Sacred, Sweet, Wicked Ecstasy

Electronic Dance Music & Social Liberation

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Editors' note: Thanks to some typically sleazy last-minute conniving by Democratic Senator Joseph Biden, the "Reducing Americans' Vulnerability to Ecstasy" (R.A.V.E.) Act was signed into Federal law by Bush on April 30, 2003.

The bill's introduction says in no uncertain terms that raves are "drug dens" where promoters sell illegal drugs and charge exorbitant prices for Ecstasy paraphernalia, such as bottled water, massage oil, and glow sticks. Under the law's measures, property owners/renters/leasers and event promoters are criminally liable for drug use on their premises and may he fined up to $250,000 and nine years in prison. The effect, of course, is to discourage the electronic music events since the actions of just one dancer could result in a fine or jail time for event organizers.

The rationale for the R.A.V.E. Act (and similar state and municipal anti-rave laws) is allegedly to open up another front in the ludicrous War on [some] Drugs. But it appears that Ecstasy is mentioned by name in the law only in the interest of a cutesy acronym logo, as cops and prosecutors have said explicitly that they are looking to go after crank and pot users as well.

However, in the following article, Apollo offers a deeper look into anti-rave legislation. Apollo is a rave producer, founder of the Moksha Tribe collective, a house music DJ, and has been involved with dance culture for over thirty years. He lives in San Francisco.

This is an excerpt of a much longer work: available at www.livingart.com/raving/articles/housemusic101.htm

Those who believe that the current oppression of raves (and dance culture in general) is based entirely on a desire to stop the spread of the drug Ecstasy are missing the broader context. Crucial to understanding this atmosphere of police and governmental oppression is our culture's long historical fear of the union of body and soul represented by dance. If we are to fight this new wave of repression effectively, we must first understand something about the hate, fear, and prejudice of what really drives it beyond anti-drug rhetoric.

The house and modern electronic dance music scenes grew out of an oppressed peoples' need to build alternative communities in which they find refuge from the bigotry and racism of mainstream culture. The new dance culture arose, as did prior musical and dance movements in this country, from underground subcultures, evolving spiritually and aesthetically in the US out of the need for African-Americans, gays, lesbians and Latinos to build a community through dance.

Before the Stonewall bar uprising in Greenwich Village in 1969, the gay subculture was really an underground, secret society: all states outlawed gay sex by prohibiting sodomy and related non-standard sexual practices (some still have sodomy laws on the books).

Further, same-sex dancing was prohibited. And these laws were enforced: police regularly raided gay clubs and other meeting places, packed the participants off to jail, charged them with a variety of morals related offenses and, the worst part for most, published their names in local newspapers, all of which gave most pre-'69 gay dance clubs the clandestine feel of underground raves or of speakeasies during Prohibition.

In the years after Stonewall and before AIDS, tens of hundreds of oppressed, abused, rejected gay kids who had experienced the worst kind of mind-fucking while growing up in rural and suburban American poured into NYC

to express themselves freely as sexual beings for the first time. Some had never actually seen a room full of people like themselves. They certainly had no support groups or community to grow into.

For them, this was the fulfillment of a secret and distant dream: life for the first time. They wanted to build a world that accepted them, where they could have sexual relationships without punishing guilt, self-hatred or suicidal thoughts.

Among other things, these sexual rebels started to build a new paradigm for social interactions on the dance floor, intuitively based on ancient rituals. Instinctively they seemed to know that dance would help make them whole—dance would exalt both their bodies and souls. They would be FREE for the first time, and they would be freed from oppression, in part, through the power of communal dance.

Dancing is the Devil's Work

It is the body, of course, which is the vehicle of dance, meaning that people's attitudes towards dance are shaped by cultural and religious beliefs about the body and its uses. From its start, Christianity developed a complex love-hate relationship with the body for a variety of reasons. For one, early Christians wished to disassociate themselves from pagan beliefs.

Linked to this was the influence of Neo-Platonist philosophy—there's no need to get into a detailed discussion of philosophy here except to say that early Christian thought was fueled by the Neo-Platonic teaching that flesh was inferior to the intellect and the spirit. (This has always been a paradox to me, for the core belief of Christianity, the incarnation, seems to be a powerful metaphor for the need to redeem the soul through the flesh.) From this we arrive at the dreadful bifurcation of the body and the soul and the origin of much unhappiness in our culture.

It may have been Increase Mather who defined the American Puritan attitude towards dance in 1685 with his tract against "Mixed or Promiscuous Dancing": "sober and grave Dancing of Men with Men, or of Women with Women" was okay "in due season and with moderation," but "wanton" (that it is, to say, "pleasurable") dancing, especially "Gynecandrical Dancing," was literally considered evil. When one recalls that US Attorney-General John Ashcroft adheres to a Christian sect that forbids dancing, we can see how little has really changed in three hundred years.

Puritanism remains as powerful a force in politics and culture as ever. Work, the Puritan focal point, is the centerpiece of our daily lives, and pleasure is still suspect.

Anything that is perceived to interfere with productivity of the individual is damned. In Mather's day, the controllers used hell-fire sermons as the vehicle of social control; now it's anti-drug pseudo-science.

Dance culture has always been under very heavy fire in this country. My grandmother was arrested repeatedly during Prohibition when she went dancing at jazz clubs in the twenties, not because she was drinking the devil's brew, but because she was dancing the devil's dance.

Dancing to rock 'n' roll was bitterly opposed because it was believed that this passionate "Negro" music (facilitated by "reefer madness") would lead to teenage promiscuity and social chaos.

For a few brief years in the seventies, everyone, even the elite white man, was disco dancing, but this came to an end in the Reagan years when we were all reminded of the Puritan dictum that playing too hard can lead to unhappiness, and making money was a far more acceptable and righteous way to spend one's time.

No, things haven't changed that much. Good, righteous mainstream Americans don't dance all night long to tribal beats of the devil's music because it may reduce productivity and undermine the Gross National Product.

Pagan beats—those of house music, in particular, given its evocative fleshy-spiritual dimensions—unleash all those disorderly pagan connections between the body and soul. We can't have that in this rigidly controlled, work-and-money-oriented Puritan society that we all seem to accept without question. Puritans, after all, are suspicious of pleasure, especially pleasures of the flesh.

The Ancient Rites of House Music

"It's got something to do with the speed of the beats. It's hypnotic, tribal, and primal. That particular speed has worked for thousands of years, which is why you can spin in Arab music, Bhangra music, Aboriginal music'.. You can take all these different cultures and find the same beat, between 125 and 130 bpm. It's there in ecstatic, trance music, where people shake and spin until they reach a state of hyperventilation and psychedelic alpha-wave experience. In a sense (house) is regressive music. You're going back to the roots of why music was invented: to reach ecstatic and visionary states, in a communal tribal celebration."

—Simon Reynolds, "Where 'now' lasts longer," in *Blissed Out* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990)

The belief that individuals can achieve spiritual liberation 1 through communal dance and sexuality is nothing new. The concept of salvation through music, dance and eroticism is ancient and can be found in both Eastern and Western cultures. Many specifically religious rituals were, and still are, constructed around communal dance—often with a sexual component.

It is primarily in the West, however, that one encounters the total divorce of body and soul. This distinction between the sacred and secular, the spirit and the flesh, is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition but has little currency in non-Western cultures. In pre-Christian Polynesia, for example, communal dance and sexuality were integrated into daily life. The arioi (a troupe of dancers-actors) would go from island to island to celebrate the cult of Oro, god of rain and fertility.

The core of their performance was sacred dance where the men would wear mock phalluses made from animal bladders and simulate sexual intercourse. On Tahiti, men and women danced day and night to praise their gods, celebrate the completion of various communal projects, honor the chiefs, and for the sheer fun of it.

Dance was also an extremely important feature of many American Indian religious rituals. The Hopi calendar revolved around a sacred dance cycle, and they used dance to connect with the very forces that they believed governed the universe, such as the Snake Dance held in late summer to summon life-giving rain. The gods dance in India, and Shiva, the god of creation and destruction, is represented as Nataraja, Lord of Dance. Shiva is depicted as a four-armed deity, shown in a dancing mode, his raised left leg signifying that one of the blessings of dance is to free the dancer from worldly cares. The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria believe dance opens direct channels to the gods, and speak of actually being "mounted" by a god during a sacred dance in which the dancer actually makes the god within his or her body while in a deep trance-like state.

One could cite many other examples of non-Western traditions where dance plays a crucial role in ritual and worship. In the West, however, there is much ambivalence about dancing in any context, and especially the religious.

Judeo-Christian culture embraced the notion of the bifurcation of body and soul, adopted a fearful attitude towards dance that aroused bodily passion, especially in a spiritual context and, for the most part, confined dancing to a strictly secular activity. Although the Hasidic movement of the eighteenth century and some visionary Protestant sects like the Shakers incorporated ecstatic dance into worship, mainstream Western Judeo-Christian societies from the Renaissance onward severed dancing from any spiritual content.

While I have always felt that the best communal dance experiences were transformative events where body and soul, sexuality and spirituality, worked together to produce a very valuable altered state of consciousness, it was not until I studied non-Western cultures that I came to understand that what I once thought was addictive behavior was actually an ancient and very natural part of life.

This ecstatic dance was the glue that bonded many of the world's tribal and other communities, and it was the source of energy and validation of the self and soul in the intentional communities in which I lived most fully. From African priests to Korean shamans, there was and still is the belief that dance and music can open communication with intangible powers and produce tangible benefits for the communities involved: self-knowledge, fuller understanding of the natural world, good health, and a sense of belonging to a supportive group in an often dark and hostile but ultimately understandable universe.

The exquisite integration of the erotic and the spiritual in early house music partly derives, I believe, from primarily non-Western traditions of salvation and release through communal music and dance.

It's not at all surprising that African-American culture gave birth to the modern yet ecstatic, erotic yet spiritual dance experiences and music in underground gay venues like the Paradise Garage and the Warehouse. The vibe of these parties was intensely pagan, non-Western, and exuberantly non-Puritan.

The dancers were people who were all about loss of control and of giving oneself over to a collective eroticism, a movement into an altered state of consciousness resembling that spoken by the ancients when they describe possession by spirits. I believe that all of us who were passionate about this new dance experience knew intuitively at the time that what we were doing was something far more ambitious than throwing parties. This was about liberation of the loins and the soul through music and dance.

That said, though, I want to be clear that I am in no way suggesting that the form and content of house music was intentionally designed to resurrect some pagan tribal rituals. This desire was, I believe, bubbling below the surface as part of some natural need that is consciously suppressed in the West. The context in which house was born—oppression, mortality connected to sexuality, the need for redemption and release through communal dance—brought these needs and ancient rites to the surface, and the body and soul were once again united in music and dance. Much of the early rave community was well aware of these pagan erotic, spiritual ecstatic trance dance experiences, and this may explain why the spiritual symbols used at early raves were intentionally non-Western and most often evoked Eastern and Hindu erotic-spiritual dance traditions. To this day, these intentions are still clearly evident at many electronic dance music events, especially those given by the psytrance community, where the connections are more explicit.

With these issues underlying and informing the electronic dance experience', it is no wonder that dance culture is again a source of moral panic for a full spectrum of cultural authorities. The language of these crackdowns always comes wrapped in the codes of law enforcement and public safety—after its investigation of electronic dance music subcultures, Congress declared that "raves have become little more than a way to exploit American youth."

And though anti-rave bills are most commonly associated with Ecstasy, it is not the drug and drug dealers that are really the issue, but rather the ecstasies of the dance. The Puritanical terror of the ecstatic movement of bodies has been drafted into the Drug War, and unless we work to subvert the Puritan paradigm and fundamentally change this culture's anxieties over unruly flesh and mind, more of this kind of oppression should be expected.

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