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**A GLOW IN THE DARK  
INTO THE LIMELIGHT AND BEYOND****BYLINE:** Article by Paul Weingarten a SUNDAY, Magazine staff writer.**SECTION:** SUNDAY MAGAZINE; Pg. 8; ZONE: C**LENGTH:** 8958 words

Take my word for it, the best time to read this is 3 a.m. It will make more sense then because night is when these scenes take shape. Things happen at night that could never happen in the day. They happen to people who usually wake up hoarse and crimson-eyed on weekday afternoons. People who eat soup for breakfast at 5 p.m. to soothe vocal cords scraped raw by smoke and shouting over music. Extremely pale people.

Under cover of darkness, a separate society emerges in Chicago, a shadow society of people who know what Echo and the Bunnymen is, who understand that the return of psychedelic high-tide bell-bottoms is imminent, who know the supreme cultural icon of the moment is Godzilla.

Their work is play. These night people do have jobs but not the kind where you punch clocks. The hours are flexible. R-r-r-real flexible. Last week you might have seen them at a high-profile club such as The Limelight at Ontario and Dearborn Streets or an underground spot such as The Rainbo at Damen Avenue and Division Street.

This week perhaps someplace new.

They discover places and pass the word. They do not travel in a set circuit or always in the same crowd; that would be too predictable. There is very little that's predictable about them, except that they travel outside the mainstream. The only way to find them is to sleep during the day and take the night as it comes.

It is called the demimonde, this borderline society of the night. Little about it is conventional; perish the thought. They don't go to Rush Street. They don't go to places that have ladies' nights or 25-cent beer nights. The denizens of the demimonde consider themselves creative--artists, musicians, graphic designers, sculptors, poets, writers, fashion designers, photographers, hairdressers. Included in their ranks are assorted free-wheeling heirs and heiresses who don't have to get up too early, some too-rich-for-their-own-good commodity traders, a smattering of drug merchants and a few of the more experimental University of Chicago students. Money isn't necessary; in this society, you can climb the ladder simply by having the power of imagination, the power to continually reinvent yourself.

Black is their color. Retro is their style. Anything that looks like fake leopard or brocade, anything kitschy. A toothpick in the lapel. Earrings for men, preferably three. A suit that looks like a chia pet.

"Cool" is the password.

Cruising through Wicker Park in his girlfriend's VW Rabbit, Tom Doody

remarks, "Cool neighborhood."

Just so.

There's no "coool," or "that's cool." Just a single, clipped syllable.

If you ask, Tom Doody will trace the genesis of this locution. If you ask, Tom Doody will tell you just about everything there is to know about night in Chicago.

Doody is the night veteran, his credentials impeccable. He has managed or worked in every hot (cool) club since the late 1970s--Metro Cabaret and Smart Bar, Neo, Club 950, Park West. He knows Marsha Mellow and Venus Vargas and a kid named Tommy who used to get "comped" (complimentary admission) into the clubs, even though he lived in a cardboard box near a heating duct. Doody knows socialites, transvestites, suburbanites, musicians, deejays and high-priced female "escorts."

Doody recently turned 30 and began to wonder if there was any future in managing a night spot like the Metro on North Clark Street. His life wasn't all that glamorous: a debris-strewn studio apartment on the Near North Side, which he shared with his digital synthesizer and his pet tarantula Snoopy. "He can go six months without eating," Doody says, "which is perfect for me." Acquiring food for Snoopy is also tres economical: Snoopy eats cockroaches.

Sure, Doody was the First Man in Chicago To Have Pink Hair (streaked down each side). But that was 1979. Now he sports a short \$7 cut, moderately slicked back, reminiscent of Cap Weinberger. "I look like a dad now," he says with a smile. Except, perhaps, for the small silver cross dangling from his left earlobe.

Doody has small, even features; from profile, he looks like Calvin Klein. At various intervals, sometimes when he gets excited, he makes hollow, popping noises by clapping his hands in front of his mouth, which he shapes into an "O." It sounds like half a dozen bottles of champagne uncorking.

A tour of the night can only be undertaken with the services of one such as Tom Doody. Four months ago Doody decided his career needed a boost, so he joined The Limelight, in public relations. "I see Limelight as the culmination of the gathering place for both the young and creative against the older, more established, moneyed set," he says in a typically analytical tone. "I mean, regardless of how rebellious the kids are, they're always intrigued by power and money. And power and money is always intrigued by youth. It's a winning formula, always, for energy."

There is plenty of that at The Limelight. It is the only nightclub in Chicago that fuses the various factions of night life--as owner Peter Gatien once identified them--"punks, yuppies, gays, tourists, celebrities and the artsy crowd." They're all here: Old Money, New Money and No Money. The Limelight has achieved another first: It has conferred a certain respectability on some of the more bizarre aspects of underground night life.

The Limelight occupies a charred-pink granite fortress once known as The Castle at the corner of Ontario and Dearborn Streets. At the castle door Rick stands like a New Wave sentinel. He is 6 feet 7, swathed in a long black hooded cape, an imposing presence made even more impressive by his hair, which sticks straight up, as if electrified. The brooding effect is completed by eyeliner.

The Limelight is the first stop on this tour. The descent into night is quick and jarring. At the entrance one catches a seductive whiff of decadence, a distinct undercurrent of sex and drugs--although neither is evident.

The visitor is greeted by four glass cases, each of a different size but large enough to hold several human beings, which, indeed, they do. The cases are decorated by theme; most recently, it was suburbia, the title,

"Vaporville."

Tonight the cases represent the home of the mythical Herb Swatz family. The first is the kitchen, containing the requisite sink and counter but also a stuffed white Persian cat and Vanessa, a voluptuous French maid, in the appropriate lacy black costume and with a feather duster.

Next door Herb and his wife, Lois, sit in the living-room case: two 1950s Danish-modern chairs, a retro-turquoise lamp, a mock fireplace with fake glowing logs and a marlin trophy. Lois Swatz is decked out in bear-shaped slippers, curlers and cold cream, blond fright wig and long multi-colored flannel nightgown. Herb, reading the newspaper, is in his gray three-piece suit, porkpie hat and horn-rimmed glasses.

Chuck, their rebellious son, hides from the world in his closet, a separate case that is a panorama of Bruce Lee and Madonna and Mad Max posters, dog-eared Playboys, an empty beer bottle, dirty socks--the various adolescent accouterments.

In the fourth case is their teenaged daughter Bibi's bedroom, all pink and yellow and lavender. There are three girls--two female--having a pajama party, playing 45-r.p.m. records, dancing the frug, reading gossip and teen magazines and getting into pillow fights. When the fights break out, Lois shrieks at Herb, "Do something!" He exits the living-room case, stomps over to the bedroom and invariably gets caught in the cross fire while trying to make peace. Meanwhile, Mom invades Chuck's closet and finds him smoking a joint.

Mom (hysterical): "What is this?!"

Chuck (sullen): "It's a joint."

Etc., etc.

Seeing people behind glass is, at the very least, unsettling. Some visitors, unnerved by the "human zoo," race through and take refuge in the bar. Some visitors try to elicit reactions from those inside the cases by taunting them, making faces, pounding on the glass. Many are ignored; a few are invited behind the glass. Some visitors stare and stare, refusing to react to those on the inside, peering through them as if they did not exist.

At The Limelight, things are not always what they seem. The line between male and female blurs. A transvestite, otherwise known in the club as a "TV" or a "he/she," gushes repeatedly to an unsuspecting tourist, "You have great bones."

A tourist, in club parlance, is anyone who is: a) from the suburbs or beyond, or b) unfamiliar with the infinite permutations possible between and among consenting adults. (Sometimes Limelight security guards take pity and draw the unsuspecting tourist aside to inform him of the facts of life.)

Another glass case is upstairs, a redwood deck. This is where three diminutive performers--Vandy, Tommy and Roger--cavort. Sometimes they wear football pads painted pink and swaddle themselves with ballet tulle. There used to be a Weber grill, but the threesome demolished it one night with croquet mallets. Usually they can be found hammering the chicken with spatulas to the beat of the New Wave dance music that throbs throughout the club.

After that, you wouldn't think that the guests could outdo the performers, but it does happen. Mark Rodriguez, a local hairdresser, most recently appeared at The Limelight with a foot-high Christmas tree, complete with ornaments, atop his head. To complete the effect, he studded his head with rhinestones set in geometric patterns and painted portions of his hair fuschia, flamingo pink, navy blue and turquoise. He also wore a white 1920s dinner jacket, an ankle-length Scottish tartan skirt ("It cost me 40 cents") and combat boots that belonged to his brother, a Vietnam veteran.

"I do it for the people," he says proudly, "the ones who can't put a tree on their head. I can do it. I can do anything." The only drawback to

doing this particular thing, he says, is that the tree is attached to his head with Crazy Glue and removing it in the morning--he sleeps with it on his head after the party--is very painful. But obviously it is worth it. One woman appraises him from across the room, then delivers her verdict. "It's brilliant," she purrs.

Then there are the ones who go for the quick kill. Julie Swedien, known simply as The Snake Lady, creates quite a sensation when she brings her "baby," a 7 1/2-foot, 45-pound Red Amazon boa constrictor, to the club. Her name is Roxanne. Julie treats her like a baby, nuzzling her, letting her slither up her cheek, the snake's face pressing against her eye, then exploring her hair. "Everyone wants to hold my baby," she says. "People think they're vicious, but they're big babies." She has another boa, Chase, at home. "They think I'm their mother. They get real freaked out if I leave the room and someone else is holding them."

Swedien is a screenwriter during the day and has submitted a script to the producers of "Miami Vice." "Roxanne might be pregnant," she announces. "Do you know, I have met 10 people through this nightclub who want her babies?"

The Limelight also attracts a full contingent of the moneyed elite. The downstairs bar, overshadowed by a wood-lattice sculpture in the shape of a band shell, is generally full of high cheekbones and gold lame and smoldering looks. This is a "poser club," Tom Doody says, "where people come to see and be seen."

"I used to go to Faces and then a few places on Division," says Jim Levin, 26, the Tru-Link fence heir who's opening the new Gianni Versace boutique on Oak Street. "But this is a totally different atmosphere. You don't have your weekend warriors, you don't have your guys who are out to get drunk, you don't have the pushing and shoving and people spilling beer on you and everything else. It's a more selective crowd."

Judy Walker is a former showgirl who runs with a crowd that includes fashion designer Towanna and Jim Flint, owner of the Baton Lounge and a candidate for Cook County commissioner. "I walk in here almost every night of the week," she says, "and I hate labels, but just so you understand, I see black and white, I see gay and straight, I see socialites and I see my mailman. And that's wonderful. Yes, my mailman, and I think that's wonderful. I see the guy who bags for me at Treasure Island and my hairdresser and my jeweler on Michigan Avenue. Standing in the same room. You never know what to expect."

You might expect Lucy Wyatt and her sidekick, Mary Ryan. They have arrived in the VIP Room. You know they have arrived. They are both blond. Mary is the sweet, chirpy, vivacious one. Lucy is the caustic, aggressive, voluble one. She sometimes affects a bored, upper-class Boston Brahmin accent.

"This place is really underexposed," Lucy laments. "I mean, you know, Chicago is so plebeian and pedestrian, and this is just like, just what the town needed."

"Between Lucy and I," Mary confides, "we know it all. We've been to every singles bar. I used to go to Rush Street, but the past two years I basically have dropped out of the night-life scene. But since this place has opened, I've started going out again at night. I love to dress up."

"You have the old main-line social-climbing old money here," Lucy interrupts. "You know, you have that little group, that are all like on that stretch near the Drake Hotel and The Mayfair. You know those kind of people. But a lot of new money. Younger people making more money. The whole thing about yuppies is sort of a myth. There are a few, like my boss, he's worth \$150 million, he's 35, that's pretty f-----' good if you ask me." She erupts with laughter. "Here's to my boss, I love you."

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Lucy, born and raised in Chicago, is a successful commodity trader. "Lost \$50,000 today," she says in her most blase tone. "I had a bad day."

"Most people get married and have babies when they're our age," she says, "and for women like us who are successful, young professionals, where do we have to go? No place. New York. That's it. Mary and I all last spring, we'd go to New York on the weekends. Bor-ring! We can't do that anymore. It's just too much."

"Or else we'd go to Gamekeepers," says Mary, "which is the dullest crowd. And we'd be dressed so fashionable, and all the guys would look at us like we were lepers. We'd dress in leopard-print lycra outfits, really sexy, and the guys would think we were hookers."

"It was like, 'God, I make more than you make in five years, a -----,' " Lucy says. "I never said that, it would be too rude." Her smiles says, "No it wouldn't." "But that was the feeling, it was so depressing last winter. Thank God for this place."

Mary Ryan explains that she works for the Egyptian consulate.

"Terrorism is very in now," Lucy says. She concocts an idea for a party: "Either come as a hostage or a guerrilla. And have some wild fun. I mean, you have all these games now for nuclear proliferation and nuclear war, where you play on the actual event actually occurring. So people should do that, train themselves how to react in a terrorist situation. Like if they're traveling in the Mideast. Sort of as a fun little lark."

"They used to have a post-nuclear exhibit up here," Mary says.

"Oh yeah, the art displays, they were such a disaster, thank God they got a new art director in," Lucy says. "It was so East Village New York, gag me. It just did not go over in Chicago, it was too original."

"Oh I liked it," Mary protests.

Time to move on. The Limelight is only one stop on this tour.

In front, a razor blade in the street. "Spent shell," Doody remarks.

Audrey Daras is having a party for her graphic design company, Jackson Gray Graphics (Jackson Gray is her cat). It is in her loft on Institute Place. "Lately the clubs have been so dead," she complains. "Basically because there's a bunch of nerds going out. Music is very stagnant, not as hot as it should be. I don't know if people are afraid to introduce the better music to the common crowd."

Mary and Lucy are there. Tim and Renee, something of a mystery couple, also arrive. Tim is a photographer, Renee his constant companion. They make all the cool parties. Tim wears his hair samurai style, pulled back, slicked, and fastened in a small ponytail at back. "There aren't enough cool people in Chicago to fill up these clubs," says Tim.

"The big change is with The Limelight; you can wear nice things out," says Renee. "Women can actually sit right on the toilet seats. You don't have to worry about soaking your shoes in the bathroom and stuff like that."

The Jackson Gray party attracts a well-heeled group of artists, photographers, traders and designers. There is one rubber Godzilla figure. Tom Doody works the crowd, handshakes and kisses all around, passing out his card, urging people in a low-key, unassuming way to come see Limelight. Some have been and find it too boring. These are people who want something different and, failing that, something outrageous. They flock to Maxtavern at George and Racine, for example, with its plywood floors and hideous green plaster moldings, because it's real and comfortable and kitschy. Maxtavern is truly underground: There is no sign out front.

Or The Rainbo, open only a month or two in Wicker Park. It is definitely underground: no advertising except word-of-mouth. A small neighborhood tavern converted into an arty hangout. But, as Doody says, "It has that look."

Inside, abstract paintings are thumb-tacked, frameless, above torn leatherette booths. A floor of dirty pink linoleum. It is dark and exudes a certain Bohemian air.

It is a big hit.

There are two plastic Godzillas, one atop the cash register.

There are no video games. There are older pinball games. There are the four-for-a-quarter photo booths. And expensive Bose speakers hanging in corners. In one window, masked from the outside, there is a display of three dolls arranged in a line. There's a Confucius-like figure and a nun and a marionette. Strewn among them are fortune cookies. The sign says: "My sister walks on Eggshells. There is a trail from the kitchen to her bedroom."

You figure it out.

Tom Doody already has.

Wherever he goes, he knows people. He instantly analyzes the scene. As soon as he sits, people come over to talk. Tonight it's a punk-rock musician in a gold brocade jacket whom he's never met but who has heard of him. He wants to talk about a gig at The Limelight. Doody is attentive, friendly. The card comes out.

Rainbo, he thinks, could be a Limelight tributary. "I'd love that," he says. "Those are the kind of people that would add mystery to the room. It's a mix of gay, straight, artsy, earthy--all kinds of stuff there." He laughs. "I reach out to those type of people. They're musicians, they're cool. You saw the Ultimo-type stuff, the look, the guy with the gold brocade jacket. Very big. Some thought has been put into their creative appearance, although it may be (from) Amvets. Granted, he didn't wear it the best, he wasn't at level of (Audrey Daras' loft) party, where there was definitely more money. But that's where those people came from. Right there. Absolutely. I remember when all those people were Amvets. I gave half of them free beers for years because I knew they couldn't afford them. Now they've made it, and hence I get invited to parties like that, and it's not because of who I am now but who I've been to them in the past five or six years. Hence, always cultivate a new crowd. Rule No. 1: Keep it fresh."

Proceeding on that basis, Doody directs the tour to the Cabaret Metro for an early-evening all-ages concert. The band, Toxic Reasons, "is hard-core trash: loud and fast." Doody comes here to see what the kids--12 to 15 years old--are doing. "That's the age I watch because they're the money-spending, trend-influencing people. There's 13- or 14-year-old 'youthquakers' now, to borrow a Warhol phrase. They're moving along fast."

The audience tonight is young and white and resplendant in punk regalia --mohawks, denim jackets, lots of leather, combat boots, ripped T-shirts, tattoos. A few look no older than 11. "These are kids that are rebelling against what people come to The Limelight and see as bizarre. To them that's status quo, mohawks and stuff. The mohawks you see at The Limelight are the 'poser' mohawks, the well-coifed mohawk."

Nothing is well coifed here. Some of these kids are doing an excellent job camouflaging the fact that they're from affluent suburban homes. The music is so loud it seems to jiggle some internal organs best leftunjiggled. One song's piquant lyrics include: "Jobless America / Nobody tells us what to do. . . Where's all our f-----' money?"

And then the vortex begins. The vortex is called a dance, but it is reminiscent of the running of the bulls in Pamplona. Twenty or 30 kids begin running, almost skipping, in a tight circle. The music whips them into a frenzy. They leap and jerk and flail about, elbows and forearms flying. A few fall and are trampled, some lunge onto the backs of the audience standing at the base of the stage. Amid this the stage diving starts: Every few seconds one of the vortexers either climbs onto the 8-foot-high stage or is conveyed

by others onto it. He dances for a few moments--in the glowering gaze of the band's bodyguards--then propels himself off the stage, as if the audience were a nice, cool swimming pool. Some do backflips, some belly flops. Some are caught, some are not. Tom asks the sound manager in the booth for this week's statistics. "Two legs, four ribs, two arms, a collarbone and numerous skulls," he is told. That means broken. This week.

Tom Doody is hard to shock. "I've seen every sexual escapade in public, every gargantuan social faux pas," he says mildly. "I've seen people drop their drawers and s--- on the dance floor. I've seen women masturbate on the bar. I've seen wild things. But these are basically in clubs where people are out to shock. They get their thrills that way. It's a case of being at the right place at the right time. When you spend enough 4 o'clock mornings, you can't miss."

Some things, however, do shock him. "What always shocks me is violence. I've done consulting jobs in the suburbs, where kids that watch "Magnum, P.I." stick a glass in somebody's face, and then they cry when they see that this person is bleeding and maimed. That will always shock me. Senseless violence, that always has shock value."

Medusa's is the next stop, a juice-bar (no alcohol served) in a converted four-story apartment building at School and Sheffield. A long flight of stairs leads to the ticket booth. A sign behind the ticket-seller warns: "Positively No Illegal Acts."

Doody interprets this: "No penetration, no controlled substances."

At Medusa's the atmosphere is even sweatier than at Metro. Several hundred kids on a dance floor, whose main props consist of oversized living-room furniture--10-foot sofas, 8-foot coffee tables. It looks like they raided the set of "The Incredible Shrinking Man."

Medusa's has three floors, one a dance, one for video and in between, a small "performance art display." Behind glass, several people dressed as mutant elves are tinkering in a workshop. One elf has suspenders holding up his white Jockey underwear, worn over a gray leotard. This elf is painting a pair of wooden scissors yellow. In the video room on the third floor, banks of monitors and a large screen display the latest videos from popular groups such as Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Cure and New Order. The place seldom advertises, but it is whispered about: "My 13-year-old niece from Belvidere heard about it and wanted to try to get in after curfew with fake IDs," someone at another club says.

As a formerly rebellious youth, Tom Doody understands this world. "I always pursued a bit of the darker side," he says. At 12, he wore hair to his waist. As a teenager, "I got harassed by the cops literally every night. My girlfriend lived on 98th and Winchester, and I lived on 93d and Ashland at the time, and every night when I walked home, I would get body-searched by the same cops. Every f----- night." He was arrested on a few occasions--"for stuff like hanging out in the park, disorderly conduct"--but never convicted.

Doody's father is a retired Chicago Fire Department lieutenant. His mother worked at the Northern Trust Bank. The family started at 79th and Halsted and moved every few years until they got to 95th and Ashland. "I was always the last white kid in the neighborhood," he says.

Asked about schools, he smiles. "Several," he says. "St. Kilian, St. Ethelreda, St. Leo. I went to Brother Rice for a year and a half. I was asked to retire from Brother Rice. I didn't fit in. I was a square peg in a round hole, big time. I had the longest hair in the school, there were rumors of drug use, of smoking marijuana."

True, of course. "Yes. I was always very experimental. But I always felt that I knew my limits, but I also liked to test my limits a bit. Thankfully, I have my mind intact; I wouldn't want to go through it again."

At 16 he did what a whole generation of youth dreamed of: He took a cross-country trip "with my best friend and two slightly older women who had their dad's credit cards and a car. We traveled, went to a condo in Vail, ate all the steaks in the freezer, skied and hung out." When the money ran out, he returned and finished high school at the Central Y, where he got straight A's in everything except math. He went to College of DuPage for a year but dropped out and took a job with an off-track betting service.

"I was taking \$40,000 to the track, undercover, with an armed body guard. I'd sit up in the Jockey Club with a briefcase full of money. I was 21. I was making \$35,000 or \$40,000, I thought I was home free. It was a great primer in real life. In a big way. The race track is the greatest place to learn about what drives the human psyche."

After those parlors were shut down by the state, Doody sold a \$6 medical product nationwide. "A little sock with a bra pad in it," which prevented "decubitus ulcers"--sores created by sheering pressure at the elbow, ankle or knee. After that, he worked for General Finance, in their deadbeat and skip-tracing accounts, for three months. At 24 he was named manager of the Franklin Park branch.

He had developed a taste for night life, however, and was particularly fond of La Mere Vipere on Halsted near Belden. (It burned down in 1978 and reopened as O'Banion's.) Then he met Rebecca. "We were enraptured with each other, spent all our time together, walked the streets at night."

He and Rebecca "began to hang out in La Mere, not drinking, just talking and watching people." He decided to get a job bartending, which he had never done before, with the goal of managing a club. "So I walked into Neo and I said, 'I bartend,' and they said, 'Where?'; I said, 'Where haven't I bartended, put it that way.' "

The bluff worked. After several years of moving through different clubs and several bouts with what he calls "overindulgence," Tom Doody has seen it all, done it all. The irony, as he sees it, is this: "When I was 14, I was hanging out with the 19-year-olds. When I was 19, I was hanging out with the 25-year-olds. And now I'm 30, and I'm hanging out with the 16-year-olds."

As a general rule, those who patronize a place like Rainbo or Maxtavern do not patronize a place like the Ultimate Sports Bar & Grill. As Venus Vargas, one of the brighter lights of the New Club scene attests, there is a certain amount of notoriety for those who stretch the boundaries of dress codes at such establishments. Venus, a hairstylist who works out of her Near North Side home, is wont to dress in casual funk--an olive-and-tan velour vest with a shoulder patch depicting the human eye, a longer shirt that hangs out underneath, torn chinos and black boots. She seems genuinely aghast that she was carded at the Ultimate, just for looking different. She is 26, too young to remember the '60s.

"The tension was pretty thick (at the Ultimate)," she recalls. "We just weren't part of the crowd." She relates this horror story at the Northside Cafe, one of the stops on the New Club tour. It is a cozy, casual tavern--mahogany paneling and marble tables--next to the "L" at Webster. "You walk into the Northside and it doesn't matter what you have on," Venus says. "If clubs don't go commercial, they're great. The minute people try to make a lot of money, it just starts losing some spirit. Riviera is a great club, it's beautiful, but it doesn't have that spirit. I mean, if a club doesn't have any soul, why go? I'd rather go to a little squeezebox, like this for instance."

Cyril Landise is the owner of this little squeezebox. Cyril is a former petroleum chemist who left that line of work "because I had to talk to engineers all day." Currently he is working on demo tapes with a French jazz musician. They call themselves Walter Ego. Cyril plays "the computer and the

keyboards." He opened the bar, after closing a nearby high-tech furniture store, "because everyone here wanted someplace to go. Because it had become gentrified, and most of the bars had SportsVision as the main offering." The Northside didn't even have a television until recently, and it is only for "special events and avant-hip video magic."

The music is also avant-hip pop--Klaus Nomi, Laurie Anderson--a smattering of Beatles, some classics, no heavy metal. There are cognacs on the menu, and imported beers. Like the others, the bar does no advertising except for a mailer. "On Friday and Saturday we get pretty crowded here and we get a little bit touristy." In this case "tourist" refers to yuppies. "I went on a conscious deyuppification campaign about a year ago," Cyril says. "I think a place can't handle more than about 60 percent yuppies. They're wonderful people . . . but they're no fun to watch. Their hair is always the same color, their suits are the same color, their shoes are the same color . . . and they're not interesting enough for me to want to find out anything more about them. They're not in costume. It's important to have colorful characters, so I encourage the artists. (He'll even buy drinks if it comes to that.) They're fun to watch, they're more exciting."

Cyril is asked how he deyuppified the bar. "Music," he says with a sly grin. "You put a Yoko Ono album on, on a Friday night, and that will drive them out. Seriously. You play an hour of Yoko Ono, and everybody with a fur coat will be gone."

Cyril has longish hair and wears an oversized red sweater. "You do try and identify yourself to others of your species," he says. "Like I changed my image because I tended to always look fairly mainstream. And a lot of my friends said they had a hard time relating to me because I was a lot crazier than I looked. You know, (I'm) a nonsmoking, 15-year vegetarian aikido-ist. But I look pretty normal. So I decided to let my hair grow, and a friend of mine suggested I wear some bit of jewelry or paint my fingernails green, some symbol to identify myself to others of my species. And people who weren't of my species would understand that they shouldn't treat me as though I'm one of them, even though I look like them. You want to meet other people like you and you want to tell people who aren't like you that you're not like them. I don't want someone in a three-piece suit to say, 'Hey, can I buy you a martini?' You wouldn't believe how many times I've been invited home for Thanksgiving dinner by some receptionist because I looked like such a nice fellow. I said I am not that kind of nice fellow. I don't want to meet your parents. If you don't have leather underwear, I don't even want to talk to you."

Sunday night around town is known as "Boy's Night Out," because the gay community is out in force. Russell Brunelli of The Limelight handles it this way: "I will say to some people, 'Tonight is primarily a gay night, you're welcome to come in if you like. The door is open if your mind is open.' That's kind of a line I like to use."

This Sunday night at Joz, above Cabaret Metro, Marsha Mellow, an underground cult figure of pink hair and estimable girth, is taping her Christmas special, destined to be replayed in bars like Northside. She has a small cult following, and tonight perhaps a hundred of her most rabid disciples fill the audience. Marsha and some friends formed "Arama Productions" six years ago and have thrown several large parties, including "Camp-arama," in the Wisconsin woods; "Float-arama," a big boat party on the lake; and "Combat-arama," where everyone played war games in Wisconsin.

The set for the "Marsha Mellow Show" includes a putrid green velour couch and leopard-skin-covered Kleenex box, a large bowl of marshmallows on her desk--all set against a jungle backdrop. This evening her guests included a Zoe Zagula, her vampy sidekick in black leather skirt, fishnet stockings, a

short black fake fur and frizzed-out hair; she is looking for a millionaire husband. Also: Beulah Zagula, female mud wrestler and Zoe's cousin; singer Elvis Hell, whose latest hit is the ballad "If This Is Heaven, How the Hell Do I Get Out?"

And Tom Doody, as himself.

Marsha does her opening monologue, supine on a chaise. "This (Christmas special) puts me in a league with all the big-name stars," she says in a high, piercing voice. "Bob Hope. Perry Como. But hey, I don't gotta go overseas to entertain the boys, I just go up to Halsted!" The audience howls.

She then addresses certain persistent rumors: "I have never been a man."

On her competitor, Oprah Winfrey: "I could do her show. Come on, I could sit there and ask people, 'What's the strangest thing you ever put in Tupperware?'"

She divulges some personal history: How she was tossed out of beauty school after two days ("It made me sick to touch human hair") and how her greatest ambition is a guest shot on "The Love Boat." "I want to eat Rice Krispy treats with Merrill Stubing at the captain's table!"

Much of the rest of the show is punctuated at regular intervals by requests from the audience for certain guests to partially disrobe.

And so on.

Then it's Tom Doody's turn. "It is great to be here," says Doody, oozing smarm. "I love this woman. I love her." He has the wrap-around sunglasses and is carrying a half-split of what looks like champagne. "What's in the bottle?" someone yells. "Just red wine," Tom says, nonchalantly pouring a good portion onto the stage.

They get into some of his personal history, including the time a hooker stabbed him in Uptown while Doody was interviewing her for a series of videotape profiles he did on Uptown people. (He did another on "Sleeping Chicago," wherein he sought out people sleeping in the parks, on benches, etc., and snapped quick Polaroids of them.)

By day the party animal known as BJ hibernates. He has been known to sleep for 29 hours straight, interrupted only by a predawn snack of 7-Up and Oreos. He has been known not to sleep for many more hours straight, kept awake by a constant headache and an internal throttle that is naturally stuck at full. There is nothing idle about Bernard John Murray.

BJ, as he prefers, is a cross between Sean Penn and Rod Stewart, with the fashionably disheveled streaky blond hair, the long face and a prominent jaw. He is the keeper of the VIP Room, upstairs at The Limelight. It is a powerful position. This is where the celebrities and other important personages party, partly removed from the high-decibel dance floor and the gawkers. The room itself is unremarkable--black-cushioned banquettes lining the walls, dark corners and a few dim spotlights. (The look changes, sometimes daily. When they discovered Tina Turner was coming to the club, it was totally redone in a day--the walls were repainted from black to a silver "Memphis-style amoeba" motif.)

BJ is the real attraction. He strides into a room. . . Well, let him tell it: "When I walk into the VIP Room, everyone's sitting there like this (glumly), and here I come walking in"--he demonstrates basic BJ: arms flapping, hands clapping, fingers snapping, his whole body twitching as if his strings were being yanked by a demented, hyperkinetic puppeteer--"what you doin' what's happening blah blah blah what's hip what's going on how you doin'."

You might think he is running for something.

You might think he is running from something.

It is merely instinct. BJ is blessed with a total lack of self-

consciousness. On various nights this could mean: BJ leaping into the room with his plastic accordion and shouting, "Okay, boys and girls, let's polka!" (Later he investigates the purchase of a monkey but finds it too expensive.) Or BJ making pointed jokes related to his recent acquisition of a set of plastic toy crabs. Or, on Fridays and Saturdays, BJ turning the "sex-ray gun" on various females in the room. The gun lights up and makes six different noises, depending on how BJ feels about that woman at the moment.

As for his own social life, he "collects a lot of lipstick" at the club. He says he has a shoebox full of women's phone numbers. He had a girlfriend for a while, but they broke up. "She was a day person," he shrugs, "I'm a night person." He says it as if they were from different planets and the Council of Elders wouldn't permit their union.

Part of his Limelight job is to make sure everyone has a good time. He introduces people, provides the correct dose of lubricant so that the party may begin. The other part is to get the celebrities into the club and make sure they have a good time so they'll come back. It's good for the club and it's good for him: Much of his living is made on tips.

"He's a choreographer," observes Tom Doody. "He makes the room happen by mixing the right personalities, the right formula." It is not totally up to him, of course. Some celebrities are automatically passed into the room--hot musicians, fashion designers, writers. The other way to get in, says Tom Doody, "is to go up and through your image or appearance try and hustle your way in. If you try and hustle too hard, it works against you because BJ is definitely the hustler's hustler. You can't put anything on him. He is a half step ahead of everyone with a line of bull that comes to the door."

BJ talks faster than most Hollywood producers, heretofore considered a physical impossibility. He drops names even faster. Everyone is his buddy. Billy Crystal, Gregory Hines, Grace Jones, Otis Wilson, Sidney Green, Tom Cruise, Richard Gere. He traded Michael Jordan a Limelight gold card--free admission for him and an unlimited number of friends--for two pairs of Air Jordans, autographed, for himself and general manager Russell. Rob Lowe flew him to Los Angeles. Tina Turner offered him a job on her crew.

In any five-minute stretch of conversation, you will hear about these and more. On others this type of behavior could be a bit wearing. On BJ it is somehow more boyishly engaging.

BJ lives in a world of his own creation--part real, part whimsy. He has, for instance, dozens of uncles, cousins and sisters. Observe: He lives, he says, with his two little sisters. Only later do you learn that his blood-related sisters actually live in New York and that the two women with whom he shares a North Side apartment are merely friends. Therefore: If he visits your office when you are not there, your secretary will relay the message that your cousin BJ came by. His sentences are stitched together with "etcetera, etcetera," or "blah-blah-blah-blah," and come out so fast that it is often difficult to tell when one stops and the other starts. The following is an unedited transcript:

Q--(Doesn't matter.)

A--So like I say, you know, money, I love makin' money because I enjoy spending it, all the same. So I'm running around during the daytime, meeting a lot of people in the advertising business, meeting other reps, meetin' photographers, meeting models, lots of models, I love girls, I mean, I love two things in life, I love money, well, no, I'm not gonna say that, I have two sayings, I love good people, good conversation, good food and good sex, but don't put that in the paper, but I love money and I love girls, and that's the saying in the VIP Room. I always call the busboy over, I say, Freddy, what are the two things in life that I love most, and he says, money and women, and I says, you better believe it."

One minute he's in The Limelight art department, teasing the models who are preparing for the fashion show by telling them that "Mick and Keith" are going to be here. And the next he's philosophizing about the meaning of "VIP": "See, everyone wants to be a star, everyone wants to be a celebrity, everyone wants to sit next to Jennifer Beals and Ashford and Simpson. And to me, everyone's a star, but like I said the other day, I'm the biggest celebrity in that room. When you walk in that room, hey, it's my show, babe, you sit down and relax, you have fun, enjoy yourself. But when you're in that room, I'm the biggest celebrity in there. I'm the Prince of the City. That's what I say, the Prince of the City. Yeah. Hustle Russell (the general manager), we say Russell's the Lord of the Lake, and BJ is the Prince of the City."

If you see him at 5 p.m., he looks more like the Duke of Dissipation. The voice is a croak, the eyes bleary. His day begins in the midafternoon with his favorite cartoons--Woody Woodpecker, the Flintstones, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe. He reads Spin magazine and then gets down to breakfast. Tempo, a restaurant at the corner of Chestnut and State. They know him here. This afternoon he is wearing a black-and-white tweedy jacket with a rhinestone stickpin in the shape of a \$, and a Swatch on either wrist. He orders the cream of broccoli soup and the coconut cream pie. Good for the throat.

He talks about growing up on the streets of the Upper West Side of New York, the fifth of six kids--four brothers, two sisters. His father is retired, after working a variety of jobs, with New York Telephone, Con Edison and finally dock foreman for Macy's. "I've always been the black sheep of the family," he says. "Ever since I been like 8 years old, I've been on my own, working always. It was just what it was for me, how I always wanted to buy my own things, buy new tennis shoes, I wanted to be the kid on the block with a new watch, etc, etc. I been in the party business for about as long as I can talk. Honestly. When I was 15 years old, all the guys in New York, all the break dancers and rappers, they were just starting to come up, and we used to put together flyers and go around to all the girls in the neighborhood and hand them out and say, 'Friday night come on down to the local park, the DJ will bring the sound system, and we'll just have a big party.' "

At 17 he left home after three of his close friends were killed in a matter of two months, all caught in a drug-war cross fire. He moved to Los Angeles with a friend, Rick. He tried Santa Monica College for a year, hoped to transfer to Pepperdine on a basketball scholarship, but broke his foot. End of career. He got a job managing a coffee-and-pastry cafe in L.A. and on weekends operated a lucrative parking concession on the beach. He made \$700 a week.

Then, through a friend of a friend, he and his roommate Rick were allowed to live in a vacant Bel Air mansion, sort of as house-sitters. They'd ride around town on their Vespas, and "we thought we were the coolest things going." So when they weren't invited to a Playboy pajama party, they organized their own protest party and drew hundreds to their mansion. The next morning the owner informed them they had two days to move.

What would have been a disaster for others was merely an opportunity for BJ. "I said, listen, let's scout around for an empty mansion and just move in for a while," BJ remembers. They didn't intend to pay rent. "So now we're looking for old mansions that were up for sale, and we'd call a real estate broker who's handling it and say, 'Well, how many people have been by to take a look in the last month,' and he'd say, 'Well, there's been maybe two people by in last month.' So we said, 'Two people in the last month, I think our chances are good.' So now we find a 20-bedroom house in Beverly Hills, four major bathrooms and a guest house off to the back. We didn't want to move into the house, so we decided to live in the guest house. So now we're living in

this run-down shack, taking showers every day at this girl's house, unbelievable. So we lived there for about a month. Then we finally found an apartment."

But it was BJ's birthday, and as a farewell to their Beverly Hills address, they decided to throw another party. A thousand invitations went out, and on the night of the party they pried open a back window of the mansion, rolled in the beer and sound equipment and filled the house with 400 revelers.

He loved L.A. "If you're funny, got personality, you're charming, you got hustle, boom, you go a long way. As long as you stay away from the sex and drugs and rock and roll, keep your head above water, don't get too crazy."

He got too crazy. "We damaged our scooters one night," BJ recalls. "We were out partyin', racing down the street, and went boom, right into this wall, and that was like fun for us. And I'm like, what is happening to me? That's when I decided it was time to get back to New York and start living in the real world again."

He moved in with his brother--his real one--but they didn't get along. So three years ago, he came to Chicago. He looked for work but didn't find any. He was almost broke. His friend Rick's mother, who worked in the Chicago public schools, "would bring us public school sandwiches in wrappers and little Jell-O things and milk cartons. For three months I'm eating public school food. And I vow never ever again to: a) eat hash browns, and b) have another public school sandwich as long as I live." He swore off hash browns because he had them for breakfast, lunch and dinner for several weeks straight in his period of poverty. Now he always orders french fries with gravy on the side.

BJ finally landed a job as a waiter at the East Bank Club. "I really didn't have the experience in the restaurant. A month goes by, people say this guy from New York, he's crazy, but the customers were loving me because I was myself, I was being Bernard and I didn't know pancakes from filet mignon, let me tell you the truth, I'm being honest when I say that."

He quit before they fired him. "I was a little too fast for them," he says. "And I needed a lot of polishing too; I was a young kid, I was hungry, hustling, I was always spoiled from making \$700 a week in L.A., I enjoyed having money. When I die, she's gonna spend it all anyway--whoever 'she' is, so I'm gonna beat her to it." (BJ often introduces women he's interested in as "my future ex-wife.")

Eventually, he left that job and began to do what he knew best--throw parties. He and a friend tossed the first one two years ago at a warehouse on North Pier terminal. Two more followed at a deserted Cedar Street graystone, and then one at a garage at Clark and Maple and two more at The Swedish Club. By that time, BJ was rolling. He had designs on the club that used to be the Happy Medium, at Delaware and Rush Streets. It was due for demolition. He convinced the landlord to give him the keys, and while the landlord was away on vacation, BJ and friends pumped water out of the basement and cleaned the interior--before they signed a lease. BJ and two partners opened the Marz Bar, a juice bar a la Medusa's, on Aug. 29, 1984.

"We had no knowledge of nightclub business," he says. "We were buying all our juice around the corner here, at Bragno's. We didn't have a soda machine, we poured soda out of the cans." The police shut them down in May of 1985 for lack of a city amusement license. BJ figures the reason had more to do with the club's clientele: mainly Hispanic and black kids.

After that, BJ caught on at The Limelight.

He's loving it, riding the crest. The Limelight's hot today; no one can tell about tomorrow. At the moment, though, it's enough for BJ. It won't be forever. BJ's immediate goal is to retire a millionaire by age 27, which gives him approximately 2 1/2 years. "I remember telling my mom, when I was 16, I

used to go on the West Side at Riverside Drive and 76th and see all these nice condos overlooking the Hudson, and I always told my ma, someday I'm gonna own that building right there. And someday I will."

Meanwhile, he basks in The Limelight.

And The Limelight itself seems to be overcoming the furious backlash generated by its infamous opening-night party, when many on the guest list were left stranded outside in the overflow crowd. That suggested New York, where people try to get into clubs free by dressing as bizarrely as possible and shouting, "Pick me!" The Limelight does like to "spike" the crowd, "but it's been misinterpreted," Doody says. "It's not that people are picked to come into the club, it's that certain people who otherwise don't have the means to come here are brought in gratis because the club would like to see their presence. And I think that's where a lot of confusion came. People still drive by and yell, 'Pick me, f--- you!' "

Of course, not everyone gets in anyway. There is a flexible dress code --no sneakers, no jeans--and there is some screening. "I am not saying that we look for someone who's a beautiful-looking person to walk in the door," says general manager Brunelli. "But I don't want kids, rowdy or loud, I don't care if they are of age, I don't want to make the place a meat market, where they're going to come in and grab at girls. I don't care for, let's say, even your conventioner types; we screen them. I mean, I'm not saying conventioners, no. What I'm saying is somebody who's been on the town with the boss' MasterCard or American Express, and they come with six guys, and they're really loaded, with the ties on their heads--you've seen it. I mean, we have an opportunity now to say, 'No, I'm sorry I can't let you in, you've had too much to drink.' "

"Before Limelight opened," Tom Doody says, "I said it could be highly successful, or for a while it could become the place not to go, or at least the place to talk about not going. That has happened to some degree. So many people, if they're not insiders, they want to give that perception of being on the inside: They've been through it already and they're over it."

So where do those people go who are "over it?"

"Foremost Liquors," Doody says with a smile.

When did he say that? I can't remember. On the night tour, a certain acceleration takes place, the events of last night and the night before merge and keep on merging until all the nights become a seamless memory, faces dancing into view, smoky backgrounds, pulsating music, smiles and handshakes and shouting. There's a seductiveness to it.

The morning sun is annoying, a hostile force. Too hard, too bright.

So you wake up at 7 or 8 p.m.: The Count has risen. It's lonely until you get to the club. People are friendlier at night, the natural defenses weakened. Tom Doody always said he was at his peak at 3 a.m. I believe him.

Being surrounded by night creatures makes certain things seem less outrageous: earrings on men, multicolored hair. It becomes commonplace. One day I pass my wife's jewelry box and before I know it, I am holding an earring up to my earlobe, just to see what it would look like.

That's when I know the tour is over. I start sleeping at night. For a week, however, there is withdrawal: I want the night, the excitement, the camaraderie that develops in the early morning hours. You belong. You are cool.

Sometimes it seems like it never happened.

Except that I still occasionally get a call from my cousin BJ.

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PHOTOS: (color) Photos by Jose More, a Tribune photographer. The Limelight, in the Ontario Street nightclub district, is the first stop on our tour. Fasten your seatbelts; it's going to be a bumpy night.

PHOTO: (color) Our guide for this dusk-to-dawn adventure is veteran night person Tom Doody, seen here in his natural habitat, the club.

PHOTOS: (color) After dark is when they come out. There's, clockwise from right, Julie The Snake Lady, with her "baby," Roxanne, and the waitress, who reminds one of the halcyon days of "Hullabaloo" as she climbs atop the bar and entertains the customers at Berlin, a video bar at 954 W. Belmont Ave. Everywhere, however, the disc jockey --this one at the Smart Bar--is king, if he plays the right music.

PHOTOS: (color) Above: Behind the glass at The Limelight, the strangest things happen. A pajama party, for instance. Patrons are sometimes invited to take part; they usually refuse. Below, a party scene at the Medusah.

PHOTOS: (color) The photo booth is a fixture of some underground clubs. We don't know why. The one above is at Maxtavern at George Street and Racine Avenue. At left, a theater-of-the-night scene at the Metro.

PHOTOS: (color) Ladies and gentlemen, please pay special attention to Bernard John Murray, above. You can call him BJ. He'll be your host tonight at The Limelight's VIP Room. He is in his natural state --talking. Below, Marsha Mellow, one of "celebutants," as they have been dubbed at The Limelight. The younger set, left, works up a sweat on the dance floor at the Medusah. And, right, an intimate chat at the Northside Cafe. Yuppies need not apply.

PHOTO: (color) At the Maxtavern: Underground and kitschy but real and comfortable.

PHOTO: (color) Tom Doody and a nocturnal creature at the Limelight.

PHOTO: (color) Swirling to the night beat on the dance floor at the Limelight.