

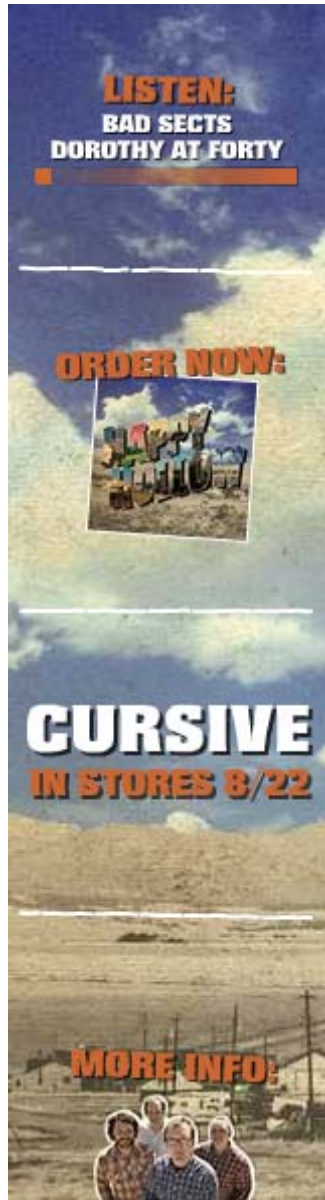
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Glenn O'Brien interviews Jean-Michel Basquiat on *TV Party* [Photo: Bobby Grossman]

Everybody Likes TV: An Interview with *TV Party* Host Glenn O'Brien

[25 August 2006]

by Charlotte Robinson

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***PopMatters* talks with NYC renaissance man Glenn O'Brien about Warhol, Basquiat, Italian financiers, and getting TV on the mayoral ballot.**

Glenn O'Brien has been a writer, editor, *GQ* style expert, ad man, standup comic, singer, and all-around scenester, but from 1978 to 1982 he was the host and primary instigator behind *TV Party*, a Manhattan public access cable show whose cast and crew included Blondie's Chris Stein and Debbie Harry, MTV personality and graffiti artist Fab Five Freddy, artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, filmmaker Amos Poe, musician and onetime Warhol assistant Walter Steding, photographer Kate Simon, and many other luminaries of the new wave era. O'Brien modeled the program after Hugh Hefner's *Playboy After Dark*, a sort of in-studio party where the audience was as much a part of the show as those making it. Guests and regulars discussed art, music, fashion, and politics, and smoked a lot of pot — all of it captured on shaky cameras and half-functional mics. O'Brien called the show "the cocktail party which could be a political party"; funkster George Clinton, appearing as a guest, dubbed it "anarchy Howdy Doody". It could be art or it could be nonsense, or sometimes both at once.

The show attracted a strong if sometimes abusive following (just witness the viewer phone call segments), moved from black and white to color, and was picked up in Los Angeles. When O'Brien got the chance to script a film, it seemed like big-time success was in the stars. But the resulting film, [Downtown 81](#) (starring Basquiat and featuring many *TV Party*

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regulars), was lost for two decades and *TV Party* eventually drew to an unceremonious close as the cast and crew went their own ways. For many years tapes of the show languished in obscurity, but all that is changing with the DVD release of Danny Vinik's documentary *TV Party* and original episodes of the program. The documentary and premier episode were released on June 6 and three more episodes (each released on its own disc) followed on August 8. *PopMatters* recently spoke with O'Brien about the mad genius that was *TV Party*.

For those who don't know, could you talk a bit about your background before you did *TV Party*?

I was going to film school at Columbia University and a friend of mine and I got hired by Andy Warhol to work on *Interview*, which had been going for about a year and they could never find anybody reliable enough to do it. We wrote about films for the *Village Voice* and we managed to land this job. I became the editor of *Interview* magazine, I guess when I was around 24. I did that for several years and then I went to work for *Rolling Stone* for awhile, got involved with music writing, and then I guess around 1976 I started a band with a friend of mine who was an art director at *Esquire*, young guy, and we had a band called Konelrad and it was kind of a funny band because we did political songs but they were sort of humorous in nature. We called ourselves the world's first socialist/realist rock band.

Then when we stopped doing that I kind of missed the performance thing and I was editor-at-large of *High Times* magazine and I came back to *Interview* and started doing a column called "Glenn O'Brien's Beat". I was writing about the punk bands and what they called the "new wave bands" and that whole scene that was going on at CBGB's and Max's Kansas City. I knew this woman [Coca Crystal] — I guess she had some connection with *High Times* — but she had a show called *If I Can't Dance You Can Keep Your Revolution*. It was a live public access show on Manhattan cable. She asked me to come on her show and I did and the next day, all these people, even strangers, told me that they had seen it. I couldn't believe it because I knew about public access and I even knew somebody that had a show but I didn't realize that anybody was watching. So I decided to start a show. And that's what I did with my friends.

***TV Party* had an intriguing cast of characters, and I was wondering how you met some of them. Chris Stein, the co-host, was one of your friends. How did you meet him?**

I met Chris at CBGB's. I would go there all the time to see the bands and I'd seen Blondie a bunch of times and I thought they were really great. One evening, somebody introduced me to Chris and Debbie, and we started hanging out and became close friends.

Walter Steding was working for Andy at the Factory. He was like a painting assistant and general handyman. Walter brought in Lenny [Ferrari], the drummer. Fab Five Freddy actually called me up. He was at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn and he was just a fan and started hanging around with us.

He knew you through your writing?

Yes. Jean-Michel Basquiat and I met because I was researching an article on graffiti and somebody hooked it up for us to meet. We got along really well and I invited him to come on *TV Party* and he had a really good time and he started hanging around with us, coming to every show, and became a really close friend. The people who worked the cameras and did the sound and stuff were just friends. Edo Bertoglio, who ended up

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directing the film *Downtown 81*, was a photographer who often took the pictures for my column in *Interview*; I did a lot of interviews with musicians for *Interview* and we worked together all the time. His girlfriend was a woman named Maripol and Edo and Maripol were often the camera people on the show.

How often did you film the show?

Sometimes we would do it every week and then sometimes we would take a break. Manhattan cable, I think, allowed you to repeat shows once or twice. We did it about as often as a regular TV show, which would be between 20 and 26 shows a year.

What were some of your favorite moments on the show?

Gee, I don't know, there's so many. There were some great performances. I liked David McDermott's "Homosexual Minute". That was a funny bit. The night Nile Rodgers brought out a ventriloquist's dummy was a pretty good night. We don't have the tape anymore, but Iggy Pop came on the show and that was kind of a big thrill. There were some funny incidents, like two times we had to pretend the show was over because guests wouldn't leave. One time we had this San Francisco punk band on called the Mutants and they became kind of hostile and they wouldn't leave, so we said the show was over and started turning out the lights. But it wasn't really over; we had about half an hour left, so they left and we said, "Oh, we were just kidding; the show is still on".

Kind of a similar thing happened with Legs McNeil, who's sort of a well known writer now, with the big punk book. Legs came on and he had taken a lot of something and he was with Tom Baker, who was sort of a legendary character who'd been a Warhol actor and he was Jim Morrison's best friend. They were both really messed up and Legs wouldn't leave and he got the microphone wire in his mouth and he had like superhuman strength, like they say people on angel dust have or something. So we convinced him the show was over and he left.

The theme shows were really fun. We did two heavy metal shows; one we did in the studio, live, and another we filmed at the Mudd Club. We would shoot shows in clubs to make money to pay for the show, so if we did a show at the Mudd Club we might make a couple thousand dollars, which would pay for the show for quite a long time.

Were those broadcast live, or you would film them?

No, we'd film them. We shot them on tape and had to edit them somewhat. But the *TV Party* heavy metal night at the Mudd Club was really fun because I think we had 12 guitarists in the band that night, plus Charles Rocket on accordion with Marshall amps. We played what we thought of as heavy metal songs at the time, which was Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin. Then we did a psychedelic show at Danceteria, which was funny. We had a lot of really good guests.

Were there a lot of theme shows?

There were quite a few. Sometimes they were more elaborate because they would involve costumes. Usually we would get that together at the last minute, like I would call everybody up and say, "It's Middle Eastern night" or whatever. But sometimes the costumes were pretty good, like on Halloween. We did two or three Halloween shows. People generally put a big effort into it. We did a UFO show and Tina L'Hotsky showed a film she had made, and people talked about abduction and stuff, but it didn't require any big, special effort. The studio heavy metal show, we all got wigs; we wore big, long wigs. We looked like long-haired heavy metal

hippies. The pajama party, we just all wore pajamas. We did two primitive shows; one of them is in the documentary. We just dressed like savages with war paint and bones.

What do you make of the fact that some people saw a political element in the show while others didn't?

It was satirical but it was based on things that I really thought. The idea of the show was that the real government is television. In a democracy, it's what's used to manipulate people to make choices that determine what the government does. Our idea was that we were the political party that was based on television. Everything was done in a kind of joking manner. I was going to try to get on the mayoral ballot because I thought if we could get on the ballot and it said "TV Party", that everybody would vote for that because everybody likes TV. But we didn't get enough signatures, so we weren't on the ballot.

Those were the Reagan years and it was pretty scary. I think people still consider Reagan to be the scariest president ever. You never knew what was going to happen. The day that Walter and I recorded that sort of rap *TV Party* theme song actually turned out to be the day that Reagan was shot. In Walter's studio all afternoon we were kind of hoping that was it for Reagan, but he pulled through.

Today there are hundreds of cable channels and lots of niche programming. What do you think about the state of cable TV now versus then? Do you think there's a way of changing things through TV now?

Yeah, I think it helps. Between the Internet and cable I think that things will change. News travels really fast now through the Internet, through blogs and stuff, and I think a lot of people get their news that way instead of through the major networks. I think there's a lot of alternative theory that can be spread around that would have been, in the days of *TV Party*, kind of unthinkable. Like if you go to Google Video you can find this documentary about the claims that 9/11 was a conspiracy by a secret element of the United States government. Something like that wouldn't have happened 25 years ago.

Which is heartening in a way, because with all the media conglomerates, as one thing gets taken over, people still find ways to communicate.

If you look at the success of — although, ultimately, he got knocked out — the candidacy of Howard Dean was largely driven by Internet fundraising. That's really positive and you can find a lot of interesting stuff on cable TV. I just watched a documentary this morning about how AIDS came from medical researchers in the Congo in the mid-'50s working on a polio vaccine. That's not the kind of thing you're going to get on *60 Minutes* but it's a very important document. I think the fact that there are hundreds of channels now gives information a better chance of getting out. In our day, it was kind of amazing that all of those cable alternative stations did not exist, so our little public access was one of about 15 choices you had on the dial in New York in 1980. Channel 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and a couple cable channels. So people just randomly going through the dial could hit on our show. I think that's how it became kind of popular. It was a lot of word of mouth among high-school kids. I didn't realize it until later but I think our audience was mostly high-school-aged kids.

One of the things I like about the show is how it breaks down the barriers between different worlds. It brings together artists,

musicians, and politics. I don't know if you agree, but one of the things I find discouraging today is that, with so many choices, everything is compartmentalized.

Totally. At that time there was a sort of relatively small creative community in New York City and the artists and the musicians would go to the same bars and the fashion people too. I would go to Max's Kansas City and I would run into Ray Johnson, John Chamberlain, really important artists, and then the New York Dolls might be hanging out there or Todd Rundgren. Then there would be fashion designers, like Scott Barrie or Stephen Burrows or somebody like that. Everybody kind of knew each other. A lot of the people who were my contemporaries, the artists, were in bands. My friend James Nares was in a band; John Lurie was in a band but he was also a painter; Jim Jarmusch, the moviemaker, was in a band. That was what you did, a little bit of everything. A lot of those people also made some small films. It was kind of a more renaissance attitude, like people were interested in all these different things. Now I think there's a lot more separation. Maybe it's because things are more professional.

I know that still exists. I was talking to Kim and Thurston from Sonic Youth the other day, and they know a lot of young noise musicians and those people are involved with artists. I don't think it's changed entirely; maybe it's not so visible in New York City because now you have to be rich to live in Manhattan. I think things have become a little more diversified but maybe that's good, too. If I were 22 years old today I don't know where I'd be. Maybe I would have gone somewhere else to live besides Manhattan. Maybe I would have gone to LA.

***Downtown 81* had the same crossover of artists, musicians, and filmmakers as *TV Party*, featured some of the same people, and was made while *TV Party* was still on the air.**

We kind of took a break from *TV Party* to make *Downtown 81*.

What was the spark behind that project?

My friends Edo and Maripol, at the time they were a couple, and we saw a lot of one another. Maripol was the creative director of Fiorucci, which was an Italian fashion store on East 59th Street. They would buy things from a lot of downtown designers and they sold T-shirts and it was kind of related to the stuff that was going on in youth culture at the time. Elio Fiorucci, who owned the company, was kind of fascinated by the club scene and the bands and everything that was going on so he said, "You kids should make a movie about what's going on here." And we said, "Okay, get us the money." So he said, "Okay, can you write a treatment?" So I wrote a treatment and he got us some money to write a script and I wrote a script and he hooked us up with some Italian backers. It happened like that, it was very casual.



BASQUIAT: Interviewed on *TV Party*

Did you write it with Jean-Michel in mind for the lead?

Yeah, when I actually got to the stage of writing the script, I did. Before that, there had been a certain amount of discussion as to who should be the central character. Originally Edo wanted Danny Rosen, who was a young man about town. He's actually in the film. He's in the scene where Jean-Michel and Danny sneak into the Rock Lounge by using a limousine. He was in various bands. He was a really good-looking kid and he had a lot of charisma. Edo was interested in using him but I thought Jean-Michel was the most interesting character on the scene.

The film was lost for awhile, wasn't it? It was a long time until it saw the light of day.

Yeah, when we were in the middle of editing it — I mean, I thought this was going to be our big break, we were all going to become stars, whatever — but in the middle of editing it, the company that backed the film got involved in a serious political scandal in Italy. The people that we'd been dealing with suddenly weren't there. I think some of them were even in jail. We didn't know what to do. We'd call up this company and say "What about our movie?" and they'd say, "What movie? We don't know anything about any movie." It was really perplexing. So that happened in '81 and then we didn't know what to do and we just kind of sat around and then in '83 or '84 I found a guy who was a powerful man in the music business who also was a bit of an art collector and I told him about the film and we went to Italy and tried to buy it. There was always some weird thing happening. We couldn't find the sound and it never happened. Years passed and we kind of forgot about it and it was a lost film, like *I, Claudius*, there were a lot of films that seemed like they were important but they never came out.

The impetus for it being finished was actually the Julian Schnabel film *Basquiat*. It really bothered me. I really didn't like it. I felt like it was a distortion of reality, of Jean-Michel and what was going on at the time. So I became very determined to try and track it down and see what could happen. Michael Zilkha and Maripol became my partners. We found out there was an Italian law that if a work of art or film or music or whatever wasn't distributed, that the creators of it could petition for the rights,

which we did. We got the rights. We actually found the film still sitting in a lab in New York City. I went to my friend Michael Zilkha; he used to own a record company called Ze, which was a very important part of the scene. He released music by Kid Creole and the Coconuts, Suicide, Contortions, James White, etc., Lydia Lunch. Michael put up the money to do postproduction. We wound up dubbing all the voices. We got it into the Cannes Film Festival, and that's how it happened.

Can you summarize what you did after *TV Party*?

I was writing for magazines. I was still writing for *Interview*. I was one of the founders of *Spin*. For two years I became a standup comic. I did it as this art project; I learned the 1960 nightclub act of a comic named B.S. Pully and I performed it — it was supposed to be one time only — at Danceteria. It turned out that David Johansen came to see me and he loved it and he said, "I'm going to start doing this lounge act called Buster Poindexter and I want you to be my opening act" so I wound up working with David every week for two-and-a-half years.

I did a lot of writing for art magazines. In 1985 or '86 a friend of mine asked me if I wanted to work on a TV commercial. They were having problems with the writing. So I said yes and that turned into a career that I still have. I still do a lot of advertising work. I started out doing an ad for Barney's and ended up working for Calvin Klein and a lot of other ad stuff. I still do that and it really helps bring home the bacon. I have a column in *GQ* which I've done quite awhile, which actually started out in *Details*. I have a weekly column in Italian *Vanity Fair*. I write for a lot of different magazines.

Would you ever do another film or TV project?

I wrote a script — it happened almost exactly the same way as *Downtown 81* getting released — it happened out of anger and resentment. When *I Shot Andy Warhol* came out I was kind of outraged by it and I decided I wanted to try and make a more accurate film about Warhol, my old boss, friend, and mentor. So I wrote a script about Warhol and I'm trying to get that produced.

Chris and I have been talking about trying to do — I don't know if it would be called *TV Party* — we've been talking about trying to do some kind of a TV show in the fall. It might involve some of the same people. We haven't changed a whole lot. He's on tour right now, but when Blondie gets back from tour [the tour has since been canceled] we might get together and do a pilot. We have a funny idea of how we would translate the *TV Party* essence into the 21st century.



TV Party — Trailer



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