

# The Rave Panic: Electronic Dance Music and the War on Drugs



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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>

—James “Disco Donnie” Estopinal

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 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

<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>.

<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/>.

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>1</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>2</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 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).

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:

*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, specially 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>3</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

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<sup>1</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>2</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>3</sup> Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, xxvi-xxvii.

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 20<sup>th</sup> century, from viewing drug addicts as weak to viewing them as criminals. 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.

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.

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