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The Gay & Lesbian Review (formerly *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, from 1994-1999) is published bimonthly by The Gay & Lesbian Review, Inc., a 501(c)(3) educational corporation located in Boston, Massachusetts. **Subscription Rates, U.S.:** \$29.70 per year (6 issues). Canada and Mexico: \$42.00(US). All other countries: \$52.00(US) All non-U.S. sent via air mail. Back issues available for \$10 each. All correspondence sent in a plain envelope marked "G&LR".

Indexed in: *Alternative Press Index*, *American Humanities Index*, and many others.

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The Circuit Party's Faustian Bargain

AMIN GHAZIANI

CIRCUIT PARTIES are weekend-long, erotically-charged, drug-fueled gay dance events held in resort towns across the country. There's at least one major circuit party every month somewhere in the U.S.—New York's "Black Party," South Beach's "White Party," Montreal's "Black and Blue Party," and so on—and people travel far and wide to take part. The parties are attended by up to 25,000 gay and bisexual men, who socialize continuously for periods up to and sometimes exceeding 24 hours. Every party has a similar format, with loud music and dancing at its core, spiced with live entertainment from popular singers and scantily-clad male dancers. Circuit parties began in the mid-1980's as part of an effort to raise gay men's awareness of AIDS as well as to raise funds to combat the disease and help its victims. To this day, many circuit parties are HIV/AIDS charity events, benefiting a variety of nonprofit organizations. The parties were also intended to stimulate gay community-building and cultural identity formation, and today's circuit parties have a strong communitarian flavor. There is also a widely recognized social identity within the gay world that's linked to these events, that of the "circuit boy" or "circuit queen."

Some observers have suggested that these events create an important sense of community among the attendees, bringing together a wide swath of people from all walks of life in a celebration of "our gay family." The nexus of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll creates an atmosphere that's often described as "tribal," with revelers referring to themselves as part of a common "tribe." One party enthusiast I spoke with told me that he considers the parties to be a reunion with his "sprawling gay family from all over the world." Another proclaimed: "When you band together and join in an event with hundreds if not thousands of friends, you realize you're not just one person out there. People have been gathering around fires, dancing, and beating sticks together for quite a few years. We've just refined the art." Yet another told me, "There's an energy that coalesces at a large-scale party that is impossible to describe with words, where a group of two or three thousand individuals becomes like one living organism." There is a deeply shared reverence for this communitarian experience.

The music and sexual atmosphere of circuit parties contribute to these feelings of community. Famous DJs play bass-pounding, electronic rhythms that drive the elaborate light shows and lasers. The dance floor is typically crowded with youthful, shirtless men with bulging muscles, hairless bodies, and short-cropped hair, wearing tight, low-rise jeans from which water

bottles can be seen to bulge. Beautiful men gyrate on raised platforms and erotic images are often played on the surrounding screens. Men can be seen dancing and embracing one another in pairs or larger groups, often in great clusters or long lines. One patron told me, "If the music is good, that'll take me away for a couple hours. We go dance to this primal music that throbs. We move to the beat of the music. There's no consequence in that moment. It's really honest. We're not thinking about it. We're not using conscious parameters to judge each other or filter the experience. We're enjoying it for those base reasons that make us human."

The reasons people give for attending these events are not hard to surmise. In one study (Mattison, et al., 2001) in which partygoers were asked to rank a series of items, 97 percent indicated they attended circuit parties "to celebrate and have fun," and the same percentage liked "to dance and enjoy music." Ninety-five percent checked "to be with friends"; 86 percent "to look and feel good"; and 73 percent "to have an intense gay experience" (whatever that means). Also of interest, fully 68 percent said they wanted "to be wild and uninhibited"; 58 percent were there "to

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Amin Ghaziani is a doctoral candidate in sociology and management at Northwestern University. With Thomas D. Cook, he published a scholarly paper on circuit parties in The Journal of the International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care, 2005, Issue 4.2.

party and use drugs"; and 43 percent wanted "to have sex." About fourteen percent sought "to forget about HIV/AIDS." The "tribe" is thus a blending of communitarian motives with hedonistic ones.

This seems harmless enough, but there's also a flipside. While the evidence to date is inconclusive, circuit parties may ironically be a potential site for HIV infection. The irony is that circuit parties began as vehicles for HIV awareness and fundraising. It is well known, both anecdotally and through research, that drug use is widespread at circuit parties. Studies indicate that club drugs are consumed by about 95 percent of party attendees (Mansergh, 2001). Indeed drug use is incorporated into the setting as an integral part of circuit culture. Of those who report taking drugs, 61 percent report using three or four different types of drugs per party. Multiple drug use is thus the norm. The most commonly used drugs are ecstasy, crystal meth, GHB, cocaine, and ketamine. Some of the consumption and exchange occurs as groups of men form a circle and then collectively ingest. This is not just to enhance bonding. The way drugs are consumed also allows the group to detect individuals who seem the worse for wear. They are then offered water or advised not to take a specific drug or not to do so right now. Through this mechanism, overuse is sometimes prevented. There are definite norms in the community about what time period is safe between hits of a given drug, and these partly offset situational pressures to shorten the period in order to maintain the high. Group drug-taking seems to serve several functions: it increases the sense of community among partygoers; it ritualizes drugs as central to the experience; and it protects against the grossest abuses.

Club drugs also contribute to the circuit party culture by virtue of their pharmacological effects. By over-releasing and preventing the reuptake of serotonin, ecstasy and GHB enhance the user's mood, often promoting a sense of well-being and togetherness. This may be why ecstasy is colloquially known as the "love drug" or "hug drug," while GHB, known as "liquid ecstasy," is seen as similar in its effects. As a stimulant that over-releases dopamine and norepinephrine, crystal methamphetamine makes it possible to have energy to party through the night—and even through the long weekend—without much sleep or food. Crystal also amplifies the libido, as does Viagra, which is taken to ensure sexual performance (needed to counteract the erection-inhibiting effect of stimulants).

Research reveals an abundance of sexual activity during party weekends. One study (Mansergh, et al., 2001) found that 67 percent of attendees reported having anal or oral sex at the party. Fully 28 percent said they had unprotected anal intercourse (or UAI). Of these, nine percent said that it was with sero-discordant or sero-unknown partners. Twenty-nine percent said they had multiple sex partners and, of these, 47 percent reported UAI. Most men reported that they were aware that free condoms were available, but few took them. The incidence of UAI increased

with the total number of partners and drugs used.

And there's more to the story. Anywhere from 13 percent to 25 percent of circuit party attendees report being HIV-positive (Colfax, et al., 2001; Lee, et al., 2003), so at a party with 25,000 men, about 6,300 may be positive. (And this may be a low estimate due to underreporting and widespread ignorance of one's positive status.) Researchers have also found that, compared to HIV-negative men, positives are more likely to engage in UAI and to have multiple partners. More specifically, 31 to 39 percent of positive men report engaging in UAI, versus 22 to 26 percent of negative men. Positives are also more likely to engage in UAI with multiple partners during a party weekend (Colfax, et al., 2001). This propensity of HIV-positive party-goers to engage in risky behavior takes on special urgency in the context of the sexually charged, drug-fueled atmosphere of a circuit party, where overall rates of sexual activity are elevated. An impressive body of public health research has shown that drug use is related to sexual disinhibition and diminished judgment, so that an individual who might otherwise avoid an activity of known risk may decide to engage in it at a circuit party.

But knowledge of what constitutes risky sexual behavior may also be compromised in the drug-induced mental state of the typical circuit participant. The drugs-and-music nexus may, as anecdotal evidence suggests, bring about cognitive distortions that lead people to disconnect everything they've ever learned about healthy sexual behavior from the present situation—notably with respect to condom use. I personally know physicians who have gotten high at parties and then engaged in unprotected sex. These are gay men who, by day, dispense advice to their patients about the importance of safer sex practices.

One group of researchers (Mansergh, et al., 2001) cogently captures the public health challenge of circuit parties when they write: "Consider the potential impact of circuit party weekends on HIV infection rates. ... If we multiply the prevalence of sexual risk behavior by the median of three parties per year ... and if we consider the large number of men who attend circuit parties, as well as the growing popularity of such parties, then the likelihood of transmission of HIV ... among party attendees and secondary partners becomes a real public health concern." Even if the lion's share of high-risk behavior is confined to a relatively small core group within the party circuit, the public health risk is still there: research has shown that all it takes is a single core group of individuals within a population to maintain a high rate of infection for the entire community (Signorile, 1997).

Circuit parties increased rapidly in numbers throughout the 1980's and especially during the last half of the 1990's, and they remain wildly popular today. There is an acknowledged and distinct circuit party subculture within the broader gay community, with many men attending several events each year. Almost everyone at a circuit party knows the dangers of hard and pro-



Doctor Faustus, by David Michael Friend

longed partying that's both enhanced and augmented by drugs. But participants also know that others are balancing danger and excitement just as they are, and that any distress they might experience will be partially alleviated and absorbed by other partygoers. If the counsel of their friends is insufficient, attendees know that care stations are available on site and ambulances are standing by to deal with overdoses. Their fate is thus a shared one, whether in fun or fear. One has a sense of belonging to a culturally viable community of similar people, many of whom have come from thousands of miles away to take part in this tribal, collectivizing event.

Circuit parties present what could be described as a Faustian bargain to participants—and indeed the image of Faust, that creature of the night, is particularly apt. Just as Faust was offered by the Devil infinite knowledge of life's pleasures in exchange for his soul, the men at circuit parties are pursuing an ultimate state of connection, a cosmic bliss that combines the sexual and the spiritual in a communitarian setting, in exchange for an assault on the brain and body that could do permanent damage. In the crash that follows a club drug binge, especially from methamphetamine, a man has plenty of opportunity to confront his demons, including the fear that risky behavior at the party might not have been such a good idea. At the same time, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that Faust's quest was a heroic one and Faust himself a hero, albeit a tragic one, who sought to transcend the confines of bourgeois society and small-mindedness to achieve something truly magnificent. There is something deeply romantic—Romantic in the 19th-century sense—about the all-night partiers' quest to reach this ultimate experience, which many describe as a tribal love, regardless of the long-term consequences.

Attempting to construct any community in today's civically disengaged America is admirable. Circuit parties are community-building and economically potent events and, short of legally closing them, they are not likely to go away. Circuit parties are an important venue on multiple levels for one subpopulation of the gay community, and it is unfortunate and paradoxical that building up this community via parties, many of which are dedicated to supporting HIV organizations, should have the effect of promoting HIV transmission. But they should be understood and, dare I say, appreciated in diverse ways that will not harm advocacy efforts around the issue. Our vision should focus on fostering a healthy celebration rather than demonizing a subpopulation of gay and bisexual men.

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