

The revolution will be a festival

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

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“Free festivals are a threat to mainstream capitalist society in amerika. Anyone questioning the commodification of our public lands and national forests, anyone who believes in the right to peaceably assemble, or anyone supporting a worldview where human rights come before property rights will be seen as a threat.”

—*Free Festival Manual* 2002

The Revolution will be a festival—or it will be nothing at all. That situationist mantra ricocheted around my brain and reverberated through my soul in the late 1980s as a dreadlocked dropout hopping from festival to gathering to direct action. Genuine social upheaval would taste a little like sweat on the dance floor—or at least a kiss behind the barricades, comrades swapping spit and subverting the ascetic notion of resistance.

The concept of the early twenty-first century free festival involves abolishing the commodity system in the most joyful manner imaginable. I’ve attended gatherings and dance parties where the energy cultivated by participants felt a bit like the revolution in action; likewise, the best street protests often harness an uncanny mix of courage, spontaneity, and festivity.

Based on all the footage I’ve seen from the battle of Seattle to the streets of Prague and Quebec and from other global justice convergences, each event shared a variety of visionary contingencies incorporating colorful, musical, theatrical elements into the context of a street battle. Who among us doesn’t admire the protester who takes time to dance joyously around a burning dumpster while ducking and dodging the barrage of tear-gas canisters?

In particular, the international movement known as Reclaim the Streets (RTS) intentionally combines the decadent frivolity of a dance with the fierce intensity of direct action. That the United States government has formally declared this far-flung, non-hierarchical network of anarchist mixmasters and street-party girls a terrorist organization can only testify to the impact of RTS events.

Writing for Berkeley’s *Slingshot* in the summer of 2001, writer P.B. Floyd confronts the bizarre contradictions of a terrorist state calling this carnivalesque tactic terrorist: “Enjoyment, art, music and social intercourse [are] what we’re all about. So it is particularly interesting that the FBI considers these dance-based parties as a terrorist threat. Where is the terror? Where is the violence?”

Floyd continues, “As far as we know, no RTS street party has ever exploded, emitted poisonous gas, or engaged in kidnapping. It is true that there has been wild dancing, loud music, flyers, banners, public art, and kissing.”

Furthermore, for a massive, secretive, hydra-like government bureaucracy to describe RTS as an “organization” twists the language and our assumptions about what constitutes an entity. Floyd explains: “Reclaim The Streets is actually more a tactic than a movement or an organization. In 1996, activists in England decided to stage the first RTS ‘street party’ by holding a daytime rave at a busy intersection, complete with sound system, dancing, party games, and political spin...Because it’s fun and crosses over with the counter-culture, it’s much easier for a street party to attract a large crowd. A street party can effectively shut down a business district in a positive, militant, yet non-threatening way. Instead of flyers focusing on the world we want to build in the future, street parties permit a revolutionary society to be conducted in the here and now, right on the street for all to see.”

In *Tearing Down the Streets*, Jeff Ferrell depicts RTS this way: “Masterful creators of cultural space, Reclaim the Streets participants flood retaken avenues with furniture, fiddlers and techno/rave sound systems, drummers and dancers, jugglers, clowns, and children, all the while hanging banners, painting graffiti, chalking sidewalk art, and otherwise overturning the arid aesthetics of the automotive corridor.” Ferrell links RTS to Critical Mass cyclists and the IWW sabotage-and-solidarity ideal of creating counter-institutions for social relations in the belly of the beast, fused from equal parts “direct action and on-the-ground resistance managing to convert the conventional practice of everyday domination into its own undoing.”

Other examples of festive revolt with more emphasis on the festive part include the Rainbow Family national gatherings in the US and Europe’s notorious free festival culture that resulted in the passage of the UK’s criminal justice bill in the early 1990s.

According to C.J. Stone’s 1996 book *Fierce Dancing*, the UK scene that created the huge illegal Stonehenge festival was a “fusion of hippie idealism with punk politics.”

In contrast, while the Rainbows here lack “punk politics,” their lovey-dovey idealism is not exclusively apolitical. Started by the anarchist progeny of the Living Theater (Garrick Beck, son of Judith Malina and Julian Beck is one of the original Rainbows), the Rainbow Family has always possessed a strong anarchist element. In *People of the Rainbow*, Michael Niman contends, “The Rainbow family is divided among members whose political activism is based in spirituality, whose political activism precludes spirituality, and whose spirituality precludes political activism. All are united, however, in their rhetorical support for a nonviolent, nonhierarchical cooperative society.”

For whatever derogatory remarks some might make about the Rainbows, they have put their bodies on the line to stave off the federal crackdown on free assembly. Anything from a new age gathering to an academic conference can lay claim to the conviviality, intimacy, and festal culture invoked by writers like Hakim Bey; however, it takes a particular vision and reckless determination to publicly defy the government’s attempt to regulate and license everything in the manner that Rainbows have with their annual attempts at practical anarchy in the national forests.

Just before the turn of the century, new kinds of North American festivals began to emerge that kept the anti-authoritarian flavor of Rainbow but dropped the ex-Deadhead, acid-flashback, “we LUUUUHVVV you” stigma that alienated so many people. Coming out of the alternative dance music milieu, projects like SPAZ (Semi-Permanent Autonomous Zones) and the Autonomous Mutant Festival arose to provide a forum for “freaks, geeks, artists, DJs, performers, musicians, MCs, punks, ravers, clowns, teknomads, riot grrls, bboys, hippies, zippies, yippies, and YOU.”

Of course, for us, it’s not so much about which fashion statement or musical tastes dominate the scene.

Some festivals that contain that juicy kernel of creativity and autonomy can grow into more commercialized caricatures of themselves. Festivals that refuse their own revolutionary roots will spawn new revolutions. Certainly, the radical impulses that birthed the Michigan Womyn’s Music festival have also sparked the defiant counter-festival known as Camp Trans, where radical F-to-M and M-to-F transpeople challenge the binary gender essentialism of the Womyn’s music establishment. Furthermore, Burning Man has probably suffered from too much publicity, and the Bread and Puppet festival in Vermont finally ended when a participant died. After the last Domestic Resurrection Circus and Pageant in 1998, Director Peter Schumann openly acknowledged that Bread and Puppet had outgrown itself, with the spectacular aspects being usurped by the Spectacle.

Of course, many greedy promoters have since the days of Woodstock tried to co-opt creative outbursts for obscene amounts of cash but free-fest culture cull thrives outside of those margins. But still, the magic of the marvelous can invade even the mundane musical mall of commercial concerts. I’m sure that people attending Ani DiFranco, Spearhead, or even Dixie Chicks shows this summer will taste some delicious resistance. What distinguishes our radical festivals from commodity culture’s version of the same comes from quality and intent. “Free” implies the lack of a “cover charge”—or at least a “no one turned away for lack of funds” policy—but also a state of mind for participants.

The authors of the ‘zine *Free Festival Manual* explain it like this: “A free flow of ideas may not be possible within the confines of a festival that is based on the framework of the classic American rock festival, devised in the late 60s as a way to capitalize on the explosion of youth energy and repackage the ‘experience’ and sell it back to new generations. The free festival evades this trap. You can’t buy it, and you can’t sell it—it’s open to anyone who can accept the

responsibility of self-government...A free festival is also perhaps the unique meeting point between scholarly political philosophy and transcendental spirituality; textbook 'anarchists' get to actually experience feelings of anarchy that go beyond words into the realm of the metaphysical."

Far from advocating drop-out-ism, free festivals propose the creation of new social relations in tangible defiance of law, license, and leader. While we cannot document the exact date in antiquity when humans first gathered to get high and dance all night, we know that festivals go way back. There may never have been a time when we did not get together with comrades to celebrate, vibrate, intoxicate, and fornicate.

Clearly, the implications of Homeland Security for our homespun spontaneity are devastatingly depressing. But this does not mean that we simply inject our insurrections with more serious sobriety. In fact, I see nothing as more realistic and practical for these times than confident, unapologetic, and joyful dancing on the ruins of the-world-as-we-know-it.

Even if dancing is a terrorist act, let us side with the dancers. Even if disseminating information about how to have a safe drug experience is a threat to national security, let us express solidarity with the safe partiers. Even if an unprecedented number of people are in prison for possessing, using, or distributing mind-altering medicines, let us fight the drug war by demanding immediate amnesty and decriminalization. Even if hosting a festival could get us all thrown in jail under the new RAVE Act, let us still create festivals. As the New World Order constantly devises new draconian and dystopian tactics to demolish our dreams, we cannot understate the revolutionary dynamism of living for our desires.

Long live the revolutionary festival! All love to the festive revolutionaries!

— Pumpkin Hollow, May 2003

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