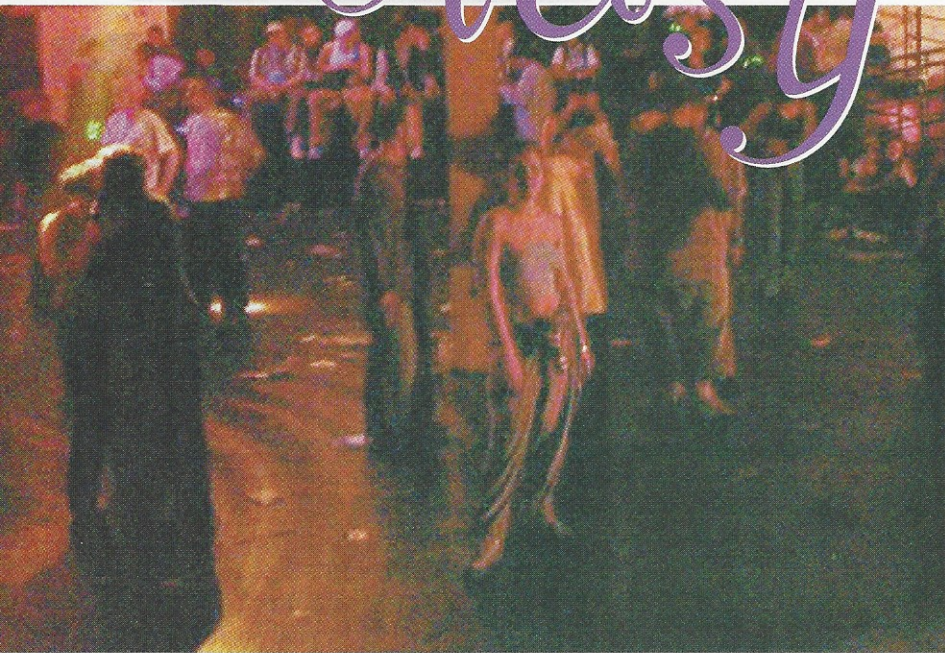


Raves

The Agony and the Ecstasy



Musical movements have united teens for generations, and the techno-driven rave scene of recent years is no different. “Popular music is an essential part of adolescent culture,” says Donald F. Roberts, Ph.D., professor of communication at Stanford University in Stanford, CA, and co-author of *It’s Not Only Rock and Roll: Popular Music in the Lives of Adolescents* (Hampton Press, 1998). “It deals with issues that are important to them: individuality, freedom, relationships and independence from authority.” Around the junior high school years, kids get assigned to groups, says Roberts. “Once they’re put in a sub-group that, among other things, is defined by music, they begin to take on that definition.”

Raves were once considered safe havens where the techno-loving masses could celebrate life and all its diversity while dancing 'til dawn. But with drugs becoming a main attraction at these massive parties, the true spirit of club culture—not to mention the lives of young ravers—could be at risk. Here, we look at the scene’s highs and lows and what you need to know if you want to go.

By Leigh Bardugo and Alexa Joy Sherman

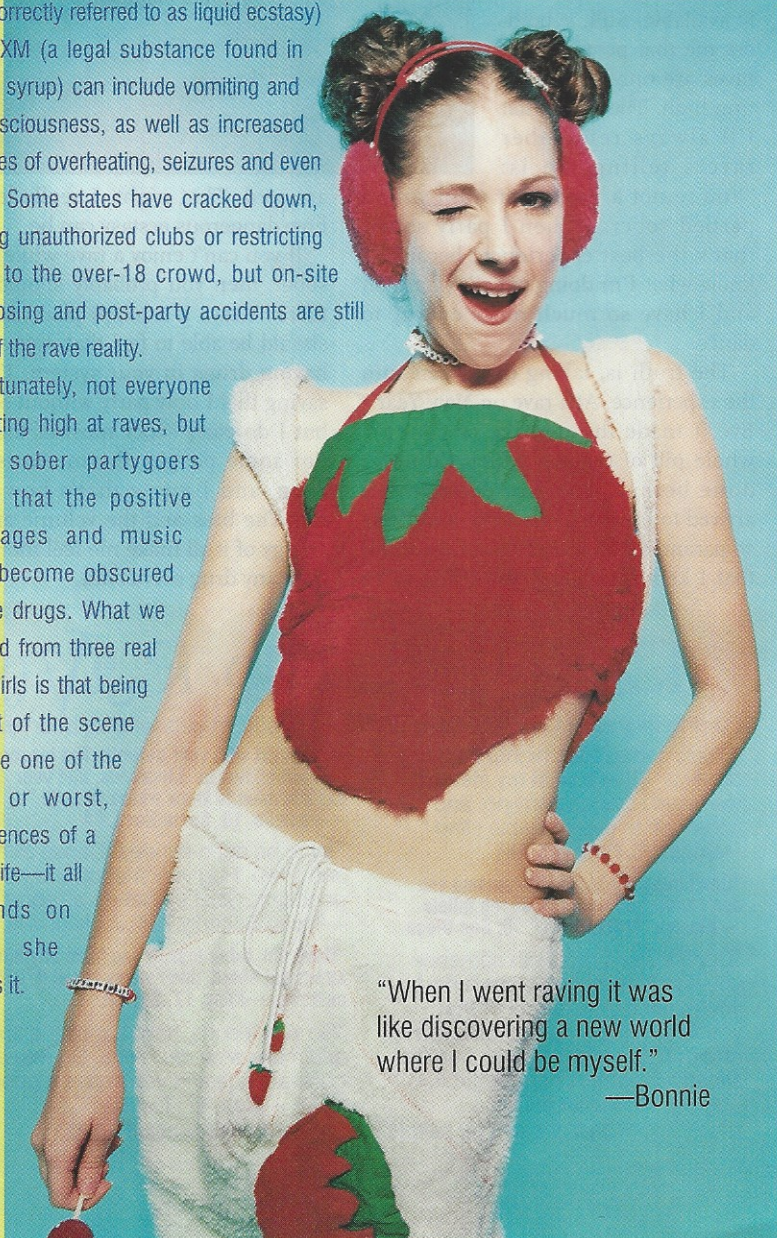
Indeed, the pulsating parties known as raves have given rise to a hip club culture since making their way from Europe to the States in the early 1990s. The hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people who flock to giant warehouses, soundstages or underground locations to groove the whole night away have a distinct fashion sensibility—big, baggy pants, glowing jewelry, funky hats and shimmery makeup—not to mention a unique raver identity.

For many ravers, the music and the message are the main attractions. The electronic sounds create an energetic party atmosphere, and the philosophy of PLUR (peace, love, unity, respect)—a sort of cyberhippie mantra adopted by ravers—gives many a newfound sense of belonging. You don't have to be prom queen, class clown or star student to be embraced by a roomful of ravers. "If someone is struggling to find acceptance, they might find that in the music," says Roberts. "When they finally show up at a rave on a certain night and dress a certain way, they could suddenly find a bunch of friends."

But within the friendly, inviting rave atmosphere is also a prevalence of drugs. Getting high is a huge part of the scene, and many don't realize—or choose to ignore—the risks involved. That's why groups like DanceSafe, a nonprofit organization that promotes health and safety in the rave and club communities, are hitting the parties to spread the word on raving safely. While they stress that abstinence is the best way to avoid harm, they realize that some ravers are still going to do drugs. "If ravers are going to use, we want them to use as safely as possible," says Emanuel Sferios, DanceSafe's founder and director.

In addition to addressing issues like hearing damage and the dangers of driving after a rave, DanceSafe educates ravers about club drugs. They warn that the side effects of drugs like ecstasy (a.k.a. E, X, XTC or MDMA), ketamine (a.k.a. K or special K), G (incorrectly referred to as liquid ecstasy) and DXM (a legal substance found in cough syrup) can include vomiting and unconsciousness, as well as increased chances of overheating, seizures and even death. Some states have cracked down, closing unauthorized clubs or restricting raves to the over-18 crowd, but on-site overdosing and post-party accidents are still part of the rave reality.

Fortunately, not everyone is getting high at raves, but even sober partygoers agree that the positive messages and music have become obscured by the drugs. What we learned from three real rave girls is that being a part of the scene can be one of the best, or worst, experiences of a girl's life—it all depends on what she makes it.



"When I went raving it was like discovering a new world where I could be myself."

—Bonnie

DOUBLE-EDGED DANCING **Bonnie, 16** **Bellevue, WA**

I went to my first rave on my 14th birthday. It was an amazing experience. I loved everyone—probably partly because I had taken E—but I also noticed that everyone was friendly and open-minded. They wore whatever they wanted, and it didn't matter if they couldn't dance. There were costumes and toys, and it was just a really positive, powerful experience.

It was so different from my everyday life. I went to a very expensive private school where everyone wore Abercrombie & Fitch. There was all this pressure to fit in, and I wasn't doing well academically. When I went raving, it was like discovering a new world where I could be myself. There was a whole culture behind it—a way to dress, positive energy and the philosophy of peace, love, unity and respect.

I started going every weekend, and I would sew elaborate costumes for myself. I had one outfit with big, white fur pants and a giant strawberry pocket, so people started calling me Strawberry Girl. I sneaked out my window and left notes on my door saying I'd walked to Denny's, in case my parents came to my room before I got back. After a while, they caught me and I got grounded. At first, I told them I'd just been going to Seattle to hang out, so when I finally told them where I'd been going, they were actually relieved. They figured that at least raves had security guards and it was safer than me wandering the city streets.

But it wasn't always safe. So many people were high out of their heads. That's what a lot of the parties became: just getting high. Ecstasy makes it easier to make friends. You think, One more time won't matter; it's not like I'm going to die. But I know of three people in Seattle alone who've died from ecstasy overdoses. There were some bad pills going around at the time. It was sad, because as more people discovered raves and they got more popular, they became more about the drugs than the music, and authorities tried to shut down the scene.

My friends at raves told me to stop taking drugs, but I didn't listen. I was

already out of control. Then, at 15, I had a breakdown. I went to bed one night and just stayed there for a couple of weeks. I thought I was being responsible with the drugs, but I'd been depressed all of my life and was already on Prozac, an antidepressant. I was stupid to think I could take other drugs with that. It really messed up the chemicals in my brain. Besides, when you come down from E, you feel even more depressed.

I finally realized I needed help. I wanted to get my life on track. I had dreams to pursue and I knew I'd never go for any of them if I continued the way I was going. So I stopped raving and got back into therapy.

Now I'm at a new school and I'm working on becoming a singer-songwriter. I've also gotten back into raving. But I've finally realized that it's about the experience, not the drugs. I go sober and have an even better time. I can dance longer and stay up later and I feel so much better the next day. I started experimenting with drugs way too young, but at least I realized it before it was too late. Ravers are getting younger and younger—I hope they're more careful than I was.

DANCING CLEAN

Lisa, 17
Tarzana, CA

I went to my first rave in November 1999 with my older sister and some of my friends. That first night, I didn't know what to expect or what to wear. I must have changed my outfit about six times before I finally decided on a blue tank top and big, baggy pants. My friend made my hair look all crazy. When we first walked in, I felt kind of weird—like I didn't belong. But when I walked on the dance floor, it was such a great feeling—the music, the lights and everybody's smiling faces.

At that moment, I realized I loved raving. I danced a lot and made some great friends. My sister met this big group of awesome people. They had the best vibe, and they even gave me a couple of necklaces, which I still have.

The thing I love most about raving is the message of PLUR. It's really had a major impact on me. Before I started raving, I had a lot of self-esteem issues, which led to eating disorders. But at a

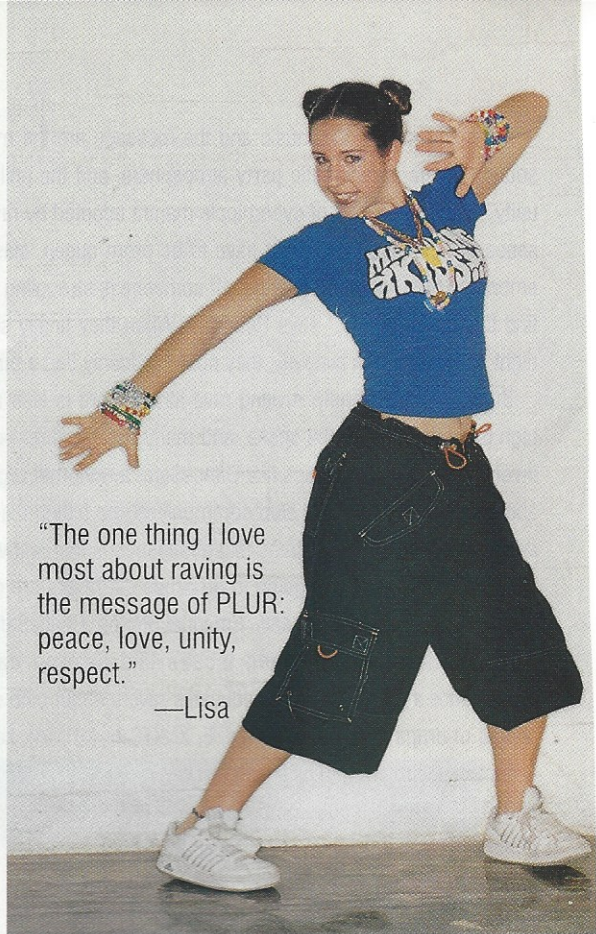
rave, there seems to be happiness everywhere and there's no drama to deal with. I feel acceptance from people like I've never felt before, especially when I pass along a contagious smile. I also love the fact that I go raving with my sister, mostly on weekends when she's home from college. We both think that the experience has brought us closer together.

I've never really been into drugs, but I did try ecstasy for the first time at a rave. No alcohol is served at the raves I go to, but drugs are definitely available. Still, it bothers me that people think raves are only about getting high. The thing that I'll always remember ravers telling me is:

"You're not a true raver until you've partied sober." When I party sober, that's the best experience, because I know what I'm doing, what's going on and I have so much more energy to dance.

The truth is, taking drugs can ruin the experience. At a rave on New Year's Eve, I made the mistake of taking a whole pill of ecstasy, which I'd never done before. The fire department arrived to break up the party, and I was so paranoid and scared out of my mind that I kept thinking I was going to be

—Lisa



"The one thing I love most about raving is the message of PLUR: peace, love, unity, respect."

—Lisa

arrested. That night, I really learned how dangerous ecstasy can be.

If you can't enjoy a rave while you're sober, then you probably shouldn't be there. A rave is a happy place, and you should be able to feel that way without having drugs in your system. I'm not saying that I only party without ecstasy, but I do party sober most of the time. For some people, the music is their drug, and I guess that's how I feel too: The bass and the volume and the energy of it all make me feel more alive than any drug ever could.

Rules of the Rave

Going to your first rave? Check out these tips from girls who've been there.

"Music can get you higher than any drug can. That's what my friends told me when I started partying, and I pass it on to every newbie I find."

—Suga, 25, Portland, OR

"Don't hang out alone with anyone you don't know and never sit on the toilets."

—Monica "Methedrine," 16, San Diego

"Don't leave a rave with someone you don't know, don't take a drug you're not certain about or that you're not totally comfortable taking and don't be afraid to walk out of a situation you're not comfortable in."

—Anna, 19, Marietta, OH

"Be honest with your parents. The locations can sometimes be dangerous, and your parents need to know where you are."

—Michelle, 18, Santa Rosa, CA

"Try to be open-minded. Dance all night and smile. Hug your friends and have a good time. That's what it's all about."

—Tricia "Butterfly," 24, Jacksonville, FL

"Have fun, bring toys. If you have anything to stress out about, don't worry about it 'til the next day."

—Kiley, 17, Seattle

"Go with friends, have a meeting spot and make wise decisions. Go with a good attitude and you'll have a good rave."

—Lisa, 17, Tarzana, CA

FOR MORE TIPS ON RAVING SAFELY, SEE WWW.DANCESAFE.ORG.