

# Rolling Stone

## See Rare Photos Inside Studio 54 Nightclub

Photographer Gene Spatz captured celebrities – including John Lennon, Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger – at the iconic New York City 1970s nightclub



A photograph of Yoko Ono and John Lennon by Gene Spatz (year unknown). Gene Spatz/POBA.org

By Jerry Portwood  
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Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager opened Studio 54 40 years ago, and it soon became the epicenter of New York City's nightlife for nearly three years. While it lasted, many photographers flocked to the bacchanal to capture the celebrities and other lucky denizens as they danced and snorted and frolicked under that iconic Man in the Moon with the coke spoon sculpture.



One of the men on the scene was Gene Spatz, a pioneering paparazzo and street photographer who most people have never heard about. Unlike Ron Galella's work – which has been exhibited and is collected as fine art – after Spatz died in 2003 the archive of images was inherited by his younger sister, Amy Lowen, and packed away in filing cabinets in her Kentucky home. She avoided the task of assessing what she had in her possession for nearly a decade until she began to unearth her brother's forgotten treasures.

"While he was working in the late Seventies, I had gotten married, moved to Louisville, Kentucky, and wasn't a part of Gene's day-to-day life," Lowen tells *Rolling Stone*. "It wasn't until he was gone, and I had brought everything home and put it in storage, that I began to open up these envelopes and discover his work."

The black-and-white photographs included scenes from iconic clubs like Studio 54 and Xenon; shots of Carrie Fisher, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, Mary Tyler Moore and Robert Redford; as well quirky New York

City street life tableaus in the 1970s and Eighties. Lowen recognized some of the celebrities in the photos, but she wasn't sure what exactly her brother's archives contained – or its value to the world. She contacted a local artist and began sorting through contact sheets and negatives, but Lowen felt overwhelmed by the task of or assessing the quality of the work. Then she discovered an organization that seemed to offer a way forward and talked with Regan McCarthy at POBA, an online hub and resource that's dedicated to recognizing creative talents who were under-recognized during their life.

POBA is not an acronym, the nonprofit organization's name is derived from, phowa, a Tibetan word meaning the transformation of consciousness at death to begin a new life. And McCarthy was able to recognize the special collection Lowen had inherited and make sure his creative legacy remained alive.

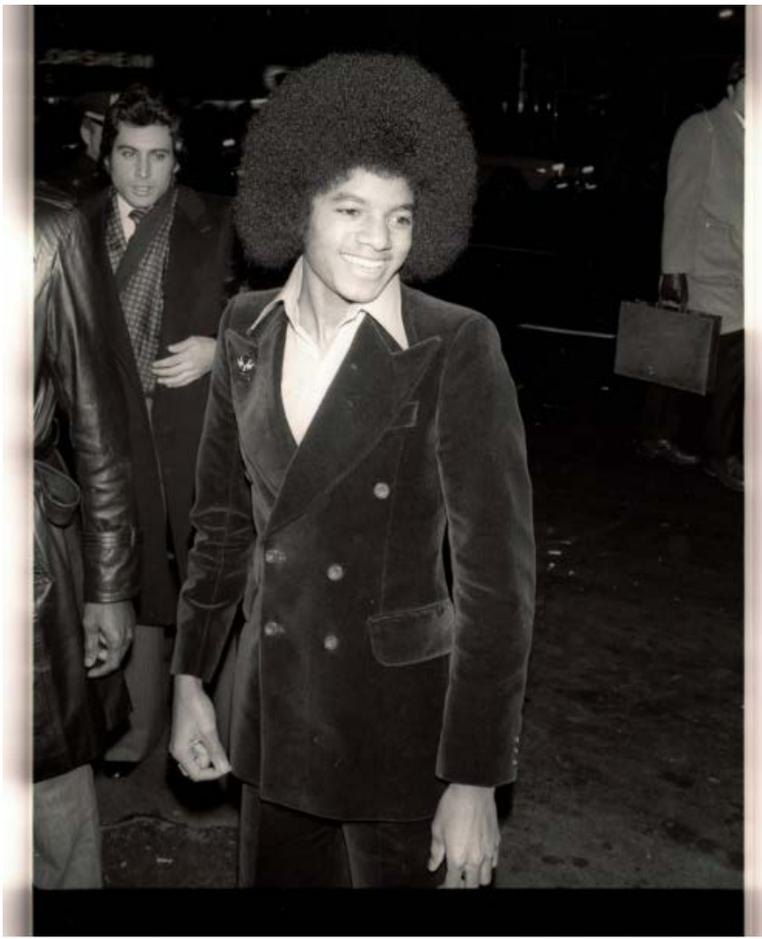
"What Gene has is a very different sensitivity," McCarthy says. "Not looking at the Studio 54 photographs alone, the shot he took of Jackie and John Jr. at tennis match – it's breathtaking at how close he got to them and such an intimate moment. Gene had a special eye for the beauty and the fun and sometimes even the weirdness of the situations. He had a 'kind camera.' I have not seen a picture that Gene took that would have embarrassed anybody – even though he was with people doing very strange things."

After Lowen uploaded digital versions of the photographs to a secure vault, POBA staff helped crop and curate the material, highlighting the value of his artistic eye. McCarthy, who happened to frequent Studio 54 on occasion, was amazed by his access to the notables in attendance.

"Gene was able to capture how celebrity rubbed up with regular folks in the most unpretentious and remarkable way – that was the wonder of Studio 54," she explains. "Other photographers didn't capture that. He captured it fantastically – the fun and wackiness, the sweetness. For that reason, his photos are not only fine art, they are history. Gene captured that part of history and the exuberance in a unique way. He captured that era in my lifetime, and I hope someone is having that type of fun again. Neither the way he captured it nor the period is replaceable."

Lowen says she hopes to exhibit the work at some point, to share it with a wider audience and expose his legacy. "We think of him as a gentleman of the paparazzi [of that era]," she says. "My house now is filled with his art, and I hope others will appreciate it too."

Here, see a selection of exclusive images of Spatz's work for the first time.



Gene Spatz/POBA.org

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**Michael Jackson**

The young entertainer captured outside the club.



Gene Spatz/POBA.org

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**Sly Stone**

Frontman for Sly and the Family Stone in a flashy ensemble.

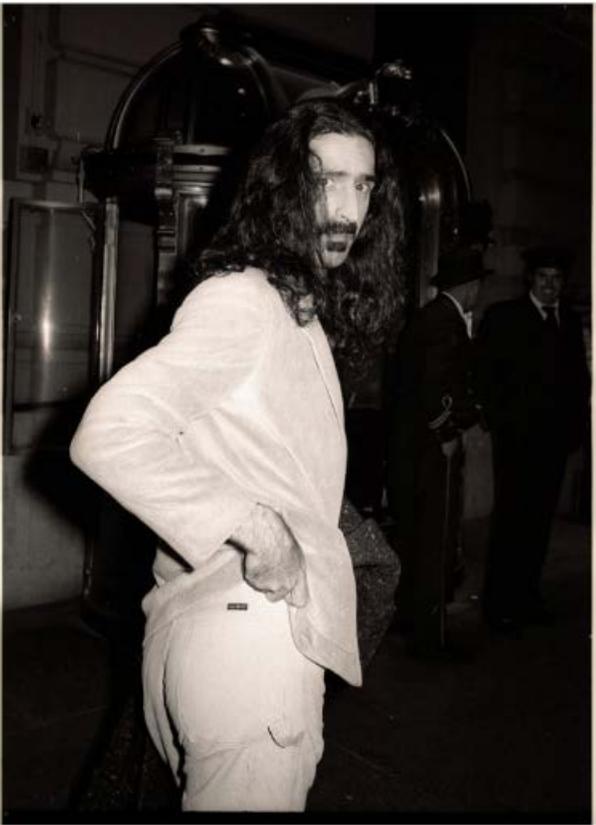


Gene Spatz/POBA.org

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**Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall**

Rock star inside Studio 54.



Gene Spatz/POBA.org

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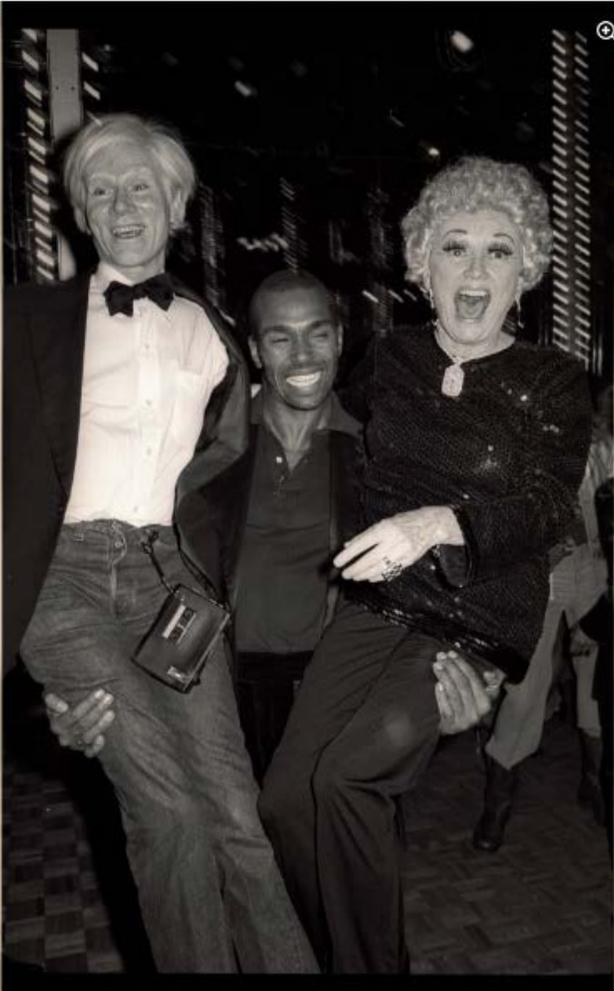
**Frank Zappa**  
Showing off a rear view.



Gene Spatz/POBA.org

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**Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge, Steve Rubell**  
On a "cold" night at Studio 54.



Gene Spatz/POBA.org

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**Andy Warhol and Phyllis Diller**  
Artist and comedian being lifted.



Gene Spatz/POBA.org

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**Rudolf Nureyev, Steve Rubell and Liza Minnelli**  
A fabulous night to revel in being alive with ballet superstar Rudolf Nureyev (far left).