



Michael L Abramson 1970s Nightclubs of Chicago South Side

The selection of images here focuses on Michael Abramson's best known photographs from the 1970s, documenting the nightlife of Black clubs on Chicago's South Side and the underground funk/blues and early disco scene. It's a celebration of the style and culture of a bygone era.

They were exhibited in a solo show *"Tales from the South Side. 1970s Chicago Clubs"*, a widely acclaimed exhibition at MMX Gallery presented in 2018.

As a white photographer working in black nightclubs, which was taboo at the time, Abramson was always welcome to photograph and became a functioning part of the club's atmosphere, he gained recognition and respect for his photographs giving many of them away to the clubbers. He also embraced the sounds and the ambience of the nights.

*In a sense, I became a functioning part of the club's atmosphere. Unlike the professional nightclub photographers who were peddling their wares, there seemed to be a recognition and respect that I was solely enjoying myself. It was not unusual for a stage announcer to call my attention over the sound system to something he thought I should photograph. Once, as I repeatedly photographed a "spectacle" on the stage, my strobe creating its own off beat with the rhythm of the music, I turned to find myself being applauded by the entire club. Always returning with prints, free food and drink, as well as "acceptance," were my rewards.* – Michael Abramson

This series won Abramson a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1978 and launched his career as a photojournalist. Eventually the project resulted in a hardbound book, *Light: On the South Side*, including the Grammy and Mojo nominated album, featuring Chicago blues as heard in the clubs from the stage and the jukebox.

"A camera is a window through which a photographer interacts with the world, and it's up to the operator to decide whether his camera will be a barrier or a mirror between he and his subjects. In the 1970s, Michael Abramson chose the latter path when he brought his camera to Pepper's Hideout on Chicago's South Side. Following in the footsteps of his acknowledged influence Gyula Halász, a Hungarian photographer better known as Brassai who became the pre-eminent chronicler of the Paris nightlife he loved so much, Abramson initiated himself into the nightlife of Chicago's predominantly black neighbourhoods. He was very much a part of the scene he documented on film, drinking, laughing, and dancing with his subjects into small hours and becoming as much a part of the atmosphere as the locals who frequented the same nightspots he did." - Joe Tangari (Numero Group, 2009)

"As a graduate student at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the late 1970s, photographer Michael Abramson spent a lot of time in clubs with names like Perv's House and Pepper's Hideout. Marked with neon signs and wood-paneled walls, these Chicago joints were the main hubs for the city's bustling underground jazz, juke, and blues scenes. Gritty and quirky, Abramson's work is an intimate documentation of this South Side subculture, a community that had largely disappeared by the mid-1980s."

MMX Gallery, Exhibition 2018, Press:

<https://mmxgallery.com/exhibitions/21-michael-abramson-tales-from-the-south-side/press/>





*"The camera gave me the necessary license to proceed with my project. For the purpose of taking pictures, I could venture anywhere. I seemed to be involved in a romantic adventure exploring a world very alien to my own."*

- Michael Abramson's thesis on the South Side Chicago project: "Black Night Clubs of Chicago's South Side", May 1977







*“This is as close as a lot of us could ever have got, and luckily, it’s pretty close. If we are ever given the chance to go back there, we now know where to go, what to wear, what to drink, what to smoke, what to drive, how to dance, how close we can get—like a good novelist, Abramson is particularly attuned to relationships and how to frame them.”*

– Nick Hornby (2009)



*“Scarves, jumpsuits, and elegant hats are on display along with dancing, drinking, and smoking, but what’s most arresting here is the subtle beauty of human interaction.”*



*“(...) I also attempted to photograph the rather transitory personal moments that seemed to be illustrative of the night time. Using the technique of pre-focusing and photographing quickly (...)”*

*- Michael L Abramson*



*“I walked into a timeless place ...full of supporting actors and actresses of every conceivable role”*

- Michael Abramson (Light: On the South Side, 2009)



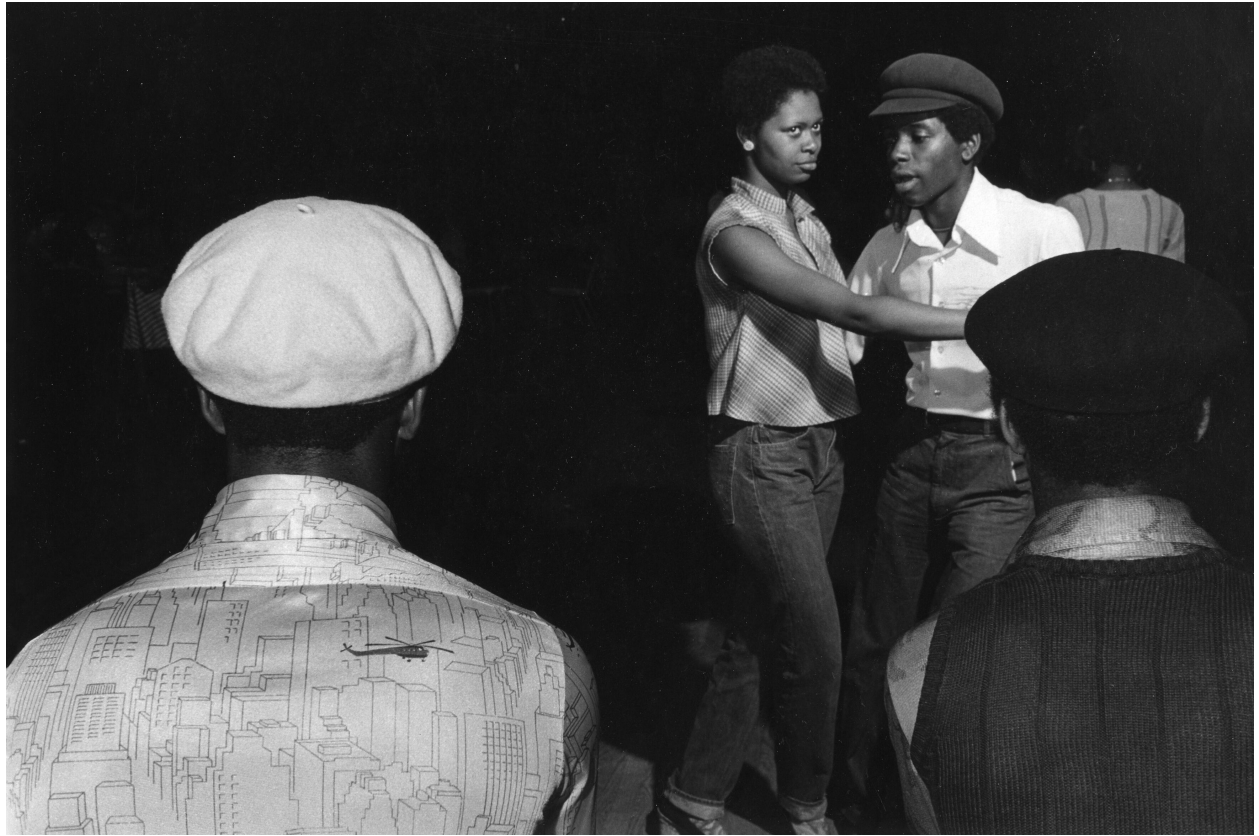
*“In some cases, it really was necessary to look up someone’s dress to be sure of gender”*

- Abramson wrote in his 1977 IIT thesis about the photos and scene.











*"You're there to have fun...to forget whatever troubles or successes you might have."*

- Michael Abramson told LENS blog in 2009

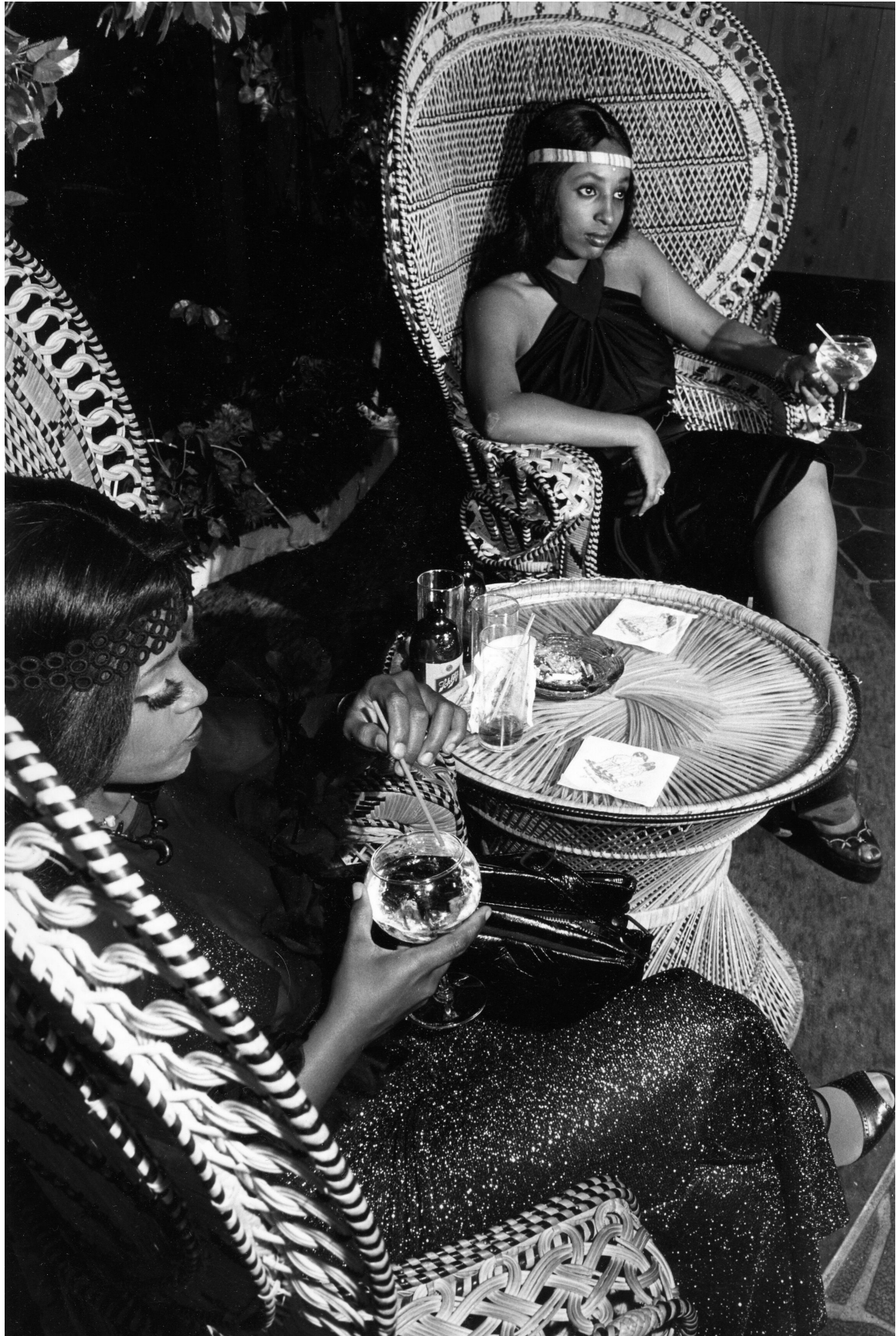


*“Having photographed at Peppers Hideout, continuously for six months, and intermittently over the following year and a half, an intimacy with the people was increasingly established without which I could not have worked. Not only was I welcomed to photograph, but my occasional absence from a night's activities was always noted.*

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- Michael Abramson, 1977









*“I realise I have been to every part of planet... But I have never been as far away as I was when I was on the South Side Chicago. Not because it was exotic, but because it was so exhilarating.”*

– Michael L Abramson



*“There is something extremely poignant about these pictures: there comes a point where the transience of the laughter and the music, the booze and the cigarettes and the drugs, pushes us into a contemplation of the mortality of the participants, and then on to our own.”*

- Nick Hornby, London, *Light: On the South Side*, 2009

**Michael L Abramson** was born in New Jersey in 1948, the late American photographer graduated with Master of Photography from Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago in 1977. His work was regularly featured in Time, New York Times, Newsweek, People, Forbes, Harpers, Wall Street Journal and other popular American and international magazines.

He was a highly sought after commercial portrait photographer and photojournalist. His subjects comprised celebrities, prominent stars from sport, politics and the entertainment industry included Bill Clinton, Steve Jobs, Steven Spielberg, Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey and many more.

Yet it was his 1970s series documenting the Chicago South side club scene that made Abramson's name. Influenced by Brassai's photographs of the 1920s Paris, Abramson caught the stylish nightlife of the funk and soul era in full, alluring swing.

His work was exhibited frequently since 1978, including a solo show at Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, in 2014 and in the same year the group show on American Photography since 1950 at Madison Museum of Contemporary Arts (US).

Many of Abramson's south side prints were published in a photography book/ 2 LP record set entitled *Light on the South Side* (2009), by Chicago music recording company Numero Group.

Following Abramson's death in 2011 a new book entitled *Gotta Go Gotta Flow: Life, Love, and Lust From Chicago's South Side* was released by Chicago-based Chicago City Files Press (2015).

His photographs are in major public and museum collections including the Smithsonian, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago History Museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, the California Museum of Photography and various private collections.

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#### Prints information:

Vintage Silver Gelatin Print

Print size: 27.9 x 35.4 cm/ 11 x 14 in with white border, Image size: 20.5 x 30.5 cm

£1,450

£1,650 (Framed)

Frame: Book mount board, custom made black frame, finished with antireflective UV protective AR glass

Series: 1970s Nightclubs of Chicago South Side > Stamped; "Provenance Authenticated by Michael L Abramson Estate, 2011" or Hand Signed in pencil by Michael Abramson on verso

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