

REVIEW



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the return of rave

If you go down to the woods tonight... you might find a new generation dancing under the stars. We report on the illegal outdoor parties sweeping Britain once again. Pages 10-11

Britannia rules the raves again

Partying like it's 1989? These days, as rave veteran **Sarah Champion** discovers, the kids are as young as 12, the drug is laughing gas, the venues are forest glades and the music is harder and faster. One thing hasn't changed, though – trying to keep one step ahead of the police

Is this it? We pass a Little Chef and turn off the A road into a shadowy lay-by. It's the second to last Saturday in August, yet as dark as November with a steady drizzle. Our beams illuminate a chain of parked cars. One flashes in welcome, as if to say, 'Yes, you're here.' We take a slot near the rear of the convoy. A figure in a rain jacket moves along the line, urgently barking: 'The police have blocked the road, we've got to go now.' A 100 or so shapes emerge from steamed-up vehicles, bass blasting from each. The buzz is infectious, everyone primed for action.

This is the culmination of a day's frantic texting and posting on internet forums. I had to find out for myself whether there was any truth behind the headlines declaring a rave revival this summer. Their eyes on the drinking mayhem in our cities, the police appear to have been

caught off guard in the past three months by a series of well-organised raves that arrived out of nowhere. In May Cornwall police broke up a party of 2,000 in Davidstow, seizing £3,000 in cash, drugs worth £40,000 and 12 lorries loaded with sound equipment. More raves followed. Was this another summer of love? Or a bunch of old clubbers who never went away, joined by bumper crowds due to July's heat wave? As a veteran of the 80s scene – both as a clubber and dance music journalist – I was curious.

With tomorrow's bank holiday signalling the last blast of the hedonist season, police have been warning of giant illegal parties kicking off. One local paper printed an appeal for anyone who has 'seen large numbers of vehicles gathering near woods or rural car parks, fliers advertising raves, or broken padlocks

on access gates' to report it immediately. Hoping to stay one step ahead, the organisers of a gathering in Kent moved it forward to last weekend.

All we know, as we cruise through the Blackwall Tunnel at 10.30pm, is that Kent's 'big one' is to happen in a forest between Canterbury and Dover. Our driver is a Lydd Airport party veteran, our photographer was at World Dance, and I grew up on raves. So we're sceptical about what we'll find. At 11pm a text directs us to the lay-by near Maidstone.

There a voice yells, 'Go, go, go!' as if we're leaping from the trenches into battle. In clusters of five we sprint across the wet Tarmac and jump the central barrier, unnerved by blinding beams of oncoming traffic. Someone's pointing to a gap in the undergrowth, 'Down there, over the barbed wire.' We scramble down a muddy bank and suddenly we're in a cornfield, and I'm excited and laughing. Yeah, this really is something like the old days.

The night has flashbacks to the cat-and-mouse games in pursuit of 'orbital' acid house parties in 1988. Personally, I experienced the dawn of the movement indoors. At the Hacienda in 1989 I danced in a haze of dry ice and lasers to Chicago house tunes and the British music inspired by it (then called 'acid house', the term 'rave' not coined until the Nineties). After closing time at 2am word would spread of warehouse parties in Lancashire industrial estates or in derelict mills on the outskirts of the city (later they'd all become designer apartments).

At 14 I'd fallen for the punk and indie bands my hometown of Manchester was famed for, but my life was transformed by these events. I didn't listen to another rock record for 10 years. I followed the party to London and out to the fields where I would find myself dancing to early trance and techno on wasteland near Dagenham or hillsides in Sussex.



A decade on and it's suddenly like being back there. There's a stile, a hill, more barbed wire and then we're in verdant woodland, emerging into the most perfect party spot I've ever seen: a lush green hollow surrounded by trees.

It's a gem of a location for Kent's biggest illegal outdoor shindig of the summer. Typically parties attract 100 to 300 but this aims for 1,000 ravers. It's to feature five or six sound systems led by local psytrance legends Section 63, Beatz & Freakz and Maidstone's electro-house crew Rebel Beat Faction. A party called Little Green Man at this site two years ago drew 2,000.

But tonight something's wrong. Sound rigs are erected around the clearing but they're all ominously silent. Then we see the police. We've been beaten to it. We're gutted.

'We had an incredible line-up with eight or more name DJs and live visual mixing but it was scuppered by the Old Bill,' says Matt, aka Morebuck\$, Rebel Beat Faction's VJ. 'The reason we were doing this party was to take it back to the underground and away from commercial clubs where what you're wearing is more important than the music.'

In the centre of the field a police-woman is besieged by teenagers. 'Don't stop the music,' they beg. 'We're stuck out here till morning.' The crowd is pushing and shoving. I'm bumped from behind and fly into her. She spins round with her pepper spray. The police are tired and irritated. One is overheard saying: 'Right, I'm sick of this – let's nick the dreadlock.' In the end there are no arrests and the crowd disperses peacefully. Later I learn they terminated the rave at the landown-



Raving, 2006-style: party-goers in Kent, some as young as 12, spend much of the night searching for a field in which to dance and evading the police. The party finally starts in Stonegate (centre). Photographs by Alex Sturrock. Photograph above by Phil Dent/Redferns

tygoers 'range from managers to people running their own businesses to people who are doing monotonous day jobs, who really let go on weekends.'

The secret of holding a party that isn't busted is getting the numbers right – not so many that you attract attention but having enough people at the site before the police arrive. Tom, 19, from Faversham, says: 'If they figure it's organised, peaceful and far away enough from houses, they might as well let it run.'

The official police view is that they are prepared to use all laws available to stop raves going ahead. Sergeant Alan Mobbs of Devon and Cornwall Police tells me they can call on the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, the Anti Social Behaviour Act of 2003 and recent changes in the licensing laws. However, the choice of remote locations is making it harder for the police to stop events. 'There are some raves that we only know about two or three days later because they're in such a remote spot that no one has complained. Action is determined on a case-by-case basis. If it's small and out of the way, we're not always quick enough to stop other people arriving. Then it's difficult to stop it – but that doesn't stop us arresting the organisers as they leave. That's the time we look at seizing equipment.'

'If the landowner has consented and it's not causing a nuisance that's fine, but there are other considerations, like health and safety – things like no fire precautions – that are a danger with parties that suddenly appear from nowhere.'

Back in the Kent lay-by, rumour is spreading that the six sound systems will be setting up in different locations. One is close to the original site. This is not the end of the night but the beginning. We follow the motorcade down a narrow lane until we reach a pub car park with 20 or so cars, people milling around but no music. We're wondering whether to call it a night when...boom! The beats begin in a nearby field. The DJ is spinning house and techno; they've got disco lights and a little marquee. This suits me fine as one of the older generation who likes tunes with uplifting piano breaks and grooves, music

with its roots in black America. The kids aren't impressed. The anthems I danced to – the ones that created those visions of an entire dancefloor thrusting hands skywards and a life-affirming feeling in your chest that stays with you for ever (I'm thinking classics like A Guy Called Gerald's 'Voodoo Ray', 808 State's 'Pacific State', 'Ride on Time' by Black Box) – feel so slow and lightweight to this crowd, they might as well be the Bee Gees. They want their music hard, loud and fast. And then harder and faster and trippier still.

For the new rave generation, hard techno, acid techno and psytrance are where it's at. The unrelenting sound of psytrance evolved in the mid-Nineties on Goa beaches and at Brixton squat parties and has become one of the most global and enduring dance cultures with scenes from Israel to Estonia to Brazil. It's the utilitarian soundtrack for a journey from the dark into the daylight, reaching its menacing peak in the dead of night then becoming lighter as the sun creeps above the horizon. 'You'll never hear this in the mainstream,' says Darragh.

If acid house was a rebellion against Eighties blandness, what's happening now is a reaction to the equally banal corporate chain-pub culture with its bouncers, mainstream music and drunken violence. There are few takers for the budget French beer and alcopops being sold from a car boot. Clearly much Ecstasy has been ingested, and the biggest queue is for an entrepreneurial pair with giant tanks of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) at £1 to £2 a balloon. It's not currently an offence to ingest the dental anaesthetic once likened to the 'air of heaven'. Many have come prepared with their own supply of gas in whipped-cream dispensers and metal propellant pods. If there's a 'new' drug accompanying this chapter of the rave movement, this is it.

'The party's not here,' someone says. 'The party's in Hoo. At a mansion.'

More texts, circling of roundabouts in Thames Estuary suburbia, and at 3.30am we find the Isle of Grain 'mansion'. Down a remote track in a power station's shadow is an abandoned nursing home, now a squatter encampment and regular weekend party venue. In the yard a green laser lights up the dancers while many sprawl on straw bales, skinning up. The DJ, whose soundsystem has also relocated from the first party, plays a slouching funky house that they complain is too 'chill-out'. 'The party's not here either,' people tell us, even as we arrive. We resume the chase again in a seven-car convoy. We career, lost, around Kent. The destination is finally located deep in a forest near Tunbridge Wells.

Here, and seemingly unnoticed by police, it's finally 'going off'. As sunbeams penetrate the foliage, 200-300 kids dance into a fresh day to the banging psytrance they've sought all night. The mission is over. It's not the 'big one'. But, they assure me, there's always next week.

Sarah Champion has edited a number of drug-culture fiction anthologies, including Disco Biscuits (Sceptre) and Fortune Hotel (Penguin)

Are you involved in the rave renaissance, or does the idea fill you with dread? Email review@observer.co.uk or join the debate at observer.co.uk/blog

OLD RAVE, NEW RAVE

THEN

Who Urban kids, squatters, travellers, football hooligans.

Where Clubs, warehouses, fields, airstrips.

Tunes House, rave, happy hardcore.

Drugs Ecstasy, acid, speed, poppers.

Clothes Trainers, stripy trousers, hoodies.

Accessories Smiley T-shirts, glow sticks, face masks, Vicks Vapor Rub.

Headlines 'The Evil of Ecstasy' (*The Sun*, Oct 1988).

'Spaced Out...thrill-seeking youngsters in a dance frenzy' (*The Sun*, June 1989).

NOW

Who Teenagers, twentysomethings who want to party all night outdoors.

Where Forests, beaches, fields, quarries.

Tunes Hard techno, psytrance, drum'n'bass.

Drugs Ecstasy, shrooms, nitrous oxide.

Clothes Trainers, combat trousers, hoodies.

Accessories Mr Creamy whipper (for inhaling its nitrous oxide propellant), mobile phone.

Headlines 'Rave yobs ruined our weekend' (*Peterborough Evening Telegraph*, April 2006).

'Nightmare Moor Rave Aftermath' (*Cornish Guardian*, June 2006)

"Epic...Heartbreaking...his most anticipated album since Blood On The Tracks and its brilliant!" Mojo

"Another Classic from the revitalised master" Uncut - Album Of The Month 5/5

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VOX POP

If you go down to the woods today... what last weekend's say about new rave culture

JOE & KIM
25, Gravesend
Last year was the year rave really came back but news is only just getting out. The music's changing, fusing styles and getting exciting again now, starting to mix reggae, dub, funky stuff and chanting.

TOBY
19, Faversham
I prefer outdoor parties to clubs, where you're looking over your shoulder for the bouncers. I don't partake of all the chemicals everyone else does, so I just stay up in a tree all night mooching cigarettes.

CELINA AND AMY
15 and 17, Ascot
We like the free party scene; it's a mass of people with the same intentions – getting wasted and enjoying music. You're not inhibited and there's no closing time. Where we live it's grassland so you'd never get away with this.

TOM
20, Canterbury
I've been going to free parties for three years. Sunrise is the best bit; it's lovely watching lots of hippies jumping around as the sun comes up. Publicity stopped the summer taking off last year – CCTV units kept on turning up.