children, and wow, did they. If you're interested in this particular scene, or in bohemian artistic life more generally, you should absolutely pick this up.

Richard says

I stumbled upon an advance copy of this book by pure happy accident at the Abrams Books booth at the Brooklyn Book Festival last weekend and, intrigued by its subject matter, started reading it as soon as I got home. I read this fantastic book with great pleasure and will be recommending it to all my friends who are fans of boundary-pushing downtown theatre and punk rock.

The book tracks the downtown underground scene in New York from the late 50s through the late 70s, focusing on a number of well-known and lesser-known figures, like:

- Andy Warhol
- Debbie Harry (of Blondie)
- Patti Smith
- Hibiscus (a drag performer)
- Shirley Clarke (filmmaker)
- Ellen Stewart (founder of La MaMa)
- The Ramones
- Joe Cino and his Caffe Cino
- Jayne County (formerly Wayne County)

With cameos from many others — Lou Reed, Bernadette Peters, Harvey Fierstein, Bette Midler, Barry Manilow, Divine, John Waters, Basquiat, etc.

McLeod does a fantastic job of making the reader feel like a wide-eyed seventeen-year-old kid who's just stepped off the bus/train/plane in Greenwich Village and is experiencing the scene for the first time. Another reviewer mentioned that they rarely read scholarly works, but that's really not what this book is — it's a masterful (and relatively conversational) history of a time and place that aims to be an oral history while at the same time drawing conclusions about how the downtown scene gave birth to a broader pop culture movement, especially with the explosion of Blondie onto the international scene and the birth of the punk rock movement (which the final section of the book covers). At the time, alternative (and often queer/trans) performance was sparking a revolution downtown, but because of the Village's proximity to the seats of media power, the major TV networks and record companies, the scenes cross-pollinated generously at times despite being at odds.

I loved reading about the off-off-Broadway theatre scene that was such a big part of the downtown experience. Despite the fact that Debbie Harry and Patti Smith went on to successful music careers, both started as actors/singers in downtown productions and built their careers from the ground up with their collaborators.

The time described was a period in New York where rent for a month might be \$33 (low even considering inflation), so a fledgling artist might pick up part-time odd jobs and still make enough to live and support their art. The 1980s real-estate boom (epitomized by Donald Trump) signaled an end to the artistic possibility presented in McLeod's book, but the figures described nevertheless provide inspiration for the DIY artists, musicians, and theatre-makers of today who aspire to stay weird and create art, writing, film, etc. that pushes boundaries.

Kudos to the author for putting together a book that I think will be treasured by culture vultures for years to come. It's an impressive synthesis of a time and place that readers will hopefully enjoy venturing into, as I did.
