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All-Night Parties and a Nod to the 60's (Rave On)

By NEIL STRAUSS
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The following snippets of conversation were overheard on Memorial Day weekend at the Eagle Cave and Mountain Campgrounds here: "Dudes, my last brain cell is already hanging on the edge, and it's only Friday -- or Saturday." "Is everyone here a D.J.?" "I hate brushing my teeth when I'm wasted." "Does anyone have some milk or vitamin B12?" "I can't find my car. Man, I don't even know if I drove it here."

While Memorial Day weekend marks the beginning of three months of beaches, barbecues and sun for some people, for others it is the start of a summer of outdoor raves, techno-music dance parties that can last one night or several. On Friday night at Eagle Cave, rave season officially began, with one of the biggest outdoor parties of the year: Even Furthur, which drew some 4,000 people to a 300-acre campground with an onyx cave, a lake and a petting zoo. For the event, which ended this morning, a laser show, fireworks, live bands and more than a hundred American and European disk jockeys were added to the site, with dance music thumping unremittingly, even during the scheduled nap time, 8 A.M. to noon.

When raves started popping up in the United States in the early 90's, mixing fast electronic dance music, with roots in Detroit, and contemporary British party culture, they were exciting, trendy and new. Raves were all-night (and -morning) parties at which people on the dance floor had the opportunity to be themselves, whether that meant playing instruments, bringing toys or wearing homemade outfits.

At the time, the news media covered raves extensively, focusing on the music, the fashion, the youth movement or the drug taking (ecstasy, LSD and the animal tranquilizer ketamine are common). But soon the spotlight moved elsewhere. Now, five years later, the rave scene has grown and evolved on its own energy, becoming an entrenched subculture that exists in a near-vacuum, similar not only to the cults that gather around punk-rock or Gothic-rock music but also to the Deadheads who followed the Grateful Dead.

With the death of Jerry Garcia and the end of the Grateful Dead, raves are becoming the communal gathering of choice for Deadheads with nowhere to congregate. At Even Furthur, people were decked out in standard rave gear -- baggy pants, small backpacks, oversize logo-emblazoned T-shirts, floppy hats or baseball caps and pacifiers or lollipops -- but also on display were tie-dyed shirts, bandannas and torn, faded jeans.

Though some Deadheads follow groups like Phish and the Allman Brothers Band around the country, rave culture seems to have a more entrenched network of dedicated

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the country, rave culture seems to have a more entrenched network of dedicated travelers, who spend the summer (or longer) in vans, chasing raves from city to city trying to see their favorite D.J.'s, as opposed to bands. (On the rave road map this summer are a camp-out with bands like the Orb and Leftfield at Big Bear Lake near Los Angeles on the weekend of June 21, One-der in Minneapolis and Fantasia 2 at Randall's Island in New York City, both on July 6.)

Deadheads and ravers actually have a lot in common. The music and the uniforms may be different, but both groups are rooted in the 60's subculture of tuning in, turning on and dropping out. In fact, the Wisconsin rave's oddly spelled name, Furthur, comes from the word printed on the front of the bus Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters drove around in the 60's. Coincidentally, when the former members of the Grateful Dead tour together with their own bands this summer, they will be calling the event the Furthur Festival, inspired by the same bus-sign declaration of pressing forward on the road and in the expansion of consciousness.

Though raves certainly have more relevance than Grateful Dead shows to 90's culture (with themes of speed, technology, synthetics and the dismantling of individuality), they are becoming less relevant. The rave scene, like the Deadhead scene, is turning into an autonomous, self-referential and self-perpetuating culture with little desire to effect change on the outside world -- just to escape it for a little while. This was borne out by the location of Even Furthur, which was a three-to-five-hour drive from the nearest major cities (Chicago, Milwaukee and Minneapolis).

For four days, an alternative community was built. The ravers, who ranged in age from 12 to a few stragglers in their 30's, slept in tents, recreational vehicles and cars. Some rented trucks, in the back of which they set up their own sound systems and added to the filigree of dance beats stretching over the campground valley. It rained every day; nonetheless, ravers danced in muddy tents to their favorite D.J.'s (Frankie Bones, ESP Woody McBride, Scott Hardkiss, Apollo, Mixmaster Morris), marveled at how well electronics whizzes like Daft Punk and Laura Grabb could perform the music on live instruments and discovered that rock bands like Low and Poi Dog Pondering could also fit into a rave.

Though raves can get a little more cliquish, fashion-conscious and musically snobbish than a Grateful Dead concert, each night the crowd at Even Furthur grew more generous and cohesive. Individuals' campfires became public shelters, where people could warm up, meet fellow travelers and talk, away from the din of the music. Some of the younger ravers who come from troubled homes described the community as a substitute family; others, from small towns where being a raver means being an outcast, said the parties were the only opportunities they had to meet and talk to people with similar interests and mind-sets. (There was only one arrest over the weekend, of a boy who was having a violent reaction to a psychedelic drug, smashing car windows and screaming that he was dead.)

Like the crowds at Grateful Dead parking lots, ravers even formed a few drum circles. As different as techno's pile-driver boogie and the Dead's brand of jam-rock are, they both place importance on complex rhythms and the primitive, spiritual force of percussion. Several Deadhead ravers (call them Deadbeats) said that it wasn't a stretch to like techno music, since the long, experimental "space" and "drums" improvisations that were a staple of every Dead show are similar in sound and hypnagogic intent. (The festival was organized by Drop Bass Network, Communique and David Prince.)

The future of raves is ambiguous. They are certainly now as entrenched as any other music-based youth subculture, but with more and more Deadheads and curious sybarites popping up at the parties, they are slowly expanding. The promoters of Even Furthur see potential for the rave's grand entrance into the mainstream in children born

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since 1989, the first generation since the baby boomers to have an annual birth rate of more than four million. If these children's parents and grandparents all listen to rock-and-roll, one promoter from Chicago explained, they'll need to rebel and find a music of their own. That, he hopes, will be the electronic pulse of rave music, whatever it will have evolved into by the time these children are old enough to stay out (or sneak out) all night.

Photo: About 4,000 people attended the Even Furthur rave festival over the Memorial Day weekend at a campground near Gotham, Wis. (Andy Manis for The New York Times)

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