SLATE

About Last Night
By Matthew Terrell
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Photo illustration by Lisa Larson-Walker. Still from a film by Nelson Sullivan courtesy of the 5 Ninth Avenue Project and Good Dog Blackout LLC.

This piece is part of the Legacies issue, a special Pride Month series from Outward, Slate's home for coverage of LGBTQ life, thought, and culture. Read an introduction to the issue here.

The artifacts of queer history are often unassuming: an album of snapshots from a drag show, say, or back issues of the Village Voice.
To some, these may seem like trivial scraps; indeed, it wasn't until recently that major institutions like museums and libraries saw fit to preserve them. If we have any archives of such materials to rifle through and learn from today, it's usually due to the unappreciated, obsessive work that certain driven individuals put into documenting the people and scenes of our queer past. Nelson Sullivan was one such hero.

Thirty years ago, Sullivan released the first episode of a cable access show featuring video he shot of the underground queer community in New York City. A day after his first episode aired, he died. He left

behind thousands of hours of unaired footage of drag shows, parties with gay icons, and scenes of 1980s Manhattan. These tapes are now in the care of the Fales Library at New York University, and they constitute some of the most thorough documents of queer history at a pivotal and challenging time.

In the 1980s, portable VHS camcorders (the kind lugged around by dads at Disney World) hit the consumer market via stores like RadioShack. They recorded on tapes available for a few bucks that could record for up to 120 minutes. Since these systems used magnetic tapes instead of film, which required chemical processing (like the popular Super 8 cameras by Kodak), they were much more accessible to amateur videographers. Sullivan bought one of these early VHS camcorders to document the lives of downtown New York City's artists and weirdos, rising luminaries who also happened to be his friends.

This was a time long before iPhones and today's culture of recording everything; seeing Sullivan lugging around a camera on his shoulder must have been quite a sight. The equipment was expensive and heavy, but Sullivan dutifully carried his camera to huge discos (like the Limelight), to dives (like the Pyramid), to Coney Island, to private parties packed with Warhol-era stars, and behind the scenes with rising stars like RuPaul and Deee-Lite.

What made Sullivan's films even more interesting was that he rarely filmed his movies in the conventional point-and-shoot way. Instead, he often turned the camera on himself and, with a fisheye lens, captured a full spectrum of the world around him. He was an early pioneer of the selfie, of turning the "backward," as a way of documenting life.

"Nelson suffered for his art," says David Goldman, who helped preserve Sullivan's video collection. "He got a hernia from carrying around that camera. Nelson was constantly working on his videos. It could be a beautiful New York City day and he would get call after call from friends inviting him out to the park or for a walk. He would turn them down and say, 'I have to edit my videos.' "

Sullivan went around New York City like this for years. Before he knew what he was going to do with all this content, he knew he wanted to film the world around him—constantly. Sullivan rarely went out without his camera, especially if he was going to a club or party with his fabulous friends. He created a modern-day Proustian video archive so rich in detail that each frame is full of history. Look carefully and you might notice a copy of a newspaper with a photo of Keith Haring on the cover or see an iconic club kid (like Michael Alig) in everyday clothes at a house party.

With such dedication, Sullivan's tape collection grew rapidly. He lived in a creaky three-story rented townhouse at 5 9th Avenue in Manhattan's Meatpacking District, and he very quickly filled up his home with box after box of his VHS tapes. In these tapes were scenes from parties for Leigh Bowery and Keith Haring, a very young Lady Bunny asking Sullivan to borrow money for drugs, RuPaul reflecting on letting men touch her for money, and rides in convertibles around New York City with two twinks (Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey, who would eventually start World of Wonder, the production company that makes *RuPaul's Drag Race*).

Noticeably absent in Sullivan's videos is the darker side of 1980s New York: He records virtually no references to AIDS, or political conservatism, or anything remotely negative. What Sullivan captured on his camcorder seems to be a nonstop party. In fact, Sullivan documented some performers at their peak, before they died during the AIDS epidemic. This includes several videos of the underground, lusty lounge

singer John Sex, with his towering sculptural hair and skintight metallic jumpsuits—and the last recorded performance of John Sex at Club Mars, months before he died of AIDS at 34.

While he would always make copies of videos for his friends, Sullivan carefully guarded his original tapes, confident that he would find a way to share them with the world. One of Sullivan's lifelong friends was the underground media artist Dick Richards (life partner of David Goldman), who had an influential cable access show in Atlanta. The pair had grown up neighbors in Kershaw, South Carolina, two gay boys who would both grow up and want to share their colorful lives with the world via new media like cable access and VHS. Richards' weekly broadcast *The American Music Show* (which was not really about music so much as it was a surreal, queer vision of the South) helped launch the career of RuPaul and many other gay icons. With encouragement and technical help from Richards, Sullivan was able to pursue producing a cable access show in New York City using his vast archive of tapes.

In the 1980s, cable access was the YouTube of its time—a trove of innovative, experimental media that had a cultlike following among the younger generation. The show was going to be the start of a new phase in Nelson Sullivan's career: He had finally found his outlet. But tragically, after completing just one episode, he died of a sudden heart attack in the early morning hours of Independence Day, 1989. Seven years after it began, Sullivan's quest to document the downtown scene was over. He was buried at his familial home in Kershaw, South Carolina.

Knowing the significance of Sullivan's archive, Dick Richards immediately traveled to New York City to put all of Sullivan's tapes into safekeeping, lest they end up in a yard sale, destined to be recorded over. "Dick must have sent back a dozen boxes of tapes from Nelson's house. We stored them for a long time in our house in Atlanta, until the Fales Library at NYU said they wanted it as part of their permanent collection in 2013," says David Goldman.

Nelson Sullivan's legacy lives on in so many ways today. There is the YouTube page for the 5 9thAvenue Project (which was curated by Dick Richards in the last years of his life), the complete archives in NYU's Fales Library, features at film festivals around the world, and inclusion in art and queer history exhibitions. For Pride this year, the New York City's Fort Gansevoort cultural center will feature Sullivan's work as part of the exhibition *A Look Back: 50 Years After Stonewall*.

Although Sullivan didn't know it at the time, he was creating an incredibly thorough archive of queer cultural life in 1980s New York. For straight kids who want to know their family history, they can talk to their parents or sign up for a genealogy site. But queer kids have a lot more work to do; they need to seek out and piece together the history of *how* they became *who* they are today. Thanks to Nelson Sullivan and his camcorder, as well as those who preserved his library, today that work is a little bit easier.