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LUCA



BACHELOR WORK
From Slaves to Raves

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INTRODUCTION - RELATING TO THE ROOTS

I've always loved Drum 'n' Bass events, and supporting them with live visuals as a VJ has since then become a major part of my beloved practice. Being the grandchild of a native Congolese man, who met my White grandmother during the 1960's (right after the Belgian colonization), I feel like there is a connection to be made between my love for complex drum rhythms and my African roots. Also, I happen to be gay, and I feel totally safe, respected, and free to be my full unique self around my fellow ravers at this moment in time, regardless of different beliefs around sexuality.

Actually, I find myself lucky to be part of such a loving community. For not all people get to experience the support this raving scene has to offer, by at first random strangers, in dealing with the daily struggles and anxieties that come with modern life. Because, let's face it, that's really what it's all about. As William J. T. Mitchell puts it so well in the book *Art in the Age of Anxiety*:

“THE SENSE THAT SOMETHING UNPRECEDENTED HAS SUDDENLY OCCURRED, NOT ONLY IN ITS FEARFUL AND INFURIATING IMMEDIACY, BUT IN ITS CAPACITY TO IMMERSE THE ENTIRE WORLD IN A 24-7 MEDIA STORM OF COLLECTIVE DISTRESS AND ANGUISH, MANIFESTED IN THE 'DISSMELLING' FACIAL ICONOGRAPHY OF THE HYGIENIC MASK. AND THAT THIS IS OCCURRING IN THE CONTEXT OF A POLITICAL PLAGUE THAT THREATENS TO REPLACE PRECARIOUS DEMOCRACIES WITH AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES ALL OVER THE WORLD.” (KHOLEIF, 2021)

In this world of many uncertainties and crises indeed, the phenomenon of actively replacing frustration with salvation, is not only a logical but also a crucial development. Those social gatherings are meant to help us in escaping our current reality, in order to (re)connect with a higher self for a brief moment. As a kind of communal dance ritual, they have always played a huge part in our societies, effectively bringing peace of mind across many cultures in human history. Speculating on the effect of the Dionysian spirit on Apollonian culture, in his work *The Birth of Tragedy* Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:

“LET US IMAGINE HOW THE ECSTATIC SOUNDS OF THE DIONYSIAC RITES PENETRATED EVER MORE ENTICINGLY INTO THAT ARTIFICIALLY RESTRAINED AND DISCREET WORLD OF ILLUSION, HOW THIS CLAMOR EXPRESSED THE WHOLE OUTRAGEOUS GAMUT OF NATURE.” (NIETZSCHE, 1886)

And especially today, raves being a modern form of such ecstatic events, they are very appealing to individuals seeking out that feeling of conscious liberation from a heavy, mostly unpredictable life, in a seemingly doomed society.

Needless to say, Afro-American slaves also experienced massive amounts of frustration and anxiety throughout their unfair oppression. Their only escape from this reality being to come together secretly, in commonly shared safe spaces, to bond over ethnic chants and dancing rituals.

You could imagine, if you want, that today's frustrated generation and their enslaved ancestors that were relentlessly suppressed, in a way 'tune in to each other' on this matter. Sharing with each other a process of actively surpassing their somber realities, until calibrated to occupy the same wavelengths, like a mirror image, ignoring the rules of time and space. Almost as if the ancestors projected their freedom upon future generations using movements and sounds. Letting go of their individuality in order to connect with the larger group, that in its turn connects towards a higher plane.

Similarly today, ravers often get lost in a state of temporary bliss that can only be attained by being together and alone at the same time. Dancing their bodies away through the night, their state of minds get transported to another dimension, just for a moment. Perhaps that other dimension exists on the same plane as the one their ancestors explored at the time, allowing all bodies to communicate with entities both from their past, and future. Feeding back on themselves, towards infinity.

We could otherwise also use Aldous Huxley's analogy of *The Doors of Perception* here. Where in relation to altered states, whether or not chemically induced, he claims:

"ONE NEED ONLY CLEANSE THE 'DOORS OF PERCEPTION' IN ORDER TO GLIMPSE INFINITY. THIS IS THE Gnostic PROGRAM, THE VIEW THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO GAIN KNOWLEDGE ON EARTH, BUT ONLY AT THE PRICE OF WITHDRAWING FROM THE WORLD." (HUXLEY, 1954)

Seeking both sin and salvation, being tribal and global, but also primal and futuristic, underground and 'out there', asking for a revolution and eternal peace at the same time, resisting affiliation with any larger group but seeking belonging nevertheless, ... All of that (and a lot more) happens when reconciling our body and soul, together with others, without any notion of judgment towards culture, belief, age, gender, or sexuality. That's why I truly believe that raving is a form of personal healing, allowing all participants to (momentarily) shift their world views for the better. Ignoring all preconceived notions about life, and transcending them altogether.

CHAPTER I - THE VISCERALITY OF CULTURE

I.1 Religious aspects

It's no coincidence that the man in front of the stage, shouting towards the crowds at raves is called a Master of Ceremony (MC). That is because he doesn't merely shout, he interacts. He preaches unity by putting his lighter up and calls for a rewind with 'gun fingers' asking for a 'Pull Up!'. After this, he toasts to his fellow pillars of the community through a 'Big Up'. His purpose is to make sure every single soul in that room feels like they belong, in the same way a pastor does at church service. Both the rave's MC and the church's pastor strategically build pace throughout their performances towards a unified emotional peak.

Although I'm deliberately not focussing on other genres branched out of Afro-American culture, such as Jazz, Hip-Hop, or Rock 'n' Roll, here's a lovely quote by Jay David Bolter on the concept of Flow in relation to Hip-Hop music that I believe succeeds in painting a similar picture to the one experienced with Drum 'n' Bass music:

"WE HAVE BECOME USED TO THIS MASS PARTICIPATION IN ROCK AND POPULAR CONCERTS, ALTHOUGH CERTAIN GENRES OF MUSIC, SUCH AS TECHNO AND DANCE REMIX, INSPIRE PARTICULARLY ECSTATIC PARTICIPATION. THE PARTICIPATION IS STRONGEST WHEN THE MUSIC IS REPETITIVE, ELECTRONICALLY PRODUCED OR REPRODUCED THROUGH SAMPLING. THE MECHANICAL NATURE OF THE MUSIC SEEMS TO CALL OUT TO THE AUDIENCE TO RESPOND WITH THEIR OWN REPETITIVE AND OFTEN MECHANICAL GESTURES TO LOSE THEMSELVES IN THE MUSIC AND TO BECOME PART OF A MUSIC MACHINE, JUST AS EMINEM ADVISED IN 'LOSE YOURSELF'. THE WHOLE WORLD OF REMIX MUSIC, AS HIP-HOP PERFORMERS HAVE LONG KNOWN, IS FLOW MUSIC. THE AVANT-GARDE DANCE MUSIC OF GIRL TALK, LIKE ALL SAMPLED DANCE MUSIC AND LIKE RAP, COULD GO ON FOREVER." (BOLTER, 2019)

Also not a coincidence I believe, is the name of London's most legendary underground club/label called 'Ministry of Sound'. They gather their crowds together to worship the sounds of heavy basslines and snappy snares. Almost like a new religion, where glorious churches get replaced by grimy warehouses, and holy confessions by cheeky grins. Almost literally that is, when knowing that most UK Garage events used to be hosted exclusively on Sunday mornings. As a more relaxed kind of afterparty, to tremendously popular events of a Saturday night, this was a space where people came to bond on a deeper level, rather than just dance their lives away and getting wasted for the sake of it. People would wear their finest clothes to a Sunday Garage club, to show off their status to others in the community, quite similarly to how their ancestors used to 'dress to impress' when going to church service. Rietveld suggests:

"THIS ELEMENT OF THE SCENE IS INFUSED WITH RELIGIOSITY, IN THAT EVENTS OCCUR ON THE MAIN CHURCH DAY, WHICH IS REGARDED AS 'BEST-CLOTHES-DAY' FOR SOUTH LONDON CARIBBEAN YOUTH, WHO HAVE GROWN UP WITH GOSPEL SUNDAY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES." (ST JOHN, 2004)

In the year of 2005, DMZ-crew hosted their first anniversary event in the recently converted 'Mass' venue. Prior to that, it was a catholic church.

I.II Cultural challenges

But local authorities were not so fond of those gatherings they just couldn't seem to grasp the concept of, and the power it unlocked in the individuals attending them. Risking to lose control over these crowds, and fearing some sort of social revolution, they chose to make up a bunch of poorly justified rules instead. These began in December 1989 when Graham Bright, Conservative MP for Luton South, sponsored a Private Member's Bill, which later became *The Entertainments (Increased Penalties) Act 1990*.

THIS LEGISLATION RAISED THE LEVEL OF FINES FOR BREACHING THE LICENSING LAWS FROM £2,000 TO £20,000 AND INTRODUCED A MAXIMUM SIX MONTHS PRISON SENTENCE FOR THOSE ORGANIZING UNLICENSED PARTIES. (...) LATER, THE INTRODUCTION OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PUBLIC ORDER ACT 1994 CRUCIALLY SHIFTED FOCUS, IN THAT IT BECAME THE FIRST ACT TO PLACE RESTRICTIONS ON INDIVIDUALS ATTENDING OR ATTEMPTING TO ATTEND UNLICENSED EVENTS. (ST JOHN, 2004)

This happened with multiple genres such as UK Jungle, UK Garage, and UK Bassline, where because of these absurd government policies, they eventually died off, slowly but surely. To look at the bright side of things, this also meant that DJs and producers had to constantly refine their styles, inventing whole new genres through variations on those from previously banned events. This meant multiple rapid shifts happened throughout UK music history. Those shifts rippled through far beyond Britain's borders, and went on to further affect the rest of the globe.

Another tool politicians used to dismantle that strong unity that was forming itself around rave culture, was to spread messages of hate and doubt, specifically targeted against the Jamaican and Asian communities. Enoch Powell, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care 1960-1963, during his *Rivers of Blood Speech* on 20th of April 1968 said:

“THIS COUNTRY, IN 15 OR 20 YEARS TIME, THE BLACK MAN WILL HAVE THE WHIP HAND OVER THE WHITE MAN.” (POWELL, 1968)

Nevertheless the members of the rave scene endured, and mostly managed to ignore measures forced upon them. They found themselves thriving, regardless of the numerous attempts to shut them down.

CHAPTER II - HISTORY OF THE GENRES

II.1 From Gospel to Drum 'n' Bass

When we decide to go back, all the way to the beginnings of Drum 'n' Bass music, we have to start in Charleston USA. This is where African men and women were sold to slave owners after being stripped of all of their belongings, including their musical instruments. Unfortunate as they were, African slaves still managed to express themselves using solely their voices. This led to the phenomenon of Afro-American Gospel, and ultimately to (mostly lyrical) Soul music. From the moment those Afro-American slaves started to gain more rights, and were evolving towards being more equal to White folks, they finally regained access to instruments. Not their original native instruments that is, but rather instruments manufactured in the USA, primarily known for usage within Rock 'n' Roll music at the time. Taking those instruments, including the acoustic and bass guitar, the piano, drum set, and trumpet, and making them almost 'sing' for them, this naturally evolved towards what we now know as Jazz music.

When this Jazz music slowly migrated to Kingston Jamaica, it got a bit rougher and more lyrical, resulting in a genre called Ska music. This is a genre characterized by rastafari 'chatting' over a musical piece, and can be very much compared to what later would be called Reggae music. Discovering the power of digital manipulation, many producers now chose to virtually reassemble entire tracks using various instrumental Reggae recordings, but then consciously leave any lyrics out. This enabled MCs or otherwise 'crowd controllers' to lyrically freestyle on those reassembled, purely instrumental records now called 'dubplates'. There and then, Dub music was born.

“TO DUB IS TO DOUBLE, TO FORM A DOPPELGÄNGER, A DUPPY (JAMAICAN PATOIS FOR 'GHOST'). ALL AUDIO RECORDINGS ARE GHOSTS OR REVENANTS IN A BASIC SENSE: TRACES OF THE PAST THAT REFUSE TO REMAIN THERE, CONSTANTLY RETURNING TO HAUNT THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE. BUT DUB (AND THE DUB CONTINUUM THAT INCLUDES TRIP HOP, JUNGLE, MINIMAL TECHNO, AND DUBSTEP) REVELS IN THIS AURAL SPECTRALITY, EMPLOYING REVERB, DELAY, ECHO, FRAGMENTATION, AND ERASURE TO GENERATE AURAL TRACES, AUDIBLE ABSENCES, AND OTHER UNCANNY EFFECTS.” (COKES, 2020)

Although this further evolved towards Dancehall and Moombahton within Jamaica and the US, let's focus on what happened when many Jamaican people were brought to the 'mother country' of the British commonwealth, England, after WWII to help rebuild the country's economy. Knowing that Rock 'n' Roll, and more specifically Punk, were big in the UK at the time, this resulted in an interesting mix between those 'White' genres, and the Jamaican Ska/Dub music. Working class from both the White and Black communities united together to experiment with sounds and lyrics, trying to find a right middle ground. This ultimately resulted in a musical genre called 2-Tone, which

sounds like a perfect mixture of typical White music, but then with all of the inevitable Black influences added to that. Let's call it 'Funk Rock' perhaps? Or maybe 'Ska Punk'? You get the idea.

To bring the US back in all of this, where Funk and Soul had further been developing since, DJ's started to notice that crowds were usually most energetic during the drum break solos. Producers started to resample many of those golden bits of snappy drum rhythms (incl. the famous 'Amen Break') and looping them over and over, sometimes speeding them up, resulting in a new genre called (UK) Jungle.

“ONE NIGHT I WENT THROUGH RECORDS TO PLAY, AND I THOUGHT: THEY'RE WAITING FOR THIS PARTICULAR BREAK, I HAVE A COUPLE MORE RECORDS THAT GOT THE SAME BREAK UP IN IT. WONDERED HOW IT WOULD BE IF I PUT THEM ALL TOGETHER? AND I TOLD THEM, I SAID 'I'M GONNA TRY SOMETHING NEW TONIGHT, IMMA CALL IT THE MERRY-GO-ROUND.'” (KOOL HERC, 2012)

Combine this again with the heavy basslines of Reggae and Dub music and the toasting/chatting of Ska and 2-Tone music, and that's when you get pretty close to what can now be called Drum 'n' Bass.

Drum 'n' Bass is characterized by low, gritty basses and fast, snappy drums, together with an MC preaching to the community. The move from UK Jungle to Drum 'n' Bass was further accelerated by the authorities' activity trying to ban any Jungle-related events, because of their reputation of being related to frequent (armed) violence and drug abuse. Knowing this, managers quickly started branding their events under this new Drum 'n' Bass genre, and MC's changed their message to focus more on the unity aspect of it all, attempting to detach raves from their previously negative reputation. At some point Drum 'n' Bass producers went on to experiment with techniques such as carefully selecting chopped drum parts, removed from their originally longer breaks, and placing them strategically synced to the beat. This resulted in the sub-genre called 2-Step, referring to how Drum 'n' Bass samples were now typically put on every two beats, going for a cleaner but even snappier sound.

II.II From UK Garage to Dubstep

Meanwhile in the US, Funk and Soul further developed into genres such as Rhythms 'n' Blues, and Disco (and later on Hip-Hop). This would again highly influence what was about to happen in the UK. London DJs took notice of what was happening in the vibrant clubs of New York, and took those upbeat dance records to speed them up even more, sometimes combining them with vocals

sampled from other tracks popular at the time. Add a groovy bassline to that, chop it up a bit, and UK Garage, the typical 'London sound', is born! With this genre rapidly gaining more popularity, and therefore further spreading over the masses, many Drum 'n' Bass producers took it as an opportunity to join the momentum, and alter their sound slightly to match with the atmosphere of UK Garage. They adopted a groovier urban sound, whilst sticking to their more complex drum patterns and using the same fast tempos as before, resulting in a genre that was now called Speed Garage or sometimes 2-step Garage.

The Garage rave scene was truly thriving at this point up until, once again, things got edgy and authorities felt like the only way to deal with it was to take action by shutting down all UK Garage related events. This resulted in both average crime rates, but also UK Garage's popularity to instantly drop, to a point of virtually vanishing. Feeling like there was nothing else left to do for them but to reinvent themselves once again, producers went on to experiment a whole lot more with the sounds already available to them at the time. Combining even darker basslines with samples from the earlier Jamaican dubplate culture, and also intentionally putting snare drums on the wrong beat, we now get pretty close to what's soon about to be called 'Dubstep'. Although the actual origin of the genre's name is not totally clear, the underground Ammunition Promotions label, who ran London's highly influential Forward>> club, began to use the term 'Dubstep' to describe this style of music that was 'kinda like 2-Step, but Dub as well'.

Inspiring the electronic music scene of North America, Dubstep was given a whole new meaning when US and Canada based producers such as Excision, Datsik, Zeds Dead, and Skrillex, combined the genre with elements originally to be found only in Heavy Metal. Dubstep became 'Brostep', and then 'Riddim' and 'Deathstep'. Here in Europe, both the Drum 'n' Bass and Dubstep sounds further got refined, and branched out in many sub-genres, supported by industry heavyweights such as Sub Focus, Chase & Status, Nero, Shiverz, Kanine, Andy C, and DJ Fresh in the UK, Noisia, Black Sun Empire, T & Sugah, Posij, and Imanu in the Netherlands, Alix Perez, Bredren, Phase, Eptic, Netsky, and more recently Used in Belgium.

OUTRO - WHAT'S NEXT?

So what's next, raving fully into the digital Metaverse? I personally don't think that will happen. An immense part of raving is all about the metaphysical embodiment of psychic energy in a space. I don't believe that virtual environments made primarily out of pixels can live up to the challenge of simulating equally beautiful and random experiences that feel genuine on a human level, ultimately leading to transcending the ego through interconnection with other beings. To quote one of my VJ mentors Aitor Biedma, that I recorded during an interview together with Pieter Steyaert:

"IT'S ABOUT CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE YOU CAN BE WHEREVER AND WHOEVER YOU WANT TO BE, WHICH ALSO APPLIES TO THE DIGITAL WORLD TO SOME EXTENT, BUT I THINK YOU'RE MISSING THE MAGIC ELEMENT. THINGS HAPPEN FOR NO REASON, AND THERE'S NO CONTROL OVER IT BECAUSE YOU'RE ACTUALLY TAKING ACTION INTO A PHYSICAL SPACE." (TROWFLOX, 2022)

Another concern with raving in digital dimensions is that in the end that virtual space (although being 'open/accessible') is still owned, and therefore also controlled, by corporate tech companies. Those companies decide for their users what's allowed and what's not, applying limiting constraints on their virtual environments. This could potentially be a threat to the original 'free-spirited' nature of raves, where the only rule is that there are no rules, as long as you respect your fellow ravers.

With this virtual space owned by social media giants however, we could easily evolve towards a more modern form of controlled oppression, perhaps similar to the one felt by Afro-American slaves back in the day (though I'm aware the levels of maltreatment would be far from comparable). But rave culture, a culture that in the end is all about love and unity, is not ready to be consciously constrained any time soon. Raves, some will gladly lean into the experience of it all, while others will choose to simply ignore it, if that's what they want to do. But no one can ever put it down. Many tried before, none of them succeeded.

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