

# The Essence of Raves: A Transfusion of '60s Counterculture

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**Abstract:**

*The counterculture decade of the '60s is examined with comparative reference to '90s underground rave culture. Based on research specific to New York City, this journal dives into the amorphous fusion of space, sound, bodies, and technologies to discover hidden spectacles of culture inherent to raves. Seen most evidently through the analysis of music, dance, and production design, these movements hold sociocultural implications of mass youth generation credos. The infiltration of underground movements into popular culture, seen today through the commercialized appeal of electronic music, represents a rebirth of classic countercultural ideas. Most notably, the identification with marginality, democratization, and the desire for a social utopia are generational ideas transfused through the Beats and hippies and adapted to a globalized system of interconnected technologies of the new millennium. An interesting product emerges through rave culture, which embodies age-old, anti-establishment, anti-conventional ideas while fulfilling the new social needs of '90s raver babies.*

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**T**he idea of counterculture revolves around the notion of breaking free from established norms, rules, or traditions of society. Sociologists, historians, and ethnomusicologists have been fascinated with the manifestations of counterculture throughout history, with one of the most prominent and well documented occurring during the infamously turbulent decade of the '60s. Conceptual notions of counterculture have a few overarching, defining characteristics. Beginning as a sociocultural movement that sweeps through ideology embraced by the youth generation, counterculture captures communal credos of release from society's expectations. It is a celebration of individuality while simultaneously embracing an underground community and rejection of mass consumerism. Through the avenues of music and dance, we

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look at the body as an instrument that is able to reflect multiple social, cultural, and musical identities and meanings. In social dance, many individuals use their bodies to respond to music as a form of self-expression. Enacted on a dance floor, together a multitude of individual bodies form a type of collective experience, uniting the dancers as one 'body,' one musical instrument, one crowd.<sup>1</sup> It is this collective performance in which we examine perceptions of cultural identity. Therefore, when looking at counterculture, we relate dance, music, and culture as one expression of opposition to predominant social rules and values in American society. Focusing on the New York City area, this paper will briefly examine the underground bohemian and Beatnik culture of the '60s, with the purpose of drawing comparisons to rave culture that blossomed through the '90s and today. The music, dance, and cultural nexus of rave dancing in the '90s underground garage scene of New York City draws clear parallels to countercultural credos of their hippie predecessors. Although the raver's exact credo has differences in application, analysis of three aspects – the outlaw image of marginality, democratic philosophies, and desire for social utopia - show how rave dance culture, with its recent onset and growing popularity in public youth, is in the midst of a countercultural revolution.

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The underground counterculture of the '60s in New York City consisted of an anti-war, anti-establishment, anti-commercialized audience not dissimilar to the hippies in San Francisco and the “freaks” of London. It was a collection of psychedelics, mods, Beats, and hippies whose ethos can be summed by the famous phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan in 1967 during a lunch in New York City, “turn on, tune in, drop out.”<sup>2</sup> Disturbed by the rigidity and elitism of universities, the US's involvement and obsession with war, and the social injustice and racial inequality associated with the civil rights movement, the NYC counterculture preached a nonviolent, alternative lifestyle alienated from the expected roles for a white, middle-class, educated lifestyle, the primary background from which they came. Hippies preached love, harmony, community, and nonviolence, while sharing a common interest in psychedelic drugs as a gateway for transcendence from a mundane, commercialized world. Dances like the twist, mod, and psychedelic were popular among rebellious youth, which were experimental,

provocative, and liberating for the dancing individual.<sup>3</sup> The Beatnik subculture produced followers known as the Beats, who were especially interested in escaping the body and mind from a culture they felt restricted these freely accessible items. The Beat generation's prime pioneers, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, were proponents for turning society's attention away from the product and towards the self. They rejected common stereotypes of the typical '60s conformist family, advocating freedom and choice in an aggressive, authoritarian, Cold War era.<sup>4</sup> These "hipsters creeping around Times Square, beat, tired, and word down from reality, yet talking of a plodding pilgrimage through life, a visionary spirituality of personal experiences and hopeful rumblings for a new soul," were the living denunciations of capitalism and the true expression of anti-technocracy sentiments of '60s counterculture.<sup>5</sup> Responding to the belief of an imposed American value system that had become plastic, synthetic, and materialistic, the Beats were in some way radical in their mentality of personal sovereignty over mainstream American obligations.<sup>6</sup> This idea of personal identity explains their attraction to marginal identities and a mystic escape into space and silence.<sup>7</sup> In Kerouac's novel "On the Road," the character Sal searches for the "point of ecstasy" involving a "complete step across chronological time into endless shadows."<sup>8</sup> This desire to find spiritualized transcendence, to escape from the de-individualizing socioeconomic conditions of a commodity driven society pushed by the media, state, and workplace, became the groundwork for the first real critique of the organized system. Kerouac acknowledged himself in 1967 on William Buckley's "Firing Line" that the hippie movement was a "continuation of the Beats," although the Beat's intentions were mainly apolitical in nature and never enacted a campaign for systematic change.<sup>9</sup> However, by fast-forwarding through modernized society 20 years later, we are able to see how their countercultural perspective still influences those who feel alienated from dominate culture. In the '90s, this was the rave, the digitized rebirth of countercultural ideas.

A rave is an all-night long party where electronic or techno music is played, organized anywhere with the means to support a space for bodies to dance till dawn. It is a shared experience of sound sensibility of performer and audience, with a constant feedback loop running from DJ and his equipment to the dancing bodies. A reciprocal circuit of social energy is generated where the DJ can evaluate the appeal of their program through the multiplication of individual responses to the music.<sup>10</sup> It usually involves high-tech sound systems that have evolved

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from advances in electronic digital recording. Turntables, amplifiers, subwoofers, samplers, and speakers are often arranged with the mechanics of creating a physically overwhelming sound experience, while strobe lights, slide projectors, LSD walls, and smoke machines transform the space into an amorphous fusion of sound, space, light, and bodies.<sup>11</sup>

The evolution of electronic music can be traced back to the explosion of house music in Chicago during the early '80s. Pioneers of this underground dance movement essentially took disco records of the '70s and layered them with repetitive drum and bass rhythms, producing tracks more suited to keep devoted clubheads on the dance floor. The techno beats of "Kraurock" in Germany inspired a newfound adrenalized fervor of bands like MC5 and The Stooges in Detroit, harboring the birthplace of techno experimentation. Electronic music eventually traveled and split off into three distinct locations in the US, each with their own subgenre – techno in Detroit, house in Chicago, and garage in New York. Raves began to manifest when the thirst of New York's underground party lifestyle merged with the sonic sensibility and ambience of garage, a melody oriented, deep house sound. Venues like Sound Factory and Paradise Garage in New York were the forerunners of discotheque house culture that began in the '80s, and rave culture gradually grew into its own logic within the underground dance movement that continued through the '90s.<sup>12</sup>

One way in which raves were similar to their countercultural hippie siblings was through their outlaw relationship with established society. Raves were illegal in nature, and their whereabouts were often kept secret to keep the location obscure and authorities at bay. Raves were truly an underground movement relegated to party boats, dingy lofts, squats, big-house tents, warehouses, or other abandoned spaces in Brooklyn or Queens, where you would only hear about it through word of mouth or by asking for a flyer from a local record store.<sup>13</sup> Arising from New York's squatter and pirate radio culture, raves developed in the shadows of New York's underground anarchists, who were the champions of discreetly organizing free and cheap parties for anyone willing to pay the cover price. The rave scene exploded across the five boroughs with the Storm Raves, Lunatarium, 38 Nine, WildWildBrooklyn, 23 Windows, and Spiral Tribe parties in Brooklyn and Queens, and a plethora of DJs such as DJ Spooky, Atomic Babies, Khan, Nicky Fingers, and Soulslinger kept the scene thumping.<sup>14</sup> These were "outlaw" dance

parties that eventually had to grapple with frequent police raids.<sup>15</sup> The opposition to raves was so great that two acts of legislation were targeted directly at underground-related nightlife. The Cabaret Laws threatened to close down unlicensed parties where any more than three people were to be found dancing. The RAVE act was enabled to charge, convict, and imprison event promoters and made club owners liable for any patrons found in possession of controlled substances at their venue or event.<sup>16</sup> Despite authoritarian attempted shut downs, raves endured. The music kept evolving and exploding into even more subgenres like trance, psy-trance, drum and bass, experimental, jungle, gabba, hard-core, and progressive.<sup>17</sup> People kept dancing, which was free form and music-responsive, like the hippies and their psychedelic dancing in the '60s. The outright disregard for rules of the establishment represents a return to the countercultural theme of revolution from conventional society. The outlaw allure of going to an illegal space to dance, as long as its obscurity remained in the shadows, is a theme of marginality that began with the Beat's countercultural ideas of nonconformity. The very essence of the rave, therefore, is to remain obscure, hidden, and tucked away from the influences of conventional society and its demanding expectations. The dancing itself, as mentioned before, was an individualized interpretation of the stimulating hard liner tempos, endless rhythms, and waves of energy, therefore releasing the body to raw stimulation of senses. This 'release' is a philosophical release, in a sense, from society's expectations.

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Along with this notion is the idea of raves being completely tolerant zones of celebrated democracy. Currently, there are just as many artists as listeners, with a high amount of production on the market. It is a culture where less skill is required to start creating and it encourages active participation of its members.<sup>18</sup> Doors were open to all and the vibe was about people gathering to listen to good music. Meanwhile, predominant nightlife culture was inside club land's velvet ropes, where “models and bottles,” VIP booths, celebrities, and a downtown cool, upscale atmosphere dominated mass culture. If the standard nightclub represented society, the rave was the underground rebellion against that, shaping its characteristics to be inherently opposite.

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People dressed casually, and the drug of choice was Ecstasy, famous for promoting empathy and tolerance across lines of class, race, and sexual preferences. The drug essentially rids club culture from its clique-ness and elitism, inverting the ideology of club land where boundaries dissolve and the purpose became a shared, collective experience of music, drugs, and technology.<sup>19</sup> One raver by the name of Amok stated concisely: "NYC is THE police city, THE capitalist capital, everything around us is money, profit, and bling. We need something for us. All of us come from a pretty poor background, none of us were able to afford clubs."<sup>20</sup>

Going even further with the idea of tolerance and democracy inside the raver experience is the reflection of a desire for a social utopia. The rave symbolizes a drop out from the social and political arena altogether, channeling idealism and a spirit of community transcendence. Much like the hippies were champions for peace, love, and a universal vision of humanity, and the Beats were hipster dropouts in search of spiritual consciousness, sociologists have rightly championed the '90s as a "Second Summer of Love."<sup>21</sup> Raves reflect utopianism ideals by evoking a feeling of eternity, communal bliss, and freedom in the dancing the music inspires. It is a spectacle of living immersion into a field of dancing bodies, into an amorphous, de-partitioned space devoid of separation between audience and artist. It is the multiplication of many dancing bodies that together form this ritualistic, ephemeral, festive collection of youth desiring to be in spiritual relationship with one another. Besides the dancing itself, utopia is also evoked through sound and production design. The sound design of electronic music uses techniques of loop, repetition, and variations of timbre and texture to synchronize pitch and rhythm from one song to the next. It is often difficult to distinguish when one song ends and when another begins, as the art of mixing requires transitional flow between interconnected tracks. The sonic landscape is constantly morphing and evolving, reminiscent of the idea of traveling from one epoch to another, from this world onto the next, into the forefronts of utopia. The sheer possibilities of the modelization and sculpture of sounds that the DJ has of raw sound signals (equalization, reverbs, filters, volume) reflects the notion of an endless frontier of possibilities, a musical continuum of soundscape paradise. There is a desire to immerse and plunge into a world outside of oneself, which opens the channel for neighbor-dancer reciprocity. Even the space, with its dry ice fog, light shows, and moving geography of bodies, are wandering and suspended, where traditional societal standards have disintegrated and people are dancing towards



a more progressive vision of reality.<sup>22</sup> The raver's ideal utopia, although centered upon a more digital, cyberspace medium than their '60s counterparts, reflects a disembodiment from society, an alternative lifestyle, and youthful cry for camaraderie and companionship with one another. The search for new realms of consciousness, by dancing through the wee hours of the night, is a kind of nocturnal, spiritual awakening past the point of physical exhaustion where the body is perceived as limitless and unbound in its physical abilities. Much like psychedelic drug use was a common interest for the hippies, so is Ecstasy for the raver, where users report using the drug for a heightened sensibility of this state of liberated consciousness.

The Beatnik and psychedelic era of the '60s activated a value system that spanned its reach across the youth generation of many decades. Certain resurgent themes of underground marginality, tolerance across lines of classism, and a feeling of eternity channeled through an idealized utopian community have resonated in the hearts of youth across the decades of American social history. The medium through which these themes resonate are prone to change according to variations in culture, which is why the '90s birthed a counterculture adapted to a globalized system of interconnected technologies. As the millennium made a progressive shift toward a new type of economy and exchange, the rave culture continued to layer and adapt, and the commercialized version (EDM) is a direct reflection of an underground movement unearthed and transplanted into mainstream America. After peeling back those layers, seen most evidently through the realm of music of dance, there is a whole new perspective of countercultural ideologies that drive this movement.

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7 Rachel Adams, review of *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomas Rivera*, by Manuel Luis Martinez, *The Americas* 61, No. 1 (2004): 124-125, accessed October 19, 2013, <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

8 Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy," 103.

9 Ibid, 103-105.

10 Fikentscher, "You better work!", 60.

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13 Green, *Dj, dance, and rave culture*, 76.

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16 St. John, *Technomad*, 102-103.



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18 Jean-Yves Leloup, *Digital magma: from the utopia of rave parties to the iPod generation*, trans. Paul Buck and Catherine Petit (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2010), 16.

19 Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 412-415.

20 St. John, *Technomad*, 88.

21 Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 227.

22 Leloup, *Digital magma*, 7-13.

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Jesse Daub is a senior at Florida State University graduating with a B.F.A. in Dance and a B.S. in Management currently pursuing a performing arts career in New York City. She is an administrative intern for choreographer Pam Tanowitz and works in the Education Department at New York City Center.