

Rave New World

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BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

Rave I: Ghost in the Machine, Icehouse, November 4, 1995

The beat. The beat. The beat.

I can feel it through the concrete and steel from 300 yards away, like the pulse of some adrenalized titan going wild within the warehouse before me. It's jackhammer fast—at least 125 hits a minute—and as I walk toward it, the stark canvas of the rhythm takes on color: sequenced rainbows of synthesizer; dark, whirring bass lines; and a computer-generated voice that suddenly washes over it all, resonating: "This is our house, and our house music."

A quick frisk, a \$15 cover and I'm over the threshold. It's dark behind the door, and the beat now has the force of a small, nearby explosion. Boom, boom, boom, boom-ba, boom, boom, boom. Crimson laser beams slice the air in a restless web that hovers about seven feet off the ground, and random, disembodied hands reach up to caress the light.

As my pupils dilate, I thread my way to the heart of the throng, stand still and try to get my bearings. A strobe light kicks on for a few seconds, exposing five or six bodies of indeterminate gender in a pile against a wall on the perimeter of the dance floor. I keep my eyes on the spot and wait for the strobe to flash again. It does, and I see what I thought I saw: hands running over clothing, kisses, nuzzling—a "cuddle puddle," as I'd later learn to call it.

That's fine, no problem here—after all, I'm an open-minded kind of guy. Still, I need some air—bad.

Too fast, I turn and slam into a shirtless guy in a belled jester's cap. His hat pops off and he stumbles back a few steps, setting in motion a domino effect that jostles the three dancers beyond him. He bounds back toward me and I bristle, ready to duck and swing—people fight over less in bars every weekend. But there's no anger in his eyes, and when he reaches out, I don't knock his hand away.

"Whoop, whoop," he yells, then musses my hair and pulls me into a sweaty hug. Embarrassed, I break away and make a more careful beeline for an exit sign on the far side of the cavern.

As I step outside, I accept that I'm a bit freaked out and take a few deep ones. Where the hell are Candy and Julie? Friends from Tempe, they got me into this.

"Ever been to a rave?" they'd asked, their tone so seductive, so sure of the fine time lying in wait. But I was incredulous. "In Phoenix?" They'd just laughed.

I didn't see what was so funny. Rave culture is supposed to be dead and buried. The commercial press wrote its obituary in the latter half of 1993, when the scenes in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York plateaued after three years of exponential growth. Maybe there're remnants in those epicenters of hip, I thought, but Phoenix?

Rave culture was conceived in Chicago, where a supercharged version of disco called acid house evolved in gay clubs that catered to men of color. Acid house jumped over the Atlantic in 1986 when a British deejay named Genesis P-Orridge came across a bin of vinyl marked "Acid" in a Chicago record store and mistook the label as a reference to LSD, instead of the corrosive liquid.

He bought the whole bin and took it to his regular gig at Ibiza, a Spanish party island populated primarily by "the orange people," followers of the free-love guru Rajneesh, who extolled the use of the chemical compound methylene dioxymethylamphetamine (MDMA) as an aphrodisiac. (MDMA, or "Ecstasy," was legal at the time.)

The orange people discovered that MDMA and acid-house music complemented one another like peanut butter and chocolate, and happily passed on that knowledge to the boatloads of British clubbers who arrived in Ibiza every weekend via party ferries.

By the summer of 1988—thereafter referred to as rave's "Summer of Love"—crowds of 10,000 regularly congregated in the English country fields, where organizers would erect massive sound systems and multimedia screens, pass out bags of MDMA tablets and throw dance parties that often lasted more than 36 hours. They called these gatherings "raves."

The British government cracked down on the rural gatherings the next year, and the raves moved to London warehouses and airplane hangars. And then, a few months later, to San Francisco, when British expats looking for sunshine and psychedelia arrived in California with milk crates of house music and a missionary zeal.

Rave culture spread quickly from the Bay Area to Los Angeles and New York, and, throughout 1990 and '91, daily newspapers and mainstream magazines were littered with breathless stories about the new fad of all-night dance-orgy drug fests called "raves." In response, American ravers took after their British predecessors and started referring to their subculture as "the underground" and their events as "parties," rather than use a term—rave—co-opted by the media.

By 1992, the underground had spread from New York to Miami and Boston; from L.A. to San Diego; and from San Francisco to Portland and Seattle. It had also begun to define itself as a counterculture by developing an ethos to accompany the drugs and the music.

To generalize—and, with a movement this amorphous, you have to—the underground is fueled by an ideology that's half-hippie, half-cyberpunk: peace, love and psychedelics, sure, but don't forget about virtual reality, chaos theory and the Internet.

Like the hippies and punk rockers before them, ravers are members of a counterculture with a well-left-of-Democrat political bent and a specific taste in music—a faster music, it should be pointed out, for a faster era.

However, unlike the Abbie Hoffman/Tom Hayden branch of the '60s movement, ravers don't view The System as something they should work to actively overthrow or, like the punks, sneer and spit at. Instead, they see modern society and its rules as more or less beside the point—a hopelessly flawed paradigm, constructed long before any of them were born, that is doing such a fine job of self-destructing, it doesn't need any help from them.

Ravers agree with the tenets of the environmental and other progressive political movements—they just see those efforts as too little, too late; things can't be put right without a radical shift in the collective conscience. And the only way to bring that about is to spread "the vibe"—the energy of positive thinking and blanket acceptance that crackles in the air of an underground party like ozone after a lightning storm.

If enough citizens of the First World tap into the vibe, the thinking goes, they will instinctively stave off the crash. And if not, then the underground is simply a comfortable, well-lighted place to wait for the modern world to exhaust itself.

Apathetic and kooky? It's easy to dismiss the subculture as such. But judging by the number and geographic variety of log-ons to rave Web sites, the coverage of underground events in national rave-culture magazines and a recent PBS documentary, reports of rave's death have been greatly exaggerated. Recent issues of XLR8R magazine carried articles on large parties in Cleveland, Ohio; Des Moines, Iowa; and Lawrence, Kansas.

Yet the so-called major media have virtually ignored the underground since a 1993 article in *Details* magazine that quoted a few disgruntled promoters in San Francisco and New York who declared rave in America a corpse.

And so, for the past two years, the underground has continued to grow and aesthetically mutate while flying well below the radar of mainstream society.

By the looks of what I've walked into tonight, it has landed in Phoenix.

Outside, in the industrial yard of the Icehouse, 20 transfixed ravers circle a ponytailed juggler who has attached neon orange and green light wands to the ends of his sticks. The tracers, I admit to myself, are a nice effect. I check my watch: 12:20. Candy and Julie were supposed to meet me at midnight, but how will we hook up in this Mardi Gras?

I take a minute to look around, then scribble some notes: "Age: 16-28, a handful older. Fashion: Blade Runner/Dr. Seuss/Flannel/Beastie Boys/Whatever ... no one seems to really care about looking sharp." Nearby, a young woman with light-chocolate skin, her name Hip-Hop, is singing "You Are So Beautiful" in an angelic alto. I listen for a while, then silently thank Lady Luck—Julie and Candy are leaning against a nearby wall, dressed in leather and sequins, glitter on their faces and arms, wrapping one another in cocoons of the white Christmas light strands that hang down the walls like ivy.

Candy glances my way, and I wave. Her eyes widen, and she taps on Julie's shoulder, points. Julie sees me, then looks back at Candy and gives an earnest nod of understanding. Slowly, they unravel themselves and come toward me, arm in arm, heads on each other's shoulders. They look overjoyed to see me, but running is obviously quite beyond their present range of motion. They reach me and, wordlessly, draw me into a close group hug. This seems to be a motif for the evening.

Candy's murmur is soft in my ear. "Are you on E?" I shake my head subtly no. "Do you want to be?"

I'd done my research, and it said MDMA is relatively safe—no real danger of overdose or physical addiction. I don't even hesitate. "Where can I get some?"

Julie breaks from the huddle. She looks at once thrilled and dead serious—we have a mission.

"We have to find Pez," she whispers.

It doesn't take long. Pez is grooving near the doorway to the dance chamber, moving his hands and head to the beat, rapt in conversation with a young black man in harem pants. "It's all about communication," I hear him say as we come up. He turns toward me, sees who I'm with, asks,

"How are you, man?" Candy fills in the blank for me. "He's looking."

Pez pulls me aside, and we go for a walk. He tells me to get \$30 in my right hand. I pull a clump of cash from my jeans and try not to be obvious about peeling off a 20 and two fives as we move into the middle of the crowd around the water booth and then stop. Pez is wearing yellow glasses and a long, brown-leather coat with two deep front pockets. He puts a hand into the right one, pulls it out and presses his palm into mine. We shake. He slips me a small packet and takes the cash.

"Gotta be careful," I say, trying to sound cool. Pez smiles. "This isn't careful. This is a modicum of discretion. Enjoy yourself." He melds back into the party.

I move out of the crowd and peer down at my purchase—a small white tablet wrapped in clear plastic. Candy and Julie come up and hand me a cup of cold water. I take out the pill and ask them if I'm just supposed to swallow it. "Chew it up first," Candy says. The taste is bitter and chemical. I chew for as long as I can stand it, then reach for the water, swish a mouthful around and swallow. Suddenly, the lollipops and candy canes so many of the ravers are sucking on make more sense—this stuff tastes like shit.

"How long before I feel something?" I ask.

"About 20 minutes," Julie says. "We took ours at 11 and arrived about an hour ago."

I look at my watch again: 12:28. I write down the time, and Candy looks at me like I don't get it. "We're going to go find something to do," she says, already drifting away. "Come find us when you've arrived."

Arrived? Where the hell am I going?

I assess my situation. My friends are gone again, and I've just ingested a powerful psychoactive chemical. Second thoughts are irrelevant at this point, but I'm having them anyway—nothing to do now but wait. I take another spin through the dance room, but the music is too hard, electronic and repetitive. Back outside, I see Pez conduct another transaction. I'm already bored with just muddling around, so I strike up a conversation with him. Ecstasy is the obvious topic, and Pez, like most people on MDMA, is eager to talk.

"E is your premier drug in the underground," he says. "Acid is running a close second, and then mushrooms. And, in the underground, a lot of people mix their drugs—especially candy flipping [a combined hit of LSD and MDMA]."

"Seventy percent of my E comes from the coast: L.A., San Francisco, a lot from San Diego. You hear about Dallas every now and then, but out of six shipments, five will be from California. Usually, there's anywhere from two to four kinds of Ecstasy circulating in Phoenix at any given time. And they all have different whereabouts. Once in a while, someone will get prescription MDMA from Amsterdam, but most of it is made in labs.

"The problem with street drugs is that greed is so unpredictable a factor. I've seen people press crystal meth into a pill, put a drop of acid on it and sell it as MDMA. Real Ecstasy lasts three to four hours, but people who've never done it take some speedy crap, and they're up for eight or ten hours and think they got the best hit of X ever. People are selling horrible shit as Ecstasy in this

town. They're starting to realize that the underground crowd doesn't like the speedy stuff, so they're cutting it with heroin.

"If you take something and it really hammers you and makes you not want to do anything but sit in a chair and feel good, or if your nose gets cold and damp and your legs cramp, most likely you got heroin in your X."

By this time, I'm flexing my calves, have a hand on my schnozz and am seriously considering a dash to the bathroom for the two-finger throat treatment. I must look like I'm wiggling out because Pez claps a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Hey, man, the key to the door is to know your source, and you know me. I'm cool. That was pure MDMA."

I ask him how the hell he knows that. He says there's a lab downtown that will test any substance anonymously. "You don't get your sample back, but you get peace of mind that you're selling people pure stuff."

What a guy.

Pez is still rapping, but I've phased him out because something strange is going on at the base of my spine. A hot, tiny ball of tingle just came to life and is rapidly expanding. I check my watch: ten to 1. "Right on time," I say out loud, then wonder if I really did. Pez stops midsentence.

"Have you arrived?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I feel something in my back."

I reach around to touch the affected area through my silk shirt and marvel at how perfectly smooth the fabric is. Wait, I think, was that a normal thought?

A moment later, the ball bursts, releasing a warm, fuzzy liquid sensation that rockets up my spine and floods my torso, then shoots into my brain, arms and legs, coursing through all of my blood vessels at once, to the very tips of my fingers and toes, until all of my inside is coated with feel-good. When the transformation is over, I realize I've been describing each stage to Pez as it occurred.

I feel like my every day, introverted self is floating outside my body, shocked at how talkative I've suddenly become. I can't tell if the positive—confidence, energy, honesty—has been accentuated, or if the negative—fear, anxiety, my public facade—has simply been edited out.

MDMA was invented by a German pharmaceutical company in 1912 as an appetite suppressant, then virtually disappeared until free-love enthusiasts in the United States rediscovered the compound in the '70s and gave it the street name "Ecstasy."

The drug induces the brain to release high amounts of the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine—serotonin signals carry messages of love and empathy, while dopamine suppresses pain. The end result is a sort of psychedelic/amphetamine/opiate combination platter.

There is no evidence that MDMA is physically addictive, and when it was legal, many psychiatrists in the U.S. used it in therapy as a libido enhancer, an antidepressant and an empathogen—a chemical hammer to shatter the barriers of communication. MDMA has also shown promise as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease and alcoholism, and is commonly used by marriage counselors in Switzerland and the Netherlands, where it is still legal.

By the early '80s, Ecstasy was popular on college campuses across the country, and in 1985 it was banned by the Drug Enforcement Administration and designated a Schedule I drug—one with a high potential for abuse and no recognized medical purpose.

Studies on the long-term effects of MDMA indicate that, while occasional use poses no serious danger, heavy recreational use—three or four doses a week for several months, or a massive single dose of ten or more hits—strips serotonin cells of their axons, projections that make contact with cells elsewhere in the brain. Since serotonin helps regulate moods, effects of the axon loss can include episodes of severe depression.

There have been 76 "Ecstasy-related" deaths reported in the United States and Great Britain since 1980. (British law enforcement agencies estimate that 50 million hits of MDMA were consumed in the United Kingdom last year.) Seventeen of the fatalities were people who thought they were buying MDMA, but, in fact, got anything from animal tranquilizers to botched variations on the compound that can cause heart attacks and brain seizures. Several others died in car wrecks while tripping on E, and one climbed an electrical pole and grabbed a live wire.

By far the leading cause of "Ecstasy-related" death, however, is heat exhaustion—ravers forget to drink water while they're on the drug and, quite literally, dance themselves to death.

Which reminds me—water is vastly underrated, and I should drink a lot of it right now. It takes me five minutes to travel 30 feet to the fluids booth. How could it not, with so many fascinating people to talk to? Thirty minutes ago, I was an ill-at-ease rave wallflower. Now, I'd be the coolest person on the face of the Earth except for one thing: Everyone else seems just as cool as I am.

I'm not sure if the people I talk to are on E, but if they're not, they don't seem to mind my jabbering. One young woman is definitely flying on my tangent—I tell her I like the embroidered

star on her shirt, and she looks at me wide-eyed for a second, then reaches her arms up around my neck.

"You are so beautiful," she says. When she turns to the woman next to her and does the same thing, I don't mind a bit.

Nor do I mind that a plastic cup of water costs \$1 (\$2 for weak Gatorade). Wow—a couple thousand people at \$15 a head, you figure each of them spends an average of at least \$5 on drinks. ... My brain's not up to the math right now, but someone's making some serious bank off this thing.

I barely remember gulping down my water, but the glass in my hand is empty and I want more. I buy another cup and hand it to the person behind me in line—it just seems like the thing to do. Then, for myself, I splurge on a Gatorade, which has never tasted better.

My thirst quenched, I zero in on a guy who looks like he just stepped out of a J. Crew ad; he's sitting Buddha-style against the railing opposite me. I decide to play reporter, walk up, ID myself, show him my tape recorder and ask if he'd mind a few questions. He grins and motions for me to take a seat in front of him. (Ravers, as a rule, make good interview subjects.)

I squat down and ask him his name and age. "Chad, the 17-year-old," he says. I ask him if it's obvious that I'm on E—feeling curious, not worried. Chad smiles. "Kind of." I pop the question: "Are you?" He shakes his head and grins wider.

"Once you've done it, you can get there on your own sometimes. You should be able to get there on your own all the time, at least that's the goal. But I know how it feels—when you're dancing, the music and the lights can take you to another level, and I'm not being all cosmic and funky and psychic. Seriously—when you're out there sweating and moving to the beat, you feel exalted.

"I'll take one or two hits of X and dance nonstop from 11 until four or five o'clock in the morning, and when I'm done ... the only thing I can compare it to is what a shaman goes through after he's taken peyote. I have a sense that I've been somewhere else inside myself, and I feel purged.

"X isn't about being numb or hallucinating or just getting fucked up for fucked-up's sake. It plays an integral role in this whole fantasy. And the bottom line is, this is all a fantasy world. A rave is like Disneyland—you take the ride, you see all the funny creatures, and you go home, you feel relaxed, and the next day you go back into reality."

This has become a night of sudden decisions, and I suddenly decide I'm a little too out of it to be tape-recording any conversations, especially one I'm involved in. I thank Chad for his time, and, as I stand up, he hands me a flier for a party on November 17—the weekend after next. I suddenly decide to sit back down and ask him how many raves there are in Phoenix every month.

"Big commercial ones like this, maybe one or two," he says. "But there's deeper underground stuff going on all the time; every weekend there's something somewhere."

I ask Chad what draws the line between commercial and underground. "Basically, it's how widely a party is advertised and what the goal behind it is," he says. "This thing tonight is highly commercial. The promoters wanted to make a lot of money, so they had fliers for it in coffee shops, record stores, everywhere, so you not only get the eight or nine hundred people that are hard-core into the underground, you also get a bunch of people that only come to the commercial raves because that's all they ever know about, plus a bunch of people coming to their first rave ... and a lot of them are just curiosity seekers."

He gestures to a pair of teenage girls gawking with a mixture of awe and disgust at a cuddle-puddle foursome lolling in a concrete corner, oblivious to the attention. "They should take that into the dark, but they also shouldn't get stared at," Chad says. "Also, at a true underground party, no one would be staring."

And how does one get connected to the true underground?

"You just do," he says, shrugging. "Word of mouth. Some of 'em are small, just house parties. Some of 'em are in warehouses, some of 'em are in office buildings someone has a key to. There are full-moon parties out in the desert every month. I went to a party in Tucson last year that was in an airplane graveyard. It was sick, man—they had [the deejays] up in the cockpit of a bomber."

Chad leaves me with that image to go for water, and I stand to bum a watermelon Blow Pop off my right-hand neighbor. It might be just hard sugar and artificial flavor, but it tastes like ambrosia. I haven't enjoyed a piece of candy this much since I stopped trick-or-treating.

Dancing—now there's an idea. Whoever came up with dancing should get a medal. I shuffle purposely toward the music, succumbing to the volume and the speed.

The beat. The beat. The beat.

A fetus's heart beats 120 times a minute. Mine's going at least 130 in here, but I still feel like a baby in the womb, safe and blissfully unconcerned with anything beyond my own private paradise. Again, I feel like a sober part of me is watching the action from afar, amazed to see me gyrating under the laser light. Usually, I'm too terrified of looking silly to dance, but I feel instinctively sure that no one here will laugh at me, or even silently pass judgment that I look like a fool.

Is that the drug, I wonder, or the truth?

The revelations are coming fast and clear now: I notice that, unlike people watching television or a rock show, those around me aren't oriented toward a single object or direction. Instead, they're facing one another, making eye contact, interacting. At the same time, they all look intensely self-involved. And look at what a melting pot this crowd is: about 60 percent white, 25 percent black and 15 percent other—some Chicanos and Native Americans, a lot more Asians. Another realization: None of the groups is self-segregating—the first time I've seen anything like this in Phoenix.

The whole time I'm thinking, I'm dancing like a dervish. Suddenly, the constant flurry of keyboards and bass drops out of the music, leaving the beat bare. As if on cue, everyone on the dance floor raises his or her voice in a shout of release. The music cuts back in a second later, but I'm cashed.

I focus on my timepiece: 3:30 a.m. My throat feels like it's cracked and bleeding. I blow four more bucks on Gatorade, chug it, stagger to the wall and sit down to smile and watch all the people. I can feel that I'm coming down. On the surface, it's gentle, a feather-fall back into normality; but deeper down, there is a thorny cry of despair—"No, not this again. Bring back the beauty."

Rave II: Electric Kool-Aid, PartyGardens, November 17, 1995

Getting into the groove of most techno tunes is like easing through the wall of a sonic bubble—go slow, and you'll get there. The sound tonight, however, is "hard acid" house music—the synthesizers have a harsh, serrated edge, and the beats come out of the speakers like sprays of automatic-weapons fire. There's no bubble here—trying to get into this music is like trying to jump through a fan of spikes. The ravers who have managed it are jacked up hard, twitching like figures in a stuttering movie frame, and when the white strobes kick on, the dance floor looks like a ghastly mass electrocution.

Pez is stressed out. "I can't feel the beat," he says. "I have to be brought into music this hard."

We walk back through the 21-and-over section to the chill-out area—a peaceful room with cushioned booths, dim purple lights and speakers full of hypnotic electronic drones and chimes. I feel much better, but Pez can't get comfortable.

"I just don't feel it tonight," he says, then abruptly walks away.

Just after Pez departs, I hear someone behind me sputtering about undercover agents making arrests in the main room. I rush in there to find several men in security shirts detaining three

teenagers and searching their backpacks. Almost immediately, someone comes in and announces that a guy just got busted back in the chill-out lounge.

I see Pez and start to give him a heads-up, but he mutters that when he left, he went to his car and unloaded his stuff. A short time later, *New Times* photographer Timothy Archibald stumbles upon the busted kids in the lobby of a closed Italian restaurant connected to Party Gardens and tries to ask them what happened. A man snaps, "Hey, they're under arrest," and orders Archibald to leave. The deejay in the chill-out room puts on a tape of an old BBC broadcast of a ranting speech by Adolf Hitler. The message is clear: The enemy is among us.

It was probably the flier that did it—a logo of the Kool-Aid mascot as a spaceman and the words "Electric Kool-Aid, unsweetened hard acid mix. Super psychedelic acid party! Just add water."

On the back is a number that yielded a message directing would-be ravers to Party Gardens—a location hardly worthy of the intrigue.

In the initial stages of the American underground, most parties were held illegally in empty warehouses and promoted primarily with rave cards—mini-handbills with intense computer graphics that had a date and a telephone number to a recording where organizers would post the location at the last minute. Now, legal, commercial raves often appropriate that process to imitate the ambiance of the early days.

Ask veterans of the Valley scene when it all began, and most will flip the calendar to spring of 1992 and a club at 24th Street and Van Buren at the Kon Tiki hotel, where a local deejay named Eddie Amador helped organize a weekly Saturday-night rave called "Scream."

"It was hard, hard, fast, sweaty techno," Eddie now says of the parties at KonTiki. "We had cage dancing, film loops, lights ... we had a line outside the door and around the corner, 400 people packed into this tiny bar." Scream only lasted six weeks before it was shut down by the cops for exceeding the fire code.

But in those six weeks, a seed was sown. And from there on out, the Phoenix underground scene grew in the same pattern as rave culture in the American cities before it.

First came the hijacks—illegal parties held in warehouses.

"They would put out a number before they even had a location, then scout out a warehouse that was empty, cut the lock, put the spot on the recording, bring in the sound system, use the warehouse's juice and throw the party in these huge, corrugated-steel buildings," says Tommy, a local underground promoter who does business as Panic Productions.

Funny thing about rave promoters in the Valley—they all know of other promoters who pulled off hijack parties back in the day, but none of them actually did it themselves. They all agree, however, that the illegals often made for less than fantastic parties. One, held in a vacant church, was a landmark fiasco of antiquated wiring, blown fuses and mass confusion in the dark.

But a pivotal lesson was learned from the hijacks: There is money to be made in the rave business, enough to make dealing with permits, insurance and zoning laws worth the hassle.

So broke the dawn of the first commercial parties and, on their heels, the inevitable oxymoron of a "commercial underground club."

Most members of the underground here seem to think The Works used to be something, and now it's not. "When The Works first opened, it had exactly what you wanted," says Tommy. "Now it's so played out, it's sad." Amador was hired to deejay the opening night at The Works and stayed for about half a year before he quit to open his own after-hours club. The cover charge had climbed too high, he says, and the owners wanted him to play music that was embarrassingly old.

Amador and his partner, Pete, have deejayed together under the name Direct Force since 1989. They started out spinning hip-hop at west Phoenix block parties and switched to house music in 1992. "We come from the days of ducking bullets in the backyard," says Pete. "It was like, 'Drive-by, get down.' You don't have that problem at raves."

Eddie and Pete's club is called Chupa, or "suck" in Spanish. Every Saturday night, 200 to 400 core members of the Valley underground gather to dance or just hang out. The club opens at midnight and closes when everyone leaves—usually about 6 or 7 in the morning. The music there is primarily roots house—disco's final revenge—but Eddie and Pete also spin some break beat, a hip-hop-influenced form that, along with trip-hop, is bridging the gap between the world's two largest music-based subcultures.

House music is a sprawling genre, but if you had to pin down a definition, you could do worse than this: "Synthesizer sequences and samples fused with electronic tribal rhythms executed at high speed. No vocals." Also, people who make house recordings intend for them to be sampled in bits and pieces, not played in full.

The true artists of the underground are the deejays—"spinners" whose success in the scene is determined by their talent in three areas: The first and most important is how well they stay on top of the music. Unlike rock songs, house singles are considered stale after a month on the racks, if not less. As a deejay, you're either on the cutting edge or you're lagging—there's no in-between.

"You have to know your music," says local deejay Emile, the self-proclaimed "king of break beat, master of all forms." "There are hundreds of new records every week, and you have to pick the ones that will work."

The second indication of talent is how well deejays read a crowd. The third is their ability with cross-fading and beat-matching, the two skills that must be perfected to play music from as many tracks as possible in a perfect mix—one where each song is an individual movement in a seamless electronic symphony.

The headline deejay at Kool-Aid is Hyperactive, a spinner from Chicago who set promoter Russ Ramirez back \$800. (Tickets were \$15 at the door, and more than 800 people attended the rave tonight. After the event, other promoters estimated Ramirez cleared at least five grand.) Hyper's beat-matching is butter-smooth—you can't tell where one song ends and the next begins—and the acid attack is relentless through the 30,000-watt sound system.

Riveted into place a few inches from each speaker is a Basshead—the hardest of the hard-core, ravers who put their hands on the speakers and dance at the very source of the fury. I try it, but I only last about ten seconds in the blast storm before I retreat to the ambient area for good.

Along the way, I see several people wearing gas masks in a symbolic nod to impending apocalypse. Next week, the City of Phoenix will issue air-quality warnings on four straight days.

I find Candy and Julie snuggling in a booth and join them. Candy rubs mango oil on my chest, wrists and neck, then on herself. The scent makes me think of tropics and sin. Underground events are inherently erotic—the sweat, the skin, the E—but they're not meat markets by any stretch of the term. No one seems to be cruising for sex, but groups of friends often kiss and caress one another.

For a generation that came of age in the shadow of AIDS, it's about as free as love gets.

Rave III: Full-Moon Party, Superstition Mountains, December 7, 1995

The scene is timeless—dancers gathered in front of a flickering fire to celebrate the full moon. The music, however, is pure now: break beat spun hard and fast by Emile. I'm at a party on top of a mesa 45 minutes and one mountain range from the nearest pavement. The "road" here was a Jeep trail that, in some places, was more hazardous than the dry riverbeds it paralleled.

Suffice to say that if you're at this party, you really wanted to be here.

Pez knew the number to call for directions. The secret-agent routine required to get the location isn't just for show in this case—full-moon parties are the antithesis of a commercial rave: No one is there to make any money, and no one is there to watch the ravers like monkeys in a zoo, and no one is there to enforce the rules of the real world.

At 11:30 p.m., there are only about 50 people on the hilltop with the fire, the sound system and the generator. But by midnight, a caravan of headlights is seen descending the mountainside about two miles away, and by 1a.m. the crowd has easily tripled. Roughly 100 people are dancing or standing around the fire, another 15 are cuddling in a nearby mine shaft, and at least 35 are wandering aimlessly in the desert.

There are three kinds of LSD and two varieties of MDMA circulating through the crowd, but only about half of the people here seem to be tripping. Almost all of those in the desert, however, have been hit hard by a particularly wicked variety of acid sold on pastel splotched tabs of paper for \$5 a dose.

I thank myself for abstaining as I watch the flashlights of confused psychonauts bobbing in the dark, some of them almost a mile away. I worry for a moment how many are out there without any light. Nothing I can do about it, so I climb a nearby hill to a point where the panorama is so clear and wide that it seems like I can make out the curvature of the Earth.

Nearby, three ravers in cold-weather gear are seated around a hookah. Two others are standing—one of them pin-cushioned with cactus spines, the other trying to fashion a pair of tweezers out of his key ring.

It's a tough situation under any circumstances, but all the more so because the tweezer-maker is hallucinating and keeps twisting the metal in the wrong direction. Eventually, he gets it right, though, and starts to pluck the spines out of his buddy.

I pick my way down to the fire and track down Scotty, the co-organizer of tonight's festivities. Scotty tells me this is the fifth full-moon party, and the second in this location. The one before this was in a ghost town near Wickenburg. Scotty has been into the underground for a year and a half, and funds the free full-moon parties out of his own pocket. He also helps promote the occasional commercial rave, including the Kool-Aid event almost three weeks before.

However, he says the commercial raves and even the underground clubs are never this good.

"I found out after ten months of doing clubs that an every-weekend thing can't be that spiritual," he says. "I want people to see Shiva in the speakers, and at once-a-month parties outside in a setting like this, people are more apt to come prepared to completely let go of themselves."

And if they do, then what? The drugs, the dancing, the lugging of a generator and speaker cabinets out into the middle of the desert—done to what end? Is there a purpose beyond the partying?

Scotty says yes. "The hardest part of this is to get people to leave here understanding that it doesn't have to stay here. That's the biggest barrier people have to break down—to realize that they can take pieces of the vibe from here back out into mainstream society and prove that people can gather and truly love one another and celebrate positivity in peace."

If you look at the underground as a religion, then parties are clearly the equivalent of church services—a place for people of a shared belief to gather once a week, engage in ritual and recharge their ideological batteries before they venture back into a world whose values are, for the most part, antipodal to their own.

This much is for sure: You can't just talk the talk in the underground. You either go to parties or you don't. And if you do, you lead your life well outside the normal parameters of your society. The odd hours alone ensure that.

It's now 5 in the morning, and the scene on the road below the full-moon party is pretty grim as several bands of exhausted ravers struggle to get it together enough to start the long road home.

One poor soul on a bad trip has panicked and locked himself in a car. Instead of coaxing him out, the owner is pounding on the glass and issuing threats. A whole carload of partyers failed to factor in the dirt-road-driving time; their car is out of gas, and the hose they have for a siphon won't reach my tank.

I do my part in the group effort to get everyone home alive by packing two stranded ravers—one of them Eddie Amador—into the back of my car. The road out of the mountains is treacherous, but far less stressful than the highway to Phoenix, which, from Apache Junction west, is jammed with morning commuter traffic.

"Who are all these people?" I wonder as we creep along. I'm in a car full of dirty, spent ravers who can't stop talking—about Brahms and Coltrane, life as a whole. I look again at the workaday drivers all around me—scrubbed, alone, jaws set—and flash on a recent conversation with Inertia, a local deejay, who summed it up so: "More important than the drugs are the ideas—the philosophy, the desire to connect. It's a tribalistic thing, the idea that you're all tuned in to the same thing at the same time, whereas most people just want to stay locked in their own small worlds."

"People drive around the city all day listening to different stations in their cars; they work in their cubicle all day, then get back in their mobile cubicle and travel to their home cubicle. They do it day after day after day. It's monotony, and it's spiritual death."

"Something important is missing in a society where people think they have to live like that, and this is a way to say, 'No, I'm not going to do it.'