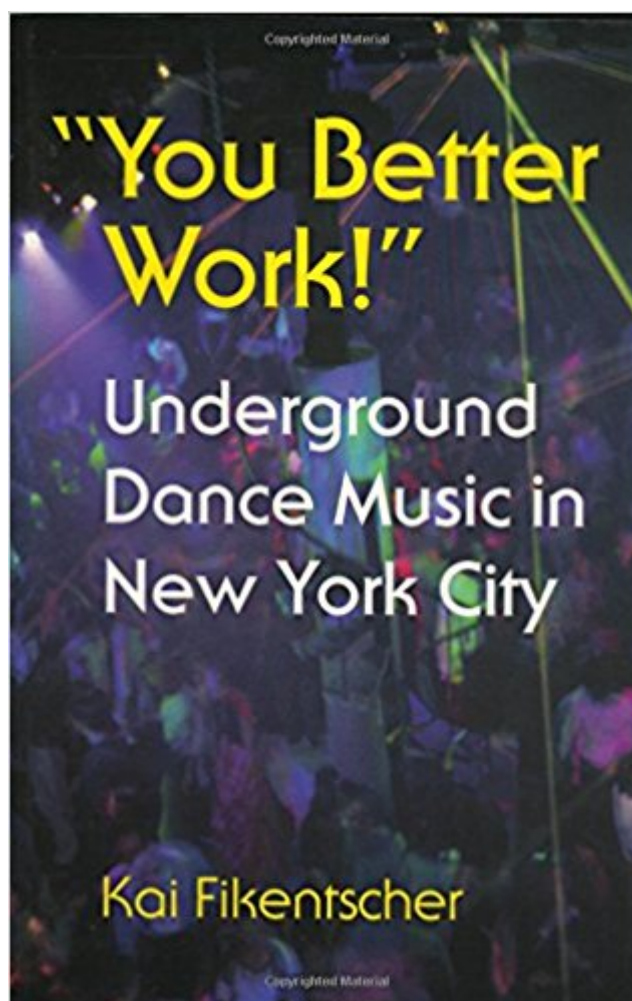


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# "You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music In New York City



## Synopsis

"You Better Work!" is the first detailed study of underground dance music or UDM, a phenomenon that has its roots in the overlap and cross-fertilization of African American and gay cultural sensibilities that have occurred since the 1970s. UDM not only predates and includes disco, but also constitutes a unique performance practice in the history of American social dance. Taking New York City as its geographic focus, "You Better Work!" shows how UDM functions in the lives of its DJs and dancers, and how it is used as the primary identifier of an urban subculture shaped essentially by the relationships between music, dance, and marginality. Kai Fikentscher goes beyond stereotypical images of club and disco to explore the cult and culture of the DJ, the turntable and vinyl recordings as musical instruments, and the vital relationship between music and dance at underground clubs. Including interviews, photographs, and an extensive discography, this ethnographic account tells the story of a celebration of collective marginality through music and dance

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"New York City readers will surely enjoy his tales of a thousand and one club nights at the Tunnel, Mars, Twilo, the Garage, and the Palladium, where we find such dominant turntable masters as Junior Vasquez, David Morales, Little Louie Vega, and Danny Tenaglia working and creating." [Boston Phoenix](#)

"Fikentscher understands the historical importance of disco as few writers do. He guides you effortlessly through the evolution of the DJ from spinner to mixer to remixer to producer. He offers insightful and pathbreaking connections to the black church and to gay expressivity. And he is able to translate the emotional language and transformative experience of music and dance into engaging, readable prose. It's the next best thing to dancing itself!" (Reebee Garofalo, author of *Rockin' Out: Popular Music In the USA*) "You Better Work!" is not just the only serious book about underground dance music in the U.S. It is also a very good book. Fikentscher documents several crucial music scenes before they mutate into the night." (Andrew Ross, Director, American Studies Program, NYU)

This book is informative, but it's a dissertation and reads like one. I'm only 30 pages into it and it's a bit exhausting for me. If you don't mind the formality, then it's a good book. For example: "Here, I am concerned with disco as a concept denoting a particular performance environment in which technologically mediated music is made immediate at the hands of a DJ, and in which this music is responded to via dance by bodies on the dance floor. He could have wrote that he is "interested in disco in terms of how the DJ's music makes people dance." But it's a dissertation...so, it is what it is. I'm enjoying reading it. But I have to read some lines more than once.

ok expecting more

Enjoyable reading

This wasn't so much a book as a term paper or some kind of academic journal. The prose was so dry, so wordy, so clinical and 'round in circles, that I felt like I was back in the classroom. I guess I was expecting more of a typical straightforward pop-culture read, or a book geared towards the casual reader, not a sociologist or historian. Here's an example passage, one I just now turned to randomly in the book (and yes I did finish it) that perfectly demonstrates what I mean: "From the individual dancer's perspective, underground dancing is a personal yet potentially collective response to musical sounds and signals shaped by a DJ. In relation to the DJ's efforts, the dance becomes an interactive performance, and vice versa. The results is a simultaneous interaction between music, as sonic phenomenon, and dancing, as its physical correspondent." Say what? This is the kind of circular mystical double-speak nonsense that fills this book. I was expecting to read

100+ pages about NYC clublife in the 90's, its drama, its superstar DJ's and remixers (Junior Vasquez, Danny Tenaglia, Frankie Knuckles, Roger Sanchez, etc) but instead I get this muddled pretentious prose that reads like a dissertation or some kind of weighty scholarly journal. The only reason I'm not giving this book 1 star is because maybe a dozen or so pages out of its 150 were, in fact, filled with the kind of fun more light-hearted dance-music history that I did very much enjoy reading about (record pools, Def Mix Productions, Sound Factory & Twilo, CD's vs. 12" vinyl, etc).

There's amazingly little "serious" literature on the NY underground dance scene, even though it's been around for decades and now has counterparts all over the States and all over the world. There's not even that much non-serious, vapid stuff about it, either, in fact. So Fikentscher's book really merits the worn-out phrase, "essential reading," because it explores all aspects of the subject in a serious but accessible way: the origins in the disco era, the gay-black-latin interrelationships, how form and function and venues combined to produce a distinctive music, the various outsized personalities, the "quality of life" campaigns that periodically threaten to squash the scene, etc. The author is obviously conversant with all the critical-theory tools and concepts that help to illuminate this kind of subject, and he uses them well here, yet he's produced a book that the average scenester (if there is such a person) could read and would probably approve of (the pomo academic dream come true, I guess). Anybody with even a mild interest will find this book engrossing (I picked it up and couldn't stop), and I suspect that even long-time insiders will learn a few things. Kudos to Fikentscher for producing something this good on such a fascinating, diverse world.

*You Better Work! Underground Dance Music in New York City*, by Kai Fikentscher

Of the recent works of word or image dedicated to the spirit of the New York Underground, *You Better Work!* stands alone, in my opinion, as the first to conduct a thorough, scientifically sustainable analysis of a subcultural phenomenon whose rarified nature made it heretofore nearly impossible to grasp, save from within. Other works can speak of history and its major players with unquestionable authenticity, as does Mel Cheren's *Keep On Dancin'*. Fikentscher's offering, however, proposes an exacting dissection of Underground Dance Music (UDM) properly placed in the sociocultural time-space continuum and described with academic accuracy, all the while remaining reverently connected to the magic of the specific dancefloor experience that gives UDM its singularity. UDM, and the invisible universe it materializes around itself and its dances, present a unique quandary to the academically-inclined thinker. UDM is at once quite quantifiably tangible in its elements and techniques, yet undeniably metaphysical in its manifestation and effect. The scientist's dilemma,

then, is to draw the black-and-white line of academic discipline around the grey frontiers of a shadow world. Without an initiate's third eye, the accomplishment of writing this seminal work for the students of a nascent discipline would have been unattainable. The advantage of being both an academic pioneer and a subcultural insider allows Fikentscher to paint his complicated picture within the perfect frame of reference-namely the sociocultural and (importantly) religious experience of gay African- and Hispanic-American men-as can only one who knows the subject matter firsthand. This "mind over market" approach means, in practice, that notions of musical immediacy and method of consumption are solidly deconstructed without minimizing the importance of context and real-time interaction in analyzing the deconstructed parts. The relevance and insight of such a study is only more poignant now, after the near-demise of UDM's vanguard subculture (and, subsequently, of its home city) in the last decade and the present resurgence both of community and dancefloor spirit within, as well as mainstream curiosity surrounding New York's gay underground of colour. Both Fikentscher himself, and the roadmap through the history and psyche of a people-within-a-people that he painstakingly and respectfully lays out in *You Better Work!*, are special gifts to the academic world at large, and particularly the literati of the Underground. *You Better Work!* is the definitive comprehensive treatise for those academic minds that can bend around the deep afterhours disco and house beats of the New York Underground. It will be required reading for ethnomusicologists everywhere, and should be studied by all those who profoundly want to understand why club life is as essential to the Big Apple as its subways. E. Kipling BRITTON  
New York City, November 2001

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