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NEWS



Once known for abundant drugs and secret locations, West Coast raves have grown up and embraced a techno-flavoured spirituality Photo illustration-Dan Toulgoet

[Rave new world](#)

Last New Year's Eve at a campsite 20 minutes by boat from Deep Cove up Indian Arm, the forces of light battled those of darkness.

OPINION

[Larry haunts rookie council](#)

Thanks to the wireless world we live in, Senator Larry Campbell reached out from beyond the grave of electoral politics Tuesday to insert himself into the first formal council meeting held since he departed.

LETTERS

[Garr on personal anti-Sullivan jihad](#)

I wish the Courier would replace Allen Garr and find a more balanced and sophisticated columnist. I certainly expect good columnists to display opinions, but it's obvious that every column coming from him will be anti-NPA, anti-Sullivan and wholly uninformative and unconstructive in

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NEWS



Theologian Dr. John G. Stackhouse Jr.: "...for people for whom the rave is the focus of their week, is the most intense and pleasurable and identity-giving experience of their week or month, now we're into religious territory."

Photo-Dan Toulgoet

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Rave new world

Last New Year's Eve at a campsite 20 minutes by boat from Deep Cove up Indian Arm, the forces of light battled those of darkness.

More than 200 celebrants arrived by 10 p.m. for an event called Intention 6. Dressed in whatever they pleased-T-shirts, flowing robes, or anything shiny, they gathered in the "fire-themed" room, one of four themed rooms or dance floors created for the night from the campsite's lodges and cafeteria hall. Everyone formed a circle to chant "Om." The voices crested, a DJ kicked in house music from a sound system, and the floor erupted in frantic, joyous flailings.

At 1 a.m. the participants left the four separate dance floors, which were lit in green, blue, red and white to represent the elements of earth, water, fire and air. Gathered outside in the chilly winter air, they watched fire spinners dressed in white and black engage in a mock battle, as a ceremony leader dedicated the physical battle to humanity's internal emotional and mental battle between the "intentional" and the "unintentional."

Throughout the event, which cost \$30 to attend, there was no alcohol and very few drugs. People were there to dance, groove, and relax with friends and enjoy an ambience of West Coast spirituality. Welcome to the modern B.C. rave.

"We don't advocate use of substances, but people make their own choices," says Sobey Wing, a 33-year-old who is actively involved in what he calls the "tribal" or "intentional" rave culture represented by last year's event.



Continued from page 1

The motivation behind this growing style of rave-and events like Intention 6 which moves to the Sunshine Coast for this New Year's Eve-is achieving inner peace.

"There's been a container created with all the dance events, where you can use the dance floor as a place to release, to purge yourself of emotions and of things that are happening to you in a safe environment," says Wing, who splits his time between the Sunshine Coast and Vancouver. "You end up feeling renewed and ready to face the world again."

In their heyday in the mid and late '90s, raves were the serious partier's party. Content-free rhythmic beats, darkness punctuated by brilliant flashing lights, and large-scale drug consumption were the stereotypes, if not the norm. Raves died when police cracked down on the events, but as the dedicated ravers and DJs grew up or got old, they resurrected their culture and in many cases traded the party scene for what some believe has become a bona fide religion.

Focused on dancing and electronica music, the tribal and intentional raves draw inspiration from the world's meditative and indigenous religious and spiritual traditions. Participants frequently incorporate smudging, chanting, and the building of altars dedicated to the four directions (north, east, south, west) and the four elements. Rave organizers avoid official dogma, but often incorporate Buddhist, yogic, or First Nations art and imagery into both advertising and the actual dance environment.

The dancers have also changed. A decade ago, the typical West Coast raver was an 18-year-old, candy-necklaced "bunnykid" popping E in a warehouse. Attend a rave now and you're more likely to bump into a thirty-something, Buddhist vegetarian popping aging vertebrae somewhere in the Elaho Valley.

A lot of ravers don't want to grow up.

Two weeks ago, one hundred and one Santas in various states of dress and undress boarded a fleet of False Creek Aquabuses and made their merry way from Granville Island to the landing under the Burrard Street Bridge. They chanted "ho-ho-ho-ho" and downed gin and whisky, disguised as the contents of household cleaner bottles.

They were there for the annual "Santacon," a moving convergence of all things Santa in which jovial participants dressed as Santa hand out candy canes, sing twisted carols and crawl from pub to pub. Late that night, 300 of the participants gathered at their ultimate venue: a rave party at Club 23.

"For me the whole rave thing is the meeting of minds. The going out, enjoying yourself-and getting some exercise, really," says one Santa, who is also known as Brian Corkum.

Corkum, 42, is typical of the "grayvers," or greying-haired ravers, who made up the vast majority of the Santa conference crowd. He works at a ski hill and as a freelance graphic artist, has a family, but also admits an addiction to dancing to techno "house" music.

"If I'm working at home, I'll get up and just dance around the living room.

It drives my kids nuts; they think I'm a freak," he says.

Corkum, who usually doesn't dress up in more than pants and a T-shirt, still tries to get out to a club dance once a week. He may be exhausted after dancing for four hours straight, but claims he still feels "fantastic." Stress is released and he feels renewed.

"The pure experience when you're dancing is the heart and soul of it," he says.

Many dedicated ex-ravers like Corkum lament they can no longer party like it's 1999, which marked the beginning of the end for rave culture.

As media reports expounded the dangers of raves as a mixing ground for young teens and designer rave drugs like Ecstasy ("E"), an international moral panic took hold. Civic authorities and police began to shut the events down. Rave culture-soothers, glowsticks, space boots-withered.

At its peak of popularity, attending a rave was a secretive, cloak-and-dagger affair. To gain admission, you had to know the right people at the right time, and spend an evening playing treasure hunt.

"You would get a number and an address, you'd go to that address and there'd be a guy standing there and he would have directions to the event. You wouldn't know where it was until you went to talk to that guy," Corkum explains.

Sometimes flyers would be handed out after regular clubs were closing: the pager number listed would lead to another set of phone or pager numbers, and eventually you'd find where the rave was held. The cloak-and-dagger techniques were meant to elude the police, and for valid reason: raves were often associated with the trafficking and use of illegal drugs, including Ecstasy, LSD, and psilocybin mushrooms.

Raves went further underground and were held in basements and warehouses. The "Pangea" rave, held in a warehouse near Powell and Franklin, easily attracted up to 3,000 ravers in one night. Its organizers shut it down, Corkum says, when a criminal gang tried to take over the action. The police were pleased to see it go as well.

"With illegal raves, there's an obvious concern for us because public safety and disorder issues come into play. We don't know if the venue meets fire standards or health standards," says Const. Howard Chow with the Vancouver Police Department.

The VPD also is concerned with illegal drug trafficking. Between 1998 and 2001, seven people in B.C. died from adverse drug reactions at raves.

"We still have raves all the time, but usually they're quite harmless," says Chow. "What is a huge concern still with us in regard to raves is the number of drugs that are still used and sold there. Our drug squad has done a number of targeted enforcements."

At a rave in early 2005 held at the PNE, Chow says, officers arrested five drug traffickers between the ages of 15 and 54.

But according to some ravers, drugs are not the focus.

Audrey Geber is a younger member of the older-raver set. Now a 26-year-old willowy blonde, Geber got drawn into the excitement of raving at 17, when it was still new to Victoria.

"I didn't know what I was getting into-my first rave-but I got hooked on the experience; the music, the people, the connection [with one another]," she says.

A lot of her friends were candy ravers and club kids who would dress in costume and cartoonish fashion and often were active in the rave drug subculture.

Geber demonstrates a few of the smooth and hoppy dance moves she used to revel in before she burned out of the scene at 21. She appears alternately to be swimming, strutting, and doing aerobics Jane-Fonda style. Her eyes are closed.

Now returned to raves, Geber enjoys the social and physical aspects of raving but takes deeper spiritual meaning from the rave experience. As she gets older, she's interested in health, yoga and taking classes in herbology. She only goes raving a few times a year. Rather than going to a club, Geber is more at home at an event like Shambhala, a three-day outdoor event held each year in Salmo, B.C.

Shambhala is a Sanskrit word meaning "place of peace, of tranquillity," and the festival has a much more spiritual focus than a city nightclub.

"Everyone's on this farmer's field by a river. There's the trees, there's the mountains; there's hip-hop, there's breakdancing, there's hula-hooping; there's techno, there's trance, there's cabaret," Geber says.

And though some ravers still opt for drug-enhanced vibes, it is equally the norm, if not more so, for ravers to go substance-free, she says. Geber says people don't need chemical help to have extraordinary or transcendental experiences.

"You don't need to do drugs at Shambhala. You can be up for 24 hours on a natural high, wired with all this energy," she says.

The kind of energy experienced by Geber intrigued Robin Sylvan, a religious studies researcher who teaches at the Sacred Center, an educational facility in Oakland, California.

Sylvan tripped into rave culture while working on a dissertation delving into music as a universal and key component in triggering religious experience. He sought to discover and document what he calls "traces of the spirit," or spiritual elements from people's experiences with four music genres popular in North America: heavy metal, hip-hop, jam bands and rave techno.

The result of his research was a book, *Trance Formation*, which documents the energized re-born feeling that ravers commonly report. The research became personal. Sylvan went from knowing nothing about raves 10 years ago to becoming "a pretty dedicated" participant.

"As soon as I found myself in the underground intentional wing of it, I instantly took to it and felt this was what I had been looking for most of my

life," he says, on the phone from Oakland.

Sylvan compares trance states achieved at raves to better known religious trance experiences: Mongolian shamanism, voodoo spirit possessions, and the whirling dervishes of Islamic Sufism. The repetitive, solo, focused dance efforts of the trance raver, with or without drugs, is akin to a form of meditation, he says.

Sylvan takes the analogy further by comparing the role of the DJ, who spins and mixes music for the dancers, to a type of priest or ceremonial leader.

The comparison to religion is not far off. Tribal or intentional rave culture is growing at the same time as an unprecedented number of Westerners seek out meaning in their lives through religion-but not just one religion.

"Human civilization has not seen this kind of thing before," says Dr. John G. Stackhouse Jr., a theologian at UBC's Regent College.

Stackhouse is referring to what Canadian sociologist Reginald W. Bibby terms "religion ... la carte": the habit among choosy Westerners to ignore old hierarchies and determine for themselves what works for them spiritually. Stackhouse says a Christian today might also believe in a non-Christian doctrine like reincarnation and not give it a second thought.

Thirty-five per cent of British Columbians reported they had "no religion" in the 2001 census, the highest proportion of non-religious people in Canada outside of the Yukon. But that doesn't mean they aren't spiritual. Vancouverites could easily find themselves practising tai chi or yoga to keep limber, using Buddhist meditation for focus, attending a tantric sex workshop, or joining a rave for a communal experience.

Popular culture has picked up on the community and social religious aspects of rave ceremony. In the film *The Matrix Reloaded*, the city of Zion prepares for an apocalyptic battle by holding a huge party that resembles a rave.

"The Wachowski brothers [the creators of the Matrix mythology] see that the rave form is a kind of liturgy-a kind of ritual of collective identity," says Stackhouse. "The rave might only be a form of entertainment for many. But for people for whom the rave is the focus of their week, is the most intense and pleasurable and identity-giving experience of their week or month, now we're into religious territory," he explains.

And that, he says, is enough to make rave a religion. Though the most common definition of religion entails ritual belief in the supernatural, a more functional definition accepted widely by religious scholars sees religion as whatever activity an individual or group uses to embrace an ultimate set of values.

The linking of rave culture and church-going is also growing. Victoria boasts The Rainbow Cathedral, likely Western Canada's first church devoted to PLUR: Peace, Love, Unity, Respect. Its all-night celebrations are open only to congregation members.

In Vancouver, Sobey Wing attended a sold-out Cosmic Mass held last July at Christ Church Cathedral downtown. The event was organized by American Matthew Fox, an ex-Roman Catholic priest, now with the

Episcopal Church, who attempts to put body back into the "body of Christ" through a rave-inspired mass. Wing, brought up in a Filipino Catholic tradition, enjoyed the chance to celebrate his past and present: "It was a way of bridging worlds for me."

Wing was also involved with Luminance II, a winter solstice celebration held last weekend at the Scotiabank dance centre, and is also a key organizer for Intention 7, the New Year's gathering being held this year at a YWCA camp near Mt. Elphinstone on the Sunshine Coast.

Tribal Harmonix members have been active in Vancouver in the past year, holding Earthdance in Stanley Park, and adding music and a party-like atmosphere to the summer's inaugural Car-Free Commercial Drive Festival, which saw 20,000 people at a giant street party on Commercial Drive.

But secure in his perch behind the counter at Sativa

Hemporium at Parker and Commercial, Wing laments the negative image most of the public has of raves, and the resulting difficulty he's faced when trying to plan events.

"If you want to do a dance event [in Vancouver] you're faced with a lack of venues, or expensive venues, and oftentimes it's hard to find a location that will run all night. The alternative is to go for clubs but they're pushing drink sales pretty heavily, which sometimes runs counter to what we're after," Wing says.

Raves in the U.S. also encounter problems. Wing invited Sylvan to speak in Vancouver in November, and Sylvan described the ups and downs currently faced by rave culture in the Western States. A giant rave street party called "Love Parade" took over San Francisco's Embarcadero district with 20,000 people last year. This year, it attracted 75,000 people, took over the much-more prominent Market Street, and received public funds as sponsorship. But a rave this year on private property in Utah was violently shut down by riot police and dogs, supposedly taking direction from the U.S. 2004 RAVE Act. The rave had all the required legal permits, Sylvan says.

"The RAVE Act severely restricted people's rights to assemble-basically it said a promoter could be jailed if it was found that people were doing drugs at an event that he put on," Sylvan says.

Though Canada and Vancouver lack similar legislation, Vancouver does have bylaws restricting late-night gatherings and venues. The licensing fees for such events can also be prohibitive, especially for a small or first-time promoter. Wing hopes the climate here will gradually open up to raves.

"My hope is that Vancouver will take the precious gift that it has-a vibrant, artistic, creative dance music culture-and allow us to work with it more to do things on the scale of Love Parade. I want the city to have the chance to really celebrate its richness and diversity with the help of people who have been doing it on a more underground level for awhile," he says.

Many ravers like Wing are adamant the moral panic over raves and rave drugs is unwarranted. Alcohol, they argue, is statistically a much deadlier drug than the natural and synthetic party drugs popularized by raves. And ravers who use or support drugs as a means to enhance mystical experience don't want to be classified as addicts or as dangers to society.

Their drugs of choice focus or increase the physical and musical experiences, they say. According to users, dried "magic" mushrooms give the ingester a five-hour trip of feeling giddy, seeing heightened vibrancy in colours, and perceiving hidden intricacies unfolding from the music. Ecstasy, or MDMA, can be deadly for a few who have allergic or adverse medical reactions to the drug. Others, who claim they know how to dose themselves properly, say they experience a rise in body temperature, relaxed muscles, empathy toward others, and pleasure in soft touches, smooth textures, and dancing. Still others report LSD gives them visual and auditory enhancements or hallucinations for up to eight hours, and may also cause the tripper to have moments of deep insight, bliss, and time-distortion. Of course, many illegal drugs can have serious side effects just as many prescription medications do.

"It's tricky to talk about [drugs] in the mainstream world because there is so much stigma in the 'war on drugs' and not enough awareness about how things are being used in critical ways that are positive, in ways that are helping people with their lives, in a traditional indigenous context, where it's about rites of passage and healing and finding ways to contribute in a deeper way to society," Wing says, sipping on herbal tea. "Unfortunately there's been just a lot of people hearing about how they [drugs] relate to the failings of our society."

But, Wing says, drugs are not really the point of raves. And ultimately, the fashion, the drugs, and the philosophies are just externalities for the dedicated raver. Rave culture is about losing yourself on the dance floor or the dance field. It is about freeing yourself from daily hang-ups and worries.

Geber summarizes the common feeling among ravers: "It's about dancing and really letting go-just embracing each other without ever making contact."

Many are wishing joy to the world this season, and at spiritually centred raves, some may be trying to embody joy as well.

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