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Sowing the Seeds of a Subculture

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Ravers dance into the early morning hours during a rave hosted by Synonymous in Des Moines.

photo by Conor Bezane
SOWING THE SEEDS OF A SUBCULTURE
INSIDE IOWA'S RAVE UNDERGROUND

story by CONOR BEZANE
subculture is evolving. Thumping and pumping out of the nightclub's of Europe, it's spinning into every corner of the earth, plowing its way through the cornfields of Iowa. The beat-heavy sounds of trance, jungle, techno, and drum 'n' bass infiltrate the masses. Here in central Iowa, over a thousand kids are gathering for Crop Circles, an all-night rave featuring DJs from as far as Copenhagen, Denmark.

We were just outside of Ames, driving south on Interstate 35 around midnight, when the music began to take hold. We could see searchlights in the distance, marking off the spot where the rave would take place — the Ankeny Aviation Expo Center. Ravers drive from all across the state and the Midwest, some from as far away as St. Louis and Kansas City.

I pay my 15 bucks and pass through the gates. The party is a full-sensory experience. Pounding bass beats throb through my eardrums. Kaleidoscopic-colored lights flash as ravers paint the darkness with the streaks of green, blue, and purple light that emanate from their glowsticks. They're concentrating deeply as they dance, entranced by the music. They show no signs of stopping. Some are hanging out on the grass, comfortably enjoying the seamless mix of music, chatting with friends, or watching people walk by. Others cling close to the speakers, soaking up the sound.

Many of the ravers who are at tonight's party embody the style of dress adopted by rave cultures across the globe. They wear rainbow-colored beaded jewelry, obnoxiously baggy pants, and sun visors. They suck on lollipops and dance robotically, creating an otherworldly aura.

I walk toward the DJ booth where DJ Soren is in the middle of his set, holding a flashlight in his mouth so he can see through the darkness to flip through his record collection. On the soundboard, he's turning knobs and flipping switches, putting out a sound that's electrifying the crowd.

I'd been to raves in Chicago, and even heard legendary British trance DJ John Digweed spin at his monthly residency at the New York City nightclub Twilo. But there is something purer about the rave scene in Iowa. After nearly six hours of listening, dancing, wandering, and watching at Crop Circles, I was beginning to realize what this culture means to Iowa youth. A small house party one month later would confirm my feelings.

It's the weekend before Halloween, and John Solarz and Kim Heiderscheidt are hosting a house party in Ames. A cluster of people dressed in Halloween costumes dance in the living room as various area DJs spin techno.

DJ Solarz spins regularly at Boheme, an all-ages club on the outskirts of Campustown frequented by ISU students. The venue's bi-monthly Vinyl Groove nights have brought in capacity crowds since they began last February. Solarz drags two chairs out into the backyard so we can talk in a quieter atmosphere.

"It was great coming to Ames," Solarz says. "I never thought I'd get involved because it's in the middle of Iowa. But the funny thing is I did get involved because I came to Ames. If I went to a bigger city, I might have been intimidated about what was going on and not actually [feel] like I could do it."

Heiderscheidt joins us a few moments later. She's been a veteran of the central Iowa scene since her first rave in Des Moines in 1992. We try to pinpoint the history of raves in the Des Moines area.

Des Moines was a thriving rave scene from 1993 to 1997, when warehouse parties first started to take place. "Downtown in Des Moines, we used to have [raves]," Heiderscheidt explains. "The City Council found out about it, so they were like 'No more, that is it.' So that was the end of it."

The Des Moines City Council had passed an ordinance prohibiting dance parties that extend past 2 a.m. As a result, for a while, the scene suffered and stayed dormant for several years. But last winter, a local promotion company called The Invasion decided to revive the scene. It hosted a party called All Night, which was the first large-scale rave in that area in past three years. How did they pull it off? They found a loophole. Though it lies on the edge of Des Moines, All Night's venue technically lies in Saylorsville Township.

The Invasion crew was founded in the winter of 2000 and consists of six DJs — Nothing, Digital Killer, Kernel Scurry, Rorschach, Intravenous, and Slapinfunk.

The Invasion's Jason Mendelson just moved to Iowa from Boston where he was a music synthesis major at the Berklee College of Music. Known in the scene as DJ Slapinfunk, he joined the crew last spring. Slapinfunk spins drum 'n' bass at raves and house parties across the Midwest.

"When I was in Miami, there were like three or four parties to choose from a night, and each one had, like, 2,000 people at 'em. They're a lot bigger, and things started getting commercial," Slapinfunk says. "Here, it's still new. Kids are just starting to hear some of this music. If treated properly, it can be really strong."

Since All Night in February 2000, nearly a dozen raves have taken place in central Iowa, and the scene is slowly regaining momentum.

"The culture is trying to reinvent itself from what it was in the early '90s to the late '90s," Solarz says. "I think that's the best thing about this scene is that it's trying to rebuild itself. That's the significance of the Iowa rave scene. For me that's it. It's starting again. I can sense that."

Last February at Boheme, you could feel the anticipation. Until then, the club had attracted its largest crowds during its Thursday Latin dance nights. Then Kim Heiderscheidt talked
DJ Carl Michaels spins at Synonymous

photo by Conor Bezane
When I first got here, I drove to St. Louis, I drove to Omaha and Kansas City to go to parties, but now I think Iowans are getting more of a draw so I think people are gonna be driving here for parties, it's just gonna get bigger and better. DJ Slapinfunk

Boheme owner Pete Sherman into hosting techno. In the beginning, the Boheme events were called Lock Stock and Three Smokin' DJs. "Kim was working [at Boheme] and she talked her boss into letting us do it, throwing a night seeing how it would go and if it would go good then we'd have a regular thing," Solorz says. They spread flyers all across campus and soon enough, everyone from hardcore rave to average college kids came in droves, lining up in the freezing cold, sometimes waiting as long as two hours to get inside the doors. People came, and it grew into a regular event, changing its name to Vinyl Groove.

"We were pumped because we knew people were really excited about it, as excited as we were," Solorz explains. "We had people to listen." James Marshall is new to the Iowa scene. He moved out here from Hawaii, where he put on 12 raves a year with a company called Alliance Productions. The 26-year-old transplant teamed up with partner Scott Jones to launch Synonymous, a promotion company that held its first party in Des Moines on Nov. 11.

Marshall stands more than six feet tall and ties back his slender dreadlocks in a pony tail. After chatting a bit over the loud sound of trance music still playing at the Halloween house party, we move outside where it's chillier, but quieter.

"As soon as I came into the rave scene, I was like 'This is it. This is where I belong,'" he says. Thirteen years later, Marshall's love for techno has brought him to rural Iowa, an unlikely destination for a veteran raver. Why did he come out here?

"The bottom line is, in the Midwest, people don't have anything to do, and this is like something that's real to do," Marshall says. "It's something that people can put their heart into. People can say, 'This is a part of culture that I belong to.'"

"I definitely see it as the '60s era coming to life again," he adds. "The younger culture is trying to express themselves because there's nothing really radical that's happened. We don't have any wars; we don't have anything to really inspire us today. So people are seeking like other outlets, through music, expression, and art. I think that's what the electronic, house, rave [scene provides]."

Later at the party, Jesse Aldridge (a.k.a. DJ Supreme) talks about why he appreciates Iowa raves. Like the others, he says this scene is more intimate than big cities.

"It's not really money-hungry and profit-motivated like a lot of the parties out in the West Coast," he says. "Those are a lot more cut-throat, and people step on each other's feet, and purposely throw parties on the same date as another person's party just to try to steal their business away from them. [Here], it's a lot more united."

Aldridge hopes the scene will grow, but he doesn't want it to lose its grassroots sensibilities. "Crop Circles actually had a large turnout, bigger than I thought it was gonna be," he says. "The crew, Synonymous, that party should really help boost the scene a lot."

"When I first got here, I drove to St. Louis, I drove to Omaha and Kansas City to go to parties, but now I think Iowa's getting more of a draw so I think people are gonna be driving here for parties," Slapinfunk adds. "It's just gonna get bigger and better."

It's clear that Boheme, The Invasion, and Synonymous have planted the seeds of a promising subculture. But is it too early to call the current Iowa rave scene a renaissance?

"It's more like a poker game," Aldridge explains. "They've already lost, but they're trying to come back. But people need to play their cards right. The next four months will probably be crucial for what's gonna happen in the future here."

My Iowa rave experience culminated November in Des Moines at Synonymous, my third Iowa rave in the past four months. The moment I walked in the door I was treated like I belonged. James Marshall and Scott Jones put me on the guest list. They gave me a badge to wear around my neck and allowed me to go wherever I wanted. I shook hands and chatted with DJ Slapinfunk and Jesse Aldridge. I danced side-by-side with Solorz and Kim Heiderscheidt. I hung out behind the DJ booth and watched Charles Feelgood throw down a spine-tingling set. I became one with the crowd. I felt alive.

Ravers are the hippies of our generation. We're not holding demonstrations or protesting a war, but we are fighting for a revolution — one that it's not too late to join. The utopian raver credo of Peace Love Unity and Respect has almost been forgotten in the trendy big-city rave scenes. There, it's become superficial and stale, deviating from its original goal. In Iowa, music is at the core of rave culture — not drugs, money or prestige. Maybe it's not as trendy as New York City or Chicago, but for a tight-knit group of Iowa ravers, it doesn't matter.

Somewhere amid this rustic community, we are finding a new identity. We're creating our own scene based on the purity and genuineness only the Midwest could inspire. We don't have anything better to do. And it couldn't be more fulfilling.

Conor Bezine is a senior in journalism. He interned at Rolling Stone.
A rave at Crop Circles at the Ankeny Airfield

photo by Ellen Dahl