 JC ALVAREZ

THE TAMING OF A

# PARTY MONSTER

LIKE RIP VAN WINKLE AWAKENING FROM HIS PROLONGED SLUMBER, FORMER NIGHTLIFE CZAR MICHAEL ALIG HAS EMERGED FROM 17 YEARS IN PRISON TO SURVEY HIS FORMER KINGDOM





Fame has always been a desirable acquisition, often accompanied by the distinction of notoriety. Andy Warhol declared, "in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." No one had a more thirsty desire to be relevant and famous than Michael Alig. At a time before Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were the way we learned about trending personalities and memes, Alig pursued instant celebrity – the kind that could be self-designed and prophesied only within the glittering halls of clubland. He ventured from his modest surroundings in Indiana to make something of himself in New York City under the strobe lights and cotton-candied smoke machines of the disco.



After the passing of Warhol in 1987, columnist Michael Musto legendarily affirmed that nightlife indeed was dead. The fashion and art worlds were desperate for new kinds of creative infusion, and AIDS all but decimated the gay community, creating a vacuum that needed filling. Situating himself in obscure downtown hangouts popular for their dark ambivalence, Alig began to carve a niche amid the disenfranchised, disavowed and discarded seeking refuge in the shadows. Cultivating a cast of characters from those inhabiting the club scene, Alig pedaled his talents as a showman and club promoter, and is credited with having created the Club Kid.

Fabricated from the bits and pieces of the interesting to the macabre among the city's nightcrawlers, Club Kids included such New York City socialites as James St. James, Kenny Kenny, Jenny Talia, DJ Keoki, and the transgender pop darling Amanda Lepore. Alig would give rise to one of nightlife's most uproarious eras. In a solar system of outrageous personalities, he was the sun.

But like Icarus, one of Alig's Club Kids would fly too close to the sun, only to come crashing to his death. In March 1996, well-liked, small-time drug dealer and emerging Club Kid Angel Melendez – known for wearing a set of oversize, usually white feathered wings – disappeared

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from the scene. At first, no one suspected foul play. But rumors that Alig and Robert "Freeze" Riggs murdered Melendez over a drug deal flew around clubland. Alig paradoxically denied and perpetuated these rumors himself, but most wrote off the gossip as a ploy for attention. Seven months later, Riggs and Alig pleaded guilty to the crime. The murder was the inspiration for the 1998 World of Wonder documentary *Party Monster* and 2003 feature film of the same name starring Macaulay Culkin as Alig.

In October 1997, Alig was sentenced to 10 to 20 years. In 2000, he was placed in solitary confinement after failing a drug test, still suffering his addiction to heroin. He faltered on multiple parole hearings, until finally paroled from New York's Rikers Island in May 2014 after serving 17 years of his sentence.

While maintaining much of the charismatic *je ne sais quoi* that made him an unmistakable standout among his club disciples, Alig today is more subdued; gone is the hubris that made him such a divisive personality in his heyday. Understandably, he sits intensely on the edge. The subject of much scrutiny since his release, Alig is faced with reintegration into the world while carrying several loads of baggage that

will forever taint him in the public eye. His reputation enters the room before he's ever physically present.

On the day selected for our interview, Alig is running late – about 45 minutes. He apologizes profusely, several times by text as he makes his way across town. He's terribly maligned by his tardiness. In a digital era where every minute counts and relevancy is measured not in minutes but in seconds, every moment matters.

When asked about how he's adjusting to his new life, Alig admits: "Not very well." As part of his parole, Alig must keep a very strict schedule that includes group meetings (for his addiction as well as anger management) and a mandated curfew, all while maintaining a creative structure and various entrepreneurial commitments. "I try to put a day aside to deal with each thing," he said. The key focus of Alig's creative energies at this time is his artwork. He's preparing to launch a wearable graphic campaign of his own design. "Everyone keeps telling me I should be doing nothing but painting, and I'm doing everything but painting."

Since reentering the "real world," the Internet and social media have injected themselves into



our daily diatribe in a way that Alig himself couldn't have imagined. Reality TV has exploded and launched the careers of an entire new type of celebrity — people who are famous for absolutely nothing except the sake of living their lives on camera, chasing the trail of false stardom blazed by the Club Kids.

To put it into perspective, when Michael Alig entered prison, the first Apple iPod hadn't come out, DJs mostly still spun vinyl records, and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was on the verge of being published stateside.

"Things are much more complicated ... especially in New York," Alig says. "I haven't seen not one TV show or a movie in 20 years, but I do allow myself [at least] one DVD a week." He's still working on budgeting his time more efficiently, especially to keep pace with an overflow of ideas. "There's no shortage of those," he adds.

When Alig and his Club Kids began to overrun the scheme of club life, their intent was to satirize the corporately controlled, mass-market capitalist manipulation that was eating up popular culture.

"More people got it than I thought," Alig says of the ironic concepts embodied by the scene's Club Kids. "The people around us certainly got it that it was all satire, and they say that satire is often confused for the real thing."

Many of his eventual followers — Club Kids that would inherit the culture he presented through media appearances — sent Alig letters and email admitting they too felt in on the joke. "A lot of people hated us because we came off as the superficial and vapid celebrities that we were mocking, so that's kind of a compliment."

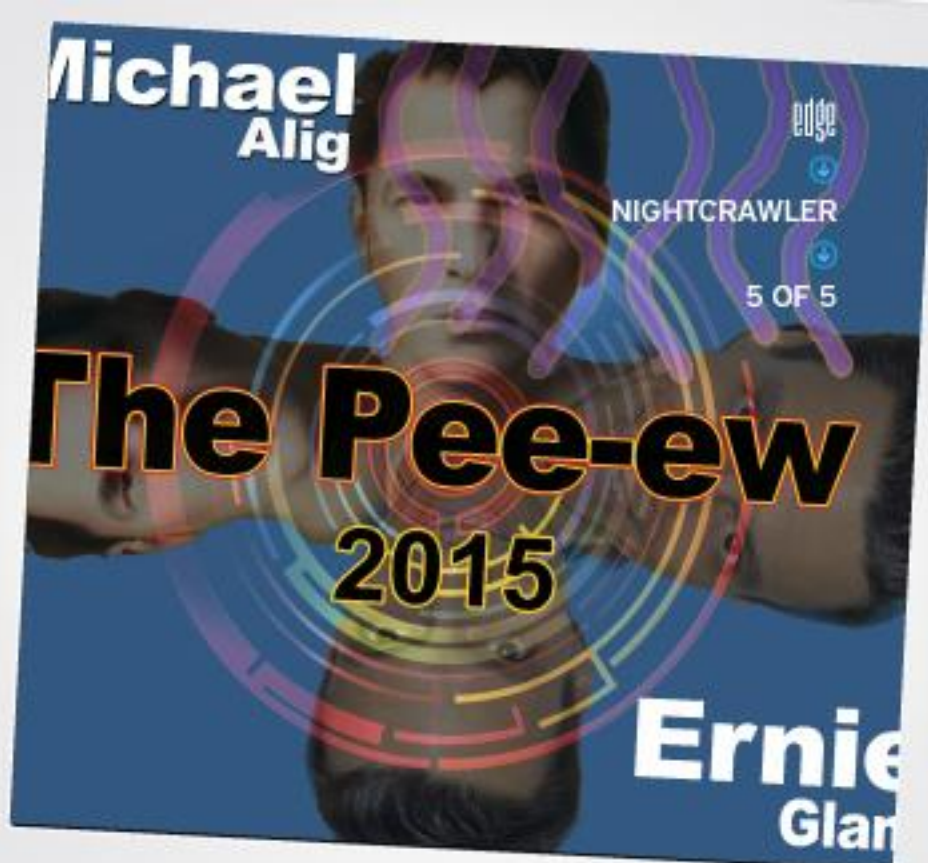


There 's no denying that Alig raised the profile of a largely subversive group within the LGBT community, and certainly engaged the mainstream on issues of sex and sexual identity at a time when gays and lesbians still pursued acceptance. "To me, gay liberation was all about mixing and intermingling," he explains. "I actually found it offensive when clubs were only described as being exclusively gay or straight, while everyone is basically just the same." To this end, Alig purposefully pursued mixing guests at his events.

The phenomenon that followed, urged along by Alig and the Club Kids, was more an afterthought than a calculated maneuver. "I wasn't thinking we were important; I was thinking people were just desperate," he says about the interest generated by the mainstream and surrounding his colorful entourage. "I honestly thought that people would switch channels when they saw us."

Alig sees plenty of what was started in the late 1980s still thriving in club life today, but he agrees that today's promoters are motivated mostly by how much revenue they can generate. "Everybody wants to have that experience again, but no one wants to pay for





it." He recognizes the desirable extremes by which we measure the heights of club culture, from the exclusivity of the velvet rope to today's VIP table service. "Now they'll let anyone willing to pay in before letting anyone in that is fabulous."

He says his motivation was never solely the pursuit of fame; rather, Alig says he was much more dedicated to achieving relevancy by whatever means at his disposal. "We were fighting against what was boring and normal." Seeking out the disadvantaged and giving them a pedestal gave Alig a voice as well, and he has lived to see his goals succeed. "The world has become what we've engineered. We've become the establishment. We didn't subvert the establishment, however weird that is ... If there's enough of you, it eventually becomes all of you."

Though *Less Than Zero* author Bret Easton Ellis did not much admire the film adaptation of his novel, he did revel in the film's actors, especially Robert Downey Jr.'s portrayal of "Julian." Though obvious to the audience, Julian's fate – his decent into decadence, the selling of his body and soul – parallels Alig's own ride: fame coming at all too high a price, aligning Alig forever in infamy.

But Alig left an indelible mark on the dance floor, even as it evolves into the 21st century. His renegade persona has been replaced by an identity less subversive and more mainstream, and the availability of social networking gives voice to a more savvy



generation of narcissists more interested in one another than in fame and notoriety. Today's digital-age "Club Kids" – Version 2.0 – are calloused and indifferent to celebrity as they impatiently chase after their own in cyberspace. No longer content with merely 15 minutes, they seek a more permanent relevancy in the safety of a crowded dance floor.

Party on! **1**