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Review of *Studio 54: The Documentary*

By Ryan Rodriguez

Synopsis

Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell embark on a business venture that would shape the culture of New York and America during the late 1970s. Two middle class college students that wanted nothing but to do better than their own parents, and to not have to live check to check. They wanted to make the most of the opportunity that their parents worked so hard to give them, come together in partnership, and work towards the dream of building something to stand on in a world with so much competition during an economically pressed America. When an enormous wave of success and fame washes over them, they get dragged into the abyss of excess. The American Dream quickly becomes a nightmare, and as the world begins to grow envious and hateful, they are left to fight for what they believe to be most important: Freedom.

Review

During the 1970s, the United States was a place that was searching for something to help them forget what awaited them the next day. A war in Vietnam, the fear of the Soviet Union, and the fuel crisis buried any hope for a better tomorrow. There was an influx of stressors that every American faced that weighed heavily on their consciousness. Gas shortages, a war in Vietnam, protests throughout the country, and presidents that many people viewed as untrustworthy were among the pressures the country dealt with. Because of this, there was a new drive for people to seek the relief that they needed from the daily troubles they faced, sometimes in drugs and alcohol. America was torn, but things would change

after Vietnam. There was a surge of music that focused on rhythm, and vocals that complimented and encouraged movement. It was a genre named Disco, and it grew strong roots in the country's underground scene.

Throughout the film, Ian Schrager, one of the founders of the nightclub Studio 54 said that, "the preference for Disco originated in Gay bars. Women who did not want to be approached by guys would go, and guys would go to meet the women. It was a blur of people, and they were all connected by the music." People wanted something to help them settle down and relax after being so serious during the first part of the 1970s. They began to go out and find places to have some fun; places like Discotheques.

This is where we find ourselves in the film *Studio 54*. Matt Tyrnauer brings his expertise in journalism to this documentary, as he leads the camera to report on the inside of a venue that only a few would ever see with their own eyes. Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell created a nightclub with the principle to do what no one else had done before. They were ambitious, reckless, and lucky. This could be seen in all of the testimonies that Matt Tyrnauer found to support the cultural phenomenon that was Studio 54. These range from employees, to celebrities, law enforcement and patrons from every background. From Michael Jackson and Liza Minnelli, to journalists, photographers, and the average patron, everyone shared in the experience as an equal.

Two young men from Brooklyn's middle class met in college, and pursued a dream together. They were Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell. Ian was a man who kept his head down and did well in his classes, while Steve was the man that was the go-to guy on the campus. If you wanted to know where the after party was, you spoke to Steve. These two met, and became very good friends, but went their separate ways after college to pursue their own dreams.

It would be 1977 when the two would meet again, but this time as business partners. They agreed to build a nightclub that could rival all the others in Manhattan. It is the core of the film, and shares the same name, Studio 54. Schrager and Rubell decide to build their club in an old NBC Studio, located on 54th and 8th

Street. It was a predominantly poor neighborhood, and building a club there seemed to be antithetical for a successful business. They built the inside to match their vision of what a club should be, something that hadn't been done before in the city. They used the lights and setup that had been in the studio beforehand, and did all the work with people that agreed to help them without permits. All of the ideas, material and accessories would equal an estimated cost of \$800,000 in 1977 dollar values. Adjusting for inflation, \$800,000 in 1977 is equivalent in purchasing power to \$3.3 million in 2018, a difference of \$2.5 million over 41 years. This was not just a business venture; it was a gamble that neither of these men could afford to lose on. Their dream of being the most acclaimed club owners in New York was contingent on getting people to come to the front door. However, the opening was a complete and overwhelming success, and Studio 54 was now the place to be in the disco world. The money rolled in, and the two men were on top of the world.

When I watch a documentary, I always look for the method that the movie uses to tell the story. What does the film believe to be the most important things to focus on, and how well does it dive into those details? Throughout the film, the viewer is treated to many eyewitness accounts of what happened behind the gold trimmed doors, as well as a plethora of photos and footage that would envelope the audience in the feeling and atmosphere of Studio 54. When the music and memories begin to flood the screen, and the bizarre and interesting characters and events introduce themselves to the viewer indirectly, the audience feels the same excitement and energy as the patrons of the club did.

The disco became a place that only allowed patrons in at Steve Rubell's discretion, and he chose to allow people from walks of life that were seen as outcasts by society into the club above others more socially respectable. These people would be members of the LGBTQ community, or other extravagant individuals; like a 70-year-old woman who was a lawyer by day and a disco dancer by the name of Disco Sally by night. The venue was exclusive to the excluded, and that is what made it a place people felt was a

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second home to them. Two of the patrons, a pair a drag queens, mentioned that they felt that the venue was special because they were accepted there. Out on the streets, they were ostracized and mocked for being who they felt they were. American streets were not inclusive of all Americans, just as the club and it's entry standards was only inclusive of people who suited the personality of the man who ran the show, Steve Rubell. There were plenty of straight patrons as well, but they matched the attitude and perspective that Rubell, as well as others society did not view as acceptable, had: they just wanted to have fun, and forget about the struggles that they had, for just one night.

Tyrnauer, Matt. *Studio 54: The Documentary*. Produced by Matt Tyrnauer, John Battsek, and Corey Reeser. 98 minutes. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2018. Accessible via Netflix (with subscription) as of June 30, 2019.

Author Bio

Ryan Rodriguez is a student at CSUSB. He studies English in the Creative Writing track. He looks up to authors such as Stephen King, Raymond Carver, and James Brown as his mentors in writing. He spent most of his childhood life in Perris, CA, so he carries over most of his experiences of growing up in an expanding community. He wants to follow in the footsteps of his mentor, James Brown, and seek the position of a professor at a university. He wants to teach English writing as a craft to others, as he was taught by the great teachers and professors that he had.

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