The Fierce Tribe

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Chapter 2

The Few, the Proud, the Cracked

Not you, perhaps you, and never you.
Fierceness is always welcome.
These are role models.

—Alan T

The Circuit community is a loose-knit, transregional association of men and women from many backgrounds that come together for extended weekends to dance. Circuit participants make up an urban nomadic community of revelers that reconstitutes itself for a few days and then disperses until the next Circuit party. In addition to the movement of bodies on the dance floor, there is also the movement of people from city to city and country to country. Originating in Manhattan, Circuit culture has spread across the United States and Canada to Mexico, Britain, Australia, Holland, France, Germany, Spain, Brazil, Israel, South Africa, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand, and Malaysia.

The Circuit creates an intimate public space where muscle is privileged, intoxication is the norm, and sex is usually limited to what a man can do with his pants on while dancing. Aggression is limited as well; participants rarely attack each other with anything other than dirty looks and rude remarks.

Theoretically, the Circuit community is inclusive. Anyone can attend. There are no membership requirements per se concerning sexual preference, race, age (besides being over the age of eighteen), or appearance. One need not dance well or even walk. I have witnessed people dancing in wheelchairs at Circuit events.

The Circuit is not for everyone, however.

1. Alan T (Tibaldeo) is a famous personality/performance artist in Miami nightlife and a recording artist in electronic dance music. These words by Alan T are part of a soliloquy that Circuit Boy used in a Circuit anthem called “The Door” (words cited with permission of Alan T, copyright © pending 2008)
Circuit parties tend to be expensive. Event tickets for the weekend range from $150 to $600. A Circuit weekend can cost each participant well over $1,500 after tabulating costs for entrance fees, hotel, travel, food, and intoxicants. An estimated 200,000 Gay men worldwide participate in Circuit parties (Nimmons 157), so net expenditure would be somewhere around $300,000,000 per annum. This gives the Circuit community economic clout: some businesses cater to it, including hotels, airlines, clothing designers, and compact disc (CD) manufacturers.2

The average American/Canadian Circuit boy3 is a White or Hispanic Gay male between the ages of twenty-one and fifty-five with some college education. Income level is between $20,000–$100,000 annually. 4 In terms of physique, most Circuiteers are of average build, although there is a large and cherished minority of men (around 25 percent) who have exceptionally muscular physiques.

Circuit parties are all about dancing. At the bigger events, it is possible to dance from 10:00 PM Friday until 4:00 PM Monday. Music, clothing, staged performances, venue decoration, and technologies for lights and sound encourage participants to dance and to unify the crowd into a single pulsing entity. Physical fitness (dedication to the gym and perhaps steroid use), personal grooming, and selection from a variety of intoxicants enhance the performance of self.

The premium placed on performance can be unnerving. Most participants attend the events in protective clusters of friends and lovers.

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2. Many people who deal with the business end of the Circuit are reluctant to give actual dollar amounts raised by their parties. My numbers resulted from consultation with industry professionals such as Patti Razzetto of Dance4Life, and based upon the birth of new parties, the death of old ones, and the rebirth of a few dead parties. Since 2001, numbers in North America have dropped dramatically. There appears, however, to be a rebound since 2004–2005, as well as a growing international Circuit scene outside of the US and Canada. The numbers given here are conservative estimates that take into account both the downsizing and the resurgence of the Circuit.

3. My sources are not exclusively American and Canadian, but the vast majority are US/Canadian citizens. The events that I attended were in the United States and Canada, so my focus is on the American/Canadian Circuit. There is a review of the East/Southeast Asian Circuit at the end of this chapter.

4. Averages are based on my own observations of the Circuit and conversations with promoters and are similar to those of Mansergh et al (published in American Journal of Public Health) and Mattison et al (published in Journal of Substance Abuse). The Mansergh survey (295 participants in San Francisco) is more restricted in age range (78 percent between 25–39 years of age) but concurs with me in that 70 percent are White, 91 percent have an education past high school, and 79 percent have an annual income between $20,000-$100,000 (955). The Mattison survey (1169 participants from across the US) differs somewhat from Masergh in terms of categories: 76 percent Caucasian, 68 percent with a BA or higher, and 50 percent with an annual income of $50,000 or more (122). Both give an almost identical median age: 32 years (Masergh) and 33.5 years (Mattison).
Much of the networking in the Circuit is interaction between small groups, resulting in new friendships and alliances over the weekend. Participants congregate in specific places between events (often around the host hotel), transforming these places into safe havens by sheer force of numbers where men may hold hands, kiss, and let down their guard. If these places are already Gay ghettos, they become even more so for the weekend.\footnote{Usually a protective social bubble envelops these areas and most homophobes tend to avoid them. However, homophobic Christian organizations have been invading some of these spaces (such as Gay Days at Disney World in Orlando and New Orleans Southern Decadence in 2003–2005) to protest what they consider to be the revival of Sodom.}

Codes for dress and grooming reflect the kind of Circuit event it is. For those parties that are not masquerade parties, military gear parties, Bear\footnote{Bears are Gay men who celebrate being gentler, heavier, and hairier.} parties, or Leather\footnote{Leathermen are Gay men who mark themselves as sado-masochistic participants by wearing black leather clothing, although such clothing is sometimes worn more as a fashion statement than as an identity/community marker.} events, the norms are fairly uniform. Most men have short hair and smooth-shaved faces. They eliminate or trim chest, back, and neck hair. Although there can be a broad range in clothing options, a universally accepted outfit is blue jeans and a white sleeveless undershirt (known in the community as a “wife beater”). Boots or athletic shoes are standard footwear. Dancers usually remove their shirts after dancing starts in earnest.

There are Leather Circuit parties, as well as growing participation in Bear events, in which body fascism is enthusiastically rejected. For Bears and Leathermen, the rules for grooming are not so stringent. Clothing at Leather events usually features lots of leather and chrome accessories. The Circuit tendency to privilege the perfect physique and haircut is less pronounced.

Straight women, Gay men of African and Asian descent, men over sixty, and drag queens are typically present at Circuit events in the United States and Canada. Straight men can be found as well but in fewer numbers (with the exception of Montreal Black and Blue).

The Dinah Shore Golf Classic in Palm Springs has inspired a Lesbian dance festival concurrent with the tournament, and may be considered a women’s Circuit party. Many Circuit events (including Montreal Black and Blue, White Party Miami, White Party Palm Springs, Miami Winter Party, D.C. Cherry, Philadelphia Blue Ball, and Gay Days-Orlando) have separate women’s dance parties. To my knowledge, however, there is no Lesbian interregional Circuit outside of the women’s events held within the Gay men’s Circuit, the Dinah Shore Classic, and Lesbian/Gay-oriented ocean cruises.
Circuit parties tend to be themed. The White Parties, for example, usually inspire attendees to dress in white. Themes often feature fantasy settings and may have spiritual references. The theme for the Philadelphia Blue Ball 2004, for example, was “Ascension” (a recently-invented party on Fire Island is called Ascension as well), and Chicago Fireball 2003 featured a performance with a live gospel choir. During Montreal’s Black and Blue 2000, participants walked with candles through a giant candlelit red AIDS ribbon on their way to the dance floor.

Participants maintain communal ties by means of Circuit-based literature and computer sites that help them keep up with the music, the DJs, and each other between parties. Virtual communities exist by means of listservs and message boards. The Circuit also has its own folk media through printed and online news. Edge, a national online publication, has a permanent section entitled “Circuit Parties” for the latest updates on events and interviews of people in the scene. There are two quarterly magazines dedicated to the Circuit, noiZe Magazine (formerly Circuit Noize) and JustCircuit.Mag, which have articles, reviews, and photographs as well as advertisements for upcoming events.

Preferred intoxicants include a range of recreational drugs, the most popular being alcohol, MDMA (also known as ecstasy, X, or E), ketamine (K), GHB (G), cocaine, crystal methamphetamine (crystal), tobacco, and marijuana. Due to legal prohibitions against most of these substances, it is impossible to accurately determine how many participants take which drugs.

Participants often refer to themselves as a tribe; some describe their experiences of transcendent solidarity in shamanistic terms. The parties, they say, bond people together by putting them in touch with what they perceive as primeval spiritual feelings. They subscribe to the following mythos: human beings have accessed such feelings all over the world through intoxication and ecstatic dance since the dawn of time. The Circuit is but a recent version of cosmic tribal solidarity. Within this transcendental context, some participants find that the Circuit is also a site for the living to bond with the dead.

Male members of the Circuit community are often referred to as “Circuit boys,” a term that is not necessarily a compliment. For Gay men outside of the Circuit, it implies that one is shallow, arrogant, and drug-addled. In the spirit of playfulness that the community possesses

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8. Party List, Just Circuit, Circuit Party Insanity, and Circuit Life are some of the more popular listservs and Web sources of information.

9. Flaggers, dancers who artfully wave large pieces of colorful cloth, are considered by many to be the most spiritual side of the Circuit. Usually an individual activity, it often puts the flagger into deeply introspective states. Some claim to encounter dead companions while flagging.
in abundance, participants exaggerate their own outlaw identity and fondly refer to each other as “crack whores” or “cracked-out Circuit queens.” Well-built men are called “muscle marys.” Illegal substances are given girl names as well, such as Stacy (MDMA or ecstasy), Tina (from “Christina” for crystal methamphetamine), Katie (ketamine), and Gina (GHB). The necessity for discretion in obtaining, ingesting, and talking about these substances bonds the community even closer.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the Circuit and the club scene. Circuit culture is best understood as an inseparable, intensified extension of Gay men’s club culture. In many ways, a Circuit party is a night of clubbing writ large: more hours on the dance floor, more people, bigger spectacle, and music designed specifically for that crowd and played at just the right time by the best DJs in the business. Most Gay male dance venues play “Circuit music” (songs that are formatted specifically to the scene) as well as Top 40 dance music. The most avant-garde clubs introduce new music that will later play at Circuit parties, and vice versa. On holiday weekends in major cities, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between the club scene and the Circuit scene. The two scenes are also geographically and economically interdependent. When a city hosts a Circuit weekend, local clubs hold most of the parties besides the main event.

Circuit music consists of house music between 125–135 beats per minute (bpm), about the pace of a brisk walk. Popular songs are often remixed (sonically reformatted) so that a three-minute tune is stretched out for six to ten minutes, a strong percussive backdrop is inserted, and “synth stabs” (strong blasts of synthesized riffs) play off the central melody. A lot of Circuit music comes from remixes made by DJs in the Circuit scene.

The Circuit has a well-established commercial side. Companies such as Centaur Music produce CDs specifically tailored to the Circuit community that feature the songs du jour mixed by popular DJs; they are sold on the spot at the bigger parties and distributed across the nation for sale in Gay men’s boutiques and LGBTQ bookstores. Promotional materials feature advertisements for host hotels and airlines. Event T-shirts can be purchased or are provided in gift bags for those who pay more for VIP tickets. VIP status also includes the luxury of skipping long lines to get into the venues and admission into special VIP lounges.

The Circuit has its share of problems. Revenue from a Circuit weekend can lead to nasty competition among the host city’s dance clubs. Big-party promoters will occasionally go head-to-head and plan

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10. “Cracked-out” is street slang for being intoxicated on illegal drugs to the point of losing self-control. “Cracked-out” or “cracked” is synonymous with “messy” and “tweaked.”
large-scale events that happen at the same time. Too often, competition splits up a good-sized crowd into two separate venues, disturbing the underlying sense of solidarity that Circuiteers expect from the experience, and siphons needed participants from established fundraisers. A stark example of unnecessary competition occurred on April 19, 2008, in Washington, D.C. when a for-profit Circuit party was held less than two hundred meters from the D.C. Cherry Main Event fundraiser.

Forgery has also been a problem. Since main events are $50–$100, and weekend passes can go for as much as $600, forged passes can seriously cut into profits. I know of two instances where promoters lost significant amounts of money due to fake tickets during the 2002 Hotlanta River Expo (reported to me by a participant years after the event), and White Party Palm Springs (I witnessed some men bragging about making VIP weekend passes for themselves in the host hotel lobby in 2001). In addition, embezzlement scandals have led to the end of a few Circuit parties and necessitated the restructuring of some organizations that sponsor events.

Members of the Circuit community refer to a pervasive attitude of body fascism, the obsession with physical perfection and the snobbery that comes with it. “Body fascist” is synonymous in some Gay circles with “Circuit boy.”

The desire to have a desirable body has inspired some participants to use steroids to increase their muscle mass. I have found, however, that folk wisdom linking steroid use with "roid rage (aggressive and violent behavior resulting from neurochemical imbalance due to steroids) is not supported by a marked increase in violent behavior among the overly muscular during Circuit parties, other than the tendency for a small minority of muscle queens to occasionally be physically pushy and to behave with insufferable arrogance toward those not deemed worthy of their attention.

Substance abuse also plagues the community. A couple of years ago, it was not uncommon to see comatose Circuiteers carted away in ambulances and hospitalized by the dozens over a big Circuit weekend because of irresponsible GHB use. Circuit parties also have a reputation for being hotbeds of HIV transmission.

In response to these health issues, concerned members of the community have conducted campaigns for safer sex and intoxicant harm reduction during Circuit weekends. Dr. Chris Mann of Dallas, Texas, created a volunteer organization (MedEvent) of doctors and nurses who work at events to reduce health risks.11 Chicago Fireball held health summits

11. MedEvent personnel are licensed doctors, nurses, and EMTs who have been in the Circuit scene and are familiar with the ever-expanding range of intoxicants and combinations that Gay men concoct. MedEvent has state-of-the-art protocols that are,
and educational programs during its weekend, a tradition still carried on by Montreal Black and Blue. Pamphlets and posters at events in Toronto and Montreal remind participants to party responsibly. Many of the campaigns have considerable marketing savvy, using eye-catching models and outrageous humor to bring home the message.

In addition to safer-sex and harm-reduction campaigns, many parties raise funds for Gay causes, especially for AIDS charities. Philadelphia Blue Ball, D.C. Cherry, Miami’s Winter and White Parties, Montreal Black and Blue, Gay Days–Orlando, Halloween’s in New Orleans, Ascension in the Fire Island Pines, and Toronto Pride events donate a portion of their revenue to charities. This practice has created some controversy; some critics say that throwing parties that encourage irresponsible sexual behavior and then claiming that these parties are AIDS fundraisers is the height of hypocrisy (Signorile 118–27).

in many cases, superior to the standard practices of local health care workers. EMS personnel who are unfamiliar with the scene have been known to misdiagnose problems of Gay male patients, be it GHB seizures or HIV medication complications.
The Circuit scene in Asia is driven not only by economics and attendance levels but namely by the permission of the local government to hold a Circuit party at all. The biggest factor of whether or not a party is successful depends on the political climate and the ability to bribe the local officials to allow an event to happen. As such, the Circuit will drift toward the country that is most conducive to hold a large party at any given time.

The Circuit started in several different countries concurrently and you cannot pinpoint just one event being the catalyst. There were smaller local parties in each respective country that were natural offshoots of the mixed [Straight and Gay] Raves that were occurring. At each large-scale mixed Rave, there was always a section of Gay men dancing shirtless that was easy to spot.

It was the Nation party in Singapore that really put the traveling Circuit as we know it on the map. Nation was put together by Fridae.com, the largest LGBT portal in Asia. The founders were mostly a bunch of Gay Singaporean men who loved to party in the United States and saw an opportunity to bring that type of large party to Asia. This also coincided with liberalization of the Singaporean government, which allowed these parties to thrive alongside the opening of Gay bathhouses within the conservative country. The party started small and quickly grew. However, once the party started becoming noticed by the likes of the Wall Street Journal and TIME magazine, the government got concerned about how it would be perceived, slammed it shut, and started a severe crackdown on any and all parties within Singapore.

The party scene continually shifts from year to year. Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, once major destinations of the past, are now out due to current governmental persecutions of the party.

The last Nation party occurred in Thailand a couple of years ago. From that, numerous new parties in Bangkok sprang forth for both Songkran, the water festival, and for the annual fall party. Taiwan is the other country of circuit choice right now for Asia. It has the summer Gay Days party (no relationship to the Gay Days Orlando party other than the name) and New Year’s Eve. There is also an ongoing party in Japan called Ageha. This party is similar to Alegria. It takes place four to five times a year and the boys fly in from all over to attend the one party. They take the bullet train from Tokyo to attend these all-
night festivities. When the train commences again at 6:00 AM, hoards of Circuit boys can be seen waiting at the station. Unlike the other Circuit parties, this one is not a weekend of events, but a single event of renowned status.

These parties bring out thousands of much-needed tourist dollars to the local economy and the governments of each of these countries are currently turning a blind eye to these events.

However, all of this can shift with an election or a lack of a bribe to the proper police officer. It’s always tricky and dangerous to party in Asia. There’s always a chance that the government will show up in the middle of a party and haul everyone off to be drug tested. The visitors will most likely be let off with just a warning since the government is trying to promote tourism. However, the locals will face fines, be made to go through drug rehabilitation, and possibly even face jail time. Although they like to party, the specter of getting arrested and doing jail time always looms in the back of their minds.

However, the desire of the boys to get together and bond over music and brotherhood still prevails. The genie has been let out of the proverbial bottle. The boys in Asia are part of a traveling Circuit that will draw them from one country to another in search of the next party. It does not matter if a party is curtailed in one country, it will just reappear in another. It is this unquenchable desire of being part of the Circuit community that draws the boys to different corners of Asia again and again.