

University of Colorado Boulder

# The Rave Panic

Electronic Dance Music and the War on Drugs, 1980s – 2010s

Sarah Elizabeth Rosenbloum

Department of History

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Committee Members:

Dr. Phoebe S.K. Young, Department of History (Thesis Advisor)

Dr. Matthew Gerber, Department of History (Honors Council Representative)

Dr. Adrian J. Shin, Department of Political Science (Outside Reader)

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## Introduction

“It was a Sunday morning. I was out late [the night before], and the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency]... came banging on my door... So, I looked out of the window, and it was three DEA agents, with the sunglasses and the mustaches. They looked like the guys from the [Beastie Boys] ‘Sabotage’ [music] video, in full regalia, with the jackets on and everything. My neighbors were looking around. They wanted to come in, and I was like ‘No, I’ll come down there.’ We had a conversation, and they basically spent the first part of the conversation telling me how bad of a person I was, that I was ruining people’s lives, and that I was killing people. Trying to take that route. When that girl died, I felt that way. I was like, ‘Have I done something wrong?’”<sup>1</sup>

In August 1998, 17-year-old Jillian Kirkland of Alabama passed away of an overdose after attending at a rave held at the State Palace Theatre in New Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> In combination with the moral panic surrounding raves gripping American society at the time, her death, and several others, fueled the government’s anti-rave crusade. One of the first instances of prosecutorial action against rave organizers occurred in New Orleans in the aftermath of Kirkland’s death, when the Drug Enforcement Administration attempted to prosecute promoter James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal and the owners of the State Palace Theatre under the Crack House Statute, as they were under the assumption that the sole purpose of holding raves was to promote drug use. When the DEA agents confronted Donnie with this view, they directly challenged his experience of raves as being a source of joy and community. To be sure, some rave attendees used drugs, namely Ecstasy, to enhance their experience, but this didn’t

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<sup>1</sup> James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal (electronic music events promoter, Disco Donnie Presents), in discussion with the author, March 2023.

<sup>2</sup> John Cloud, “Ecstasy Crackdown: Will the Feds Use a 1980s Anti-Crack Law to Destroy the Rave Movement?” *Time*, April 9, 2001, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,999633-2,00.html>.

particularly distinguish raves from other types of concerts. How *did* raves spark such a strong negative reaction, to cause even Donnie himself to question the morality of his events?

Raves are characterized by loud electronic music with a pulsing beat; strobe lights; attendees wearing crazy, almost child-like clothing; and “1960s-style feelings of unity and joy.”<sup>3</sup> The events are defined by a unique culture, shaped by three interrelated elements: the music, the community, and the drugs. The central element of rave culture is electronic music. Electronic music is created using keyboards, drum machines, and synthesizers, and is defined by a constant beat, which ranges in beats-per-minute (BPM) depending upon the subgenre, of which there are hundreds. Another key element of rave culture is community. Rave culture is defined by PLUR, an ethos subscribed to by all ravers, which stands for “Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect.” In addition, especially in the earlier years of the rave scene, drugs have been a central element of rave culture. MDMA, commonly referred to as Ecstasy or Molly, allows its users to feel “more empathetic, open, and receptive,” thus contributing to the PLUR ethos among ravers.<sup>4</sup> Despite the backlash of what I call the “Rave Panic,” which emerged in the 1990s, electronic dance music, commonly referred to as EDM, has flourished worldwide, becoming a multi-billion-dollar industry.<sup>5</sup>

Since raves emerged in the United States in the early 1990s, they had been notoriously associated with the use of club drugs, most notably Ecstasy. This association – undeniable yet far from universal – sparked a moral panic surrounding raves, which ultimately resulted in federal

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Collin, *Rave On: Global Adventures in Electronic Dance Music* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2018), 150; Brooke Masters, “The Scene That’s All the Rave,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1992/07/03/the-scene-thats-all-the-rave/ae9872a2-8613-4b9b-a56d-3d86c6dc9f67/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ewa Mazierska, Les Gillon, and Tony Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/reader.action?docID=6631376&ppg=5>.

<sup>5</sup> In the late 1990s, the electronic music community started to distance itself from the term “rave,” due to its negative connotation. Adherents of rave culture first referred to the music as “electronica,” and, beginning in the early 2010s, started using the term “Electronic Dance Music,” or “EDM”: Collin, *Rave On*, 154.

legislation which would allow promoters to be punished for the drug use of attendees at their events. According to Stanley Cohen, who developed the term, the subjects of moral panics follow a certain formula:

They are *new* (lying dormant perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon) – but also *old* (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils). They are damaging *in themselves* – but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition. They are *transparent* (anyone can see what’s happening) – but also *opaque*: accredited experts must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless (decode a rock song’s lyrics to see how they led to a school massacre).<sup>6</sup>

It is not simply enough for a subject to follow this formula for a moral panic to develop; moral panics, according to Cohen, are defined by a set of elements interacting with one another:

(i) *Concern* (rather than fear) about the potential or imagined threat; (ii) *Hostility* – moral outrage towards the actors (folk devils) who embody the problem and agencies (naïve social workers, spin-doctored politicians) who are ‘ultimately’ responsible (and may become folk devils themselves); (iii) *Consensus* – a widespread agreement (not necessarily total) that the threat exists, is serious and that ‘something should be done.’ The majority of elite and influential groups, especially the mass media, should share this consensus. (iv) *Disproportionality* – an exaggeration of the number or strength of the cases, in terms of damage caused, moral offensiveness, potential risk if ignored. Public concern is not directly proportionate to objective harm. (v) *Volatility* – the panic erupts and dissipates suddenly and without warning.<sup>7</sup>

As this thesis will discuss, the conditions discussed above apply to the reaction to rave culture in the United States during the 1990s and 2000s, creating the Rave Panic.

The Rave Panic followed a similar pattern to other American 20<sup>th</sup>-century moral panics: associations with drug use fueled moral panic about not only the drug, but the cultural subject itself. While the modern War on Drugs officially began with President Richard Nixon’s declaration on June 17, 1971, American public opinion surrounding drug use shifted in the early

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), vii-viii, <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203828250/folk-devils-moral-panics-stanley-cohen>.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxvi-xxvii.

20<sup>th</sup> century, from viewing drug addicts as weak to viewing them as criminals.<sup>8</sup> This shift led to multiple drug-related moral panics over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including those related to jazz, the 1960s countercultural movement, rock ‘n’ roll, and, as this thesis will discuss, rave culture.<sup>9</sup>

This thesis will examine the Rave Panic in this context, arguing that while the backlash against rave culture was not solely due to the use of so-called “club drugs,” War on Drugs rhetoric, fiercely promulgated in the decades prior, fostered a political environment in which the novelty of both the rave scene and Ecstasy were seen as a threat to American youth culture, fueling a massive social and political uproar. In addition, this thesis will examine how electronic music ultimately survived the Rave Panic, becoming the global phenomenon that it is today. With the recent discussion of drug use shifting toward the importance of rehabilitation and harm reduction, as well as the increasing legalization of drugs such as marijuana and psilocybin across the country, the War on Drugs now seems to have lost its luster. This thesis will argue that the Rave Panic represented one of the last gasps of the drug war, and, largely due to shifting social attitudes toward drug use, the electronic music community ultimately survived. The American rave scene contracted significantly following the passage of anti-rave federal legislation, however, the popularization of European electronic music, combined with the widespread shift in thinking about drug use, allowed its resurgence during the early 2010s.

Scholarly analysis related to rave culture began to emerge contemporaneously to the cultural movement itself, and scholars in a variety of fields continue to study various facets of rave

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<sup>8</sup> David Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 17, <https://academic-oup-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/nyu-press-scholarship-online/book/42464>; Arthur Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War* (New York: Routledge, 2008), <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203886595/drugs-arthur-benavie>, 26.

<sup>9</sup> These moral panics will be discussed in greater detail in the second chapter of this thesis.

culture today. This research has grounded my exploration of the interaction between War on Drugs ideology and rave culture, as well as the shape and effects of the resulting moral panic. Several strands of scholarship are significant in this inquiry: the history and culture of raves themselves; the history and legacy of the American War on Drugs; the prevalence and effects of drug use in the rave scene; and the legal interpretations of legislation targeting raves, especially the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, a section of the PROTECT Act passed in 2003. Putting these historiographies into conversation with each other opens up new interpretive possibilities.

Historical and cultural sources about raves reveal crucial insights into the growth of rave culture and the environments in which rave culture developed and flourished, suggesting multiple origins in urban contexts as well as transatlantic connections. In *Rave On: Global Adventures in Electronic Music*, British writer Matthew Collin traces the historical development of rave culture in cities around the world, arguing that rave culture developed in different ways in different parts of the world, yet each unique rave scene still shared many common influences and features.<sup>10</sup> Collin used interviews with key players, newspaper and magazine articles, and documentary footage to conduct his analysis.<sup>11</sup> His chapters about Detroit, Las Vegas, and New York provide the most valuable information about rave culture in the United States.<sup>12</sup> For example, Collin first describes the inception and growth of techno, one of the first electronic music subgenres, by three African American teenagers in Detroit as a reaction to the crack epidemic in the inner city, the fall of the automotive industry, and the resultant gang-related crime.<sup>13</sup> He then details the separate development of the American rave scene on the West Coast through the lens of Pasquale Rotella, the founder of Insomniac, the largest electronic music

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Collin, *Rave On: Global Adventures in Electronic Dance Music* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Collin, *Rave On*.

<sup>12</sup> Collin, *Rave On*.

<sup>13</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, chap. 1.



events company in the United States today.<sup>14</sup> Rotella started holding events in the Los Angeles area during the 1990s, after electronic music had made the transatlantic journey to Europe and back, and is best known for the Electric Daisy Carnival, often referred to as EDC, which he started in Los Angeles in 1997.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, Collin reviews the integral role of garage, which contributed greatly to electronic music's early development, which emerged in New York's thriving gay club scene during the 1980s and early 1990s, and subsequently declined due to HIV/AIDs, the crack epidemic, and the anti-crime, anti-drug platform of New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who was elected in 1993.<sup>16</sup> Demonstrating the multiple origins of electronic music and raves is crucial to understanding the complexity of the history of electronic music.

Music journalist Simon Reynolds explored different aspects of the development of electronic music and electronic music culture during the same time frame as Collin. In his *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*, Reynolds argues that electronic music and raves are not only a musical genre and the events associated with it, but comprise a unique culture.<sup>17</sup> Raves are not solely about music, drug use, or a combination of the two, he argues, but rave culture has emerged from a fusing of those factors and the intentions of participants to form a common lifestyle and belief system.<sup>18</sup> Reynolds presents the origins of electronic music as “a tale of three cities: Detroit techno, Chicago house, and New York garage, 1980-90.” He highlights the African American and, in the cases of Chicago and New York, gay influences that shaped the creation of electronic music.<sup>19</sup> He touches on similar themes to Collin's discussion of both Detroit and New York, but also highlights the influences of early house music in Chicago.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, chap. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, chap. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, chap. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*.

<sup>18</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*.

<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, chap. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, chap. 1.

House music emerged in gay nightclubs in Chicago, Reynolds explains, evolving out of disco influences with the aid of skilled disc jockeys, or DJs, who would use “cut ‘n’ mix, segue, montage, and other DJ tricks” to spawn a new form of music.<sup>21</sup> Reynolds then builds on Collin’s discussion of the influence of drugs to detail the history of MDMA, from its creation by German pharmaceutical company Merck during the early twentieth century to its “rediscovery” by Californian biochemist Alexander Shulgin during the 1960s, and its subsequent association with rave culture as Ecstasy beginning in the late 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Reynolds concludes by surveying the 1990s bi-coastal American rave scene, European influences in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and suggests its likely downfall – though his prediction clearly did not come to fruition.<sup>23</sup>

While scholars like Reynolds and Collin include discussion of drugs as they relate directly to the origin and development of electronic music and rave culture, more historiographical context is necessary to understand the resulting moral panic. Scholarship examining the historical background and policies of the American War on Drugs is crucial to understanding the broader cultural reaction to rave culture, as it provides valuable insights into the characteristics and development of the drug war, as well as the precedents of backlash against cultural movements associated with drug use. Prior to and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the timeframe in which electronic music and raves arose, the War on Drugs created tremendous social and political uproar about any and all drug use.

In *Can't Find My Way Home: America in the Great Stoned Age, 1945-2000*, Martin Torgoff traces the historical development of drug use, and related cultural movements, in the United

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<sup>21</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, chap. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, chap. 7.

States between 1945 and 2000.<sup>24</sup> Torgoff's extended review of drug use in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century provides key information about American drug policy and use in the years preceding the growth of rave culture, as well as the influence of War on Drugs policies and rhetoric on the public perception of raves during the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Torgoff's chapter about the use of Ecstasy during the 1980s and 1990s positions rave culture within the context of the War on Drugs.<sup>26</sup> He tells his narrative through the lens of Alexander Shulgin, the biochemist who "rediscovered" Ecstasy.<sup>27</sup> Torgoff details the history of MDMA, most importantly its scheduling by the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1985, which was strongly influenced by the anti-drug rhetoric of the Reagan administration.<sup>28</sup> Shulgin and other highly educated biochemists claimed that Ecstasy had significant potential for therapeutic use, and the judge involved in its DEA hearing recommended a Schedule III classification, which would allow for its medical use.<sup>29</sup> However, because it had already garnered a reputation for recreational use, "the DEA fastened its legal handcuffs," and MDMA was given a Schedule I classification, the strictest possible, preventing any scientific studies beyond those on its neurotoxicity.<sup>30</sup> Here, rave culture appears largely as a vehicle for discussing the use and regulation of Ecstasy as one phase in the drug war.

In *The War on Drugs: A History*, edited by David Farber, several authors discuss the evolution of the relationship between drugs and drug policy in the United States. The overarching argument of *The War on Drugs: A History* is that the War on Drugs has not

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home: America in the Great Stoned Age, 1945-2000* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), <https://archive.org/details/cantfindmywayhom00torg>.

<sup>25</sup> Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home*.

<sup>26</sup> Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home*, chap. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home*, chap. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home*, chap. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home*, 396-397.

<sup>30</sup> Torgoff, *Can't Find My Way Home*, 397.

achieved its intended effect, and has caused residual effects including mass imprisonment, racial bias in the criminal justice system, and the emergence of a massive illicit drug market.<sup>31</sup> The first chapter, which focuses on the origins of the War on Drugs during the Nixon administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s, details how the “silent majority” fought against drug use in America’s inner cities, on the battlefield in Vietnam, and among youths involved in the infamous 1960s counterculture.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the chapter explains how the Nixon administration marked the beginning of the American government’s more punitive approach to drug use, as opposed to aiding those afflicted with drug addiction, a tendency which continued during the Reagan administration of the 1980s and beyond.<sup>33</sup>

Arthur Benavie traces the causes and effects of the American War on Drugs in *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, emphasizing the crusade-like nature of the war, and the government’s disregard for its actual costs and benefits.<sup>34</sup> Benavie’s analysis highlights the War On Drugs’ moral ramifications, specifically the idea, promulgated by the bourgeois political establishment, that drug use and users are “sinful,” and therefore, to protect the American youth and public more generally, the government must combat drug use using the full force of the law, regardless of the social costs that this war creates.<sup>35</sup> Benavie divides his analysis into four parts: Background, Damage from the Drug War, The Federal Government’s Case for the Drug War, and Beyond the Drug War.<sup>36</sup> Benavie begins by focusing on the context of the 1980s War on Drugs and the story of Len Bias, a socially respectable, former University of Maryland basketball player recently signed to play in the NBA, who passed away from a cocaine overdose

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<sup>31</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*.

<sup>32</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War* (New York: Routledge, 2008), <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203886595/drugs-arthur-benavie>.

<sup>35</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*.

in 1986.<sup>37</sup> Bias's story provoked fear in the eyes of the white middle-class establishment, who were initially convinced by the media that Bias's death was caused by crack cocaine, and thus feared that the drug had reached their communities.<sup>38</sup> This fear led to the rushed passing of federal anti-drug legislation, which primarily emphasized punitive action.<sup>39</sup> In the second section of his analysis, Benavie reviews the negative effects of the War on Drugs, specifically its contribution to rising crime rates; the creation of a vast, unsafe black market for drugs; the AIDS pandemic; the deterioration of civil liberties, stemming from unreasonable searches and seizures and mandatory minimum sentences; the racialization of law enforcement against drug use; and its significant financial costs.<sup>40</sup> The latter sections of *Drugs: America's Holy War* examine the government's dismissal of the scientific consensus on various substances in favor of more draconian approaches and the future beyond the War on Drugs, suggesting a shifted focus to harm reduction, as opposed to punitive action; the legalization of marijuana; and legal reforms for other illicit drugs.<sup>41</sup> Understanding the War on Drugs as a moral crusade (rather than a science-driven effort that evaluated costs and benefits) helps to explain why a moral panic developed in reaction to raves and Ecstasy, out of proportion to the dangers they posed.

The histories of the War on Drugs detailed above treat the subject from a modern scholarly standpoint that critiques the motivations, methods, and outcomes of the war itself. They directly contrast with scholarly sources about MDMA produced during the height of the Rave Panic, which tend to describe MDMA and drug use more generally using a traditional, anti-drug lens. In the 1990s and early 2000s, as corroborated by the sources detailed below, both scholarly and

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<sup>37</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, chap. 3-7.

<sup>41</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, chap. 12-14.

popular discourse characterized rave culture as synonymous with drug use, specifically the use of MDMA, commonly referred to as “Ecstasy,” “Molly,” “E,” or “X.” For example, in 2001, Dr. Harold Kalant, Professor Emeritus in the University of Toronto’s Department of Pharmacology, wrote “The pharmacology and toxicology of ‘ecstasy’ (MDMA) and related drugs,” in which he described the chemical composition of MDMA, how it affects the brain during its use, the desired effects of its users, its long-term physical and psychiatric effects, and the medical causes of MDMA fatalities.<sup>42</sup> Kalant’s primary argument is that, while many MDMA users perceive little to no harm in its use, the drug has multiple short- and long-term negative effects on one’s neurochemistry, including that it decreases the natural serotonin levels in one’s brain in the long term, and using the drug even once can be life-threatening.<sup>43</sup>

In a 2008 article, “A cross-sectional survey of young people attending a music festival: associations between drug use and musical preference,” Megan S. C. Lim and her fellow researchers found that music festival attendees who listened to electronic dance music or rap were more likely to use drugs than those who listened to other types of music, such as pop or alternative music.<sup>44</sup> Such evidence suggests that ravers not only engage in the use of illicit drugs, but they do so at higher rates than those who listen to other forms of music.

For their study “It’s a Rave New World: Estimating the Prevalence and Perceived Harm of Ecstasy and other Drug use among Club Rave Attendees,” George S. Yacoubian, Jr., Cynthia Boyle, Christine A. Harding, and Elizabeth A. Loftus interviewed rave attendees in the Baltimore/Washington D.C. area in 2002 to assess the prevalence of MDMA use and the

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<sup>42</sup> Harold Kalant, “The pharmacology and toxicology of ‘ecstasy’ (MDMA) and related drugs,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 165, no. 7: 917-925, <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/165/7/917.full.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Kalant, “The pharmacology and toxicology of ‘ecstasy’ (MDMA) and related drugs.”

<sup>44</sup> Megan S. C. Lim et al., “A cross-sectional survey of young people attending a music festival: associations between drug use and musical preference,” *Drug and Alcohol Review* 27, no. 4 (July 2008): 439-441, <https://discovery.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/viewer/pdf/c7ppnbnx4n>.

perception of the harms of MDMA use among American ravers.<sup>45</sup> They found that 86% of those interviewed had used Ecstasy at least once, and discovered a negative correlation between MDMA use and the perception of the drug as harmful.<sup>46</sup> Yacoubian and his fellow researchers therefore argued that a significant number of ravers had used Ecstasy, and that many of these MDMA users did not fully understand the drug's harmful effects.<sup>47</sup> While a substantial number of participants reported using Ecstasy at least once in their lifetimes, far fewer reported recent use, with 51% having used Ecstasy in the previous 30 days and 30% having used Ecstasy in the two days prior.<sup>48</sup> Another study conducted by Yacoubian and other researchers in 2005, titled "An Exploration of Recent Club Drug Use among Rave Attendees," also conducted in the Baltimore/Washington D.C. area, found decreased Ecstasy use from the previous study, with 71% of ravers interviewed having used Ecstasy at least once in their lifetimes, 22% having used Ecstasy in the 30 days prior, and 12% having used Ecstasy in the two days prior.<sup>49</sup> These studies show that Ecstasy use among ravers decreased over time, and that, while high numbers of ravers have used Ecstasy in their lifetimes, most do not use it every time they attend a rave.

Histories of the rave scene tend to treat drug use, specifically Ecstasy, as an important, but secondary, factor in the culture and its development. Where War on Drugs-related scholarship discusses electronic music and raves, they focus almost exclusively on Ecstasy use, neglecting its

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<sup>45</sup> George S. Yacoubian, Jr. et al., "It's a Rave New World: Estimating the Prevalence and Perceived Harm of Ecstasy and other Drug use among Club Rave Attendees," *Journal of Drug Education* 33, no. 2 (June 2003): 187-196, <https://journals-sagepub-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/doi/epdf/10.2190/RJX5-WRA6-BNG5-Q2TY>.

<sup>46</sup> Yacoubian et al., "It's a Rave New World: Estimating the Prevalence and Perceived Harm of Ecstasy and other Drug use among Club Rave Attendees."

<sup>47</sup> Yacoubian et al., "It's a Rave New World: Estimating the Prevalence and Perceived Harm of Ecstasy and other Drug use among Club Rave Attendees."

<sup>48</sup> Yacoubian et al., "It's a Rave New World: Estimating the Prevalence and Perceived Harm of Ecstasy and other Drug use among Club Rave Attendees," 187.

<sup>49</sup> George S. Yacoubian et al., "An Exploration of Recent Club Drug Use Among Rave Attendees," *Journal of Drug Education* 37, no. 2 (June 2007): 145-161, <https://journals-sagepub-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/doi/epdf/10.2190/4VK6-0571-N771-863T>.

broader history and culture. By treating either the music or the drugs as an appendage of the other, neither of these fields can thus explain the particular moral panic surrounding rave culture. Moreover, studies that do aim directly at the connection between drugs and raves were generally discussed during the height of the moral panic and so result in more of an alarmist account than a true historical analysis.

Finally, scholars have investigated the implications of the federal anti-rave legal regime spawned by the moral panic. Law Review articles analyzing the use of the Crack House Statute and the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, an amendment to the Crack House Statute, to prosecute and later threaten legal action against rave organizers and promoters argue that such use is unconstitutional. These legal scholars argue that the targeting of one specific music genre and form of dance violates the First Amendment, as both music and dance have been declared protected speech. In “The Agony and the Ecstasy: Preserving First Amendment Freedoms in the Government’s War on Raves,” Christina L. Sein discusses the use of the federal Crack House Statute, part of the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, to prosecute rave promoters holding legal events in nightclubs, arguing that such use is unconstitutional, as it violates rights granted by the First Amendment.<sup>50</sup> “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” by Erin Treacy similarly argues that the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, ultimately passed as part of the PROTECT Act, or “Amber Alert” bill, was unconstitutional because it is overbroad.<sup>51</sup> The statute is overbroad, Treacy claims,

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<sup>50</sup> Christina L. Sein, “The Agony and the Ecstasy: Preserving First Amendment Freedoms in the Government’s War on Raves,” *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 12 (2002): 139-165, [https://advance-lexis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/search?crd=01ff4f78-36b5-46b3-85ab-aaef20d14b1d&pdsearchterms=12+S.+Cal.+Interdis.+L.J.+139&pdbyasscitatordocs=False&pdsourcingroupingtype=&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true#](https://advance.lexis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/search?crd=01ff4f78-36b5-46b3-85ab-aaef20d14b1d&pdsearchterms=12+S.+Cal.+Interdis.+L.J.+139&pdbyasscitatordocs=False&pdsourcingroupingtype=&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true#).

<sup>51</sup> Erin Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” *Hastings Communications and Entertainment Law Journal* 28, no. 2 (2006): 229-286, [https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1623&context=hastings\\_comm\\_ent\\_law\\_journal](https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1623&context=hastings_comm_ent_law_journal).



because, while its intended action of combating drug use is within the scope of congressional power, the targeting of one specific form of music and dance is not, and is a violation of the First Amendment.<sup>52</sup> These conclusions offer important insights for understanding both the reaction to ravers as a moral panic and its effects – actual and potential – on the culture, promoters, and enthusiasts of electronic music.

Together, scholarship on the history and culture of raves; the history and residual effects of the War on Drugs; drug use among ravers; and the legislation used to prosecute rave organizers provides strong grounding for this thesis. These sources offer important historiographical context for the connections between the War on Drugs and raves, with clues as to how and why the “Rave Panic” occurred; however, they fail to substantially articulate the social reaction to raves as a moral panic or to provide any substantive information about its aftermath. To examine the ways in which the War on Drugs shaped the social reaction to raves requires bringing the complex history of rave culture (beyond its connections to Ecstasy) into conversation with a modern, historical lens on the drug war. This also allows a more substantive discussion of how the Rave Panic shaped the contemporary electronic dance music scene, a piece of the historical puzzle which has been neglected in previous works on rave culture.

The primary source base for this thesis consists of media sources, legal and governmental sources, and rave-related sources. Newspaper articles, magazine articles, television documentaries, and television clips from the 1990s and early 2000s illustrate the information promulgated about raves, the public perception of raves, and the mainstream media’s reaction to raves during the Rave Panic. In addition, more modern newspaper articles, magazine articles, television documentaries, and television clips provide an image of electronic dance music today.

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<sup>52</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?”

Both information contained in these sources and the rhetoric used by their authors were useful for this historical analysis. Comparing and contrasting media sources from different time periods provided key insights into how the public perception of the electronic music community shifted over time. For example, in 2001, Oprah put forth an episode about the dangers of raves and Ecstasy use, creating a common misperception that Ecstasy use creates holes in your brain.<sup>53</sup> Yet, in more recent years, as electronic dance music has become more legitimized in the eyes of the public, *Forbes* releases yearly statistics about the most economically successful electronic music artists.<sup>54</sup>

Another integral set of primary source material for this thesis is legal sources, including legislative texts, congressional testimonies, CSPAN footage, and recommendations for policing raves from the U.S. Department of Justice and policing academies. The legislative texts of the original RAVE Act and its subsequent iterations provide a basis for the legal realization of the Rave Panic. Additionally, legislative texts reveal the small, but significant, changes in legislative language, which attempted to make legislation targeting electronic music events more palatable. The most significant change was the removal of the original RAVE Act's "Findings" section, which drew a direct connection between the Ecstasy and raves, in subsequent versions of the bill.<sup>55</sup> Congressional testimonies and CSPAN footage provide integral evidence suggesting politicians' motivations behind introducing and staunchly defending legislation aimed at raves, as well as debates between politicians about the promulgation of such legislation. For example, in the congressional testimonies prior to the passage of the PROTECT Act on April 10, 2003,

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<sup>53</sup> Tom Schroder, "The colossal government failure that obstructed a potentially major medical breakthrough," *Salon*, September 21, 2014, [https://www.salon.com/2014/09/21/the\\_colossal\\_dea\\_failure\\_that\\_prevented\\_a\\_potentially\\_major\\_medical\\_breakth\\_rough/](https://www.salon.com/2014/09/21/the_colossal_dea_failure_that_prevented_a_potentially_major_medical_breakth_rough/).

<sup>54</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> RAVE Act, S. Res. 2633, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (October 9, 2002), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/senate-bill/2633/text>.

Senators Hatch and Biden openly disagreed with one another about the inclusion of the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act in the PROTECT Act.<sup>56</sup> Senator Hatch, the primary sponsor of the PROTECT Act, expressed worry over its inclusion, as it directly opposed the wishes of his constituents, while then-Senator Biden, who introduced both the original RAVE Act and the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, maintained his support for the provision.<sup>57</sup> In addition, recommendations from the Department of Justice and policing academies for policing raves illustrate how raves themselves were viewed as criminal, and how, even prior to congressional action aimed at eliminating raves, they were being policed significantly at the local level.

The final set of primary source material used to construct this thesis's argument are from the ravers and rave organizers themselves. James "Disco Donnie" Estopinal, one of the first rave promoters to face prosecution, and Glenn Goodhand, a promoter who paused operations in the aftermath of the Rave Panic, were interviewed for this thesis. These interviews provided invaluable firsthand accounts of the Rave Panic and its effects. Documentaries, including *Rise: Story of Rave Outlaw Disco Donnie*, *Under the Electric Sky*, and *What We Started*, also proved useful, as they contain interviews from and information about key players from the rave scene.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, interviews with key players in the rave scene, both recorded in video and in magazine articles, further provide first-hand accounts of the history of the rave scene and the impacts of anti-rave legislation on the electronic music industry.

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<sup>56</sup> *Congressional Record*, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2003, vol. 149, no. 58.

<sup>57</sup> *Congressional Record*, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2003, vol. 149, no. 58.

<sup>58</sup> *Rise: Story of Rave Outlaw Disco Donnie*, directed by Julie Drazen (Movement, 2006), <https://www.amazon.com/Rise-Story-Outlaw-Disco-Donnie/dp/B079Q7VFG7>; *Under the Electric Sky*, directed by Dan Cutforth and Jane Lipsitz (Focus Features, 2014), [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00MGWH4E0/ref=atv\\_dp\\_amz\\_c\\_UTPsmN\\_1\\_9](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00MGWH4E0/ref=atv_dp_amz_c_UTPsmN_1_9); *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi (Giant Interactive: 2018), [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv\\_dp\\_amz\\_c\\_UTPsmN\\_1\\_10](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv_dp_amz_c_UTPsmN_1_10).

This thesis explores these intertwined stories in three chapters: “The History of Rave Culture,” “The Intersection Between the War on Drugs and Raves,” and “Surviving the Panic: From Rave to EDM.” The first chapter, “The History of Rave Culture,” reviews the history of rave culture in the United States, specifically describing its key characteristics and tracing its development. More specifically, the chapter discusses the evolution of rave culture including its disco influences; the creation of electronic music in its three original American hubs, Chicago, Detroit, and New York during the 1980s; its spread to and growth in Europe during the late 1980s; and its journey back to the United States, with large rave communities developing in across the country during the 1990s.

The second chapter, “The Intersection Between the War on Drugs and Raves,” places rave culture within the broader War on Drugs. First, this chapter briefly covers the beginnings of the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century War on Drugs during the Nixon administration, and its increasing intensity during the Reagan and Bush administrations, as well as earlier cases of moral panic due to the association between a specific musical genre and drug use in the United States. Then, the chapter discusses MDMA, commonly referred to as Ecstasy, and its role within electronic music and rave culture. Finally, this chapter reviews the manifestations of the Rave Panic itself, beginning with societal reactions and culminating in the passage of the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act as a subsection of the PROTECT Act, or “Amber Alert Bill.”

Finally, the third chapter of this thesis examines the effects of the Rave Panic. It begins by discussing action against anti-rave legislation by both the ravers themselves and seemingly unrelated institutions, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, who claimed that the statute violated the First Amendment. The chapter then covers the effects of the legislation on the rave scene and rave promoters, most notably its dramatic decline in the years following its passage.

The next part of this chapter discusses how electronic music ultimately survived due to the rise of European superstar DJs who collaborated with American artists, bringing electronic music into the top 40 charts, and the shift in public opinion about drugs from War on Drugs-era criminalization to more of an emphasis on legalization, decriminalization, harm reduction, education, and rehabilitation.

The Rave Panic, inspired by the over-exaggeration of the role of Ecstasy in rave culture, almost eliminated electronic music entirely; however, shifting opinions surrounding drug use, combined with a continuing trend of transatlantic cultural sharing, allowed electronic music to survive. Before the emergence of the Rave Panic or its aftermath, it is important to understand the origins and evolution of electronic music from the African American and gay communities of Detroit, Chicago, and New York City to the underground, yet nationwide, craze of the rave.

## Chapter 1: The History of Rave Culture

“There is a place in the distance  
 A place that I’ve been dreaming of  
 No, oh time and space don’t exist there  
 We can dance like there’s no tomorrow”  
 – “The City” by Madeon<sup>1</sup>

The year is 1992. A friend of yours gives you a phone number to call for the location of an incredible, all-night dance party, which he calls a “rave.” You call the number, but there’s no answer. An answering machine picks up and provides an address to an industrial park in the seedy part of town. You show up, and there must be 5,000 people in this dank, humid warehouse. You can hear the thumping before you can even see the building. It is a new sound – one you’ve never heard before – like a bass drum, kicking to the same beat over and over. The sound is coming from a multitude of speakers around the warehouse, under the control of the DJ behind vinyl turntables. The strobe lights and images projected onto the walls intensify the feeling of the music. The people in the warehouse, dancing and jumping like mad, are dressed almost like children, with “pigtales, JNCO pants, stuffed-animal backpacks, Adidas shell-toe sneakers and visors, Looney Tunes T-shirts, Kangol hats, oversize track suits, rainbow-colored accessories,” and “pacifiers.”<sup>2</sup> The happiness emitting from everyone in the warehouse, fueled by the repetitive music, is infectious, and you can’t help but feel a sense of euphoria too.

The American rave, now known as an Electronic Dance Music (EDM) concert or event, has spawned a significant countercultural movement over the last four decades – a movement large

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<sup>1</sup> Madeon, “The City,” track 1 on *The City*, popcultur, 2012, Spotify streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/59iJua476fbi3PbdddPrez?si=7b4f5775f2564d59>.

<sup>2</sup> Kiko Miyasato, “A Look Back at the Very First EDC,” *Las Vegas Weekly*, June 19, 2014, <https://lasvegasweekly.com/nightlife/2014/jun/19/first-edc-1997-electric-daisy-carnival-insomniac/>.

enough to prompt moral panic in American society and federal legislation aimed toward its elimination.<sup>3</sup> Raves, which began in the late 1980s and reached their first peak of popularity in the United States during the early 1990s, feature a sort of “MTV-Woodstock” fusion with loud electronic music; near-constant dancing; strobe lights; and feelings of equality and togetherness.<sup>4</sup> Three interrelated elements have defined rave culture throughout its history: the music, the community, and the drugs. Electronic music, created using keyboards, drum machines, and synthesizers, is characterized by a consistent, pulsing beat which fuels the ravers’ dancing. By 1990, the rave community began to express its values through the label of “PLUR – ‘peace, love, unity, and respect’” – a utopian ethos reflecting the desire for a world with “racial, sexual, and social tolerance.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, early raves were not centered around the DJs and producers, as is characteristic of electronic music today; according to Pasquale Rotella, the founder of Insomniac, one of the largest electronic music promotion and events companies in the world, prior to the commercialization of the rave, “the dancer was just as important as the DJ.”<sup>6</sup> Lastly, raves have been notorious for drug use, namely the use of MDMA, which is commonly referred to as Ecstasy or Molly. MDMA increases the levels of serotonin and dopamine in one’s brain, creating feelings of “euphoria” and heightening one’s senses and perceptions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the late 1990s, the electronic music community started to distance itself from the term “rave,” due to its negative connotation. Adherents of rave culture first referred to the music as “electronica,” and, beginning in the early 2010s, started using the term “Electronic Dance Music,” or “EDM”: Collin, *Rave On*, 154.

<sup>4</sup> Brooke Masters, “The Scene That’s All the Rave,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1992/07/03/the-scene-thats-all-the-rave/ae9872a2-8613-4b9b-a56d-3d86c6dc9f67/>.

<sup>5</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR,” *Insomniac Magazine*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.insomniac.com/magazine/frankie-bones-on-the-origins-of-plur/>;

Matthew Collin, *Rave On: Global Adventures in Electronic Dance Music* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2018), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 149.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203824962/generation-ecstasy-simon-reynolds>, 83.

As described by British electronic music great Graham Massey in *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music*, “tracing the roots of electronic dance music is like trying to find the source of a river... undoubtedly a mighty confusing torrent that cannot know its own growth daily in the world.”<sup>8</sup> Electronic music has been shaped by a multitude of influences around the world over time, a trend made possible by the extensive communication technologies prevalent during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In *Rave On: Global Adventures in Electronic Dance Music*, Matthew Collin explained that rave culture was “a digital culture for digital times.”<sup>9</sup> Early electronic music subgenres such as house, techno, and garage originally developed and flopped in the United States yet became popular in Europe. A European rave culture developed, and it was this European culture that made the trans-Atlantic journey back to the United States. During this time, the most prominent rave organizers made the transition from illegal to legitimate events; raves started as illegal events due to their after-hours nature, which led them to utilize more clandestine venues, though later turned to legitimate venues after police crackdowns. This chapter will examine the process by which the electronic music subgenres mentioned above developed in Chicago, Detroit, and New York City, respectively; the popularization of and changes in electronic music in Europe; and the spread of the rave to the United States.

The origins of rave culture provide key insight into the later moral panic, as well as demonstrate the way in which public outrage against raves highlighted mere aspects of a much larger phenomenon. Ecstasy was injected into rave culture at a critical time for its growth, and the association between the drug and the music is undeniable; however, the history of electronic music is much more complex than a simple music plus drugs equation. Electronic music

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<sup>8</sup> Ewa Mazierska, Les Gillon, and Tony Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/reader.action?docID=6631376&ppg=5>, xi.

<sup>9</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 6.



originated in urban America during the 1980s as a way for minority groups to react to the social issues of their time, including discrimination, the crack cocaine epidemic, economic downturn, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic – and it has since served as a means for the reclamation of lost voices in communities around the world. The history of raves is rife with protagonists, including DJs, producers, and event promoters – often overlapping categories – eager to create the most spectacular experiences for the ravers. These figures and their adherents developed a clear, countercultural, utopian vision of what the world is meant to be; there’s a reason that rave culture has, far more than once, been compared to religion. Without a doubt, the consumption of Ecstasy, often referred to as the “hug drug,” contributed to this sense of feel-good utopianism, but far from all ravers consumed the drug.<sup>10</sup> As electronic music legend Frankie Bones said, “The music is what it’s all about.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Cities of Origin**

In Chicago, Detroit, and New York City, their respective electronic music subgenres developed in response to and as a form of backlash against major social issues. The first major subgenre of electronic music to appear was house, which developed in the Black gay community of Chicago in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>12</sup> House music was largely influenced by disco, as well as newly developed music technologies from Germany and disc jockey culture from New York.<sup>13</sup> By the late 1970s, disco had largely fallen out of favor among the general public, yet these Chicago electronic music pioneers, as a reaction against their “double exclusion” of being both Black and gay, used the music then deemed “passé, disposable,” and “un-American” to

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<sup>10</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Sterling, “Frankie Bones and the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 23; Mazierska, Gillon, and Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Mazierska, Gillon, and Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music*, 5; Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 25.

create their own, distinct form of music: house.<sup>14</sup> The term “house” was coined after the music was widely played at the famous Chicago gay nightclub, the Warehouse.<sup>15</sup>

At the Warehouse, due to the lack of new disco music, disc jockeys (DJs) worked to revitalize disco, “making a ‘dead’ music come alive.”<sup>16</sup> DJs edited disco classics using “cut ‘n’ mix, segue, montage, and other DJ tricks,” spawning an entirely new form of music.<sup>17</sup> Chicago house emphasized drum beats, incorporating “a drum pattern played over six, seven minutes coming out of a machine,” a departure from previously established forms of music.<sup>18</sup> While house certainly originated in Chicago, DJing began in New York, arriving in Chicago only after Frankie Knuckles, an early New York DJ, brought his skill with him; he famously performed at the Warehouse between 1978 and 1983.<sup>19</sup> Knuckles is now referred to as the “godfather of house music” for his invaluable contributions to the formation of the genre.<sup>20</sup> As Chicago house became more popular and new clubs developed as competition for the Warehouse, DJs began making their music more complex, leading to the establishment of the “stomping four-to-the-floor kickdrum” as the hallmark of house music.<sup>21</sup> Later, other signature components of house music such as “hissing hi-hat patterns, synthetic hand-claps, synth vamps, chiming bass loops, drumrolls that pushed the track to the next plateau of preorgasmic intensity” and the manipulation of vocal tracks, “often garbled, sped-up and slowed down, pulverized into syllable- or phenome-size particles” emerged – all elements that are still prevalent in various forms of

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<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi (Giant Interactive: 2018), [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv\\_dp\\_amz\\_c\\_UTPsmN\\_1\\_10](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv_dp_amz_c_UTPsmN_1_10).

<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Oisin Lunny, “Frankie Knuckles Day, Remembering the Godfather of House Music With Eric Kupper,” *Forbes*, August 25, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oisinelunny/2019/08/25/frankie-knuckles-day-remembering-the-godfather-of-house-music-with-eric-kupper/?sh=bc915a075114>.

<sup>21</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 26.

electronic music.<sup>22</sup> Another key aspect of electronic music emerged during the Chicago house era: the producer, rather than the singer, was considered the main artist on a given track.<sup>23</sup> In the United States, Chicago house failed to achieve a significant following, however, as I will discuss later in this chapter, it spurred an entire countercultural movement among youths in the United Kingdom.

The next major subgenre of electronic music to emerge was techno in Detroit during the 1980s. By the 1980s, Detroit's automotive industry was disappearing, the crack epidemic was painfully ever-present, families were disintegrating, and crime was rapidly increasing.<sup>24</sup> For the techno pioneers, music presented itself as another path. Techno was created by the "Belville Three," Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, then-high school students in a majority-white suburb, and their friend Eddie 'Flashin' Fowlkes.<sup>25</sup> Atkins referred to techno as "a phoenix rising from the ashes of the crumbling industrial state," a reaction to the clear neglect of Detroit and its people.<sup>26</sup> Influenced by German band Kraftwerk and African American artists Herbie Hancock, George Clinton, and Stevie Wonder, as well as house and disco, the "Belville Three" spurred what would soon become a global phenomenon.<sup>27</sup>

Like Chicago house, Detroit techno failed to break through to the mainstream in the United States – but it quickly achieved success in Europe. Detroit techno diverged in the 1990s: European-born, but Canadian-raised Richie Hawtin and John Acquaviva began holding underground raves in Detroit, while a second wave of Black Detroit techno developed. Hawtin and Acquaviva, who grew up just across the US-Canada border from Michigan, started hosting

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<sup>22</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 22-23.

<sup>26</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 25.

illegal raves at the old Packard Automotive Plant, “a ravaged symbol of” the “busted boomtown,” during the 1990s, after Detroit techno club Music Institute, frequently featuring performances by Derrick May, shut down.<sup>28</sup> Due to the economic downturn and fall of industry, leaving many abandoned warehouses and other derelict spaces, underground raves flourished in Detroit until local crackdowns eliminated the scene.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time that Hawtin and Acquaviva brought Europeanized techno to Detroit, the next generation of local Black techno artists emerged. A key part of this so-called “second wave” of Detroit techno was Underground Resistance, a record label founded by ‘Mad’ Mike Banks in the early 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Underground Resistance artists released “heavy” techno and wore black clothes and masks “to disguise their identities.”<sup>31</sup> Underground Resistance continued the legacy of Detroit techno as a reaction against the status quo, whereas Hawtin and Acquaviva’s underground parties mark the beginning of changes in American electronic music culture, away from its original creators and purpose and toward the rave as it is known today.

Like Chicago house, the early electronic music subgenre of New York City, garage, was influenced and inspired by the struggles of the city’s Black gay community.<sup>32</sup> Also similar to Chicago house, the term “garage” originated based on its beginnings at Paradise Garage, a “legendary” New York City gay nightclub.<sup>33</sup> While the music still drew inspiration from disco, garage differed from house and techno in its “deep” sound and so-called “traditionalism,” wherein garage featured songs rather than tracks; more conventional vocal tracks; R & B influences; and “an aura of adult-oriented maturity.”<sup>34</sup> While “garage” was named after the

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<sup>28</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 32-33.

<sup>29</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 17-18.

<sup>31</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 34; Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 36.

Paradise Garage, the genre truly developed after its closing in 1987, with the Sound Factory, another LGBTQ+ nightclub in New York City, taking its place, eventually becoming the last of New York's great gay nightclubs to close.<sup>35</sup> Frankie Knuckles, New York City native and prolific Chicago house DJ, declared the Sound Factory as “the ‘last great room’” of classic New York LGBTQ+ dance clubs.<sup>36</sup> New York City's gay nightlife culture ultimately faded into obscurity due to the HIV/AIDs and crack epidemics, as well as the staunch anti-crime policies of New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, which targeted much of the city's non-gentrified nightlife.<sup>37</sup>

Electronic music, most notably house, techno, and garage, was spearheaded by American minorities as a reaction to their unique circumstances, including the double exclusion of being racial and sexual minorities and the struggles of economic downturn in a former industrial powerhouse. These origins of electronic music may explain its lack of commercial success in the United States, which was in the midst of the moral majority era, dominated by President Ronald Reagan's conservative Republican Party. Detroit artist Robert Hood explained, “People have had over time and history a natural propensity to discount black art and what black folks have created, and that's the same thing with electronic music.”<sup>38</sup> Hood's observation about the long-term neglect of minority-created art, as well as the heightened conservative attitudes of the time, provide a clear picture of why early electronic music did not achieve mainstream success. Early electronic music failed to reach large audiences in the United States, however, DJs started

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<sup>35</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 35; Collin, *Rave On*, 342.

<sup>36</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 342.

<sup>37</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 336; Collin, *Rave On*, 343.

<sup>38</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 40-41.

playing the new tracks out of Chicago, Detroit, and New York on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, viewing their creators “as genuine cultural originators.”<sup>39</sup>

### **European Connections and the Role of Ecstasy**

While Chicago house, Detroit techno, and New York City garage all failed to become massive phenomena in the United States, electronic music took off across Europe, “[mutating] beyond all recognition.”<sup>40</sup> While rave culture was certainly a radical departure from the original Chicago, Detroit, and New York scenes, similar patterns of reaction against the status quo continued. In the UK, house music first took off, creating a so-called “Second Summer of Love” in 1988, partially as a reaction against Margaret Thatcher’s inequality-inducing conservative policies.<sup>41</sup> While Reagan’s conservative America neglected the minority-driven electronic music, it became popular among British youths tired of “the ruthless, individualistic, competition-driven” economy created by Thatcher’s policies.<sup>42</sup> Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany, there was an “explosion of openness,” and electronic music helped bring East Germans and West Germans together, namely with Berlin’s famous Love Parade street festival.<sup>43</sup> While these patterns draw a direct connection to the initial reactionary nature of the music, Europeans quickly forged their own forms of electronic music, with a new rave culture accompanying them. In Europe, the euphoric, utopian ethos, now a hallmark of rave culture, was combined with the music, and DJs and event promoters started holding all-night dance parties: raves. In addition, the connection between electronic music and Ecstasy was forged in the early

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<sup>39</sup> Collin, *Rave On*

<sup>40</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Angus Walker, “The history of illegal raves, and why they’ve been making a comeback,” *Brighton Journal*, August 4, 2020, <https://brightonjournal.co.uk/the-history-of-illegal-raves-and-why-theyve-been-making-a-comeback/>.

<sup>42</sup> Walker, “The history of illegal raves, and why they’ve been making a comeback.”

<sup>43</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

years of European rave culture, after the drug made its way from the United States, where it was rediscovered in the 1960s, to Ibiza, an island off the coast of Spain, in the mid-1980s.<sup>44</sup>

Historically, Ibiza was “a bohemian paradise for writers, painters, and artists,” and in the 1960s, the island became a haven for hippies.<sup>45</sup> Beginning in the 1980s and rapidly growing in the 1990s, clubs Amnesia and Pacha became the center of a new “Balearic house” music, combining the elements of Chicago house and the hippie nature of Ibiza.<sup>46</sup> In the 1990s, Ibiza clubs had shifted their primary focus toward electronic music, a trend which endures on the island today.<sup>47</sup> Now-famous British electronic music artist Paul Oakenfold, then a hip-hop “DJ, club promoter, and agent for... Run DMC and the Beastie Boys” traveled to Ibiza in 1985, and became enamored with the music and club culture on the island.<sup>48</sup> As “a seasonal place,” Ibiza only hosted workers and travelers during the summer; when September came, the clubs closed for winter, and, in the few years prior to the spread of electronic music across Europe, its adherents had to wait until May for the clubs to re-open.<sup>49</sup> Oakenfold and friend Trevor Fung attempted to bring an Ibiza-style club to London in 1985, though the venture failed to become profitable, and their club closed within six months.<sup>50</sup> After traveling to Ibiza again in 1987, once Ecstasy had reached the island, Oakenfold decided to try to bring it back to London again, this

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<sup>44</sup> Mazierska, Gillon, and Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music*, 184; Caspar Melville, *It's a London Thing: How Rare Groove, Acid House and Jungle Remapped the City*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 164.

<sup>45</sup> Danielle Levy, “Crash Course: The History of Ibiza, The Party Capital of the World,” *EDM Maniac*, June 15, 2022, <https://edmmaniac.com/history-ibiza/#:~:text=Dance%20Music%20Comes%20to%20The,of%20the%20new%20electronic%20sound>.

<sup>46</sup> Levy, “Crash Course: The History of Ibiza.”

<sup>47</sup> Levy, “Crash Course: The History of Ibiza.”

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>50</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 58.

time spearheading an illegal event at the Project Club in South London for “about 150 Ibiza veterans” after official club hours.<sup>51</sup>

While Oakenfold’s illegal event was eventually shut down by the authorities due to its ever-increasing attendance, house music continued to rise in popularity, with London’s house scene rapidly expanding with new events and clubs.<sup>52</sup> Hallmarks of rave culture, including the Ibiza-style dress, “a weird mix of Mediterranean beach bum, hippy, and soccer hooligan” and an ethos of tolerance and happiness, solidified in the London scene during the late 1980s.<sup>53</sup> Driven by the increasing association between electronic music and Ecstasy, an intimate, members-only club in South London called Shoom embraced the ideas of “losing it – your cool, your self-consciousness, your *self*” and “love, peace and unity, universal tolerance, and we-are-all-the-same,” becoming the blueprint for later raves.<sup>54</sup> British acid house, the United Kingdom’s subgenre of choice during the late 1980s, spread beyond London and became a large-scale phenomenon, fueling what became known as the “Second Summer of Love” in 1988.<sup>55</sup> “Rave culture,” Oakenfold acknowledged, “developed from acid house... outdoor parties held in fields.”<sup>56</sup> The Second Summer of Love, reminiscent of “late ‘60s... peace and love,” was largely driven by illegal raves around the newly-built M25 highway, which circled London.<sup>57</sup> Each rave was held at a different location, with Brits having to call secret phone numbers to find the address.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 58-61.

<sup>53</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 60-61.

<sup>55</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>57</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi; Walker, “The history of illegal raves, and why they’ve been making a comeback.”

<sup>58</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.



While house experienced dramatic popularity in the United Kingdom, as well as in other European countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Italy, techno boomed in Germany.<sup>59</sup> Despite its origins in Detroit, techno rose to prominence in Germany far more dramatically, and many still view Berlin as the world's foremost destination for techno.<sup>60</sup> After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, German youths started holding underground, illegal raves in “power plants, bunkers, hangers and underground stations” to celebrate the end of the fissure between East and West Germany, which had been in place since the end of the Second World War.<sup>61</sup> In July 1989, prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, West Berliners hosted the first Love Parade, a techno event in which only 150 people participated; in subsequent years, the techno street festival grew to an astounding 1.5 million people.<sup>62</sup> Carl Cox, one of the most prolific electronic music DJs, described the beginnings of the Love Parade as “very innocent”; people “would stop the trucks” in the streets “and just party.”<sup>63</sup> The founder of the event, Dr. Motte, said he started the Love Parade “because [he] had a dream of people dancing in the street. Nothing else.”<sup>64</sup> In the words of the prolific DJ Moby, the Love Parade was representative of a “new youth culture that wasn't burdened by the prejudices of the past.”<sup>65</sup>

With the rise of European techno, Detroit techno pioneers felt that it was yet another example of cultural appropriation, with “Black music... exploited by white Europeans.”<sup>66</sup> As occurred in the UK, Ecstasy had eventually reached continental Europe, and aided the rise of the European

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<sup>59</sup> Joe Muggs, “Beatport’s Definitive History of House Music,” *Beatportal*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.beatportal.com/features/beatports-definitive-history-of-house-music/>.

<sup>60</sup> Omri, “Short history of Techno in Berlin,” *Techno Station*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.technostation.tv/short-history-of-techno-in-berlin/>.

<sup>61</sup> Omri, “Short history of Techno in Berlin.”

<sup>62</sup> Omri, “Short history of Techno in Berlin.”

<sup>63</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>64</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>65</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>66</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 30.

rave.<sup>67</sup> While other drugs were common in the early Chicago house and New York garage club scenes, rave's association with Ecstasy began in Europe. The Detroit techno artists, largely due to the reactionary nature of their music against the crack epidemic, never intended for their music to have any association with drug use. Lawrence Burden, a member of Detroit techno group Octave One, described an early 1990s German rave as "hauntingly strange," comparing the ravers to "zombies."<sup>68</sup> The fissure between Detroit techno and European techno was openly discussed at the time – the Detroiters denied any connection between the music they created, while European techno adherents declared "the dawn of a new psychedelic revolution."<sup>69</sup> In 1993, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Derrick May, one of the "Belville Three," and Fraser Clark, a London promoter and magazine editor, argued about techno's association with drug use.<sup>70</sup> Fraser claimed that techno was a return to the "earth's primal energies," and that dancing at raves on Ecstasy "was a shamanic rite with its roots in ancient African ceremonies."<sup>71</sup> May quickly refuted Fraser's claims, however, the European rave, as well as its drug use, quickly made its way back to and gained traction in the United States.<sup>72</sup>

### **Return to America**

Brooklyn, New York became the first center of the American, European-style rave.<sup>73</sup> After traveling to the UK to perform at a massive 25,000-person rave, Frankie Bones, a New York DJ and producer, fell in love with the Ecstasy-fueled scene and decided to bring it to New York.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 31.

<sup>71</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 31.

<sup>72</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 144.

<sup>74</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 144.

As his Brooklyn events grew in size, he started calling them “STORMrave.”<sup>75</sup> In addition to Bones’ critical role in bringing European-style raves to the United States, he also coined the term “PLUR,” a now-synonymous term for the ethos surrounding rave culture, which stands for peace, love, unity, and respect.<sup>76</sup> At one of his early raves at the end of June 1990, he painted an old subway car with the words “Peace, Love, Unity,” to ensure that the European-style rave culture of tolerance and happiness spread to his New York raves.<sup>77</sup> Bones and his friends called this culture “the Peace Love Unity Movement,” or “PLUM.”<sup>78</sup> Later, in 1993, at a rave in the Bronx at which Bones DJed, a fight broke out, the first he had ever seen at a rave, leading Bones to angrily yell, “If you don’t start showing some peace, love and unity, I’ll break your... faces.”<sup>79</sup> At the Bronx rave, Bones had a box of records with his track “PEACE, LOVE UNITY (The STORMrave Story),” one of which was picked up by promoter Laura La Grassa.<sup>80</sup> La Grassa detailed the entire story of the fight on an online rave chat group called Hyperreal, giving the definition of PLUR – “the ‘M’ got stripped out and the ‘R’ got placed in there.”<sup>81</sup> Bones hypothesized that La Grassa got the “R” from his record, as “the first word until the title of the song said ‘respect.’”<sup>82</sup>

Taking advantage of the possibility of monetary gain, Michael Caruso, known among New York ravers as “Lord Michael,” brought raves into the city in 1991 while working for club magnate Peter Gatien.<sup>83</sup> A friend of Frankie Bones, Lord Michael felt that “Bones can’t do these

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<sup>75</sup> Reynolds. *Generation Ecstasy*, 144.

<sup>76</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>77</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>78</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>79</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>80</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>81</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>82</sup> Scott T. Sterling, “Frankie Bones on the Origins of PLUR.”

<sup>83</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 146-147.

parties forever,” and thus decided to expand New York’s rave scene into clubs in the city.<sup>84</sup> Lord Michael’s two weekly events at Gatien’s clubs featured hardcore music, an “aggressive” subgenre with “tempos peaking at a then-outrageous 150 bpm” (beats per minute).<sup>85</sup> London-born DJ DB worked with lighting director Scotto to create a new event in New York at the club Shelter, which they named the “Nocturnal Audio and Sensory Awakening” (NASA) in July 1992.<sup>86</sup> NASA, more so than Bones’ and Lord Michael’s events, were considered “full-blown raves,” as they featured music similar to the raves in Europe, as opposed to high-BPM hardcore.<sup>87</sup> The STORMrave and NASA parties spawned what early New York ravers remarked to be “just like the sixties,” similar to the British experience of the Second Summer of Love in 1988.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast with the beginnings of the early New York City rave scene, in which Frankie Bones’ trip to England was seemingly reminiscent of Oakenfold’s pilgrimage to Ibiza, the Californian rave scene started after British expatriates brought rave culture with them.<sup>89</sup> The Californian rave scene started in San Francisco, where liberal ideology, a prominent history of disco, and lax views on drug use made it a natural rave haven; San Franciscans were especially drawn to Londoner Fraser Clark’s drug-fueled view of techno and house.<sup>90</sup> While “a peripheral figure” in the UK rave scene, British expatriate Genesis P. Orridge is considered one of the primary figures who brought electronic music and the rave to San Francisco.<sup>91</sup> He became such a prolific figure in the San Francisco rave scene that false rumors spread that he brought the acid

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<sup>84</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 146.

<sup>85</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 147; House music, the most popular form of electronic music at raves in Europe, tended to have BPMs of between 120 and 130.

<sup>86</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 147.

<sup>87</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 147-148.

<sup>88</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 149.

<sup>89</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 149.

<sup>90</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 150.

<sup>91</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 150.

house craze to England.<sup>92</sup> The San Francisco rave culture took advantage of the burgeoning technological industry in the area. Prior to widespread use of the internet, Brian Behlendorf founded an email list dedicated to raves in San Francisco; he also helped to create “the Apache HTTP server, the most widely used web server in the world” at the time.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, the San Franciscan rave embraced the city’s hippie roots, especially in its spiritual, psychedelic-driven PLUR mindset.<sup>94</sup>

In contrast, in Southern California, the rave scene emphasized dancing.<sup>95</sup> British promoters, in response to the desire for late-night dancing, were the first to start holding raves in the Los Angeles area. Brit Steve Levy, “following the warehouse party blueprint” of England, started an illegal after-hours acid house event, first at his club West Go West in Santa Monica and later in “the basement of a fish warehouse in downtown LA,” before eventually moving to legal venues in the summer of 1991.<sup>96</sup> These events reached crowds of up to a thousand people.<sup>97</sup> Les Borsai, an American Los Angeles promoter, also started holding underground warehouse raves, but after the police shut down one of his largest events, he made his events fully legitimate through a partnership with Avalon Attractions, a rock ‘n’ roll event promotions company.<sup>98</sup> Borsai and other Los Angeles promoters, including competitor Daven Michaels, sought to create larger-than-life experiences, an aspect of the rave that remains prevalent at electronic music festivals today.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 150.

<sup>93</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 153.

<sup>94</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 153-154.

<sup>95</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 156.

<sup>96</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 156-157.

<sup>97</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 157.

<sup>98</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 158.

<sup>99</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 158.

Pasquale Rotella, now one of the largest electronic dance music event promoters in the world, known for founding Insomniac and starting its biggest yearly event, the Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC) in Las Vegas, started attending Southern California raves in 1990.<sup>100</sup> Rotella was “dragged” to his first rave in L.A. at “15 years old.”<sup>101</sup> After the underground Los Angeles rave scene started to lose its traction due to police interference, he started to hold “his own outlaw parties.”<sup>102</sup> In 1997, Rotella held the first Electric Daisy Carnival in downtown Los Angeles at the Shrine Expo Hall with “a single stage, a screen showing trippy visuals, around 5,000 ravers,” and “no alcohol.”<sup>103</sup> The Electric Daisy Carnival now hosts more than 400,000 people each year across three days, and *Rolling Stone* called Rotella’s Insomniac a “\$47 million EDM empire.”<sup>104</sup>

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By the time moral panic struck American society in the 1990s and early 2000s, the American rave scene had developed into a significant countercultural movement. The American rave was a countrywide phenomenon, with adherents in 49 of the 50 states ultimately defending it against federal prosecution.<sup>105</sup> A once-marginalized form of music, spawned by Black and/or gay influences, became a phenomenon in Europe, and with the aid of MDMA, became the rave. The European rave made headway in the United States, by means of travelers to and expatriates from Britain. The rave became the newest party craze in the United States. Most American ravers failed to realize the music’s origination on their own soil – Detroit techno artist Robert Hood

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<sup>100</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 149.

<sup>101</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>102</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 150.

<sup>103</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 150-151.

<sup>104</sup> Graham Berry, “Snoop Dogg, Grimes, NFTs & Drone Shows: The 8 Best Moments of EDC Las Vegas 2022,” *Billboard*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/edc-las-vegas-2022-best-moments-1235077390/>; Collin, *Rave On*, 149.

<sup>105</sup> David Montgomery, “Ravers Against the Machine,” *Washington Post*, July 18, 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/07/18/ravers-against-the-machine/d5f8d828-ce3c-471f-a06a-26055a1a8ada/>.

claimed, “They all think it came from Europe.”<sup>106</sup> While electronic music originated in the United States, the rave would not exist without European contributions. Indisputably, the rave was the result of trans-Atlantic cultural exchange in a globalized world created by technological innovation.

Raves sparked moral panic in the United States during the early 2000s due to their association with Ecstasy. The War on Drugs-era rhetoric of the economic and political establishment sought to create a simple image in the minds of the American public: that raves solely exist to create a space for and perpetuate drug use. As this chapter clearly demonstrates, the history of raves is far more complex. While Ecstasy is associated with rave culture, the history of raves shows that they served as a method for the reclamation of lost voices around the world. In the words of 19-year-old raver Khuzema Oamruddin, interviewed by *Washington Post* journalist Brooke Masters in July 1992, electronic music contains “a beat that everyone can relate to.”<sup>107</sup> In later chapters, I will explain how the War on Drugs fueled a moral panic against raves, and how the electronic music industry was ultimately able to survive when American drug policy shifted away from War on Drugs-era criminalization.

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<sup>106</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 40.

<sup>107</sup> Masters, “The Scene That’s All the Rave.”

## Chapter 2: The Intersection Between the War on Drugs and Raves

“If this was the last dance of the night

Will you join me ‘til the morning light?

Dance the night away ‘cause it feels right

You can’t stop me, no-o-o”

– “Can’t Stop Me (feat. Shermanology)” by Afrojack<sup>1</sup>

The War on Drugs had a profound effect on American society, and on the way in which American society reacted to rave culture. While there were certainly precedents for negative associations between musical genres and drug abuse, the novelty of both Ecstasy and rave culture sparked a particular outrage, brought about by fear of the moral corruption of the nation’s youth. In an effort to prevent teenagers and young adults from attending raves, and therefore engaging in drug use, popular television stations and newspapers created articles and specials about the harms of “club drugs,” including a special episode of Oprah, which falsely claimed that Ecstasy use can create holes in your brain; the Partnership for a Drug-Free America created dedicated advertisements to highlight the dangers of raves and Ecstasy; and the popular television show *Beverly Hills, 90210* released an episode dedicated to showing the “horrors” of raves in 1991.

The moral panic surrounding raves extended further than purely societal reactions – the federal government eventually intervened. While governmental action against raves started at the local level, the Drug Enforcement Administration started persecuting rave organizers and venue owners under the Crack House Statute, part of the infamous 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, as federal officials believed that the sole purpose of raves was to support the distribution and use of

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<sup>1</sup> Afrojack, “Can’t Stop Me,” track 1 on *Can’t Stop Me (feat. Shermanology)*, Robbins Entertainment LLC, 2012, Spotify streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4T77iXUXETQmjyxMkuCSTr?si=20fc8821bcd4254>.



drugs. After attempts to use the Crack House Statute to prevent raves proved fruitless, legislators, led by then-Senator, now-President Joseph R. Biden, spearheaded the RAVE Act, passed as the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, an amendment to the Crack House Statute. The Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act expanded the Crack House Statute's terminology and lowered the burden of proof, thereby making it easier to use against rave organizers.

As shown by the first chapter's history of rave culture, while some used drugs at raves, drug use was not the defining factor of the rave at any point in its development; the primary motivation for attending raves was always the music. The overzealous societal and legal reactions to raves, on the basis of an exaggerated connection between raves and drug use, signal moral panic. The War on Drugs was characterized by a zero-tolerance, punitive approach to drug use, and many believed that this approach would end all drug use in the United States. The War on Drugs has resulted rapidly rising prison populations and racially motivated sentencing disparities, yet the RAVE Act, another detrimental effect of the War on Drugs, has been largely ignored by scholars. Rather than targeting drug dealers, or even drug users, the law targeted rave promoters and venue owners, under the assumption that sole purpose of holding their events was to promote drug use. In this chapter, I will explain how the moral panic surrounding rave culture emerged from the broader national ideology and law enforcement apparatus of the War on Drugs.

### **The War on Drugs and American Culture**

The modern War on Drugs began on June 17, 1971, when President Richard Nixon labeled drugs to be "public enemy number one," and declared an "all-out offensive" on drug abuse in the

United States.<sup>2</sup> President Nixon asked Congress for “a minimum of \$350 million,” a number far higher than the previous \$81 million federal budget to combat drug use.<sup>3</sup> The bipartisan War on Drugs has become America’s longest war, and many now believe it is characterized by “staggering policy failure.”<sup>4</sup> After trillions of dollars spent, the government has failed to stop drug sales and abuse, and the War’s focus on punitive action has distracted from the stated aim of the war: “to protect public health.”<sup>5</sup>

Nixon’s declaration of the War on Drugs, while certainly a turning point, was the continuation of a twentieth century pattern of increasing sentiments and policy against drug use.<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth century, most drug addicts were “middle- and upper-class white women,” who became addicted after their doctors prescribed “excessive” amounts of opioids.<sup>7</sup> While perceived negatively, these women were seen as “mentally disturbed or weak-willed,” not as criminals.<sup>8</sup> By the early twentieth century, drug addiction among “lower-class urban men” rose in prominence, leading to a shift in public opinion surrounding drug use, from being “a bad habit” to a source of criminalization.<sup>9</sup> Around this time, the first federal drug laws targeting the “use or sale of narcotics, cocaine, or cannabis” were passed.<sup>10</sup>

Nixon’s speech was the response to two rising trends in drug use among Americans: heroin and hallucinogenic drugs.<sup>11</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, heroin abuse became widespread in

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<sup>2</sup> David Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 17, <https://academic-oup-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/nyu-press-scholarship-online/book/42464>.

<sup>3</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> John Hudak, “Biden should end America’s longest war: The War on Drugs,” *Brookings*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/09/24/biden-should-end-americas-longest-war-the-war-on-drugs/>.

<sup>5</sup> Hudak, “Biden should end America’s longest war.”

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War* (New York: Routledge, 2008), <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203886595/drugs-arthur-benavie>, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 18.

America's inner cities, as well as among soldiers abroad in Vietnam, becoming the "most [direct]" catalyst of the War on Drugs.<sup>12</sup> Heroin fueled "a surging wave of criminality" in cities such as New York, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., as many turned to "stealing, robbing, and mugging" to support their addictions.<sup>13</sup> Heroin addiction was largely concentrated in minority neighborhoods during this period, however, many white, middle-class parents feared that the drug would ultimately reach their neighborhoods and corrupt their children.<sup>14</sup> In Vietnam, soldiers became addicted to the low-cost heroin imported from China.<sup>15</sup> 1971 reports sent to the Nixon administration showed that roughly 15% of American soldiers in Vietnam, who would later return to the United States, were addicted to heroin.<sup>16</sup> In many cases, addiction occurred after drugs were "heavily prescribed" by army doctors.<sup>17</sup> Alongside heroin abuse, the increasing use of hallucinogenic drugs, such as marijuana and LSD, among young Americans adhering to the late 1960s counterculture led to Nixon's War on Drugs.<sup>18</sup> This pattern of "casual drug use" was particularly startling to the political establishment, as it primarily occurred among "middle-class white youths."<sup>19</sup> The War on Drugs' preliminary causes started a lasting trend of targeting "poor addicts, people of color, and others outside the cultural mainstream."<sup>20</sup>

The War on Drugs started to accelerate in urgency under the Reagan and Bush administrations in the 1980s, as crack cocaine supplanted heroin in America's inner cities.<sup>21</sup> In 1986, University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias died of a cocaine overdose soon after he

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<sup>12</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Janos, "G.I.s' Drug Use in Vietnam Soared – With Their Commanders' Help," *History.com*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/drug-use-in-vietnam>.

<sup>18</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 35.

was drafted by the Boston Celtics in the first round.<sup>22</sup> News outlets mistakenly reported that Bias, “a clean-cut kid from a religious family,” died of a crack cocaine overdose, leading to mass hysteria among suburban Americans, who believed crack cocaine had reached their neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup> In the aftermath of Bias’s death, congresspeople felt they had to act, passing the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which “massively increased prison sentences for drug dealers” and the federal budget for “arresting, convicting, and imprisoning drug dealers.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, the law created a 100-to-1 sentencing disparity between crack cocaine, largely used by poorer and minority Americans, and powder cocaine, predominantly used by wealthier, white Americans.<sup>25</sup> The 1986 legislation also included the Crack House Statute (detailed below), which was later used against rave organizers and amended by the RAVE Act. The War on Drugs started to infiltrate U.S. foreign policy in 1986, as well. President Reagan issued an order naming “drug trafficking and production a national security threat,” and demanding other nations to be deemed “cooperative or uncooperative with U.S. anti-drug policy” prior to receiving foreign aid.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, alongside parent activists nationwide, Reagan’s wife, Nancy, led the “Just Say No” campaign, which sought to inform children about “the dangers of drug use.”<sup>27</sup>

The War on Drugs was a convincing endeavor. In June 1989, Americans determined drugs to be the nation’s biggest problem “by a 3 to 1 ratio” through a Gallup poll.<sup>28</sup> Despite convincing Americans that the drug war was beneficial, and even necessary, it has failed to eliminate the drug trade and drug use, and has caused “homicides and property crimes, [damaged] public

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<sup>22</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Hudak, “Biden should end America’s longest war.”

<sup>26</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 100-101.

<sup>27</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “War on Drugs – United States history,” *Britannica*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/war-on-drugs>.

<sup>28</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 55.

health, [eroded] civil liberties, [corrupted] public officials, and [wasted] billions of tax dollars.”<sup>29</sup>

As described by Arthur Benavie in *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, an effort to protect public health became “a crusade aimed at eliminating certain ‘evil’ drugs and punishing their sinful users.

Costs and benefits be damned.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Pre-Rave Associations Between Music and Drugs**

Prior to the rave, other forms of music-inspired cultural movements sparked controversy due to their associations with drug use, including jazz, the 1960s countercultural movement, and rock ‘n’ roll. African American jazz musicians were associated with marijuana in the early twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> The 1960s countercultural movement, with strong connections to musical artists such as the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin, as well as to the 1969 Woodstock Music and Art Fair, was strongly associated with the use of hallucinogenic drugs like marijuana, LSD, and psilocybin.<sup>32</sup> Lastly, during the 1980s, the Parents’ Music Resource Center lobbied against explicit rock ‘n’ roll song lyrics, including those which mention drug use.<sup>33</sup> These precedents illustrate the ways in which the rave community faced a longer-standing a trend of backlash against musical genres after becoming associated with drug use.

While the modern War on Drugs began with Nixon’s 1971 speech, jazz music’s association with marijuana, and later with heroin, coincided with changing opinions about drug use in the

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<sup>29</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Merrill Singer and Greg Mirhej, “High Notes: The Role of Drugs in the Making of Jazz,” *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse* 5, no. 4 (2006): 1-38, [https://www-tandfonline-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/doi/epdf/10.1300/J233v05n04\\_01?needAccess=true&role=button](https://www-tandfonline-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/doi/epdf/10.1300/J233v05n04_01?needAccess=true&role=button).

<sup>32</sup> Robert C. Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘N’ Roll: The Rise of America’s 1960s Counterculture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=1996182#>.

<sup>33</sup> Claude Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship,” *Popular Music* 18, no. 2 (May 1999): 179-192, [https://www-jstor-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/853600#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/853600#metadata_info_tab_contents).

United States. As described above, in the early twentieth century, popular opinion about the causes of drug use and addiction shifted from weakness toward criminality, as the demographic profile of drug users shifted from primarily wealthy white women to lower-class men.<sup>34</sup> Jazz first developed in the African American community of New Orleans, where the contrast between “Black slaves in shackles and wealthy Black freemen in imported suits” created a unique culture which encouraged intermingling between those with “ethnic and cultural differences.”<sup>35</sup> When jazz first became prominent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, marijuana, then called Muta, was legal.<sup>36</sup> Jazz musicians believed Muta was “an aid to their focus and creativity,” allowing them to “play for long hours” despite “their bone-weary exhaustion.”<sup>37</sup> Dr. Frank Gomila, the New Orleans public safety commissioner, believed marijuana use among African Americans was the impetus for rising crime in the city.<sup>38</sup> These sentiments were echoed by Oscar Dowling, the president of Louisiana’s Board of Health, who reached out to both the governor of Louisiana and the Surgeon General of the United States seeking state and federal intervention.<sup>39</sup> In 1923, New Orleans outlawed the possession of marijuana and was followed by the entire state of Louisiana in 1927.<sup>40</sup>

The Jazz-marijuana nexus spread alongside the music, sparking anti-marijuana sentiment across the United States.<sup>41</sup> Between 1915 and 1937, marijuana was outlawed in “as many as 27 states” before Congress passed the Marijuana Tax Act in 1937, the first federal legislation targeting the drug.<sup>42</sup> The bill’s foremost proponent and “the first Commissioner of the U.S.

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<sup>34</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 6.

<sup>36</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 8.

<sup>37</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 8.

<sup>38</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 9.

<sup>39</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 9.

<sup>40</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 10.

<sup>41</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 9.

<sup>42</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 13.

Bureau of Narcotics” Harry Anslinger was outspoken about his “special distaste for Jazz,” calling the music “satanic.”<sup>43</sup> Anslinger’s claims against marijuana included that the drug made “White women want to have sex with Blacks,” and that it caused people to become “violent and insane.”<sup>44</sup> The racially-motivated crusade against marijuana, partially brought to the forefront by its association with jazz, was the first 20<sup>th</sup>-century instance in which a cultural movement sparked backlash against a given drug in an era emphasizing the criminalization of drug users.

In the 1960s, hallucinogenic drug use associated with the decade’s famous countercultural movement was one of the motivators for Nixon’s modern War on Drugs. The 1960s countercultural movement was defined by young Americans who sought to question the cultural mainstays of “religion, politics, the work ethic, the nuclear family, marriage, monogamy, education, and... Western thought altogether.”<sup>45</sup> Drugs prevailed in the movement “from the beginning,” with its adherents quickly becoming infamous for the use of illicit substances such as marijuana, amphetamines, peyote, mescaline, LSD, and psilocybin.<sup>46</sup> Music was an integral part of the countercultural movement, namely through the 1969 Woodstock Music and Art Fair, held northwest of New York City.<sup>47</sup> The festival garnered significant attention, with “nearly two hundred thousand” purchasing tickets in advance and “at least one hundred thousand additional individuals” arriving onsite.<sup>48</sup> Louis Ratner, the sheriff of Sullivan County, where the festival took place, cited fifty arrests, most of which were for drug possession and use.<sup>49</sup> According to Ratner, nobody was “[arrested]... for grass,” as the numbers would be higher than the jail

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<sup>43</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 13.

<sup>44</sup> Singer and Merhej, “High Notes,” 13.

<sup>45</sup> Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘N’ Roll*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘N’ Roll*, 17-26.

<sup>47</sup> Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘N’ Roll*, 262.

<sup>48</sup> Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘N’ Roll*, 262.

<sup>49</sup> Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘N’ Roll*, 262.

capacities “in Sullivan or the next three counties” over.<sup>50</sup> The dramatic rise in casual drug use among adolescents and young adults during the 1960s served as one of the primary motivations for the modern War on Drugs, as the country grappled with “a polarizing debate” surrounding this new “ever more permissive youth culture.”<sup>51</sup>

Soon before rave culture caused uproar among the American social and political establishment, a group of elite Washington, D.C. wives founded the Parents’ Music Resource Center.<sup>52</sup> After its formation in 1985, the group lobbied against “the obscenity and violence of rock music,” suggesting that the music contributed to “the numerous ills that plague the United States.”<sup>53</sup> The center’s Board of Directors was comprised of the wives of “major politicians of public figures,” with Tipper Gore, the wife of then-Tennessee Senator, and later Vice President, Al Gore, Jr., serving as one of the primary spokespeople.<sup>54</sup> While the Parents’ Music Resource Center primarily emphasized “[educating] and [informing] parents of... lyrics that are sexually explicit,” they expanded their focus to include anything deemed corrupting of youth culture.<sup>55</sup> The group felt that, to protect the nation’s “personal and family values,” they had to “[regulate]... youth’s cultural consumption.”<sup>56</sup> After the Parents’ Music Resource Center’s action, the Recording Industry Association of America gave record companies the option “either to affix a warning label or to print the lyrics on the sleeve” of the record.<sup>57</sup> Most record companies chose the first option, a derivative of the center’s suggestion that all relevant record sleeves be labeled “V for violence, X for sexually explicit lyrics, O for occult, D/A for drugs and

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<sup>50</sup> Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘N’ Roll*, 262.

<sup>51</sup> Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 179.

<sup>53</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 179.

<sup>54</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 181.

<sup>55</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 181-182.

<sup>56</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 181.

<sup>57</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 184.



alcohol, etc.”<sup>58</sup> The Parents’ Music Resource Center, as argued by Claude Chastagner in “The Parents’ Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship,” aimed to “[eliminate] cultural differences” in an effort to provide “a simple solution to the complex social ills targeted by the PMRC,” a trend continued by the media and political establishment in the subsequent decade toward rave culture.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, as the zero-tolerance, War on Drugs-inspired mentality solidified and strengthened, musical genres provoked the mainstream social and political establishment through their associations with drug use. As opinions surrounding drug use and addiction shifted due to the changing demographics of those afflicted, jazz rose to global prominence. The association between jazz and marijuana contributed to local, state, and federal action against the drug, prior to the official beginnings of the modern War on Drugs. The 1960s countercultural movement, infamous for its adherents’ hallucinogenic drug use, served as one of the rationales for the modern War on Drugs, as declared by President Richard Nixon in 1971. The Parents’ Music Resource Center was a preliminary example of how political establishment leaders’ concerns about protecting youth culture, in a particularly conservative era of United States history, led to official action. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the Rave Panic was a continuation of these trends.

### **Ecstasy and Electronic Music**

The connection between MDMA, commonly referred to as Ecstasy or Molly, and other “club drugs” and electronic music, forged during the development of the rave in Europe, was the root of American backlash against the rave scene. While not all ravers took the drug, Ecstasy was a

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<sup>58</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 182.

<sup>59</sup> Chastagner, “The Parents’ Music Resource Center,” 190.

“crucial part of the experience for many people.”<sup>60</sup> The association between Ecstasy and the primarily youth-driven, music-based culture struck fear in the American mainstream social and political establishment, which, during the War on Drugs era, sought to eliminate all drug use in the United States first by 1995, and, after failing to achieve this goal, by 2002.<sup>61</sup> The relationship between club drugs and rave culture created the perception that raves were synonymous with drug use, an over-exaggeration with powerful ramifications for the rave scene.

MDMA is a man-made, synthetic drug, and a “psychedelic amphetamine”; the drug “[combines] the sensory intensification of marijuana and low-dose LSD, the sleep-defying, energy-boosting effects of speed, and the uninhibited conviviality of alcohol.”<sup>62</sup> In addition, Ecstasy is commonly referred to as an “empathogen or enactogen,” as it strengthens both one’s emotions and sense of empathy.<sup>63</sup> MDMA “[increases] the net release of the monoamine neurotransmitters (serotonin, noradrenaline, and, to a smaller extent, dopamine).”<sup>64</sup> Rather than increasing the amount of serotonin produced in the brain, MDMA “[binds] to, and thus [blocks], the transporter involved in its reuptake.”<sup>65</sup> Ecstasy users often experience “states of euphoria, relaxation, intensification of the music, physical sensitivity, the sensation of warmth, the enhancement of stamina,” and “increased capacity for communication and interpersonal contact.”<sup>66</sup> In one study, Ecstasy users claimed that one of their favorite effects of the drug was

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<sup>60</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America’s Holy War*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 238.

<sup>63</sup> Jane Carlisle Maxwell, Michael Fendrich, and Timothy Johnson, “Party Drugs: Properties, Prevalence, Patterns, and Problems,” *Substance Use and Misuse* 40, no. 9-10: 1203-1240, <https://discovery.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/details/rkxvm23h7j?limiters=FT1%3AY&q=Party%20Drugs%3A%20Properties%2C%20Prevalence%2C%20Patterns%2C%20and%20Problems>.

<sup>64</sup> Harold Kalant, “The pharmacology and toxicology of ‘ecstasy’ (MDMA) and related drugs,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 165, no. 7: 917-928, <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/165/7/917.full.pdf>, 919.

<sup>65</sup> Kalant, “The pharmacology and toxicology of ‘ecstasy’ (MDMA) and related drugs,” 919.

<sup>66</sup> Ronald Hitzler, “Pill Kick: The Pursuit of ‘Ecstasy’ at Techno-Events,” *Journal of Drug Issues* 32, no. 2 (2002): 459-466, <https://journals-sagepub-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/doi/epdf/10.1177/002204260203200208>, 463.

“an ability to easily connect to others,” suggesting that the drug is primarily used in group settings.<sup>67</sup>

While MDMA deaths and short-term complications are rare, the drug is capable of causing significant harm.<sup>68</sup> In the short term, Ecstasy can cause “agitation, anxiety, tachycardia, and hypertension,” as well as “‘serotonin syndrome,’ which is characterized by enhanced physical activity, sweating, lack of coordination, mental confusion, trismus, jaw clenching, agitation, hyperreflexia, hyperthermia, shivering, rhabdomyolysis, metabolic acidosis, myoclonus, tremor, and nystagmus.”<sup>69</sup> The most severe short-term effects include “hyperthermia, rhabdomyolysis, disseminated intravascular coagulation, renal failure, cardiac complications, intracranial hemorrhage, and hepatotoxicity.”<sup>70</sup> Additionally, in the days following Ecstasy use, one often feels “listless, emotionally burned out, irritable, and melancholic.”<sup>71</sup> Startlingly, the short-term negative effects of Ecstasy “are unpredictable and do not appear to be dose dependent,” due to the questionability of a given dose’s “purity” and “possible contaminants and concomitant ingestion.”<sup>72</sup> In the long term, studies show that Ecstasy can damage the serotonin neurons in one’s brain, causing severe negative effects on one’s mental health, particularly “in those at risk for depression, bulimia nervosa, alcoholism, etc.... [pushing] the individual over the threshold for psychopathology.”<sup>73</sup> One postmortem study showed that an Ecstasy user’s serotonin levels

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<sup>67</sup> Masuma Bahora, Claire E. Sterk, and Kirk W. Elifson, “Understanding recreational ecstasy use in the United States: A qualitative inquiry,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* 20, no. 1 (January 2009): 62-69, <https://www-sciencedirect-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/science/article/pii/S0955395907002162?via%3Dihub>, 65.

<sup>68</sup> Erica Weir, “Raves: a review of the culture, the drugs and the prevention of harm,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 162, no. 13 (2000): 1843-1848, <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/162/13/1843>, 1847.

<sup>69</sup> Maxwell, Fendrich, and Johnson, “Party Drugs.”

<sup>70</sup> Maxwell, Fendrich, and Johnson, “Party Drugs.”

<sup>71</sup> Martin Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home: America in the Great Stoned Age, 1945-2000* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), <https://archive.org/details/cantfindmywayhom00torg>, 404.

<sup>72</sup> Weir, “Raves,” 1847.

<sup>73</sup> Maxwell, Fendrich, and Johnson, “Party Drugs.”

“were reduced by 50%-80%” compared to a non-Ecstasy user.<sup>74</sup> Other studies examining long-term MDMA users have found correlations between its use and “sleep, mood, and anxiety disturbances, elevated impulsiveness, memory deficits, and attention problems,” which can last “for up to 2 years after cessation.”<sup>75</sup>

Ecstasy was originally synthesized and patented by Merck Pharmaceuticals in 1912, intended to be a styptic medication.<sup>76</sup> The drug was again patented by SmithKline as a dieting medication, but was soon “abandoned because of its psychoactive properties.”<sup>77</sup> Later, MDMA was used by both the U.S. and German militaries, as a “truth serum” and “an appetite suppressant,” respectively.<sup>78</sup> In the 1976, the drug was “[rediscovered]” by Alexander “Sasha” Shulgin, a biochemist based in San Francisco.<sup>79</sup> Shulgin had a private lab in his parents’ basement, with a special “Controlled Substances Registration Certificate” from the Drug Enforcement Administration, meaning that, for much of his career, he was legally allowed to experiment with and synthesize psychedelic drugs in his lab.<sup>80</sup> With this license, Shulgin created “no fewer than two hundred never-before-known chemical psychedelic structures” over the course of “thirty years.”<sup>81</sup> The process by which Shulgin synthesized these drugs was entirely legal, and, after providing samples of these drugs to the DEA, because of his special permit, he “would be the very one to analyze them.”<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, Shulgin, his wife, and a group of friends often “[took]

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<sup>74</sup> Kalant, “The pharmacology and toxicology of ‘ecstasy’ (MDMA) and related drugs,” 921.

<sup>75</sup> Maxwell, Fendrich, and Johnson, “Party Drugs.”

<sup>76</sup> Ewa Mazierska, Les Gillon, and Tony Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/reader.action?docID=6631376&ppg=5>, 184.

<sup>77</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 394.

<sup>78</sup> Mazierska, Gillon, and Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music*, 184; Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 81.

<sup>79</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 81-82; Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 392-394.

<sup>80</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 392.

<sup>81</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 392.

<sup>82</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 393.

and [evaluated]” the drugs themselves.<sup>83</sup> His rediscovery of MDMA spawned an entire “New Age, therapeutic-spiritual cult” surrounding the drug, as many believed it had significant therapeutic benefits.<sup>84</sup>

Recreational MDMA use began in Texas nightclubs in the early 1980s.<sup>85</sup> Ecstasy use in Texas, most notably among “SMU students who had enough money to buy twenty hits” quickly garnered the attention of local news outlets.<sup>86</sup> Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen, concerned about the growing use of the not-yet-outlawed substance among young Texans, reached out to the Drug Enforcement Administration for assistance.<sup>87</sup> After the DEA revealed its intention to classify MDMA as a Schedule I substance, “[prohibiting]... any application and [recognizing] no medical use whatsoever,” members of the medical community tried to lobby for its potential therapeutic uses.<sup>88</sup> Dr. Lester Grinspoon, a psychiatrist at Harvard University, led the charge, requesting a hearing to defend the drug before its classification.<sup>89</sup> The DEA rushed the classification to Schedule I “on an emergency basis,” prior to the hearings, on July 1, 1985, as “politicians [were] falling all over themselves to get tough on drugs.”<sup>90</sup>

During the hearings, Lewis Seiden, the government’s primary proponent with evidence used to defend their Schedule I classification, based his evidence that “MDMA caused ‘brain damage’” on an animal study examining the effects of injecting MDA, a similar, but different, drug, into rodents.<sup>91</sup> Another piece of evidence to support the DEA’s claims was “NIDA-funded

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<sup>83</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 392.

<sup>84</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 395.

<sup>85</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 143.

<sup>86</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 82.

<sup>87</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 396.

<sup>88</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

<sup>89</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

<sup>90</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

<sup>91</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

research” conducted by neurologist George Ricautte of Johns Hopkins University.<sup>92</sup> While Ricautte’s research did examine MDMA, the study was funded with the intention of defending Seiden’s conclusions.<sup>93</sup> During the hearings, Grinspoon and his colleagues argued that MDMA “was a valuable tool in the therapeutic process, enhancing insight and communication,” however, without a clinical study demonstrating such benefits, the “evidence was anecdotal.”<sup>94</sup> After the hearings concluded on May 22, 1986, the federal judge overseeing them suggested a Schedule III classification, “which would allow research to continue and would permit doctors to prescribe it,” however, the DEA ignored this recommendation and decided to retain the Schedule I classification permanently on March 23, 1988.<sup>95</sup> Alexander “Sasha” Shulgin, a firm believer in the drug’s redeemable qualities, reacted to the classification,

I looked at it with great sadness. But the commitment had been made that it was a dangerous evil by people in power – and since they were in power, their statements had to be correct, of course, and they just set out to document it. All the money that’s been put out by the government to study it ever since, from the mid-Eighties to the early Nineties, had been awarded to affirm and describe and show the extent of this evil danger. If you want to study MDMA, all you have to do is demonstrate some interaction that might serve as an explanation for its neurotoxicity.<sup>96</sup>

While the drug was deemed illegal in the United States, also during the 1980s, “Hindu cult leader Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh” brought Ecstasy to Ibiza, “an established part of the 1970s ‘hippy trail,’” where it became popular amongst the island’s “young ‘hippies,’” and later, amongst the island’s seasonal travelers, who spread the drug across Europe.<sup>97</sup> As described in the previous chapter of this thesis, Ecstasy’s association with the rave began in Europe, and the drug later traveled back to the United States at the end of the decade, alongside the music. This story

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<sup>92</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

<sup>93</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

<sup>94</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

<sup>95</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 397.

<sup>96</sup> Torgoff, *Can’t Find My Way Home*, 398-399.

<sup>97</sup> Mazierska, Gillon, and Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music*, 184

prompts an obvious question: how justified was the association between Ecstasy and electronic music?

Studies demonstrating the prevalence of Ecstasy use at electronic music events vary in their conclusions, however, two are fairly clear: 1) there is a connection between electronic music and Ecstasy, and 2) despite this connection, Ecstasy use at raves is far from universal, and other substances, such as alcohol and marijuana, are more prevalent. In one 2000 study, in which researchers tested the saliva of 96 rave attendees in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area, 20% “tested positive for ecstasy.”<sup>98</sup> In another study conducted in the same area two years later, of the 70 attendees interviewed, 86% had used Ecstasy at least once in their lifetimes, 51% had used Ecstasy in the thirty days prior, and 30% had used Ecstasy in the two days before the interview.<sup>99</sup> In 2005, researchers again interviewed rave attendees in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area.<sup>100</sup> Researchers interviewed attendees at thirteen separate raves, finding that “only 12% reported using ecstasy within the two days preceding the interview,” and that “alcohol and marijuana were the two most prevalent drugs of abuse.”<sup>101</sup> In 2008, researchers interviewed music festival attendees, finding that those who listened to “dance/house or rap music were more likely to have used illicit drugs recently than the remainder of the sample.”<sup>102</sup> In this study, rap music listeners had the highest levels of overall drug use at 70%, compared to dance/house listeners’ 55%,

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<sup>98</sup> Maxwell, Fendrich, and Johnson, “Party Drugs.”

<sup>99</sup> George S. Yacoubian, Jr. et al., “It’s a Rave New World: Estimating the Prevalence and Perceived Harm of Ecstasy and other Drug use among Club Rave Attendees,” *Journal of Drug Education* 33, no. 2 (June 2003):187-196, <https://journals-sagepub-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/doi/epdf/10.2190/RJX5-WRA6-BNG5-Q2TY>, 187.

<sup>100</sup> Yacoubian et al., “An Exploration of Recent Club Drug Use Among Rave Attendees,” *Journal of Drug Education* 37, no. 2 (June 2007): 145-161, <https://journals-sagepub-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/doi/epdf/10.2190/4VK6-0571-N771-863T>.

<sup>101</sup> Yacoubian et al., “An Exploration of Recent Club Drug Use Among Rave Attendees,” 145; Yacoubian et al., “An Exploration of Recent Club Drug Use Among Rave Attendees,” 153.

<sup>102</sup> Megan S. C. Lim et al., “A cross-sectional survey of young people attending a music festival: associations between drug use and musical preference,” *Drug and Alcohol Review* 27, no. 4 (July 2008): 439-441, <https://discovery.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/viewer/pdf/c7ppnbnx4n>, 439.

though dance/house listeners had the highest levels of Ecstasy use, at 44% compared to rap music listeners' 41%.<sup>103</sup>

While Ecstasy was not the defining element of rave culture, the idea that raves were synonymous with drug use spread rapidly across the United States. The connection between MDMA and electronic music became the only information that many Americans had about raves and electronic music. The American media and government sought first to forewarn, and later, to eliminate raves as part of its crusade against drug use, creating a large-scale moral panic. The rest of this chapter will describe the ways in which the American media and government, driven and influenced by War on Drugs, zero-tolerance rhetoric, created and fueled the Rave Panic.

### **American Society Reacts**

By the 1990s, War on Drugs-era, anti-drug rhetoric was a mainstay in American popular culture; however, the key difference between previous iterations of such War on Drugs rhetoric and that targeting Ecstasy was that, rather than only attacking the drug itself, or its dealers and users, anti-drug proponents also attacked raves, believing their sole purpose was for drug use, leading to the targeting of the events and their organizers. Due to their association with Ecstasy, raves were viewed as a “troublesome matter to be controlled, rather than a meaningful cultural experience.”<sup>104</sup> The Partnership for a Drug-Free America spent millions of dollars on advertisements and television storylines targeting Ecstasy use and raves. Television networks also supported the notion that raves equaled drug use, with designated news specials and television plotlines, such as one 1991 episode of teen drama *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Rather than

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<sup>103</sup> Megan S. C. Lim et al., “A cross-sectional survey of young people attending a music festival,” 441.

<sup>104</sup> Tammy L. Anderson, “Understanding the Alteration and Decline of a Music Scene: Observations from Rave Culture,” *Sociological Forum* 24 no. 2 (2009): 307-336, <https://discovery.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/viewer/pdf/c7ppnbnx4n>, 311.



solely focusing on preventing drug use, much of the anti-drug rhetoric aimed toward eliminating Ecstasy use directly attacked raves, rather than the drug itself.

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America was founded in 1985 by a group of “more than 250 big-name ad agencies” from across the United States.<sup>105</sup> The volunteer members of the organization sought to put their advertising expertise to use for public service, believing that they could create advertisements warning against drugs as they would for other products.<sup>106</sup> Between 1985 and 1996, the organization garnered “more than \$2 billion in free [ad] space.”<sup>107</sup> Most famously, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America created the advertisement stating, “This is your brain... this is drugs... this is your brain on drugs,” alongside images of one cracking an egg into a heated pan, thus metaphorically demonstrating how drugs “fry” your brain.<sup>108</sup> During the 1990s, the only advertiser with more “single-brand advertising clout” was McDonald’s.<sup>109</sup>

In 2002, due to “a 71 percent increase in the abuse of...Ecstasy” over the course of two years, the organization launched a \$2 million advertising campaign aimed toward preventing Ecstasy use.<sup>110</sup> One ad described a teenager fainting while dancing, with others continuing to dance around her.<sup>111</sup> A radio advertisement created by the organization and the Office of National Drug Control Policy described the dangers of Ecstasy, with a clear picture of its use at a rave:

Okay, so here it is. Ecstasy is a pretty way of saying MDMA, a synthetic, mind-altering drug with hallucinogenic and stimulant properties. Sometimes known as X, E, Adam, or Roll. Now this is what happens, Ecstasy can take 30 to 60 minutes to take effect, and when it does, it creates a feeling of euphoria and openness and a decrease of inhibitions. It’ll make you

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<sup>105</sup> Pamela Warrick, “Can You Just Say No?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-08-30-ls-38870-story.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Warrick, “Can You Just Say No?”

<sup>107</sup> Warrick, “Can You Just Say No?”

<sup>108</sup> Warrick, “Can You Just Say No?”

<sup>109</sup> Warrick, “Can You Just Say No?”

<sup>110</sup> Brad Wright, “Ad campaign to target soaring Ecstasy use,” *CNN*, February 12, 2002, <https://www.cnn.com/2002/HEALTH/02/11/teen.ecstasy.use/index.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Wright, “Ad campaign to target soaring Ecstasy use.”

think you're a good dancer, even when you're not, and it can make you think people like you, when they probably don't. So, there you are, dancing like a moron, sweating like a pig, with people that don't even like you. Now here's the problem: when you're spending the whole night partying, you could crash, and serious depression could set in. Suddenly, life without X doesn't seem so great, does it? So, you do it again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and the more you do it, the more you want it, and then you can't figure out how to enjoy life without it. But here's the really fun part: some of the pills passed off as Ecstasy don't even contain it, so you have no idea how the hell you're gonna feel: Miserable? Paranoid? Nauseous? Pretty damn attractive, huh? But hey, the choice is yours. Just don't say I didn't warn ya. Sponsored by the Office of National Drug Control Policy and Partnership for a Drug Free America.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to these ads adolescents and their parents, in 1997, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America made an agreement with Congress, in which the government would pay \$1 billion for \$2 billion worth of advertising slots for anti-drug messaging, to be distributed over the course of five years, beginning in 1998.<sup>113</sup> After the economy improved due to the dot-com boom, the networks involved – NBC, ABC, CBS, the WB, and Fox – decided that, rather than provide expensive advertising slots at half-price, they would create anti-drug plotlines on their popular television shows.<sup>114</sup> For example, one episode of the popular television show *ER* featured “two med students nearly [overdosing] on Ecstasy” – a plotline which gave NBC \$1.4 million worth of ad space free to sell, which would have otherwise been designated for anti-drug advertisements.<sup>115</sup> The students took the drug at a party filled with medical school students, a group not expected to engage in drug use, thus showing that anyone could be susceptible to the lure of the “hug drug.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> “Ecstasy Drug Use,” hosted by George Hager, on CSPAN, March 24, 2001, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?163395-3/ecstasy-drug>.

<sup>113</sup> Daniel Forbes, “Prime-time propaganda,” *Salon*, January 13, 2000, [https://www.salon.com/2000/01/13/drugs\\_6/](https://www.salon.com/2000/01/13/drugs_6/).

<sup>114</sup> Forbes, “Prime-time propaganda.”

<sup>115</sup> Gabe Levine-Drizin, “In the ‘90s the U.S. Government Paid TV Networks to Weave ‘Anti-Drug’ Messaging Into Their Plot Lines. Here Are the Worst Examples,” *The Column*, December 27, 2021, <https://thecolumn.substack.com/p/in-the-90s-the-us-government-paid>; Forbes, “Prime-time propaganda.”

<sup>116</sup> Levine-Drizin, “In the ‘90s the U.S. Government Paid TV Networks to Weave ‘Anti-Drug’ Messaging Into Their Plot Lines. Here Are the Worst Examples.”

In addition to these paid TV advertisements and plotlines, popular news sources and young adult television shows warned readers and viewers about the dangers of raves by themselves. On an episode of PBS's *News Hour*, correspondent Betty Ann Bowser described Ecstasy as being "a part of the scene, dance parties, called raves, that attract hundreds of teenagers, some as young as 13."<sup>117</sup> She continued by stating that "an alarming number go to raves to find the new drug of choice, Ecstasy," thereby suggesting that many attend raves solely for drug use.<sup>118</sup> An article published by ABC News suggested that parents keep an eye out for signs that their child has taken Ecstasy, which included "[wearing] child-like costumes, such as angel wings, and glow sticks or glowing jewelry, or [carrying] teddy bears and pacifiers. Another sign: bringing multiple water bottles to parties or raves, or leaving empties in their bedrooms or cars."<sup>119</sup> The article clearly suggests that specific mainstays of rave culture during this era, including wearing child-like clothing or using glow sticks, were signs of Ecstasy use, thus equating rave culture with drug use, as well as assumes that nobody could adhere to these subcultural behaviors sober. In addition, the suggestion that drinking water was a sign of Ecstasy use, an argument later used by members of the U.S. government when arguing for legislation outlawing raves, seems a bit far-fetched.<sup>120</sup>

On an episode of *Oprah* in 2001, titled "What parents should know about ecstasy," Oprah Winfrey hosted a 22-year-old woman named Lynn Smith, who claimed that Ecstasy gave her hallucinations, which began three weeks after she took her last pill.<sup>121</sup> She told the story about how she began using Ecstasy after moving from her hometown to New York City, with

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<sup>117</sup> *PBS News Hour*, on PBS, July 30, 2001, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/ecstasy-explosion>.

<sup>118</sup> *PBS News Hour*, on PBS, July 30, 2001, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/ecstasy-explosion>.

<sup>119</sup> ABC News GMA, "Study: Teen Ecstasy Use Rising Fast," *ABC News*, February 11, 2002, <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=126362&page=1>.

<sup>120</sup> ABC News GMA, "Study: Teen Ecstasy Use Rising Fast."

<sup>121</sup> *Oprah*, season 16, episode 96, "What parents should know about ecstasy," aired September 27, 2001, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w\\_-CII1Py-Gg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_-CII1Py-Gg).

ambitions to become a theatre actress.<sup>122</sup> She allowed the show to present her brain scans, which seemingly showed holes, where she lacked activity, in her brain.<sup>123</sup> This explanation for the “holes” on her brain scan were false, and were simply “mapping artifacts... created by coding the computer to represent areas of the brain with a slight decrease in blood flow, which may have been caused by a number of things.”<sup>124</sup>

In addition to these official news sources, season 2, episode 15 of popular teen television drama *Beverly Hills, 90210*, released in 1991, sought to scare its teenage viewers away from raves and Ecstasy.<sup>125</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210* was one of the most popular teen TV shows at the time, with the second season “averaging 17.6 million viewers a week.”<sup>126</sup> At the beginning of the episode, main character Brandon Walsh’s girlfriend, Emily Valentine, suggested that the friend group go to “an incredibly hip underground club,” which “changes the location every week.”<sup>127</sup> Brandon’s sister, Brenda, and her friends Kelly and Donna, viewed the plan with suspicion, but still decided to attend.<sup>128</sup> All of the friends planned to lie to their parents with the exception “popular” girl Kelly, whose mom typically gave her freedom as long as she told the truth; however, when Kelly told her mom where she was going, she said that she “just saw an exposé of those clubs on the news... they’re illegal and they’re in horrible neighborhoods.”<sup>129</sup> Kelly later snuck out anyhow.<sup>130</sup> At the convenience store where the friends received the address for

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<sup>122</sup> *Oprah*, season 16, episode 96, “What parents should know about ecstasy.”

<sup>123</sup> *Oprah*, season 16, episode 96, “What parents should know about ecstasy.”

<sup>124</sup> Tom Shroder, “The colossal government failure that obstructed a potentially major medical breakthrough,” *Salon*, September 21, 2014,

[https://www.salon.com/2014/09/21/the\\_colossal\\_dea\\_failure\\_that\\_prevented\\_a\\_potentially\\_major\\_medical\\_breakthrough/](https://www.salon.com/2014/09/21/the_colossal_dea_failure_that_prevented_a_potentially_major_medical_breakthrough/).

<sup>125</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA,” directed by Charles Braverman, featuring Jason Priestly, Shannen Doherty, and Jennie Garth, aired November 14, 1991, on Fox.

<sup>126</sup> “Beverly Hills, 90210 – Season 2 (1991),” *JustWatch*, <https://www.justwatch.com/us/tv-show/beverly-hills-90210/season-2>.

<sup>127</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>128</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>129</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>130</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

the underground club, high school freshman David was able to purchase alcohol without showing his ID; he proceeded to drink far too much over the course of the night.<sup>131</sup>

Based on the footage of the friends at the “underground club,” it was clearly a rave, with techno music playing and strobe lights flashing.<sup>132</sup> After seeing a drug dealer with a drug called “Euphoria,” a clear ode to Ecstasy, Emily suggested to Brandon that they try it.<sup>133</sup> After Brandon refused, Emily purchased some of the drug and slipped it into his water.<sup>134</sup> Brandon and Emily seemingly had a great time, however, Brandon later attributed the fun solely to drugs, stating that none of it was “real.”<sup>135</sup> In the meantime, Kelly and Brenda described the rave as “a never again,” “very weird,” and “horrible,” suggesting that raves weren’t worth attending.<sup>136</sup> The next day, Brandon breaks up with Emily for spiking his drink, as he knew that drug use was wrong, and he regretted his behavior from the night before.<sup>137</sup> At the end of the episode, Andrea, the smart friend of their group, fries an egg in a frying pan, mimicking the famous Partnership for a Drug-Free America advertisement.<sup>138</sup>

Media backlash against Ecstasy consistently showed that raves were the primary instances in which the drug was used and suggested that aspects of rave culture were simply drug paraphernalia. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America both created advertisements and, in partnership with Congress, paid for plotlines on several of the most popular TV shows to reveal the horrors of Ecstasy and raves. News media outlets and television specials portrayed raves as drug dens, as well as spread false information about the harmful effects of Ecstasy. An episode

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<sup>131</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>132</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>133</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>134</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>135</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>136</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>137</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

<sup>138</sup> *Beverly Hills, 90210*, season 2, episode 15, “U4EA.”

of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, a television show with primarily teenage viewers, intended to create a negative perception of raves and electronic music by portraying the rave as “horrible” unless one had taken drugs. The media’s reaction to raves was only the beginning of the Rave Panic. The next section of this chapter will discuss the legal ramifications of the Rave Panic, and how raves were nearly eliminated entirely by federal legislation.

### **Governmental Intervention**

By the mid- to late-1990s, this coordinated campaign that branded raves as primarily about illicit drugs began to put more pressure on politicians to respond more forcefully to what was now rising to the level of a moral panic. The backlash against raves ultimately led to the passage of the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, better known by its previous name, the RAVE Act, as a subsection of the PROTECT Act, or “Amber Alert” bill. The RAVE Act, standing for the Reducing Americans’ Vulnerability to Ecstasy Act, was an amendment to the Crack House Statute, part of the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which allowed event organizers and venue owners to be held criminally and civilly liable for attendees’ drug use.<sup>139</sup> While the RAVE Act was the first piece of federal legislation specifically targeting raves in the United States, it was not the first instance of legal backlash against the rave scene. The precedent for anti-rave national government policy was that of the United Kingdom, which passed in 1994.<sup>140</sup> Before the rave scene caught the attention of the American federal government, raves were subject to local governmental action. In addition, before the RAVE Act was passed, the Crack House Statute itself was used against New Orleans rave promoter James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal and the

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<sup>139</sup> RAVE Act, S. Res. 2633, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (October 9, 2002), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/senate-bill/2633/text>.

<sup>140</sup> Angus Walker, “The history of illegal raves, and why they’ve been making a comeback,” *Brighton Journal*, August 4, 2020, <https://brightonjournal.co.uk/the-history-of-illegal-raves-and-why-theyve-been-making-a-comeback/>.

owners of the State Palace Theatre, a legal, multi-genre music venue where Donnie held fully legal raves.<sup>141</sup> The RAVE Act, under different iterations, was introduced to Congress by itself four times and was included as a subsection in two pieces of omnibus legislation, one of which was signed into law. The passage of the RAVE Act as part of the PROTECT Act, the definitive peak of the Rave Panic, was a turning point in the history of electronic music, almost ending the movement in the United States entirely.

The United Kingdom was the first country to pass legislation against raves, not long after it burst onto the British scene in 1988's "Second Summer of Love."<sup>142</sup> In 1990, reporters from British tabloid *The Sun* published an exposé about a rave "at a disused aircraft hangar in Berkshire," which they attended undercover.<sup>143</sup> The British people then "demanded an immediate crackdown and heavier policing," leading to the passage of the Entertainment (increased Penalties) Act, which made the penalties for holding raves "up to £20,000."<sup>144</sup> This law was the primary impetus for revealing the location of a rave at "the very last minute" through secret phone hotlines and pirate radio stations, to avoid detection by the authorities, a trend which became engrained in rave culture.<sup>145</sup> Raves continued to flourish in the UK in the early 1990s, however, in 1992, "the biggest illegal rave in UK history," held at Castlemorton Common in Worcestershire, led to "the real crackdown" against raves in the UK.<sup>146</sup> The rave at Castlemorton Common lasted "for a week," with "20,000 people" in attendance at its peak.<sup>147</sup> Despite attempts by the police to make attendees disperse, the rave continued, leading to the

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<sup>141</sup> John Cloud, "Ecstasy Crackdown: Will the Feds Use a 1980s Anti-Crack Law to Destroy the Rave Movement?" *Time*, April 9, 2001, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,999633-2,00.html>.

<sup>142</sup> Angus Walker, "The history of illegal raves, and why they've been making a comeback."

<sup>143</sup> Angus Walker, "The history of illegal raves, and why they've been making a comeback."

<sup>144</sup> Angus Walker, "The history of illegal raves, and why they've been making a comeback."

<sup>145</sup> Angus Walker, "The history of illegal raves, and why they've been making a comeback."

<sup>146</sup> Angus Walker, "The history of illegal raves, and why they've been making a comeback."

<sup>147</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi (Giant Interactive: 2018), [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv\\_dp\\_amz\\_c\\_UTPsmN\\_1\\_10](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv_dp_amz_c_UTPsmN_1_10)

outright banning of raves in 1994 through the Criminal Justice Act.<sup>148</sup> The Criminal Justice Act of 1994 “[defined] an illegal rave as 20 or more people ‘gathering on land in the open air’ with music ‘that includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats,’ at a level where it is loud enough to cause ‘serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality.’”<sup>149</sup> Rather than eliminating the electronic music scene in Britain entirely, according to DJ/Producer Pete Tong, the legislation spurred the legitimization of British raves, meaning, they moved to legitimate venues and were held during the traditional club hours.<sup>150</sup>

Legal backlash against raves in the United States started at the local level. Throughout the United States, local governments established “teen curfews... to ‘protect the young.’”<sup>151</sup> In addition to teen curfews, “police departments, fire marshals, and city councils” instituted “ordinances and license restrictions,” preventing nightclubs from hosting raves.<sup>152</sup> While these were solely instituted at the local level, localities across the country instituted these restrictions, as, by the late 1990s, “there [were] very few states in America that [didn’t] have a rave scene.”<sup>153</sup> Additionally, across the country, local governments forced many clubs to shut down completely “for various violations, including illegal drug use.”<sup>154</sup> In 1997, after a couple of overdoses at raves in Orlando, the local government put together “a Rave Review Task Force” and instituted local legislation disallowing clubs from hosting “alcohol-free after-hours raves.”<sup>155</sup> Another example of local action against raves was a city ordinance in Chicago passed in 2001, which held

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<sup>148</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>149</sup> Angus Walker, “The history of illegal raves, and why they’ve been making a comeback.”

<sup>150</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>151</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 303.

<sup>152</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 316.

<sup>153</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 316.

<sup>154</sup> Anderson, “Understanding the Alteration and Decline of a Music Scene: Observations from Rave Culture.”

<sup>155</sup> Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 315-316.



“building owners and managers” responsible for “after-hours clubs and parties,” with penalties of up to six months in jail.<sup>156</sup>

Before the passage of federal legislation targeting raves, the Crack House Statute, a section of the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, was used to prosecute James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal, a rave promoter in New Orleans, Louisiana. Section (a) of the Crack House Statute “made it illegal to ‘knowingly open or maintain any place, for the purpose of manufacturing, distributing, or using any controlled substance,’” as well as to “intentionally rent, lease, or make available for use, with or without compensation, the building, room, or enclosure for the purpose of unlawfully manufacturing, storing, distributing, or using a controlled substance.”<sup>157</sup> In 2000, the Drug Enforcement Administration raided the State Palace Theatre, where Disco Donnie was holding events, and prosecuted Donnie, as well as the owners of the State Palace Theatre, brothers Robert and Brian Brunet, under the Crack House Statute.<sup>158</sup> The State Palace Theatre was not a nightclub, but a multi-genre music venue, with performances by popular bands such as the Dave Matthews Band and the Beastie Boys.<sup>159</sup> The Drug Enforcement Administration claimed that Disco Donnie and the Brunet Brothers “knowingly and intentionally” made the building available for the purpose of drug dealing and use; the DEA was under the assumption that the sole purpose of holding and attending raves was drugs.<sup>160</sup> Donnie’s attorney, Graham Boyd of the American Civil Liberties Union, argued that the DEA’s prosecution was

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<sup>156</sup> Erin Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” *Hastings Communications and Entertainment Law Journal* 28, no. 2 (2006): 229-286, [https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1623&context=hastings\\_comm\\_ent\\_law\\_journal](https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1623&context=hastings_comm_ent_law_journal), 279-280.

<sup>157</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 245-246; Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-570, 100 Stat. 3207. (1986). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/5484/text>.

<sup>158</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 252; *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>159</sup> John Cloud, “Ecstasy Crackdown: Will the Feds Use a 1980s Anti-Crack Law to Destroy the Rave Movement?”

<sup>160</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

unconstitutional, as “there was a constitutional right to play music of your choice.”<sup>161</sup> Though Donnie and the Brunets proved that they took action to prevent drug use at the State Palace Theatre, including “[instituting] a zero-tolerance policy..., [offering] free concert tickets to anyone who turned in a person with drugs,” and “[arranging] for many arrests... including the arrests of security guards who were found to be selling drugs,” they agreed to a plea deal “to avoid the possibility of serving jail time”; under the Crack House Statute, they had faced the possibility of twenty years to life in prison.<sup>162</sup> The judge ultimately enjoined the plea agreement, citing that “the government has ‘burdened substantially more speech than is necessary in order to achieve their stated purpose... by completely banning the named expressive objects,” thereby agreeing with Boyd’s legal arguments.<sup>163</sup>

While the prosecution against Disco Donnie and the Brunets failed, members of Congress sought to expand the terminology of the Crack House Statute to make prosecutions such as that against Donnie possible, despite recent government reports revealing that Ecstasy use in the United States was “being used by younger and younger folks, not in raves anymore.”<sup>164</sup> Then-Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware first introduced the RAVE Act on June 18, 2002, claiming that, due to the failed prosecutions of Donnie and a few other, smaller-scale rave promoters under the Crack House Statute, Congress “[needed] to tailor this Federal statute more precisely to the problem at hand.”<sup>165</sup> Biden stated that “rave promoters... allow rampant drug use at their events” and “go to great lengths to portray their events as safe so that parents will allow their

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<sup>161</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>162</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 252-263; *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>163</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 253.

<sup>164</sup> “Ecstasy Drug Use,” hosted by George Hager, on CSPAN.

<sup>165</sup> 148 Cong. Rec. 71 (2002), <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-148/issue-81/senate-section/article/S5699-1>.

kids to attend.”<sup>166</sup> Biden further promoted the RAVE Act by asserting that “promoters get rich... by selling popular Ecstasy paraphernalia such as baby pacifiers, glow sticks, or mentholated inhalers” and “bottles of water for \$5 or \$10 apiece.”<sup>167</sup>

The RAVE Act sought to amend the Crack House Statute “to prohibit an individual from knowingly opening, maintaining, managing, controlling, renting, leasing, making available for use, or profiting from any place for the purpose of manufacturing, distributing, or using any controlled substance, and for other purposes,” and included a “Findings” section which detailed exactly how raves fit into the proposed categories.<sup>168</sup> According to the “Findings” section, “the trafficking and use of ‘club drugs’ ... is deeply embedded in the rave culture,” and “raves have become little more than a way to exploit American youth.”<sup>169</sup> The “Findings” section makes clear the perception of raves as akin to crack houses and the intention of the American political establishment in proposing this piece of legislation: to eliminate the American rave scene. Additionally, the bill sought to expand the Crack House Statute to allow civil suits, thereby lowering the threshold of proof required to recover damages.<sup>170</sup> If one is determined to have broken this law, the penalties are: “(1) a civil penalty of the greater of \$250,000 or twice the gross receipts derived from each violation; and (2) declaratory and injunctive remedies.”<sup>171</sup> The original RAVE Act stalled in the Senate after two co-sponsors, Democratic Senator Richard Durban of Illinois and Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, withdrew their support, “citing concerns that the bill lacked adequate protection for innocent property owners.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> 148 Cong. Rec. 71 (2002).

<sup>167</sup> 148 Cong. Rec. 71 (2002).

<sup>168</sup> RAVE Act, S. Res. 2633, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (October 9, 2002).

<sup>169</sup> RAVE Act, S. Res. 2633, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (October 9, 2002).

<sup>170</sup> RAVE Act, S. Res. 2633, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (October 9, 2002).

<sup>171</sup> RAVE Act, S. Res. 2633, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (October 9, 2002).

<sup>172</sup> Jeff Gage, “Disco Donnie & The RAVE Act, 20 Years Later: Dance Promoters Targeted by Joe Biden & The DEA Tell Their Story Like Never Before,” *Billboard*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.billboard.com/pro/rave-act-disco->

The RAVE Act was subsequently introduced to the House of Representatives by Republican Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, without the “Findings” section, on October 1, 2002, however, the bill failed to pass the committee stage.<sup>173</sup> The text of the RAVE Act, excluding the “Findings” section, was included in a 486-page omnibus bill called the Justice Enhancement and Domestic Security Act of 2003, which was introduced by Democratic Senator Thomas Daschle of South Dakota on January 7, 2003.<sup>174</sup> This bill also failed to pass the committee stage.<sup>175</sup> Senator Biden again introduced the RAVE Act to the Senate, this time without the “Findings” section and under a different name, the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, on January 28, 2003.<sup>176</sup> Again, the bill went to the Committee on the Judiciary, but was never brought to a vote.<sup>177</sup> The RAVE Act was introduced to the House of Representatives again, without the “Findings” section but under its original name, by Republican Representative Howard Coble of North Carolina on February 12, 2003; the bill again stalled in the committee stage.<sup>178</sup> These initial iterations of anti-rave legislation likely failed to pass due to the constituent efforts of

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[donnie-joe-biden-90s-raves-drugs-new-orleans/](#); Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 254.

<sup>173</sup> RAVE Act, H. Res. 5519, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (October 28, 2002), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/5519/text?s=1&r=5&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22RAVE+Act%22%2C%22RAVE%22%2C%22Act%22%5D%7D>.

<sup>174</sup> Justice Enhancement and Domestic Security Act of 2003, S. Res. 22, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (January 7, 2003), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/22/text?s=1&r=4&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22RAVE+Act%22%2C%22RAVE%22%2C%22Act%22%5D%7D>.

<sup>175</sup> Justice Enhancement and Domestic Security Act of 2003, S. Res. 22, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (January 7, 2003), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/22/all-actions?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22RAVE+Act%22%2C%22RAVE%22%2C%22Act%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=4>.

<sup>176</sup> Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act of 2003, S. Res. 226, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (January 28, 2003), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/226/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22illicit+drug+anti-proliferation+act%22%2C%22illicit%22%2C%22drug%22%2C%22anti-proliferation%22%2C%22act%22%5D%7D&r=9&s=4>.

<sup>177</sup> Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act of 2003, S. Res. 226, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (January 28, 2003).

<sup>178</sup> RAVE Act, H. Res. 718, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (February 12, 2003), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/718/text?s=1&r=1&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22RAVE+Act%22%2C%22RAVE%22%2C%22Act%22%5D%7D>.

ravers themselves and other organizations with concerns about First Amendment violations; these efforts will be discussed in the third chapter of this thesis.

The PROTECT Act, commonly referred to as the “Amber Alert” bill, was introduced by Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah on January 13, 2003.<sup>179</sup> The bill’s primary intention was “to prevent child abduction and the sexual exploitation of children,” a nearly unanimously supported goal.<sup>180</sup> The bill passed in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, but, to resolve the discrepancies between the bills that passed in each house, members of both houses of Congress convened in a joint-house conference.<sup>181</sup> Neither the Senate nor House versions of the bill included the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, however, after the joint-house conference, in which Senator Biden was a participant, the PROTECT Act included the bill as a subsection.<sup>182</sup>

When presenting the conference version of the bill to President George W. Bush for signature on April 10, 2003, despite being a co-sponsor of the original RAVE Act, Senator Hatch, the primary sponsor of the PROTECT Act, expressed “[concern] about the inclusion of the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act” due to “serious grass-roots opposition,” including from his own constituents.<sup>183</sup> He cited the previous use of the Crack House Statute against “business owners who take serious precautions to avoid drug use at their events” who were worried about “being held personally accountable for the illegal acts of others.”<sup>184</sup> Hatch further stated worry

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<sup>179</sup> PROTECT Act, Pub. L. No. 108-21, 117 Stat. 650 (2003), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/151/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22illicit+drug+anti-proliferation+act%22%2C%22illicit%22%2C%22drug%22%2C%22anti-proliferation%22%2C%22act%22%5D%7D&r=12&s=4>.

<sup>180</sup> PROTECT Act, Pub. L. No. 108-21, 117 Stat. 650 (2003).

<sup>181</sup> PROTECT Act, Pub. L. No. 108-21, 117 Stat. 650 (2003).

<sup>182</sup> 149 Cong. Rec. S. 4872 (daily ed. April 3, 2003), <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-149/issue-54/senate-section/article/S4872-1>.

<sup>183</sup> Hein Online, “Congressional Record,” April 10, 2003, [https://heinonline-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/HOL/Page?collection=congreg&handle=hein.congreg/crd1490058&id=296&men\\_tab=srchresults](https://heinonline-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/HOL/Page?collection=congreg&handle=hein.congreg/crd1490058&id=296&men_tab=srchresults), S5147.

<sup>184</sup> Hein Online, “Congressional Record,” April 10, 2003, S5148.

about whether “even conscientious promoters” would “think twice before holding large concerts or other events where some drug use may be inevitable despite their best efforts” – a reality that many electronic music event promoters faced in the years following the PROTECT Act’s passage.<sup>185</sup> Senator Biden rebutted Hatch’s claims, claiming that the legislation would only target “rogue promoters who not only know that there is drug use at their event but also hold the event for the purpose of illegal drug use or distribution” – an aim that the Crack House Statute had already surpassed after it was used against Disco Donnie’s legal raves at the State Palace Theatre.<sup>186</sup> While there was significant opposition to the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act’s inclusion in the PROTECT Act, the bill’s primary objectives were so staunchly supported that it passed in the House of Representatives with a 400 Yeas to 25 Nays vote and in the Senate with a 98 Yeas to 0 Nays vote; President Bush signed the bill into law on April 30, 2003.<sup>187</sup>

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The Rave Panic was a continuation of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century War on Drugs, reminiscent of previous panics related to connections between musical genres and drug use, including those surrounding jazz, the 1960s countercultural movement, and rock ‘n’ roll. The association between raves and Ecstasy, while far from a universal trend, led to significant backlash against raves, as many Americans believed the two were synonymous. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America created advertisements fueling the association between raves and Ecstasy, while news sources sought to warn parents and adolescents of the dangers of attending raves. Popular ‘90s teen drama *Beverly Hills, 90210* released a 1991 episode titled “U4EA,” a fearmongering tactic used to teach teenagers about the seemingly pervasive drug use at and lack of positive qualities

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<sup>185</sup> Hein Online, “Congressional Record,” April 10, 2003, S5148.

<sup>186</sup> Hein Online, “Congressional Record,” April 10, 2003, S5153.

<sup>187</sup> PROTECT Act, Pub. L. No. 108-21, 117 Stat. 650 (2003).

of raves. Following the media uproar surrounding raves, the Rave Panic escalated to governmental intervention. The United Kingdom banned illegal raves in 1994, however, the British scene was strong enough to move toward legitimization, rather than extinction. U.S. legal backlash against the rave scene started at the local level before federal legislation passed, which made possible criminal and civil penalties for rave organizers and venue owners if they “knew” that drug use occurred on the premises. Examples of knowledge of drug use, as cited by the government in the “Findings” section of the original RAVE Act, included selling glow sticks and water bottles.

The Rave Panic stoked fear in rave promoters, as they could be held liable for their attendees’ drug use for actions previously considered normal, and even responsible, such as selling water. The American rave looked like it was headed for extinction after the legislation passed, as many promoters stopped holding events altogether. Yet, electronic music is now everywhere, and American electronic music festivals, the newer, non-rave-associated name for the pseudo-raves of the 2010s and 2020s, host hundreds of thousands of people in individual weekends. The gap in the story prompts the question: how did electronic music ultimately survive the War on Drugs-era Rave Panic? The last chapter of this thesis will answer this question, examining the American electronic music scene from the passage of the PROTECT Act to present day.

### Chapter 3: Surviving the Panic: From Rave to EDM

“We are the new-born; the world knew all about us

(We are the future and we’re here to stay)

We’ve come a long way since that day

And we will never look back, at the faded silhouette”

– “Silhouettes” by Avicii<sup>1</sup>

The passage of the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, previously introduced as the RAVE Act, as a subsection of the PROTECT Act was a turning point in the history of electronic music. The statute had the potential to destroy rave culture in the United States, a bleak prediction for electronic music that many ravers in the early to mid-2000s believed had already begun to occur. Despite these dire predictions, electronic music did not fade to obsolescence; in 2019, the International Federation of Phonographic Industry determined electronic dance music to be the third most popular musical genre in the world, with roughly “1.5 billion people regularly listening to it.”<sup>2</sup> How did a seemingly dead countercultural movement turn into a massive, global cultural phenomenon? This chapter will trace the history of electronic music in the United States from the passage of the PROTECT Act to present day.

The RAVE Act received strong, negative backlash from the rave community even prior to its passage, contributing to the difficulty that proponents of the legislation faced in passing it. In addition to ravers, other groups, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, opposed the law on the grounds that it violated First Amendment rights to music and dance, which several U.S. court cases determined to be protected speech. The RAVE Act had harmful unintended consequences,

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<sup>1</sup> Avicii, “Silhouettes,” track 1 on *Silhouettes*, Universal Music AB, 2012, Spotify streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/06h3McKzmxS8Bx58USHiMq?si=8e906bd61eaf44a9>.

<sup>2</sup> Ewa Mazierska, Les Gillon, and Tony Rigg, ed., *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/reader.action?docID=6631376&ppg=5>, 1.



largely due to the vague terminology of the statute; promoters, in efforts to avoid prosecution under the law, had to deny the existence of potential drug use at their events, including purposely withholding safety measures which could be helpful in the instance of an overdose and declining to host booths by drug education organizations, such as DanceSafe. Additionally, the RAVE Act prompted many promoters to move away from hosting electronic music events altogether, causing a dramatic chilling effect on the American electronic music scene in the years following the statute's instatement.

The American electronic music scene initially declined significantly, however, yet another instance of transatlantic cultural sharing, combined with changing attitudes domestically, allowed for the resurgence of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) in the United States. While the American electronic music scene declined in the early 2000s, European DJ/producers continued to flourish, with Tiesto, a Dutch DJ/producer, performing at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, bringing electronic music to the forefront of global culture.<sup>3</sup> He and other superstar DJs, including Daft Punk, David Guetta, Martin Garrix, Avicii, Calvin Harris, and Skrillex, were able to break through the barriers to commercial success, creating music that reached the Top 40 musical charts in the late 2000s and early 2010s. These DJs' commercial success in the United States fueled the growth of American electronic music festivals, pseudo-raves under a different moniker due to the negative connotation of the term "rave." The Electric Daisy Carnival, first held in Los Angeles and later in Las Vegas, and Ultra Music Festival in Miami, both of which began prior to the RAVE Act, capitalized on the commercial success of European, and later American, DJs, growing to host hundreds of thousands of people in individual weekends by the

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<sup>3</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi (Giant Interactive: 2018), [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv\\_dp\\_amz\\_c\\_UTPsmN\\_1\\_10](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B07B9QNVJG/ref=atv_dp_amz_c_UTPsmN_1_10)

mid-2010s. Why was Electronic Dance Music, or EDM, able to flourish, when only ten years prior, the federal government attempted to eliminate them entirely? I argue that the primary reason why Electronic Dance Music became a commercial success after the RAVE Act went into effect in 2003 is twofold: (1) after European DJ/producers became popular in Europe, American artists sought collaborations with them, bringing EDM into the American Top 40 charts, and (2) War on Drugs-era rhetoric began to fall out of favor during the 2000s, leading to more discussion surrounding legalization, decriminalization, harm reduction, education, and rehabilitation. The combination of these factors effectively ended the moral panic around the connection between raves and Ecstasy.

### **Backlash Against the RAVE Act from the Electronic Music Community and Beyond**

The Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, known by its original name, the RAVE Act, received considerable backlash from both the rave community and other sources, prior to and after its passage.<sup>4</sup> The RAVE Act aimed to eliminate Ecstasy use by holding event organizers and venue owners responsible for attendees' drug use, under the assumption that they knew that drug use was occurring on the premises; the original version of the bill introduced to Congress, as well as the name of this initial bill, specifically referred to raves as environments designed for the use of Ecstasy. Did the RAVE Act serve as a justifiable solution to the issue it aimed to address? Many argue that it was not. The primary argument against the RAVE Act was that the law was overbroad, failing to directly address the issue of drug use and violating the First Amendment

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<sup>4</sup> The version of the bill that passed as a subsection of the PROTECT Act was titled "The Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act," however, the bill was introduced under the title of the "RAVE Act" multiple times, and this is the name that the piece of legislation is most recognized by. I will therefore use the term "RAVE Act" to refer to the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, a subsection of the PROTECT Act, in this chapter.

rights of music and dance.<sup>5</sup> Ravers built a grassroots movement, filing petitions and holding protests, while outside organizations and individuals, such as the American Civil Liberties Union and conservative Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, argued against the law's violation of constitutional rights, alternately of speech and of property. Concerns surrounding the use of the RAVE Act to dampen free speech were shown to be justified after a rock concert, benefiting a pro-marijuana legalization organization, in Billings, Montana was shut down by the Drug Enforcement Administration over claims that attendees at the event can be assumed to engage in drug use. Together, these objections and events exposed the underlying problems with the RAVE Act.

While the RAVE Act, intended to prevent the sale and use of Ecstasy, solely targeted rave organizers and venue owners, prior to the bill's original introduction, government research showed that use of the drug had expanded far beyond raves. In a CSPAN interview on March 24, 2001, Deputy Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy Dr. Donald Vereen claimed that Ecstasy had, by then, "[been] used by younger and younger folks, not in raves anymore."<sup>6</sup> Further, he explained that, by 2001, "the profile of an Ecstasy user... [was] changing," from the "white, suburban teenagers" engaging in rave culture to "a younger age group" and "African American and Hispanic populations."<sup>7</sup> The RAVE Act's stated intention was to halt the trade and use of Ecstasy in the United States, yet the statute only targeted the rave, and government officials had already acknowledged that the drug's use had expanded far beyond the rave by the time the bill was introduced.

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<sup>5</sup> Erin Treacy, "The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?" *Hastings Communications and Entertainment Law Journal* 28, no. 2 (2006): 229-286, [https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1623&context=hastings\\_comm\\_ent\\_law\\_journal](https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1623&context=hastings_comm_ent_law_journal).

<sup>6</sup> "Ecstasy Drug Use," hosted by George Hager, on CSPAN, March 24, 2001, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?163395-3/ecstasy-drug>.

<sup>7</sup> "Ecstasy Drug Use," hosted by George Hager, on CSPAN.

The most notable objection to the RAVE Act is that its language was overbroad. As Erin Treacy argued in a law review article published not long after the Act went into effect, it “[was] not narrowly tailored to the government’s concededly compelling interest in battling ecstasy distribution and is therefore unconstitutional.”<sup>8</sup> An overbroad statute aims “to punish activities that are not constitutionally protected,” but, in doing so, violates First Amendment rights.<sup>9</sup> While then-Senator Joseph Biden claimed that the RAVE Act would not “prosecute legitimate law-abiding managers of stadiums, arenas, performing arts centers, licensed beverage facilities and other venues because of incidental drug use at their events,” the phrasing of the legislation allowed for the prosecution of such individuals.<sup>10</sup> The First Amendment rights violated by the RAVE Act, according to Treacy, include DJs’ right to play their music, the audiences’ right to dance, and the promoters’ right to “foster the development of electronic music by promoting such concerts.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the elimination of electronic music events entirely would cause “the audience [to lose] its opportunity to listen.”<sup>12</sup> The RAVE Act, without the necessary quantitative evidence and without regard for the constitutional rights threatened, allowed for the prosecution of venue owners and promoters for incidental drug use, illustrating just how blinded the law’s proponents were by moral panic.

Before the RAVE Act passed, the electronic music community banded together in a grassroots movement to protect their right to listen to the music of their choice. In 2002, ravers

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<sup>8</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 233.

<sup>9</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 256.

<sup>10</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 263.

<sup>11</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 264.

<sup>12</sup> Treacy, “The Rave Act: A Specious Solution to the Serious Problem of Increased Ecstasy Distribution: Is It Unconstitutionally Overbroad?” 265.

put forth a petition with “nearly 10,000 signatures... collected over the Internet in five days,” which stated that the RAVE Act “is a serious threat to civil liberties, freedom of speech and the right to dance.”<sup>13</sup> At this time, the internet was still in its infancy; 10,000 signatures in five days was a stunning feat. Ravers from 49 of the 50 states signed the petition – a telling sign of how widespread raves were by the time the legislation was promulgated.<sup>14</sup> Luciana Lopez, a raver and “copy editor for a science journal” from Washington, D.C. who “neither [drank] nor [used] drugs – but [did] wear green and blue wigs to raves,” was one of the many who claimed that she attended raves for the music and the culture, not for the drugs.<sup>15</sup> In Los Angeles, DJs and ravers, dressed in rave apparel and carrying anti-War on Drugs signage, held a protest at the Federal Building “[fighting] for EDM culture rights.”<sup>16</sup> The ravers’ petitions and protests garnered significant attention, convincing even conservative Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, a co-sponsor of the original RAVE Act, to express his concern about the bill’s violations of property owners’ rights as the PROTECT Act was awaiting signature by President George W. Bush in April 2003.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the grassroots petitions and protests from the ravers themselves, the American Civil Liberties Union, comprised of the United States’ foremost proponents of maintaining and defending its citizens’ rights, defended ravers against congresspeople’s arguments in favor of the RAVE Act. The American Civil Liberties Union helped to defend ravers’ First Amendment

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<sup>13</sup> David Montgomery, “Ravers Against the Machine,” *Washington Post*, July 18, 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/07/18/ravers-against-the-machine/d5f8d828-ce3c-471f-a06a-26055a1a8ada/>.

<sup>14</sup> Montgomery, “Ravers Against the Machine.”

<sup>15</sup> Montgomery, “Ravers Against the Machine.”

<sup>16</sup> Michael Tullberg, “EDM Culture Yesterday 004: “R.A.V.E. Act” Protest at the Federal Building in LA, 2002,” *Magnetic Magazine*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.magneticmag.com/2012/08/edm-culture-yesterday-004-r-a-v-e-act-protest-at-the-federal-building-in-la-2002/>.

<sup>17</sup> Hein Online, “Congressional Record,” April 10, 2003, [https://heinonline-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/HOL/Page?collection=congrecc&handle=hein.congrecc/crd1490058&id=296&men\\_tab=srchresults](https://heinonline-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/HOL/Page?collection=congrecc&handle=hein.congrecc/crd1490058&id=296&men_tab=srchresults), S5147.

rights at the very beginning of the government’s attack, with ACLU attorney Graham Boyd defending Disco Donnie in his trial.<sup>18</sup> On their website, the ACLU claimed that the RAVE Act “unfairly punishes businesses for the crimes of their customers... even if they were not involved in drugs in any way.”<sup>19</sup> The ACLU bolstered the ravers’ arguments, stating that the law “chills free speech because promoters and venue-owners may cancel events for fear of prosecution.”<sup>20</sup>

Further, the American Civil Liberties Union reiterated the point that:

Existing law already makes it a crime to sell drugs or to help other people sell drugs. The federal government has the ability under existing law to imprison nightclub owners or their employees who sell or distribute drugs. The RAVE Act is a political overreaction to the tragic, yet relatively small number of deaths among young people either at raves or after using ecstasy. The law is so broad it’s like banning cars because some teenagers get in traffic accidents.<sup>21</sup>

The government’s overblown and legally unnecessary reaction to drug use among ravers demonstrates the strength of the moral panic against raves as the primary cause of Ecstasy use. The ravers and ACLU’s concerns were not unwarranted. In June 2003, only a couple of months after the statute was passed, the RAVE Act was used to shut down a fundraiser for a chapter of NORML/Students for Sensible Drug Policy in Billings, Montana.<sup>22</sup> The organization’s fundraiser was a rock concert at a venue in Billings, which had previously hosted “similar concerts... without incident.”<sup>23</sup> Because the organization supported the legalization of marijuana, the Drug

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<sup>18</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>19</sup> “DEA Must Not Be Allowed to Chill Speech or Shut Down Electronic Music Events,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.aclu.org/other/dea-must-not-be-allowed-chill-speech-or-shut-down-electronic-music-events#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20RAVE%20Act,other%20persons%20on%20their%20property>.

<sup>20</sup> “DEA Must Not Be Allowed to Chill Speech or Shut Down Electronic Music Events,” *American Civil Liberties Union*.

<sup>21</sup> “DEA Must Not Be Allowed to Chill Speech or Shut Down Electronic Music Events,” *American Civil Liberties Union*.

<sup>22</sup> NORML, “DEA Abuses Authority Under New Federal ‘RAVE Act’ To Trample First Amendment. Venue Pulls Scheduled Montana NORAML Fundraiser After Threats from the DEA,” *NORML*, June 12, 2003, <https://norml.org/news/2003/06/12/dea-abuses-authority-under-new-federal-rave-act-to-trample-first-amendmentvenue-pulls-scheduled-montana-noraml-fundraiser-after-threats-from-the-dea/>.

<sup>23</sup> NORML, “DEA Abuses Authority Under New Federal ‘RAVE Act’ To Trample First Amendment. Venue Pulls Scheduled Montana NORAML Fundraiser After Threats from the DEA,” *NORML*.

Enforcement Administration, under the RAVE Act, claimed that there would likely be drug use at the concert.<sup>24</sup> Without any evidence beyond the organization's stated political goal, the DEA successfully stopped the event from occurring, "quashing free speech and preventing groups like NORML and SSDP from raising funds and registering voters to advocate for a position which runs contrary to the federal government's."<sup>25</sup> The use of the RAVE Act in Billings sparked public outrage, prompting the DEA to yet again claim that the statute would not be used against "legitimate property owners and event promoters just because a patron engages in illegal drug activity on their property."<sup>26</sup> Such promises had been made prior to the statute's passage, yet clearly, the vague terminology of the statute did little to prevent such prosecution.<sup>27</sup>

### **Effects of the RAVE Act on the Electronic Music Community**

The RAVE Act had two large-scale, long-term effects on the U.S. electronic music community. The RAVE Act's vague terminology regarding venue owners' or promoters' knowledge of drug use on the premises led to significant safety issues at electronic music events after the statute passed. According to multiple sources, in the years directly following the passage of the RAVE Act, some promoters purposely avoided hosting medics onsite and organizations such as DanceSafe, which advocate for drug education and provide free drug testing kits, as doing so would imply knowledge of drug use at the event. In addition, in more extreme cases, employees of venues hosting raves purposely did not seek medical attention for

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<sup>24</sup> NORML, "DEA Abuses Authority Under New Federal 'RAVE Act' To Trample First Amendment. Venue Pulls Scheduled Montana NORAML Fundraiser After Threats from the DEA," *NORML*.

<sup>25</sup> NORML, "DEA Abuses Authority Under New Federal 'RAVE Act' To Trample First Amendment. Venue Pulls Scheduled Montana NORAML Fundraiser After Threats from the DEA," *NORML*.

<sup>26</sup> NORML, "DEA Abuses Authority Under New Federal 'RAVE Act' To Trample First Amendment. Venue Pulls Scheduled Montana NORAML Fundraiser After Threats from the DEA," *NORML*.

<sup>27</sup> "DEA Must Not Be Allowed to Chill Speech or Shut Down Electronic Music Events," *American Civil Liberties Union*.

attendees who had overdosed, as doing so would provide grounds for knowledge of drug use and, thus, prosecution under the RAVE Act. Secondly, the RAVE Act contributed to a large decline in the electronic music scene in the United States. Two electronic music event promoters, James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal in New Orleans and Glenn Goodhand in Atlanta, while differing in their approaches following the passage of the RAVE Act, with one continuing to hold events throughout the 2000s and one taking a brief pause, attested to the RAVE Act’s significant negative effects on the rave community.

Because the language of the RAVE Act allowed for venue owners and promoters to be held liable for incidental drug use at their events, they needed to act as if the drug use could and would never occur. The law thus forced them to avoid having emergency medical services available and to refuse to host organizations like DanceSafe at their events. Because promoters feared that acknowledgement of drug use would implicate them under the RAVE Act, they were unwilling to take measures to ensure the safety of their attendees. For example, one promoter stated that they simply could not “have a medic here [at the event] just in case what isn’t going on is actually happening.”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, promoters failed to host organizations such as DanceSafe at their events, another method of avoiding implication under the RAVE Act. DanceSafe and similar organizations “offer a variety of harm reduction services at festivals – education in how to stay cool and hydrated at the festival, cool-down areas where people can take a break from dancing, and drug testing kits to determine if a pill is cut with potentially

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<sup>28</sup> Tammy L. Anderson, “molly deaths and the failed war on drugs,” *Contexts*, November 20, 2014, <https://contexts.org/articles/molly-deaths-and-the-failed-war-on-drugs/>.



dangerous adulterants.”<sup>29</sup> According to Pasquale Rotella, the founder of the Electric Daisy Carnival and Insomniac,

I’ve actually had DanceSafe at our events a while back, but when the venue, the local authorities, and the insurers are opposed to it, you won’t have that city or location as an option. It’s already hard enough to find venues where I can organize events. Unfortunately, some people view partnering with DanceSafe as endorsing drug use rather than keeping people safe, and that can prevent producers from getting locations and organizing events. Part of me is grateful that I got denied from bringing in DanceSafe everywhere I went, because when the DEA started going after innocent event producers under the Crack House Law, having DanceSafe at an event was one of the things they looked at to justify putting them in jail for 20 years.<sup>30</sup>

Rotella’s concerns have been echoed by other promoters who feel that hosting organizations like DanceSafe at their events “could be evidence that festival organizers knowingly and intentionally allowed drug use to occur.”<sup>31</sup> The most striking example of evading implication under the RAVE Act was a situation in which “a young woman [was] vomiting a white frothy liquid” and, after another attendee alerted the security guard, “he picked her up, dragged her to the back door, and dropped her outside.”<sup>32</sup> The security guard said that “he could not [call 911]” as “the club could be liable for her drug use.”<sup>33</sup>

Liability issues were not the only threats to the American electronic music community in the years following the RAVE Act. The RAVE Act led to a significant decline in the rave scene, as promoters feared for their livelihoods and attendees simply stopped attending events. Two American rave promoters, both of whom still hold events today, agreed to interviews for this thesis. James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal, who was formerly based in New Orleans and now hosts

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<sup>29</sup> Robin Mohr, “Preventing Drug-Related Deaths at Music Festivals: Why the RAVE Act Should Be Amended to Provide an Exception for Harm Reduction Services,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 93, no. 3 (2018): 943-972, <https://discovery.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/details/5cszcquwkb?limiters=FT1%3AY%2CRV%3AY&q=raves>, 945.

<sup>30</sup> Pasquale Rotella, “I am Pasquale Rotella, CEO of Insomniac, Electric Daisy Carnival and EDMBiz. Ask Me Anything,” *Reddit*, 2015, <https://perma.cc/LAE4-U58A>.

<sup>31</sup> Mohr, “Preventing Drug-Related Deaths at Music Festivals: Why the RAVE Act Should Be Amended to Provide an Exception for Harm Reduction Services,” 946.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, “molly deaths and the failed war on drugs,” *Contexts*.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, “molly deaths and the failed war on drugs,” *Contexts*.

events throughout the United States, was one of the first promoters prosecuted for holding raves under the Crack House Statute prior to the passage of the RAVE Act, as chapter 2 discussed.

Glenn Goodhand is an Atlanta-based promoter known for holding the yearly Imagine Music Festival, held just outside of Atlanta, and weekly events in the city at Believe Music Hall with his wife, Madeleine Goodhand. Disco Donnie continued to hold events throughout the 2000s, albeit with targeted changes, while Goodhand took a few years off following the backlash of the RAVE Act. Disco Donnie described the changes he made to his events:

At that point, we went to 18 [years] and up, so everybody was an adult. We definitely started searching harder, we banned glow sticks, because this was what the government wanted us to do. They wanted us to ban glow sticks, dust masks, and all this other stuff that was synonymous with drug use to them. Now, you can have glow sticks at a Taylor Swift concert. Back then, to them, it basically meant, “This person is on drugs.” It just shows you how things that seem so innocuous now seemed so dangerous to them then... We tried as well as we could to show them that we were toeing the line.<sup>34</sup>

As he described in the interview, Donnie and other promoters made adjustments targeting the specific examples of rave culture which were cited as evidence of drug use in the “Findings” section of the original piece of legislation as an attempt to avoid prosecution under the RAVE Act.

Another example of how the RAVE Act affected the scene, Goodhand emphasized the fear associated with throwing events after Donnie’s prosecution and the passage of the RAVE Act:

Donnie was in New Orleans, and he was one of the first people prosecuted for it. It sent a ripple down every promoter’s world of fear of getting in trouble for something that we certainly never felt like we should be responsible for. All we were doing was throwing an event for people to come and have a good time. It really had nothing to do with anything that was captured within the large net of the RAVE Act... It was scary for sure... We certainly didn’t feel that it was reasonable to be held responsible for the acts of a bad character, or a bad apple inside one of our events.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal (electronic music events promoter, Disco Donnie Presents), in discussion with the author, March 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Glenn Goodhand (electronic music events promoter, Iris Presents), in discussion with the author, March 2023.

In addition to promoters' changing certain policies at events and fear of prosecution following the RAVE Act, throwing the events became much more difficult due to the negative public perception of raves, created in the years preceding and following the RAVE Act. According to Goodhand,

I think it slowed everything down. The way they painted the picture of parties and raves was so bad, was so negative, that it cast that picture to the mainstream and to the people and media in general, to the point where events started becoming less popular and parties became more and more infrequent. It was harder to get people to come out and even really hard to find venues without getting in trouble for doing the shows. So, for us, it definitely slowed down business tremendously.<sup>36</sup>

Disco Donnie echoed the difficulty promoters experienced with holding events, citing similar problems in the years following the RAVE Act, stating that “without the shows, it [electronic music] just wasn't cool anymore.”<sup>37</sup>

Despite the safety issues posed by the RAVE Act at events and the challenges promoters experienced in holding them in the years following the passage of the RAVE Act, the electronic music community ultimately survived and thrived. Both Disco Donnie and Goodhand hold numerous events each year, including large-scale festivals with tens of thousands of attendees. So, how did a musical genre on the brink of extinction turn into one of the most popular musical genres in the 2010s? The next subsection will discuss the rise of EDM, a commercialized form of the rave that achieved mainstream success in the United States only years after the passage of the RAVE Act.

### **The Rise of Electronic Dance Music (EDM)**

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<sup>36</sup> Glenn Goodhand, discussion.

<sup>37</sup> James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal, discussion.

Even as the RAVE Act produced significant negative effects on the American electronic music scene, the rise of superstar European DJ/producers during the 2000s allowed for the growth of the rave in its new form: Electronic Dance Music (EDM). Electronic music artists such as Tiesto, Daft Punk, David Guetta, Calvin Harris, Avicii, Martin Garrix, and Skrillex achieved mainstream popularity in the United States in the late 2000s and early 2010s, leading to remarkable growth. Electronic music festivals, namely Ultra Music Festival in Miami and the Electric Daisy Carnival, first held in Los Angeles and later in Las Vegas, have grown dramatically, from a few thousand attendees during the era just following the RAVE Act to hundreds of thousands by the mid-2010s. In 2010, the Electric Daisy Carnival experienced a public relations disaster after an underage attendee overdosed on Ecstasy; yet, rather than eliminating the event entirely, the festival simply moved cities after the tragedy, suggesting both that electronic music had become even more of a durable phenomenon and that promoters no longer feared RAVE Act enforcement. Moreover, EDC's parent company is set to return to the original 2010 venue for another festival in 2023. The transformation of the rave into EDM, aided by the rise in superstar DJ/producers and the dramatic growth of music festivals, reflected the change in opinion of electronic music from a source of degeneracy to a cultural mainstream.

Dutch DJ/producer Tijs Verwest, who performs under the name Tiesto, was one of the first electronic music artists to achieve mainstream success in Europe in the early 2000s.<sup>38</sup> He was discovered by Basic Beat Recordings, a local music label based in his hometown of Breda, the Netherlands, after DJing at the Sprock, "a hometown club."<sup>39</sup> In 2000, Tiesto signed with bigger label Nettwerk, releasing his mix album *Summerbreeze* worldwide.<sup>40</sup> On the album was his

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<sup>38</sup> Rob Evanoff, "Tiesto Biography," *All Music*, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/ti%C3%ABsto-mn0000591459/biography>; *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>39</sup> Evanoff, "Tiesto Biography," *All Music*.

<sup>40</sup> Evanoff, "Tiesto Biography," *All Music*.

remix of “Silence” by Delerium, which became popular across Europe, “spending four weeks in the U.K. Top Ten.”<sup>41</sup> He released his first album comprised solely of original music, *In My Memory*, in 2001, with its first single “Lethal Industry” “[reaching] number six on the Dutch pop chart.”<sup>42</sup> In 2003, Tiesto sold out a 25,000-person stadium in his home country of the Netherlands, becoming the first DJ/producer to perform for a crowd of that size.<sup>43</sup> In 2004, Tiesto was “knighted Officer of the Order of Orange,” a high honor in the Netherlands for service to one’s community.<sup>44</sup> Tiesto’s track “Parade of the Athletes” was used as “the soundtrack to the opening ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games.”<sup>45</sup> His performance at the 2004 Olympic Games was viewed by 4.6 billion people worldwide, showcasing European electronic music for a mainstream, global audience for the first time.<sup>46</sup> There was little to no discussion of Ecstasy and no moral panic about his performance prompting drug use at the Games.

In 2006, Daft Punk fostered a significant uptick in the popularity of electronic music in the United States following their performance at the Coachella Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. The multi-genre Coachella Music and Arts Festival has long been known for its tastemakers’ ability to find artists before they achieve large-scale commercial success.<sup>47</sup> Daft Punk’s appearance helped to create the space for electronic music to reach mainstream American

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<sup>41</sup> Evanoff, “Tiesto Biography,” *All Music*.

<sup>42</sup> Evanoff, “Tiesto Biography,” *All Music*.

<sup>43</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>44</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi; “Personal Decorations,” *Royal House of the Netherlands*, <https://www.royal-house.nl/topics/decorations-and-honours/personal-decorations#:~:text=This%20order%20is%20awarded%20for,%2C%20Commander%2C%20Officer%20and%20Knight>.

<sup>45</sup> Evanoff, “Tiesto Biography,” *All Music*.

<sup>46</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>47</sup> James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal, discussion.

audiences and for collaborations between DJ/producers and popular American artists.<sup>48</sup> French DJ/producers Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and Thomas Bangalter came together as Daft Punk in 1993, quickly rising to popularity in Europe, reaching the top 10 pop charts and number one on the dance charts in the UK and France in 1995 with their track “Da Funk.”<sup>49</sup> Their first album, *Homework*, which was released in 1997, achieved mainstream success in many countries and even garnered Grammy Award nominations, but failed to break through to the top 40 charts in the United States.<sup>50</sup> In 2001, Daft Punk released another album featuring the song “One More Time,” which achieved popular acclaim around the world, hitting number two on the UK pop charts and the top of the dance charts in the United States; the song “even broke into the top 40 at mainstream pop radio in the US.”<sup>51</sup> In 2006, the DJ duo performed at the Coachella Music and Arts Festival, “[captivating] the Californian festival-going masses,” and leading to a trend in which “synth-heavy songs” charted on Billboard, “dance music Google searches peaked, kids were flocking to buy mixing decks instead of guitars, and disco stars of old... were coaxed out of retirement.”<sup>52</sup> In 2007, Kanye West sampled Daft Punk’s track “Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger” in his song “Stronger,” which reached number one on the American top 40 charts and sold more than 10 million copies.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tom Taylor, “The Daft Punk Coachella comeback set that changed the course of music,” *Far Out*, February 22, 2021, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-daft-punk-coachella-comeback-set-that-changed-the-course-of-music/>.

<sup>49</sup> Bill Lamb, “Biography of Daft Punk,” *LiveAbout Dotcom*, June 29, 2017, [https://www.liveabout.com/daft-punk-profile-4144236#:~:text=Daft%20Punk%20\(%20formed%201993%20\)%20are,outfits%20when%20appearing%20in%20public..](https://www.liveabout.com/daft-punk-profile-4144236#:~:text=Daft%20Punk%20(%20formed%201993%20)%20are,outfits%20when%20appearing%20in%20public..)

<sup>50</sup> Lamb, “Biography of Daft Punk,” *LiveAbout Dotcom*.

<sup>51</sup> Lamb, “Biography of Daft Punk,” *LiveAbout Dotcom*.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, “The Daft Punk Coachella comeback set that changed the course of music,” *Far Out*.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, “The Daft Punk Coachella comeback set that changed the course of music,” *Far Out*; Shawn Grant, “Kanye West’s ‘Stronger’ is Officially a Diamond-Selling Single,” *The Source*, October 7, 2021, <https://thesource.com/2021/10/07/kanye-west-stronger-diamond/>.

While Kanye West’s “Stronger” was the first instance of electronic music’s success in American pop music, the biggest turning point for electronic music in the United States was French DJ/producer David Guetta’s 2009 collaboration with the Black Eyed Peas, “I Gotta Feeling.”<sup>54</sup> James Barton, the founder of British promotions company Cream and the former president of electronic music at Live Nation, claimed that David Guetta was “the guy that got us to where we are today.”<sup>55</sup> According to DJ/producer Afrojack, David Guetta was “by far, the reason that EDM has had such an amazing cultural success. That song introduced so many people to another form of music. They started looking in.”<sup>56</sup> Guetta’s collaboration with the Black Eyed Peas became, at the time, “the best-selling digital song of all time” according to Nielsen SoundScan’s tracking from Apple’s original online musical marketplace iTunes, and “spent 14 weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart.”<sup>57</sup> American DJ/producer Tommie Sunshine expressed his excitement at the commercialization of electronic music, “I remember hearing ‘I Gotta Feeling’ on the radio for the first time and thinking to myself: ‘This is house music! On the radio! In America!... In 2009, America woke up to what the rest of the world was listening to for 20 years.’”<sup>58</sup> Guetta’s success continued, with his song “Sexy Chick,” featuring Akon, reaching number twenty-six and his collaboration with Flo Rida, “Club Can’t Handle Me,” reaching number forty on the overall 2010 Billboard Hot 100.<sup>59</sup>

In the years following, DJs such as Calvin Harris, Avicii, Martin Garrix, and Skrillex achieved mainstream success in the United States. In 2011, Scottish DJ/producer Calvin Harris

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<sup>54</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>55</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>56</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>57</sup> Keith Caulfield, “Black Eyed Peas’ ‘I Gotta Feeling’ Breaks Digital Sales Record,” *Billboard*, April 30, 2010, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/black-eyed-peas-i-gotta-feeling-breaks-digital-sales-record-1207509/>.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew Collin, *Rave On: Global Adventures in Electronic Dance Music* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2018), 160-161.

<sup>59</sup> “2010,” *Billboard Top 100*, <http://billboardtop100of.com/2010-2/>.

released “We Found Love” with Rihanna, hitting number one on the Billboard Hot 100 for ten weeks.<sup>60</sup> Swedish DJ/producer Avicii’s track “Levels,” reached “a No. 60 peak on the Billboard Hot 100 in February 2012 – excellent for a dance near-instrumental.”<sup>61</sup> Dutch DJ/producer Martin Garrix’s first hit song, “Animals,” another largely instrumental electronic music track, released when he was just 17 years old, peaked at number 21 on Billboard’s Hot 100 charts in April 2014.<sup>62</sup> American DJ/producer Skrillex charted on the Billboard Hot 100 multiple times in 2012, with tracks such as “Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites,” “Bangarang,” “Kyoto,” and “First Of The Year (Equinox),” marking the first large-scale commercial success of an American electronic music artist.<sup>63</sup>

The boom of electronic music in the United States led to a dramatic growth in American electronic music festivals, pseudo-raves referred to by a different name to avoid the stigma associated with the term “rave.” The two biggest American electronic music festivals are Ultra Music Festival and the Electric Daisy Carnival, both of which began as yearly events prior to the passage of the RAVE Act. Ultra Music Festival started on the beaches of Miami “with 10,000 people” in 1999.<sup>64</sup> The festival slowly grew over the course of the 2000s, but according to founder Russell Faibisch, “one year, it really exploded. It [the audience] went up over 100,000.”<sup>65</sup> By 2017, the festival had garnered an audience of over 165,000 people in one weekend.<sup>66</sup> The first Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC) was held by Pasquale Rotella at the Shrine

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<sup>60</sup> “Calvin Harris,” *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/calvin-harris/>.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Unterberger, “Ten Reasons Why Avicii’s ‘Levels’ Is One of the Greatest Songs of All Time,” *Billboard*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/avicii-levels-greatest-songs-of-all-time-8358624/>.

<sup>62</sup> “Martin Garrix,” *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/martin-garrix/>; *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>63</sup> “Skrillex,” *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/skrillex/>.

<sup>64</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi; Jack Spilsbury, “A brief history of Ultra Music Festival,” *We Rave You*, March 7, 2022, <https://weraveyou.com/2022/03/brief-history-on-ultra-music-festival/>.

<sup>65</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>66</sup> Alexis, “The Evolution of Ultra Music Festival: 20 Years of Music,” *Red Static Media*, January 11, 2018, <https://staticrededm.wordpress.com/2018/01/11/the-evolution-of-ultra-music-festival-20-years-of-music/>.



Expo Hall in Los Angeles in 1997.<sup>67</sup> According to Disco Donnie, who became Rotella's partner in producing EDC events, "in 2002, we did about 6,000 people. And then, in 2003, we did about 10,000. Barely trickling up."<sup>68</sup> In 2010, EDC hosted "more than 185,000 techno, electro, house and trance fans" at the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles, the "biggest ever Electric Daisy Carnival to date."<sup>69</sup> At the time, the age limit to attend the festival was 16 years old, however, a 15-year-old attended the festival and overdosed on Ecstasy, fueling uproar akin to that of the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>70</sup> EDC 2010 resurrected the debate about whether all festivals, or "commercial raves, should be banned fully."<sup>71</sup> The Electric Daisy Carnival managed to diffuse the nascent panic, in part by moving to Las Vegas the following year and raising the festival's age limit to 18.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, even the local government in Los Angeles County avoided a panic-induced reaction to the tragedy; rather than banning raves, it instead "introduced a groundbreaking program that was designed to reduce harm and promote safety" – a far more progressive response than the RAVE Act, which, in some cases, had actually led promoters to do the opposite.<sup>73</sup>

The rise of EDM marked the commercialization of what had previously only been an underground movement in the United States. Star European DJ/producers, who had become

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<sup>67</sup> Collin, *Rave On*, 150-151.

<sup>68</sup> *What We Started*, directed by Bert Marcus and Cyrus Saidi.

<sup>69</sup> Orange County Register, "Electric Daisy Carnival draws nearly 200,000 to the Coliseum," *Orange County Register*, June 29, 2010, <https://www.ocregister.com/2010/06/29/electric-daisy-carnival-draws-nearly-200000-to-the-coliseum/>; Collin, *Rave On*, 152.

<sup>70</sup> Ellie Mullins, "'The Last Dance' documentary offers insight into the fallout between EDC and Los Angeles," *We Rave You*, October 7, 2019, <https://weraveyou.com/2019/10/the-last-dance-documentary-offers-insight-into-the-fallout-between-edc-and-los-angeles/#:~:text=In%202010%2C%20the%20event%20came,hospitalised%20after%20a%20crowd%20stampede.>

<sup>58</sup> Mullins, "'The Last Dance' documentary offers insight into the fallout between EDC and Los Angeles," *We Rave You*.

<sup>59</sup> Mullins, "'The Last Dance' documentary offers insight into the fallout between EDC and Los Angeles," *We Rave You*.

<sup>73</sup> Mullins, "'The Last Dance' documentary offers insight into the fallout between EDC and Los Angeles," *We Rave You*.

mainstream across the Atlantic Ocean beginning in the 1990s, ultimately led to the popularization and commercialization of electronic music in the United States, after popular American artists sampled, and later collaborated with, them. The ever-increasing popularity of these DJs fueled the music festivals still left over from the rave era, causing them to become massive events with hundreds of thousands of attendees each year. Even after the tragic death of a 15-year-old attendee at the Electric Daisy Carnival in 2010, the festival managed to make changes and survive, rather than end completely; by then, the conversation had shifted, and the government of L.A. County decided to emphasize harm reduction and safety, rather than ban electronic music events outright. The last subsection of this chapter will examine the changing attitudes surrounding drug use in the United States, which contributed to the drastically different governmental reaction to drug deaths at electronic music events a mere seven years after the passage of the RAVE Act.

### **Shifting Opinions About Drugs in the United States**

The story presented above provides a clear picture of the rise of EDM, yet it fails to illustrate exactly *why* these European, and later American, artists were able to break through to the American mainstream during the late 2000s and early 2010s, only years after the RAVE Act passed. American public opinion surrounding drugs and drug use changed significantly since the late 1990s and early 2000s, partly due to the acknowledgement of the devastating impacts of the War on Drugs-era criminalization of drug users and addicts; the increasingly prominent issue of the opioid crisis, which stemmed from legal, non-recreational drug use; and the rising support for legalization of medicinal and recreational drugs, including marijuana and psilocybin. These changes can be seen in the shifted drug policies of current President Joseph R. Biden, a former

proponent of War on Drugs policies and the main supporter of the RAVE Act, who has since backtracked on several of his earlier policy goals. Because American society has largely shifted away from criminalizing drug users and addicts, much of the stigma which formerly impacted ravers did not follow when EDM rose to prominence.

The modern War on Drugs, introduced by President Richard Nixon in 1971, aimed to eliminate drug use in the United States entirely.<sup>74</sup> Over the last twenty years, many Americans have acknowledged several of the War's devastating residual effects: rising crime, the spread of AIDS, increased jail populations, the racialization of the American prison system, and the failure to use drugs that could prove useful to those with illnesses, as those drugs have been known for recreational use.<sup>75</sup> Rather than rid the country of the drug trade, an illicit market, largely run by gangs, developed to satiate the demand for drugs in the United States; this black market "[has] caused about 10,000 homicides a year."<sup>76</sup> The spread of AIDS "by using dirty needles to inject drugs" causes "more than a third" of infection.<sup>77</sup> The criminal justice system has seen what many consider the largest effects of the Drug War: "over 100,000 people are in federal, state, and local prisons for simply possessing (not selling) illicit drugs."<sup>78</sup> In 2002, African Americans comprised 47% of those in state prisons for drug-related convictions, despite only "[constituting] about 15 percent of illicit drug users."<sup>79</sup> Additionally, illicit drugs, such as heroin and marijuana, can be medically beneficial, but due to their reputations as recreational drugs, have often been

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<sup>74</sup> David Farber, ed., *The War on Drugs: A History*, (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 17.

<sup>75</sup> Arthur Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War* (New York: Routledge, 2008), [https://www.taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203886595/drugs-arthur-benavie](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203886595/drugs-arthur-benavie), 4.

<sup>76</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 4.

<sup>79</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 4.

overlooked as forms of treatment.<sup>80</sup> These stark statistics have caused shifts in opinion about the War on Drugs in the United States.

In addition to the fallout from the War on Drugs, the opioid crisis has also contributed to changing opinions surrounding drug use and addiction in the United States. The opioid crisis first became a large-scale problem in the United States in 1999, after prescription opioid deaths rose to alarming numbers.<sup>81</sup> In 2010, the second wave of the opioid crisis began, as those addicted to prescription opioids started to use, and overdose from, heroin.<sup>82</sup> In 2013, the third wave of the opioid crisis began; this third wave differs from the first two as it was largely the result of synthetic opioid overdoses, such as those involving fentanyl, often taken by mistake after being laced into other illicit drugs.<sup>83</sup> Since 1999, over 564,000 Americans have died from opioid overdoses.<sup>84</sup> Many of those addicted were initially prescribed opioids by doctors in doses too high or with prescription periods too long, leading to changes in public opinion from viewing opioid addicts as criminals to viewing them as victims of over-prescription. In fact, in February 2023, the Food and Drug Administration “unanimously recommended that Narcan, the overdose-reversing nasal spray, be made widely available without a prescription.”<sup>85</sup> If this recommendation is followed, it would be yet another way in which the American government could continue the trend toward harm reduction measures and away from criminalization. In the years prior to and directly following the RAVE Act, harm reduction measures, as advocated by

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<sup>80</sup> Benavie, *Drugs: America's Holy War*, 4.

<sup>81</sup> “Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html>.

<sup>82</sup> “Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.

<sup>83</sup> “Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.

<sup>84</sup> “Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.

<sup>85</sup> Jan Hoffman, “Narcan Is Safe to Sell Over the Counter, Advisers to the F.D.A Conclude,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/15/health/narcan-nalaxone-drug-stores.html#:~:text=Narcan%3A%20The%20overdose%2Dreversing%20nasal,advisory%20panels%20recommendations>.

groups in the rave community such as DanceSafe, were viewed as radical; these ideas are now being increasingly accepted by the American public and government.

In addition, despite federal drug laws, Americans in various states have voted for the legalization of medicinal and recreational drugs, including marijuana and psilocybin. In the 1970s, Oregon, Maine, and Alaska decriminalized marijuana, while New Mexico briefly legalized medicinal marijuana.<sup>86</sup> The more recent trend toward legalization started in 1996, when California became the first state to legalize medicinal marijuana.<sup>87</sup> In 2012, both Colorado and Washington led the way toward recreational legalization, and by 2023, recreational marijuana became legal in 21 states.<sup>88</sup> The movement toward legalizing marijuana has primarily “come from citizen support at the state level,” and these efforts have been lauded “as the triumph of average citizens over a draconian legal system.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, many citizens have voted for the legalization of medicinal and recreational psilocybin, a hallucinogenic drug found in a type of mushroom.<sup>90</sup> Psilocybin has been shown to aid those with depression, anxiety, “PTSD, anorexia, chronic pain, fibromyalgia, and addiction.”<sup>91</sup> Oregon legalized psilocybin in 2020 through a ballot initiative, followed by Colorado, which will allow individuals to consume psilocybin in licensed state facilities beginning in 2024.<sup>92</sup> The state-level ballot initiatives dedicated toward

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<sup>86</sup> Scott Martin, “A Brief History of Marijuana Law in America,” *Time*, April 20, 2016, <https://time.com/4298038/marijuana-history-in-america/>.

<sup>87</sup> Sarah Trumble, “Timeline of State Marijuana Legalization Laws,” *Third Way*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.thirdway.org/infographic/timeline-of-state-marijuana-legalization-laws>.

<sup>88</sup> Trumble, “Timeline of State Marijuana Legalization Laws,” *Third Way*, April 19, 2017; “Recreational Cannabis now Legal in 21 States: Cannabis Electoral Impacts November 2022,” *First Advantage*, November 14, 2022, <https://fadv.com/blog/recreational-cannabis-now-legal-in-21-states-cannabis-electoral-impacts-november-2022/#:~:text=Recreational%20Cannabis%20now%20Legal%20in%2021%20States%3A%20Cannabis%20Electora1%20Impacts%20November%202022>.

<sup>89</sup> Martin, “A Brief History of Marijuana Law in America,” *Time*.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Ollove, “More States May Legalize Psychedelic Mushrooms,” *Pew*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2022/07/15/more-states-may-legalize-psychedelic-mushrooms>.

<sup>91</sup> Ollove, “More States May Legalize Psychedelic Mushrooms,” *Pew*.

<sup>92</sup> Ollove, “More States May Legalize Psychedelic Mushrooms,” *Pew*.

legalizing medicinal and recreational marijuana and psilocybin illustrate a clear change in public opinion from the War on Drugs-era policies which aimed to end all drug use.

The stark changes in American public opinion surrounding drug use can be seen through one of the War's foremost proponents: current President Joseph R. Biden. President Biden authored the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which created the 100-to-1 sentencing disparity for crack cocaine, more popular among minority populations, and powder cocaine, primarily used by white Americans; the 1994 crime bill, which included "the federal 'Three Strikes' law, provided federal funding for 'drug courts' as a diversion program and gave states the funding to hire 100,000 police officers and states billions in funding to build new prisons"; and the various iterations of the RAVE Act, the legislation discussed in this thesis.<sup>93</sup> In addition, in 1989, President Biden claimed that then-President George H.W. Bush's drug policies were "not tough enough, bold enough, or imaginative enough to meet the crisis at hand."<sup>94</sup> Yet, beginning in the early 2010s, even Biden backtracked on his anti-drug policies. In 2010, as vice president, Biden assisted President Barack Obama in reducing the sentencing disparity that he helped to create, claiming that crack cocaine and powder cocaine "[are] *not* different, but it [the sentencing disparity] has trapped an entire generation."<sup>95</sup> In addition, in 2020, he claimed that "no American should be incarcerated for addiction" and "endorsed a national decriminalization of marijuana."<sup>96</sup> As president, in October 2022, Biden proclaimed that he would "[pardon] all federal offenders

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<sup>93</sup> Zachary Siegel, "How Joe Biden's Policies Made the Opioid Crisis Harder to Treat," *Politico*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/05/23/joe-biden-2020-drug-war-policies-opioid-crisis-226933/>.

<sup>94</sup> Siegel, "How Joe Biden's Policies Made the Opioid Crisis Harder to Treat," *Politico*.

<sup>95</sup> Siegel, "How Joe Biden's Policies Made the Opioid Crisis Harder to Treat," *Politico*.

<sup>96</sup> Brian Mann, "After 50 Years Of The War on Drugs, 'What Good Is It Doing For Us?'" *NPR*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/17/1006495476/after-50-years-of-the-war-on-drugs-what-good-is-it-doing-for-us>.

who were convicted of simple marijuana possession.”<sup>97</sup> Later that year, the President signed into law a bill expanding access to research on marijuana.<sup>98</sup>

While these developments are all quite recent, and the situation remains complex and evolving, this survey of key contemporary shifts suggests that there is a clear trend away from War on Drugs-era rhetoric, even if not all Americans, in or out of government, are yet on board with this new approach. It remains to be seen whether these trends toward legalization, decriminalization, harm reduction, education, and rehabilitation will continue.

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The RAVE Act had the potential to eliminate the American rave scene entirely. Despite grassroots protests and petitions spearheaded by the ravers themselves and support from organizations such as the ACLU, who claimed that the RAVE Act violated the First Amendment, the statute passed. In the years directly following the passage of the RAVE Act, some event promoters made decisions detrimental to the safety of their attendees, such as lacking emergency medical attention and drug education organizations such as DanceSafe. Promoters James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal and Glenn Goodhand provided firsthand accounts of the difficulties rave promoters faced in the early to mid-2000s, which included instating rules changes targeting the specific language of the RAVE Act, the fear associated with throwing events, and the decreasing numbers of attendees due to the negative public perception of their events created by the media and government. While the American rave scene was on the brink of complete collapse, electronic music continued its upward trajectory in Europe. European superstar DJs emerged and

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<sup>97</sup> Mackenzie Schoonmaker, Liz Johnson, and Amanda Thompson, “President Biden Signs Law Expanding Research on Cannabis,” *Beveridge & Diamond*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.bdlaw.com/publications/president-biden-signs-law-expanding-research-on-cannabis/#:~:text=President%20Biden's%20Cannabis%20Reform%20Agenda,convicted%20of%20simple%20marijuana%20possession..>

<sup>98</sup> Schoonmaker, Johnson, and Thompson, “President Biden Signs Law Expanding Research on Cannabis,” *Beveridge & Diamond*.

fostered the return of electronic music to the United States through now-famous performances and collaborations with popular American artists, creating a new term for the rave: EDM. The return of electronic music to the United States coincided with shifting opinions surrounding drug policy in the United States, from War on Drugs-era criminalization to legalization, decriminalization, harm reduction, education, and rehabilitation, providing the basis for why exactly electronic music could achieve mainstream success so soon after the Rave Panic.

The Drug War fueled a moral panic against electronic music and raves, continuing the 20<sup>th</sup> century trend of moral panics related to music-drug associations. This moral panic, primarily grounded in fear of corrupting the youth rather than fact, had significant negative effects on the electronic music community in the United States – and many believed this moral panic would eliminate the American rave entirely. The Rave Panic was one of the last gasps of the War on Drugs, leaving room for electronic music to return stronger. While the War on Drugs is not officially over yet, the public perception of drug use and addiction in the United States has certainly changed, and, in the long run, the Rave Panic failed to achieve its proponents' objectives.



## Conclusion

In May 2021, I started working for Iris Presents, an Atlanta-based electronic music event and promotion company that runs Imagine Music Festival, the largest electronic music event in Georgia, and Believe Music Hall, an intimate venue in downtown Atlanta. On my first day of working for Iris, my bosses told me about its history: they began holding events in 1996, before halting operations between 2005 and 2011 due to the threat of criminal prosecution, specifically under a provision in the PROTECT ACT, or “Amber Alert” bill, which held promoters and property owners liable for attendees’ drug usage.<sup>1</sup> As an avid electronic music fan during a time of commercialized 300,000-person music festivals with performances by multi-millionaire DJs, I was surprised to learn about the legal crackdowns on electronic music events faced by an earlier generation.

My curiosity, as well as the general lack of knowledge about the subject among my peers, led me to wonder: How did rave culture in the United States during the 1990s and early 2000s provoke mainstream cultural and legal backlash? After conducting preliminary research, I realized that the primary source of backlash against the rave scene was its association with drug use, yet this association should not have been enough to propose the elimination of the musical genre and its events as a whole. During the 1990s and early 2000s, American society was still deeply engrained in War on Drugs ideology, and its subscribers believed that any and all recreational drug use is morally wrong and criminal action must be taken against those responsible. War on Drugs ideology clearly influenced the Rave Panic. I then wondered, how did

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<sup>1</sup> “DEA Must Not Be Allowed to Chill Speech or Shut Down Electronic Music Events,” American Civil Liberties Union, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.aclu.org/other/dea-must-not-be-allowed-chill-speech-or-shut-down-electronic-music-events#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20RAVE%20Act,other%20persons%20on%20their%20property.>

the electronic music community rebound from this moral panic, sufficiently so that Iris Presents was able to resume operations in 2011?

The central argument of this thesis had two parts: one focusing on the roots of the Rave Panic, and one discussing how electronic music ultimately survived. This thesis argued that War on Drugs-era ideas and rhetoric, already well-established American cultural and political mainstays by the time raves arose during the 1990s, significantly influenced the broader societal and legal reaction to raves, as the novelty of both the events and Ecstasy were seen as threats to America's youth. Electronic music in the United States declined in the years following the RAVE Act, yet electronic music is much more widespread today than at the height of the rave movement. As such, this thesis also argued that the Rave Panic was one of the last gasps of the War on Drugs, and as public opinion has largely shifted from criminalization of drug users and addicts toward different, more tolerant approaches during the late 2000s and early 2010s, electronic music from Europe had room to grow in popularity without the same prejudice ravers experienced during the 1990s and early 2000s.

As was discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, the five primary elements of moral panics, as coined by Stanley Cohen, are: (1) Concern, (2) Hostility, (3) Consensus, (4) Disproportionality, and (5) Volatility.<sup>2</sup> Raves provoked concern throughout the United States over their association with drug use, causing many to feel hostility towards them and their organizers. The mainstream media and Partnership for a Drug-Free America fueled this idea, leading to an apparent consensus among many citizens and politicians that raves were a threat, and that "something should be done."<sup>3</sup> While there was certainly an association between raves

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), xxvi-xxvii, <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203828250/folk-devils-moral-panics-stanley-cohen>.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxvi-xxvii.

and Ecstasy, this association was overexaggerated, and thus, the response to raves was disproportional to the actual threat. Lastly, the Rave Panic was volatile, beginning and ending fairly quickly.

The Rave Panic was not the first 20<sup>th</sup>-century moral panic which arose due to the association between a given musical genre and drug use; moral panics surrounding jazz, the 1960s countercultural movement, and rock 'n' roll followed a similar pattern earlier in the century. However, maybe the Rave Panic will be the last of these War on Drugs-inspired panics. While the War on Drugs is not officially over, the American public's opinions surrounding drug use and addiction have shifted significantly since anti-rave federal legislation was passed in 2003. In addition, the domination of rap music, which discusses drug use far more explicitly than electronic music, on the pop charts in the United States further makes another moral panic surrounding a musical genre's association with drug use unlikely.

While I believe another moral panic following this pattern is improbable, this thesis is a reminder that there are multiple sides of every story, and one's perception is not always a perfect reflection of reality. During the Rave Panic, many people truly believed that raves were held for the sole purpose of drug use and trade, and that rave organizers were killing people; yet the ravers themselves embraced a culture of community and tolerance built around a shared love of electronic music and dance. Had Americans not realized the harms of the decades-long War on Drugs, maybe the electronic music community would not have rebounded. I, for one, am extremely glad that it did.

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