The Fierce Tribe

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Chapter 8

A History of the Circuit(s): 1969 CE–Present

You have to understand.
Dancing is what our people do.
—Jeffrey Sanker, producer of White Party Palm Springs

Just as there was a circuit of drag balls in the eastern part of the United States during the 1930s, so were there annual Gay events before Stonewall. But it is a bit of a stretch to consider any of them Circuit parties because of some features that came into existence only after Stonewall.

Some of the distinguishing characteristics are as follows: large-scale, semi-public, annual theme parties dedicated strictly to dance; sound and light technologies that were perfected during the disco era (1972–1981); the rise of the DJ-as-star and the art of “mixing” songs in an unbroken series; display of the shirtless male body on the dance floor; a fondness for over-the-top decoration, special effects, and staged performances while participants are dancing; and the tendency for festivities to go from Friday until Sunday.

The major impetus for the formation of the Circuit was the need for public intimacy that need not be sexual. Circuit parties are not orgies, although Black Parties thrown in places such as NYC and Amsterdam have special areas set aside for just that purpose, and sexual behavior might occur on the dance floor during almost any event. The early Circuit needed privacy in order to generate an environment where Gay men could get intoxicated, flirt, display their physiques, and find romance—all in a safe space where they made their own rules.
After Stonewall: Sex, Sex, Sex

Stonewall was a sexual bugle call for homosexual men across the country.

Immediately following Stonewall, there was a marked increase in public sexual activity, especially in NYC. No longer in its infancy, the young Gay movement rushed into undisciplined puberty as men claimed new sexual territories throughout Manhattan, legal and otherwise. The dark forest of “the Rambles” in Central Park and the large empty warehouses on abandoned West Side piers became erotic zones laden with potential thrills and real danger. Queer-bashers would seek victims there. The warehouses were full of safety hazards that could lead to injury or even death as men fell through holes in the floor, sometimes into the Hudson River.¹

But the chance of physical harm did little to prevent visitors from going there at all hours—perhaps danger and a sense of adventure

¹. Joseph Lovett’s documentary, *Gay Sex in the 70s*, admirably covers the excesses of those times.
made the lure of the forbidden even more enticing. Trucks at the piers became pitch-black “back rooms” as men would pack into their trailers once the sun went down. The notoriety of the West Side piers and the trucks parked there resonated in the sexual culture of Gay male communities. Washington, D.C. had an immensely popular Gay club called the Pier, and Man’s Country bathhouse in Manhattan had a full-sized model of a truck on its ninth floor (Loughery 360–62).

Anonymous sex was available at a glance. Venereal diseases such as gonorrhea, syphilis, hepatitis-B, and intestinal parasites were rampant. It would be unfair to say that all of this was a result of Gay liberation only; the sexual revolution had already ushered in a rise in STDs before Stonewall. A 1964 study by the New York Academy of Medicine blamed the increase on several factors including the automobile, the feminist movement, a breakdown in family values, and homosexuals who wanted same-sex love “recognized as a noble way of life” (Kaiser 150). No doubt, the Gay male community’s newfound liberation after Stonewall aggravated the problem.2

The rise in venereal disease infections did not prevent men from cruising each other (looking for sex) everywhere they could, including the free clinic treating them for sexually transmitted diseases. Far from discouraging sex, STDs were often dismissed with a shrug—everything had a cure. Mel Cheren describes the prevailing attitude:

Most of us were not particularly worried at the time. In fact, our biggest complaint was that something nasty usually meant that you were not supposed to have sex until it cleared up, which might be several weeks. When you were used to having sex with somebody new almost every day, or even several times a day, it was tough to be told that you had to take a few weeks off. (Cheren 272)

For those who wanted a degree of comfort and security when they went out hunting for sex, many Gay bars had back rooms for sexual encounters, and bathhouses were set up to cater exclusively to Gay men.3 Some of them, such as the Club chain of bathhouses (started in 1965 in Cleveland, Ohio), were homosexual-friendly establishments that

2. In Sexual Ecology, Dr. June Osborn of the National Institute of Health is quoted in 1980 as saying, “Every time we do an NIH site visit, the definition of ‘multiple sex partners’ has changed.... First it was twenty partners a year. That was 1975. Then in 1976 it was fifty partners a year. By 1978, we were talking about a hundred sexual partners a year and now we’re using the term to describe five hundred partners in a single year.... I am ... duly in awe” (Rotello 62–63).

3. Gay bathhouses existed well before 1969 but were usually seen by authorities as illegal businesses that could be shut down at any time. Stonewall helped the bathhouse industry become a legally valid institution that would be threatened again by the AIDS epidemic and consequential public panic.
were respectable, clean, and discreet. In Manhattan, the Continental Baths (which opened in 1968) and the St. Marks Baths were stylish health spas featuring live performances. “My career took off when I sang at the Continental Baths in New York,” Bette Midler said in 1972 (Loughery 359–60). Midler performed there with Barry Manilow at the piano (Kaiser 248), thus earning her nickname, “Bathhouse Betty” (she released an album with the same name in 1998). Singers Melba Moore, Cab Calloway, Tiny Tim, and comedian Dick Gregory also performed at the Continental Baths (Loughery 360).

Early 1970s: The First Circuit (The Manhattan-Fire Island Loop)

The history of the Circuit is actually a history of interrelated circuits. The first Circuit is the seasonal movement of Gay men from discos in Manhattan to dance clubs on Fire Island during the summer; it began in the early 1970s almost immediately after Stonewall. The second Circuit is the movement of men from city to city across the United States to attend Manhattan-inspired Circuit parties in the late 1970s.

Manhattan (and its Fire Island refuge) is the cradle of Gay men’s dance culture, fashion, and festival. It is the historic epicenter of American theater, the home of Broadway/off-Broadway, and the arts associated with theater, such as choreography, sets, and technologies for spectacle. Because of its visibility, New York City rather than San Francisco, pre-Nazi Berlin, or any other large metropolis, was responsible for ushering in the age of public awareness of Gay folk as a people rather than simply a deviant group of criminals, sinners, and the mentally ill.

Just as Stonewall cannot be separated from illegal and scandalous activities, including unlicensed alcohol sales and cross-dressing, Gay liberation in its initial stages was fueled by illegal drugs and funded by shirtless dancing men. One of the first organizations to form after Stonewall was the Gay Liberation Front, a politically aware activist group with a reputation for using marijuana and acid (Clendinen and Nagourney 46). In July of 1969, the GLF opened Alternate U, its own school for political debate and community awareness in an industrial loft on Fourteenth Street. Tired of going to bars owned by Straight people who were not always sympathetic to Gay folk, the GLF began holding dances in December for the Gay community. These dances drew both men and women.

4. It is during the second Circuit that the term “circuit party” becomes popular.
5. In April 1970, the GLF women organized the first women-only dances as alternatives to the overwhelming numbers of men at most Gay liberation functions (Teal 42).
Another group, the Gay Activists Alliance, began holding fundraiser dances in May 1971. Like the GLF, the GAA used its facilities, an abandoned firehouse on Wooster Street, for committee meetings and social gatherings, complete with strobe lights, coat check, and occasionally, go-go boys (Teal 41–42, Clendinen and Nagourney 76). The bay for fire trucks was spacious and packed with mostly Gay men. For a time, it was New York’s most popular Gay male dance venue. Clendinen and Nagourney describe a scene that is strikingly familiar to Circuit boys and girls today:

On any Saturday night, people would take in the expanse of men, over a thousand of them, shirtless, shoulder to shoulder, arms flying in the air, high on LSD or [Q]uaaludes or Seconals or black beauties or marijuana. They were pounding sneakers on the cement floor, under flashing colored and strobe lights, and to a sound system “that the Fillmore might envy,” as Randy Wicker wrote in Gay newspaper, referring to the rock and roll concert hall across town … it was to be the progenitor of the huge discos that later appeared in New York. Suddenly, politics was glamorous. People who never thought of going to a GAA Thursday night meeting or a zap⁶ would line up to dance in what was by day the headquarters of the most active gay rights group in the country and by night New York’s premier gay club. (76–77)

Randy Wicker’s words are almost prophetic. In only a few years, the Fillmore East would become the Saint, the most famous Gay male dance club in history.

The Gay men’s dance movement would soon leave political activism to explore a privately constructed Gay identity. Dance clubs opened in Manhattan that catered exclusively to Gay men, who then began developing their own post-Stonewall culture away from the public eye.

The insistence on privacy and segregation from women and Straight men should not be seen as contrary to Gay liberation. Rather, it was a result of Gay liberation. The Gay men’s dance movement could not have occurred without the confidence and pride that Gay men felt as a consequence of Stonewall. “One of the profound changes wrought by Gay liberation,” states Michael Bronski, “was the permission granted to Gay men to like themselves” (103). But before Gay men could like themselves, they needed to get to know each other, on their own terms and in their own venues.

Initially, the term “circuit” referred to the weekly calendar for Gay men in-the-know (called “circuit queens”) to visit Gay-friendly hair

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⁶. Disruptive, unannounced protests (Hogan and Hudson 595).
⁷. The earliest reference to circuit queens I can find is in Dancer from the Dance (Holleran 152).
salons, restaurants, bars, dance clubs, and bathhouses on Manhattan Island that were considered chic (Levine 60). It would also include the seasonal pilgrimage to Fire Island in the summer and the newly legal clubs in Manhattan during the off-season. This inter-island pilgrimage made up the first post-Stonewall dance circuit. Andrew Holleran describes the migratory pattern of these early Circuit participants in his novel, *Dancer from the Dance*:

We would not stop dancing. We moved with the regularity of the Pope from the city to Fire Island in the summer, where we danced till the fall; and then, like the geese flying south, the butterflies dying in the dunes, we found some new place in Manhattan and danced all winter there. (111)

Manhattan clubs became progressively more grand and exclusive. Venues such as the Loft, 12 West, Flamingo, Salvation, Paradise Garage, and the Saint have become legendary landmarks in LGBTQ history. These clubs nurtured a new Gay dance culture that would change the face of popular dance music and club culture around the world.

The first huge Gay dance space was the Sanctuary, a converted German Baptist church on West Forty-third Street that opened in 1971. The DJ booth sat where the altar had been, and the pornographic and pagan imagery filled the space (Cheren 102). Another space dedicated to religious inversion was Salvation (located, appropriately, in Hell's Kitchen, as was the Sanctuary), which featured a grand portrait of Satan, served drinks in chalices, and had pews lining the walls (Collin 11). But Gay male dance clubs as anti-church soon fell out of fashion.

A smaller, more exclusive space was the Loft at 647 Broadway, a racially-inclusive private club that was actually the big loft apartment belonging to David Mancuso who transformed it into a dance venue for the entire weekend. Featuring free food and a great sound system, the Loft was a weekend retreat. It was a second home for “Loft babies” who were invited to join since Mancuso opened his doors in 1970 (Silcott 20). The Loft did not serve liquor, which meant that there was no need for a liquor license (12 West, Flamingo, and the Saint would do the same) and it could stay open as long as it wanted. The high point for an evening of dancing at the Loft moved from the hour before midnight to 6:00 in the morning, marking a shift from late evening-early morning parties to marathon dance sessions at all

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8. The name “Salvation” has survived in the Gay male club scene, first in Miami, which had a legendary club by the same name, and in the Salvation parties thrown in Britain and other European countries. Repetition of names is a common occurrence. In Columbus, Ohio, two of its clubs were named after Manhattan venues: 7 West and the Garage.
hours that could go on for more than one day, a shift that was fueled by intoxicants other than alcohol.

As well as continuously mixing one song into the next, DJs learned to play the music according to the intoxicants of choice. Howard Merritt, a DJ at the Flamingo, would call drug dealers and ask them, “What’s been your big seller this week?”:

Then I would know what kind of music to play that weekend. If they sold more mda [sic], the music had to be more high energy. Cocaine and speed, that’s the kind of music I played. But if they sold a lot of [angel] dust [PCP], then people weren’t coming to hear me. (Cheren 163)

One tradition that can be traced back to these times (or possibly even further back) is color-themed parties. The Flamingo had them in the 1970s. White, Black, and Red Parties would become staples of more than one club and eventually more than one city as Gay Manhattan club culture spread. Today, many cities still have Black Parties and White Parties, but only a few are widely regarded as Circuit events, such as the White Parties in Palm Springs, Miami, and formerly, New York, and the Black Parties in New York and Amsterdam. Other colors have made their debut as well, with the Philadelphia Blue Ball, Montreal Black and Blue, Dallas Purple Party, and Amsterdam Orange Ball.

Just as the isle of Manhattan sprouted a host of openly-Gay dance venues after Stonewall, so did Fire Island. The disco song “Fire Island” by the all-male and orientation-ambiguous Village People gives some of the club names:

It’s the place where you’ll find me, the sun and sea
the place where love is free, yeah
We can scream, but let’s sing
we can do each other’s thing, yeah
Groove at the Ice Palace
Get on down at the Monster
Raise hell, raise hell
Chasin’ tail at the Blue Whale
Peckin’, I’m peckin’
peckin’ at the Sandpiper
Pumpin’, I’m pumpin’
pumpin’ at the hotel
Fire Island—it’s a funky weekend
a funky funky weekend
Don’t go in the bushes, someone might grab ya
Don’t go in the bushes, someone might stab ya

9. So far, I have heard of 1970s color-themed parties in New York, Columbus (Ohio), Boston, and San Francisco.
The presence of venues such as the Ice Palace, Monster, Blue Whale, and Sandpiper on a barrier island with an off-season population of only a few thousand gives some indication of how popular Fire Island was during the summer. The fact that this song also refers to violence indicates that there was still uneasiness brought on by random Gay-bashing in this sun-and-fun Gay resort.

The issue of building a nonconformist “butch” or “manly” masculinity became important in Gay discourse, expression, and fashion immediately after Stonewall. In part, this was a conscious move by Gay men to protect themselves from attack, to repel would-be aggressors with visible signs of physical strength and macho behavior. More importantly, it was also a means of erotic attraction, to beautify the body by clothing it in muscle and catch the eye of other Gay men. Plenty of men were ready to transform their bodies and attitudes.

This change in masculine expression marks a pivotal moment in LGBTQ history: effeminacy was no longer necessary as a key marker for homosexuality. Unlike molly houses or drag balls, clubs in the Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit openly celebrated muscular and manly Gay men, who would appear on the streets and the beach by the thousands. At night, they would take off their shirts in the clubs in a display of raw sensuality and assertiveness that shocked the awareness of anyone who witnessed them en masse. Gay men made themselves the objects of their own desire rather than wistfully lusting after some Straight masculine ideal. This ushered the age of the “Gay clone,” a mustached, nicely muscled stud made famous (and gently ridiculed) by the song “Macho Man” by the Village People:

Body, it’s so hot, my body
Body, love to pop my body
Body, love to please my body
Body, don’t you tease my body
Body, you’ll adore my body
Body, come explore my body
Body, made by God, my body
Body, it’s so good, my body
You can tell a macho, he has a funky walk
His western shirts and leather, always look so boss
Funky with his body, he’s a king
Call him Mister Eagle,10 dig his chains
You can best believe that, he’s a macho man
Likes to be the leader, he never dresses grand
Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, hey!

10. The Eagle is a chain of Gay Leather bars, where clothing made of leather, harnesses, and chains would be acceptable attire.
Macho, macho man
I’ve got to be, a macho man
Macho, macho man
I’ve got to be a macho!

The deeply internalized stereotypes of homosexuals as nelly fags (effeminate men) or sneaky perverts were challenged on and off the dance floor by the hypermasculinity of the Gay clone. For the general public, however, effeminate stereotypes were still the rule.

Effeminacy in the Gay male community did not disappear with the rise of the macho man. Cherished nelly traditions going back to the days of the molly houses survived quite well in the first Circuit. Men still gave each other girl names. Hilarious effeminate behavior in the form of camp was regularly interwoven in men’s performance of the Gay male identity, including the performance of muscular clones.

The influence of the original Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit spread and became standard behavior outside of NYC as visitors flocked there and brought Circuit culture back home with them. In response to DJs in the Gay dance scene and the popularity of the music they made, record companies produced extended-play versions of dance songs, technicians improved turntables, and clubs invested heavily in lights and sound equipment. All of these innovations contributed to a new industry dedicated to developing and enhancing techniques of communal ecstasy.

Gay club culture quickly spread beyond the Gay community into the mainstream with the popularity of disco music in the 1970s. The influence of the Gay men’s dance movement on disco can be seen in the disco scene’s relaxed attitude toward drugs12 and sensual dance floor expression in clubs like Studio 54. This included, a more tolerant attitude toward Gay people.

One musical group stood out above the rest as the kings of disco and the ambassadors of Gay male club sensibilities in the late ‘70s: the Village People.13 Made up of six physically-fit, male singers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, the Village People strutted

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11. This is also the beginning of the technology that would be used to create disco and house culture.
12. Although there is some continuity between the Flower Power movement and disco culture, I do not believe that such continuity was responsible for the remarkable tolerance toward illegal drugs unless one considers the way such tolerance was preserved within the Gay community and passed on to disco by that community, along with technologies for dance.
13. Even the name “Village People” is evocative of Greenwich Village in Manhattan, the neighborhood in which Stonewall took place. Besides “Fire Island” and “Macho Man,” their repertoire includes tongue-in-cheek titles and lyrics of songs such as “YMCA,” “In the Navy,” “San Francisco,” and “Sodom and Gomorrah.”
onstage and danced as they sang, a fusion of theatrical chorus line and pop music with a dash of burlesque. They dressed up as masculine icons: Indian, Cowboy, Biker, Construction Worker, Soldier, and Cop.\textsuperscript{14} The coded lyrics to their songs are hilarious and full of sexual innuendos that would not always register in the minds of most Straights, but were easily understood by Gay men. There was one thing that the Village People would not do, however. They would not perform in an effeminate manner. From the perspective of the Gay male community, the Village People were a band of butch Gay brothers who undermined the stereotype of the flaming queen. They were the harbinger of the muscular, macho Circuit boy.

However, heterosexuals could interpret those same macho mannerisms in a very different way. The Straight community assumed that maybe the Village People were not \textit{really} Gay because of the absence of effeminate behavior. Uptight Straight Americans could accept the Village People with open arms, as long they could assure themselves that the group was a clever joke. The Village People themselves would not say for certain on whose team they played, no matter how obvious their affiliation appeared to Gay folk. In fact, they were careful to encourage ambiguity. They portrayed themselves as sexy, possibly Straight, fun-loving dudes in costume \textit{and} as living symbols of Gay men’s resistance to the pansy stereotype.

It would be a mistake for LGBTQ historians to assume that the Village People were simply closet cases or cheap parodies—they were so much more. I personally doubt they could have been as effective in lowering the barriers between Gay and Straight if they had all been out-and-out Gay, or if they had identified only as Straight. When they danced in their butch outfits and sang with strong masculine voices in front of Straight audiences, these six men contributed to the liberation of Gay people in much the same way as the Stonewall Girls, who danced in feminine drag and sang in front of riot police. The Indian, Cowboy, Biker, Construction Worker, Soldier, and Cop inspired the world to have fun with sexual identity and follow Gay sensibilities of hilarity, tolerance, sensuality, and nonviolence. They confronted America with macho muscle, teased its citizens, and dared them to laugh.

Nevertheless, the Village People could push, but only so hard before homophobic America pushed back.

\textsuperscript{14.} The use of masculine icons was the rejection of nelly sensibilities. In their incarnation of Gay identity, the Village People accessorized masculine occupations as symbols of eroticized Gay manliness rather than projected onto Straight men.
Disco Sucks!

Any hopes of Gays and Straights forming a united club culture based on Gay values were short-lived. Thinly-veiled homophobic backlash contributed to the “death” of disco in the late 1970s. “Disco Sucks” and “Kill Disco” were common slogans in a time when beating up Queers was still a popular sport among bored Straight jocks. Chicago radio DJ Steve Dahl called for a “disco destruction army” to verbally assault DJs that played disco music. In one publicity stunt, Dahl gave away 100 tickets to a Village People concert so that disco-haters could harass the performers. “Macho Man” was no longer a laughing matter. “Disco music is a disease,” Dahl warned his minions as he called for the extinction of the genre, which he characterized as a plague (Brewster and Broughton 268). Such language and its underlying edge of hatred would soon be used in describing GRID (Gay-Related Immunity Deficiency, an early name for AIDS).

On July 12, 1979 (three weeks after Stonewall’s tenth anniversary), Dahl pulled his biggest anti-disco stunt: he supervised a Disco Demolition rally at Chicago’s Comiskey Park during a baseball double-header between the Detroit Tigers and the Chicago White Sox. After the first game, Dahl (in paramilitary gear) went on the field and burned several thousand disco albums that fans had brought in exchange for reduced admission. The album-burning excited the White teenage spectators into a frenzy. Thousands of them poured onto the field, ripped up the turf, set more fires, and started fights while chanting “Disco Sucks!” (Brewster and Broughton 269, Schulman 74, Vincent 215).

One of the reasons why Gay men were feared was because they, too, sucked and perversely enjoyed sucking. Mel Cheren, “Godfather of Disco” and founder of West End Records, sums up the backlash:

The music market is largely a zero-sum game, so as disco rose, everything else had to fall. This infuriated those who had dominated music for years—rock critics, DJs, and producers, and lots of disenfranchised fans. Rock had defined two generations of white, middle-class straight baby-boomers, particularly guys. It spoke to them and for them, and now it was in danger of being relegated to a niche market itself by a new style dominated by black musicians and Gay promoters, producers, and tastemakers. As the disco sweep turned into a tidal wave, a near panic set in. Beneath the bitter complaints that disco was mindless, hedonistic, repetitive, pounding—exactly what critics had said about rock itself in its early years—there was this deeper complaint: disco was black and Hispanic. Disco was mindless and gay. Disco sucked. (245)
Irrational hatred of disco was not limited to Chicago—it became political and international in scope. Like homosexuality, disco was portrayed as a threat to public health and national security. According to Brewster and Broughton,

All over the world, the disco menace was confronted; right-wing Americans denounced it as morally degraded and probably a form of communist mind control; communist countries banned it as decadent and capitalist. Perhaps the most bizarre expression of antidisco sentiment came from Turkey, where scientists at the University of Ankara “proved” that disco turned pigs deaf and made mice homosexual. (Brewster and Broughton 269)

The anti-disco crusade had a racist edge. Disco was not only perceived as Gay by Straight White rockers, it was also non-White. There were not many African American folk (if any) in Dahl’s “disco destruction army,” and for good reason.

Homophobia in Hip-Hop today may be seen in part as Straight Black men’s parallel reaction against disco, a means of distancing Black musical culture from Gay-influenced music that sucked. Black backlash framed disco as White and assimilationist (Schulman 74). The rise of rap music occurred at about the same time as disco-bashing. Mildly homophobic lyrics are present in the very first rap hit, “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang in which Superman is described as a fairy who flies around in panty hose, and rivals are labeled “sucker MCs.”

Nevertheless, rap music owes a debt to disco. “Rapper’s Delight” was created when the Sugar Hill Gang sampled a non-vocal version of a disco hit called “Good Times” by Chic and chanted their own lyrical poetry to it.

Disco music survived (often called urban music to avoid the backlash) and flourished in the Gay male community. Disco would eventually transform seamlessly into house music. By the time disco had supposedly died, the first generation of the Circuit was already well established. With ever-present threats of Gay-bashing and incidences like the anti-disco riot of 1979, the Gay men’s dance movement had plenty of incentive to keep itself removed from the general public.

Even though it was concealed from the public eye, this first Circuit had a huge effect on Gay men’s perception of themselves across the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe. The early Gay male scene in post-Stonewall Manhattan was embryonic and fragile, protected from harm’s way in social spaces that catered to Gay men only, at least in its first couple of years.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} The same need for privacy can be found in the women’s music festival movement. Many women’s music festivals are women-only spaces. Sometimes a community
Once the Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit began expanding to other cities at the end of the ‘70s, two Manhattan clubs would set the pace for years to come: the Saint and the Paradise Garage.


While the first Circuit was going strong, the super-club called the Saint was built. Like the Flamingo and other popular venues, it was for members only (a limited number of guests were allowed). The Saint could easily hold a few thousand revelers and had one of the most sophisticated sound and light systems for its time. If the Stonewall Inn was the bottom of the barrel for nightclubs, the Saint was the top of the line. Many people who remember the early days claim that the Saint represented everything grand about the Circuit.

The invitation for membership that the Saint’s creator/owner Bruce Mailman had sent out to his friends indicates that Mailman didn’t design the club to generate a purely secular experience:

Since the beginning of recorded history the male members of the species have joined together in ritual dance. Adorned, semi-naked with rhythm instruments, they used this tribal rite to celebrate their Gods and themselves. The Saint has been created to perform the mystery—to continue the rite. (Clendinen and Nagourney 442)

Club culture tends to be geographically volatile. The opening of the Saint contributed to the demise of the Flamingo, formerly the “only” place to go. We still see this dynamic today in every major city, as notoriously fickle Gay men flock to the latest flavor of club venues and leave old clubs in financial ruin.

The Saint (opened in 1980, closed in 1988) is a topic of Gay men’s folklore that borders on the mythical. DJ Warren Gluck said that the Saint was all about creating a rich aesthetic and transcendental experience. “When you stepped onto the dance floor, you walked into the music,” he said (interview, December 2002). On certain weekends, the Saint’s crowd would dance from Saturday night to Monday morning. By 1980, the pattern for the then-embryonic Circuit had been set. Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton (Last Night a DJ Saved My Life) describe it thus:

The Saint’s dancefloor [sic] would be a mass of bodies, each sculpted to perfection, moving in tribal unison. To the strains of the club’s ornate music, these beautiful men would proceed to get utterly trashed—on angel dust [PCP], Quaaludes, ecstasy, cocaine, amphetamines. They were Greek gods with drug habits. (197)

needs privacy so that its members can determine for themselves who they are, what they want, and how they choose to behave.
The Saint took its name from the St. Marks Baths—also owned by Bruce Mailman—which took its name from St. Marks Place, the street on which it is located. In turn, St. Marks Place took its name from St. Mark's-on-the-Bowery, a church located a couple of blocks north on East Tenth Street.

The building that became the Saint (105 Second Avenue) had formerly been the Fillmore East, a theater in which many '60s rock musicians had performed.\textsuperscript{16} After a five million dollar facelift, complete with a state-of-the-art sound system, DJ equipment, and light fixtures including a planetarium projector, the Saint was truly a heavenly place to dance. A huge dome hung over the dance floor; the lights and planetarium played upon its surface. People who had gone to the Saint in its heyday said that no club could come close to it in style and sophistication.

People also remember the Saint as holy ground. Brewster and Broughton quote an unnamed clubber: “It was the headiest experience I’ve ever had in my life…. And it is unrivaled still. It was liberating, spiritually uplifting. That’s where I learned to love my brothers” (196).

It had its flaws, however. The Saint would not initially let women in for any reason whatsoever (the more democratic Paradise Garage would admit women, but only in small numbers). Unlike Stonewall, it was a refuge only for those who could afford membership or were sponsored by members. Its sophistication came with a price tag. But considering that the Gay club scene was occasionally targeted by crazed homophobes and drug use was a given,\textsuperscript{17} it was not entirely without reason that these clubs were so exclusive. In my own experience (as recently as 1998), I can remember when Gay dance clubs in Columbus, Ohio, had no signs in front to prevent random acts of violence against their clientele.

Besides being celestial in sound and sight, the Saint also catered to the sexual appetites of its male patrons. A balcony that looked down on the dance floor was the place to have sex between dances. In \textit{My Life and the Paradise Garage}, a book about the origins of the Gay dance club scene, Mel Cheren describes the infamous balcony:

\begin{footnotes}
16. The Fillmore East was named after the Fillmore, a dance hall-turned-concert hall in San Francisco. Both Fillmores were under the direction of promoter Bill Graham, who closed them in 1971. Before the Fillmore, it was the Loews Commodore, and before that, it belonged to a Yiddish theater troupe (Clendinen and Nagourney 442).

17. Several Gay Manhattan dance clubs did not sell liquor before the advent of AIDS because it was not the intoxicant of choice. Since liquor was not sold, there was no need to get a liquor license.
\end{footnotes}
From the grand balcony you would gaze at the constellations of stars on the immense planetarium, the dance floor pulsing below…. Most of the men on the balcony were not really there for the view, however…. The balcony was essentially a big orgy room, and for most guests a trip up to the balcony became almost obligatory. On a typical night you might spend a couple of hours dancing, and then, high as a kite, you’d zip up to the balcony for a quickie…. Then after trysting up there in heaven, and smoking a dusted joint [marijuana laced with PCP] or snorting some coke, you’d come back down to the dance floor for another round. The balcony changed everything about the disco experience, and, in my opinion, not for the better. The definition of a good night ceased being whether you had danced yourself into delirium, but whether you had scored. (Cheren 278)

DJ Wendy Hunt mentions the Saint’s balcony:

Back in the day, I was one of the very few female members of the Saint, and was even jealous, at times, of the guys who could go to the area of the club where sex took place. I was even told at the door, “Please do not go there” because it was a forbidden area for women. I never really stopped to think of what I’d do once there, being penisless and all, because I really did feel like part of the tribe! (interview, December 2007)

The apparent incongruity between the Saint’s name and the libertine atmosphere of the balcony is not unique in the history of Gay sexual geography. It reflects a fondness for wordplay, irony, and scandalous speech. This is apparent from the very beginning of the first Circuit, with clubs such as the Flamingo (“flaming” refers to a Gay man who exaggerates the behavior of the opposite sex; flamingos are usually portrayed as pink), the Sanctuary, Salvation, and Paradise Garage. These names reflect common themes of sensuality, hilarity, and the sacred in Gay men’s dance culture.

The undisciplined sexual openness of the Saint and tolerance of intoxicants did not mean, however, that anything was permissible. Members expected guests to maintain a high level of etiquette. Cigarettes and drinks were forbidden on the dance floor. Members had no problem telling offenders point blank to follow the rules or leave.

Both the Saint and St. Marks Baths were among the best in their respective genres. They blurred the distinctions between bathhouses and dance clubs. Just as the Saint had its balcony for quick encounters, St. Marks sometimes had dance music for the benefit of its clientele.18

In terms of age, the bathhouse came before the mega-club. St. Marks Baths was built on the same site as the last city residence of James

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18. It is not unusual for bathhouses to play dance music or to employ live DJs.
Fenimore Cooper. It opened as a bathhouse in 1913 and was named the St. Marks Russian and Turkish Baths. The property was bought by Mailman in 1979, renovated and renamed the New St. Marks Baths.

There is a long tradition of interdependence between the Circuit and bathhouses. Major holidays and Circuit parties tend to bring brisk business to “the tubs.” Besides acting as venues for sexual encounters, bathhouses also act as centers for socializing, safe havens for men to come down off of their intoxicants, and a cheaper alternative to a hotel room so that revelers could clean up and get a few hours of sleep. Of course, the bathhouse is also a prime spot for further display of the body.

*Getting Churchy in the Paradise Garage (1977–1987)*

In contrast (and, in many ways, in conjunction) with the Saint, there was its funkier African-Latino counterpart, the Paradise Garage. The Garage was just that, a renovated garage on 84 King St.
Characterized by Cheren as “the ultimate tribal dance space,” the Garage took much of its inspiration from the Loft. Like the Loft, the Flamingo, and the Saint, the Paradise Garage was invitation-only. It would open on Friday and Saturday nights, and close whenever people went home. Like the Loft, the Garage was a home away from home. Lockers were provided, as was free food and places where one could take a quick nap. For a refreshing change of environment, there was a rooftop terrace. Larry Levan and Richard Long designed the sound system to enhance the treble and bass with extra features such as “tweeter arrays” and special low-end subwoofers known as “Larry’s horn” (Silcott 20).

Although the Garage could not match the Saint in sheer splendor, it was at least as sophisticated (and arguably better) in sound production, in no small part due to the expertise of its resident DJ, Larry Levan. The Garage and Levan are enshrined in underground music culture as, according to Brewster and Broughton, “the crucial link between disco and the musical forms which evolved from it”:

Here a young DJ, Larry Levan, exemplified his profession’s new possibilities—consolidating the club DJ’s new role as producer, mixer and commercially powerful tastemaker. Levan showed just how much creative control a DJ could exercise, and with one of the most devoted and energetic groups of clubbers ever, used the Garage to preserve and amplify much of disco’s original underground spirit. In doing this he ... grew to enjoy such a passionate relationship with the people on his dancefloor [sic] that they worshipped him more or less as a god.... Today, Larry Levan is regularly hailed as the world’s greatest ever DJ, and his club elevated to mythic status whenever it is mentioned. (271–72)

Levan’s mixture of old classics with new music, his willingness to play songs that other DJs were afraid to touch, and his tendency to send lyrical messages to the dance floor became known as “disco evangelism” (Cheren 182).

The cult of the DJ was an integral part of the Garage’s design. Cheren describes the Garage DJ booth and its premier occupant:

The Garage had the ultimate booth, with one area reserved for the DJ himself, and another more spacious area with couches and tables where the DJ’s entourage would gather. The whole thing was generally tightly guarded by a security man, and for many disco fans the ultimate sign that you had arrived was the day you were invited, or allowed, into the booth. Like any hierarchy, booths had a source of supreme power—the DJ—surrounded by a court and an entourage as serious in its own way as the royal courts of old, with its own etiquette,
including rewards for the faithful and punishment the disloyal. Usually banishment.... And in the middle of it all was the mad king who ruled this strange court: La Diva Levan. (304–5)

If the Saint was the place for the Gay male community’s elite in terms of money and looks, the Garage was the home of its dance masters, who flocked to witness the innovative DJ techniques of Levan. “There was no attitude here,” says Cheren about the Garage’s clientele, “no cliques defined by their muscles, no fashion victims, no A-list” (198). Mireille Silcott calls the Paradise Garage, “a two-thousand capacity haven from prejudice, a decompression zone, not a place to pose or to have sex in backrooms, but a place to dance” (20). DJ Johnny Dynell recalls the reverence people had for the Garage: “It’s very Old Testament. And for everyone there, it really was a temple. It was sacred ground” (Brewster and Broughton 272).

The culture of the DJ was fine tuned in the Saint, the Paradise Garage, and other Gay clubs in New York. These venues were important sites in the transformation of a night of music into a journey, a rhythmic voyage that took the dancers to uncharted psychic, erotic, and spiritual territories. The rapport that DJs enjoy with their crowds in the Circuit has its genesis in these clubs. As the Ur-spaces of the club experience, the Saint and Garage were the pace setters, oases for Gay men all over the world.

Late 1970s: The Birth of the Circuit Party

Born from the pattern set by the original Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit, a second-generation circuit of parties (that would be called “circuit parties” for the first time) across the United States began in the early 1980s. Circuit parties generated a coast-to-coast nomadic community with its own music, DJs, and social calendar. The movement started when men who had gone to Manhattan and Fire Island brought dance culture, DJs, and technology to their home cities. Some Circuit veterans say that this new, more geographically diverse Circuit began in Columbus, Ohio, when an artist/club owner named Corbett Reynolds started the Red Party in 1976.

In terms of Gay men traveling from party to party, it is probable that a hidden circuit of parties was already in place for much of the twentieth century. These events would coincide with already-established traditions and celebrations of major holidays and festivals such as

19. Rave culture and underground dance culture in general has elevated Larry Levan to the status of godhood. One reason for this could be the ambience of the Paradise Garage, which was not a place for sex, neither was it a refuge for the elite and the untouchably beautiful. Its inclusiveness would definitely appeal to those who follow the PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) ethic of the Rave community.
as Halloween and New Year's in large urban centers. There were annual events that predate the Red Party, such as the previously mentioned Emma Jones party in Pensacola (1966–1974), Mardi Gras, and New Orleans Southern Decadence (1971). Some argue that the second Circuit began with Atlanta's annual Hotlanta River Expo, also started in 1976. Reynolds, however, said that Hotlanta got its inspiration from the Red.

The Red Party can be considered the first Circuit party because it did the following early on: emphasized pageantry, transferred the party from a club to a larger rented space, imported Manhattan club sensibilities (performers, DJs, and technologies for light and sound), and relegated dance as the basis for the gathering, not simply one activity among many.

The Red was a Columbus tradition, much like a Gay homecoming. It began in a bar that Reynolds owned called Rudely Elegant. He would throw annual parties (White, Black, Tropical, and Red, a tradition he picked up in Manhattan).

The Red Party was renowned for the care that Reynolds would put in decoration and entertainment for the night, an aspect that newer parties would adopt as the Circuit spread across the nation. The Red was just as much a venue for aesthetic expression as it was a dance party, and a showcase for the special guests who Reynolds would invite, including the drag queen-turned-actress Divine and, on one memorable occasion, singer-actress Grace Jones riding onstage on a motorcycle. The last Red Party (2001), called “Red Fetish,” featured televangelist Tammy Faye as its guest of honor.

What was most important to Reynolds, however, was inclusion. Anyone who wanted to attend his parties was welcome, and he incorporated his guests into his production. One year, he had participants bring kitchen appliances that they had painted red, which he then installed on the spot as decorations. He was not impressed with the A list, those people who, due to connections, physical beauty, or wealth, considered themselves to be the best of the best. He despised the custom of setting up separate lounges for VIPs (Very Important People) and called them “V-I-Piss lounges” (interview, July 2001).

Even after Rudely Elegant closed in the early 1980s, the Red Party continued in rented spaces whose location would be kept secret in its formative years to prevent police from shutting it down. Eventually, it found a home in the Valleydale Ballroom, a large venue on the

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20. Pageantry and décor are marks of the bigger Circuit events, and are one reason for the high price of admission. Production costs for Black and Blue 2002: The Main Event entitled “Humanité,” for example, were approximately $225,000 (Humanité 74).
outskirts of Columbus. The Red’s shift from bar to rented space is now standard practice for most Circuit parties today; few clubs can handle the large numbers of participants that show up at major Circuit events.

San Francisco is an alternative site for the start of the larger Circuit. In the late 1970s, the City by the Bay had a Circuit-style club, Trocadero Transfer, which brought Manhattan sensibilities to the West Coast, including White, Black, and Red Parties. It had its own nationally famous dance scene distinct from Manhattan, including its own DJs and light technicians.

A third alternative would be Chicago. What would eventually become known as “Circuit music” also developed with the “outsourcing” of Manhattan club culture to Second City. In the late 1970s, Manhattan DJ Frankie Knuckles (a.k.a. “the Godfather of House”) brought New York musical sensibilities to a Chicago club called the Warehouse. Knuckles would rework recorded music, extend the rhythm by stretching the groove over a longer period of time without dumbing it down in mindless repetition, and preserving what he calls the “heart” of the song (interview, October 2004). Rather than the restrictive three-and-a-half-minute radio format of so many releases, the remixed result was more suited to the pace of the dancer. The innovations that he and others were perfecting would create a new sound known as house music, which was named after Knuckle’s DJ residency, the Warehouse.

Frankie Knuckles and his peers brought a strong spiritual component to club culture that goes beyond the pleasures of the flesh. Knuckles uses the language of religion when he describes what he has been doing for the last forty years:

For me, it’s definitely like church…. Because, when you’ve got three thousand people in front of you, that’s three thousand different personalities. And when those three thousand personalities become one personality, it’s the most amazing thing. It’s like that in church. By the time the preacher gets everything going, or that choir gets everything going, at one particular point, when things start peaking, that whole room becomes one, and that’s the most amazing thing about it. (Brewster and Broughton 292)

21. Reynolds suggested the Red Party could also have been a forerunner of Raves. Ravers in the 1980s would likewise keep their venues secret to prevent police interference. The Red Party was different from the Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit and more like the Rave scene in one important aspect: Reynolds welcomed everyone to attend, regardless of sexual orientation or gender.

22. Knuckles described the Warehouse as “church for people who have fallen from grace” (Reynolds 30).
As mentioned earlier, house music emerged seamlessly from disco. House could be considered, in fact, less commercialized and more sophisticated disco music. “I view house music as disco’s revenge,” said Knuckles (Brewster and Broughton 292). House music quickly became the preferred sound for Circuit parties and the soon-to-be Rave scene as they spread throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. As house music diversified into techno house and a myriad other forms, Circuit DJs picked and chose which forms would be applicable for masses of cracked-out Gay men.

Regardless of where one places the origin of the second Circuit, it gained momentum as Gay men in major cities began to set up festival weekends of their own. The pattern went something like this: a group of close friends, often men who would visit Fire Island together, would decide to have an event in their city. They would contact their friends across the country that they had met on Fire Island and send them tickets to sell to their friends to raise money for a decent sound system, lights, venue, decoration, and entertainment. Parties that started out with maybe 300 participants would grow to 5,000–plus as word got out. Initially, these parties were called “Pines” or “Pavilion” parties, named after the Fire Island Pines and a dance venue there called the Pavilion (Lou Piper, interview, July 2006).

AIDS almost brought the Gay male dance scene to a standstill. Property on Fire Island became a buyer’s market because so many owners had died. The first Circuit nearly disappeared, and the second one almost stopped dead in its tracks.


The year 1985 was bad for the Saint, the club scene, and Gay people, especially Gay men. Because AIDS was so prevalent amongst the Saint’s patrons, it was labeled “the Saint disease” (Brewster and Broughton 201). The following quote from The Gay Metropolis by Charles Kaiser describes the effect of AIDS on the New York Gay male community during the ‘80s:

Gay men in Manhattan from the generation born after World War II would suffer at least a fifty percent casualty rate from this scourge.... Virtually every Gay man in every large American city would experience the death of at least ten friends during the epidemic; for some, the number of deceased friends and acquaintances has surpassed three hundred. (283)

The catastrophic effects of the epidemic crippled the Gay male club scene. Belatedly, the management of the Saint would police the balcony
to prevent further sexual acts that could lead to new infections, but it was too late. Cheren describes the fall of the Saint:

The Saint was so huge that it could comfortably hold several thousand, and for years it was crammed every Saturday night. But by 1988, it was lucky if it drew a few hundred souls, even on a good night. The rest were either dead or mourning or dying, or taking care of someone who was. At one point the club sent out its annual membership renewals and over 700 came back marked: Return to Sender—Occupant Deceased. The spirit had completely gone out of the place. (425)

The Paradise Garage closed down in 1987. Larry Levan spun the last twenty-four hours of the Paradise Garage’s weekend-long closing party “as the last weeping revelers gathered in a circle and lit candles” (Cheren 411). The Garage reverted back to an ordinary garage (412).

On April 30, 1988, the Saint had its closing party, a marathon event with ten DJs who spun nonstop for forty hours. The last DJ, Robbie Leslie, finished the party at noon on Monday, May 1. Cheren describes the end:

The final chord, the last beat echoed and faded, and it was all over beneath the cavernous dome. Small groups of young men looked old with grief and loss. Nobody wanted to leave, leaving meant never returning, but slowly we stumbled out into the street onto high noon on an overcast regular Monday workday in New York. People were going about their business rushing around, walking dogs, shopping, hailing cabs. (428)

1988: Rebirth

The community rallied. As Corbett Reynolds said about the grief, panic, and despair of those times, “You still have to dance” (interview, July 2001).23 In spite (or perhaps because) of the fear and depression that AIDS had brought to those fledgling Gay communities, people needed a release, a space in which they could commemorate their lost ones and celebrate being alive.

At the end of the 1980s, the tradition of holding dances for Gay activism returned. There was a shift, however, from political causes to activism on the medical front to help those unfortunates who were succumbing to the plague. Major cities threw new parties with Circuit sensibilities in many major cities as AIDS fundraisers, and their popularity grew. Successful treatment and remission of the dread illness, along with an underground steroid and marijuana network to help those with

23. Reynolds was also instrumental in raising awareness of and money for people with AIDS in Columbus.
AIDS wasting syndrome, led to a resurgence of the dance community and a noticeable number of muscular (and apparently healthy) men who might or might not be HIV-positive. What began as events for 200 or so people once again mushroomed into extravaganzas for as many as 24,000.

Regular dance clubs couldn’t hold many of the main events of these annual weekend festivals. Like the Red Party, they would take place in large rented venues rather than clubs requiring year-round upkeep.

Second-generation Circuit parties are now Gay traditions in their own right. Major parties are larger than life, with mesmerizing stage shows and fabulous costumes. Gay men’s involvement with theater has had a profound effect on the Circuit. Premier Circuit parties regularly stage state-of-the-art productions with professional dancers, acrobats, elaborate stage props, well-rehearsed choreographic numbers, and eye-catching special effects—all designed to energize the participants as well as entertain them. The link to theater was strong in the days of the first Circuit and is still strong today; the legendary Saint was once a Yiddish theater. Ric Sena, the producer of the highly-theatrical Alegria events (part of the latest wave of innovative Circuit reinvention), was a theater manager in Rio de Janeiro before he moved to New York (personal communication, August 2007).

The theatricality of the Circuit adds to its spiritual potential. Since there is such a strong connection between the theatrical and the spiritual in the Gay community (theater as Gay people’s church), the notion that Circuit parties are frames for experiencing and expressing transcendence does not seem to be such a stretch.

But even with the glitter and wow of professional entertainment in the Circuit, a higher premium is placed on Circuiteers as the show rather than performers on stage or in the DJ booth. Continuing the patterns set by the first generation, DJs do not disturb the dancers by talking over the music. Unless the performer is a renowned celebrity, professionals usually tailor performances to mix in for the duration of one song and mix out with the next without skipping a beat—no speeches, no encores. The real action is on the dance floor.

The Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit did not die. Manhattan is the home of the Pride Pier Dance, the Saint-At-Large Black, White, 24 and New Year’s Parties, and the Alegria parties thrown at various times of

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24. I have been told by those who went to the old Saint that, indeed, the Saint-at-Large White Party had its share of ghosts who attended the festivities. “There used to be a place in the ceiling of the Roseland where the dead came in to be with us as we danced,” said Candida Scott Piel, a woman whose fierce intellect and passion are dedicated to dancing and to helping people with AIDS (personal communication, January 2008).
the year. Fire Island has its own Circuit events—all held in the sum-
mer—including the Invasion of the Pines, the Pines Party, Rites of
Summer, and Ascension.

The Second Circuit

The second Circuit reached its peak at about the year 2000 with
events in San Diego (Zoo Party); Long Beach, California (Shockwave);
San Francisco (Folsom St. Fair, Colossus); Palm Springs (White Party);
Las Vegas (Viva Las Vegas); Dallas (Purple Party); Austin (Meltdown,
Splash); Chicago (Fireball, International Male Leather, Market
Days, Pumpkinhead); Detroit (Motorball); Louisville (Crystal Ball);
Columbus (Red Party); Cleveland (Erie Party); New Orleans (Southern
Decadence, Halloween); Birmingham, Alabama (Rites of Spring);
Atlanta (Hotlanta); Pensacola (Memorial Day); Orlando (Gay Days);
Miami (White Party, Winter Party); Washington, D.C. (Cherry, Colors
of the Fall); Philadelphia (Blue Ball); New York (Black Party, Pier
Dance); and Provincetown, Massachusetts (Summer Camp). Outside
of the United States, Toronto (Unified); Montreal (Black and Blue, Bal
des Boys, Red Party, Wild and Wet); Amsterdam (Black Party, White
Party, Orange Party); Cape Town (MCQP); Phuket, Thailand (Nation);
and Sydney (Sleaze Ball-Sydney Mardi Gras) also joined the Circuit.

Like the drag balls of the 1930s, the second Circuit went public.
Events have been held in some magnificent spaces, such as the Palm
Springs and Miami convention centers (White Parties), Old Post Office
Building in D.C. (Cherry), Naval shipyard and Constitution Center in
Philadelphia (Blue Ball), Queen Mary cruise ship docked in Long Beach,
San Francisco City Hall (ReUnion), the San Diego Zoo (Zoo Party),
Vizcaya Mansion in Miami (White Party), Universal Studios and Disney
World theme parks in Orlando (Gay Days-One Mighty Weekend), the
Olympic Stadium in Montreal (Black and Blue), and huge beach par-
ties in South Beach (White Party, Winter Party), Pensacola (Memorial
Day Wave), and Fire Island (Pines Party, Morning Party, Ascension).

1996: D.C. Cherry Jubilee and the US Congress

Perhaps the most controversial of the new parties was Cherry
(originally Cherry Jubilee) in Washington, D.C., which attracted
the unwanted attention of the US Congress when it was held in a
federally-owned building. Bill Pullen, Cherry co-founder, describes
Cherry’s origins:

When I lived in Philadelphia, I was part of the Blue Ball committee.
That was where I got my introduction to (and first behind-the-scenes
look at) Circuit parties. Right around the same time in the mid-’90s, I
started traveling around the country to the various parties. I met a lot of new people and formed some good friendships in various parts of the country. While at these parties, I started to have what I called spiritual experiences where I felt connected to me and everyone around me. It was great.

When I moved to D.C., there was no Circuit party. Sometime in early 1995, I started to have the urge to throw a party in D.C. I was driven by the urge to create a spiritual experience for others, like so many people had done for me. I also saw it as an opportunity to raise money for the local AIDS service organizations and introduce younger people, who couldn’t afford to participate in higher price fundraisers, the opportunity to attend a fundraiser while having a lot of fun.

Ryan Peal (my boyfriend at the time) and I were driving home from a weekend away when I told him I wanted to start a party in D.C. He was immediately on board with the idea. Four of us [Pullen, Peal, Kenny Eggerl, and Dave Parham] met on a weekly basis, pulling in additional people who had the expertise we needed along the way. In addition, we promoted the event around the country. Our network of friends in the various cities around the country served as local ambassadors in their respective cities.

The first year was a smashing success. We grossed $130,000 and, after expenses, we were able to donate $55,000 to our beneficiaries (personal communication, December 2007).

But not everyone was pleased with the success of Cherry Jubilee. On May 9, 1996, California Representative Robert Dornan25 spoke before the House of Representatives about the Cherry Jubilee Circuit party that had recently been held in Mellon Auditorium, a federal building:

Mr. Speaker, the following article describes an event that should never have taken place in a Federal building. Even worse, after this vulgar event occurred, a followup [sic] recovery brunch was held in another Federal building—our own Rayburn building.26

Representative Dornan then presented in its entirety an article by Marc Morano that was published in the Congressional Record, entitled

25. Dornan describes himself as “a God-fearing American, a very lucky husband of 41 years, a father of 5 stalwart, God-loving adult children, a grandfather of 10—No. 11 is in the hanger” (Congressional Record, June 27, 1996).

26. Pullen recounts the following story about the brunch in the Rayburn House Office Building that didn’t make it to the floor of Congress: “Because it was a government office building, Capitol police were stationed at the front door of the building. Attendees had to pass through a metal detector as they went through security. It didn’t take long before one attendee after another started setting off the metal detector. We hadn’t thought about the fact that people would be wearing [metal] cock rings. Ryan took on the job of standing out front of the building and warning people to remove their cock rings before getting to the metal detector. People started ducking into the bushes removing them” (interview, December 2007).
“GOP: Choosing Sides in the Culture War?” The article describes Morano’s experiences as an undercover reporter for the conservative Christian organization, Family Research Council, as he infiltrated the Cherry Jubilee Main Event:

The dance party featured public nudity, illicit sexual activity and evidence of illegal drug use.... A Federal building, the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium, played host to the dance and was the backdrop for the illegal activity.

Morano’s description of Circuiteers, their appearance, and their behavior during the event is similar to my own. He notes that there were several thousand men, most between twenty-five and thirty-five years old, and the vast majority of them White. He also includes observations of outrageous wordplay and the lack of violence in a noticeably muscular group of well-groomed, shirtless men:

Most of the shirts came off as the men headed for the dance floor.... There were no signs of aggressive behavior.... No fights or altercations occurred throughout the night. The terms “fags” and “girls” were frequently used.... Overall the men were generally very neat, with meticulous hair and clothing ... the overwhelming majority had bodies sculpted from weight lifting.

Like Michelangelo Signorile, Morano links the Circuit community to recklessness, AIDS, and death. Morano’s observation that most participants appeared in good health and were drinking beer and bottled water in a venue that provided apples, bananas, and oranges does not keep him from citing questionable data concerning Gay male mortality:

The image of young active health conscious men, drinking bottled water and consuming fruit is a study in contrast.... The life expectancy of a homosexual male is estimated to be no more than 41 years old, regardless of AIDS. The homosexual communities credo seems to be “Die young and leave a pretty corpse.”

But Morano’s biggest fixation is on sex and drugs:

As the constant thump, thump, thump of the techno music heated the crowd, the dancing became increasingly lewd and suggestive ... dancers began simulated sexual gyrations. The dance floor became a torrent of intense groping and stroking. Some couples dancing on table tops [dance boxes?], mimicked anal sex through their clothing while others pantomimed oral sex.... Despite signs posted everywhere stating, “Use or possession of illegal substances strictly forbidden,” evidence of illegal drug use was present.... Snorting could be heard throughout the evening in bathroom stalls.
In addition to snorting and pantomimed sex, Morano was outraged by the presence of men in drag, Leathermen, and scantily-clad Lesbians, one who flashed her breasts while dancing on a “table top.” The breast-flashing Lesbian is the only example he gives of public nudity, however.

In conclusion, Morano ties Cherry Jubilee 1996 to the entire Gay community and its mission to corrupt America, proof that “the homosexual agenda is advancing in Washington” (*Congressional Record*, May 9, 1996).

Public reaction to the infiltration of the Circuit in D.C. by the Family Research Council in 1996 was substantially different from the infiltration of molly houses in England by the Societies for the Reformation of Manners in the early 1700s and drag balls in NYC by the Society for the Suppression of Vice in the early twentieth century. In the case of the Circuit, nobody was jailed, pilloried, or executed.

Dornan’s presentation to Congress on May 9, 1996, led to bickering between conservatives and liberals concerning the homosexual agenda, Gay-bashing, and AIDS in America. On June 27, Dornan continued to berate his colleagues about Cherry Jubilee, and even read Morano’s article to them. Supporting his own position with references to the Holy Spirit, Moses, Reverend Billy Graham (and his wife, Ruth), Pope John Paul II, Holy Mother Church, and Christian love, Dornan contrasts the moral laxity of homosexual men with the discipline of soldiers in uniform:

Imagine for a moment, Mr. Speaker, if the out-of-control homosexual romp that we judge today had happened on any U.S. military base or post anywhere throughout the world. What would the repercussions have been? Batten down the hatches … how dare we live by a lower, a much lower, standard of ethics and professionalism than we demand of our younger military men and women who serve under our jurisdiction, and who do risk their very lives. [sic] A slim majority of Members of Congress allow [sic] thousands of troopers of our 1st Armored Division to be sent by Clinton into harm’s way in Bosnia, and yet our Congress ignores garbage like this “Cherry romp” of hedonism right here down on Constitution Avenue (*Congressional Record*, June 27, 1996).27

Pullen relates his feelings on discovering their fundraiser had been debated in Congress, and the backlash he and his colleagues faced from the larger Gay community:

27. Dornan also implies that Cherry Jubilee was worse than the 1991 Tailhook scandal in Las Vegas, when ninety people (the vast majority of them women) stated they were physically assaulted and sexually harassed by active and retired military personnel attending the thirty-fifth annual symposium on Navy and Marine aviation.
It was surreal for those of us who planned the party to hear our names used on the floor of Congress and to hear our event talked about in such a disparaging way. Being new to D.C., I wasn’t savvy to the ways of politics at the time. In our minds, we were four guys sitting around my kitchen table who wanted to throw a party and raise some money for people with AIDS. It never crossed our minds that something so good could be twisted into something bad. What was the most disheartening for me was the response from the Gay press. One of the major Gay publications called to interview me. They asked what we were thinking, throwing a Circuit party in a federal office building, as if we had done something wrong (interview, December 2007).
Cherry Jubilee, now known as Cherry, continued to use federal buildings for its functions. But the protective Gay bubble around the Circuit was about to burst.

**1998: Death, Scandal, and the Morning Party**

The unexpected success of the second Circuit was not always a good thing. Well-connected circles of friends who started many of the major events watched with growing apprehension as the unwashed masses began participating in droves. Special VIP passes were devised to create a separate space for those *aficionados* who did not want to be constantly surrounded by the less refined. The potential for VIP passes to raise more money, however, led to their acquisition by anyone who could afford them, regardless of their level of sophistication.

As prices got higher, so did the participants, and a significant number of them became progressively messier. Trouble was on the way.

Like molly houses and drag balls, public awareness of Circuit parties would lead to condemnation. Increased numbers of Circuit participants led to more problems and more bad press. The first sign that the second Circuit was in trouble was when scandal broke out concerning an event called the Morning Party.28

The biggest dance extravaganza of the year on Fire Island has been the Pines Party, a beach event with the date fixed according to the tide tables. Traditionally held in August, the Pines Party is more than just a Circuit party; it is a community social, with food and other entertainment besides dancing. The Morning Party was once the main event of the Pines Party weekend.

Initially, the Pines Party began as a once-only gig in the 1979 in order to raise money for a fire truck. In 1983, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) began the Morning Party to raise funds for people with HIV. Like Miami’s Winter Party, the Morning Party was held on the beach on a Sunday from late morning throughout the afternoon, accessorizing the beauty of the Atlantic as the backdrop for the event.

The Morning Party helped the Pines weekend become a full-fledged Circuit party. Problems arose, however, because of the sheer size of the event, which drew 5,000–plus people. Since there is no hospital and no paved roads are on that part of the island, health emergencies are air-lifted by helicopter to Long Island. On August 16, 1998, hours before the Morning Party was to commence, a man died from a GHB overdose.

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28. I must thank my NYC collaborators Alan Flippen, Steve Weinstein, and Ben Peraza for their input about the Manhattan Circuit scene and the events that led to the demise of the Morning Party.
Twenty-one participants were arrested that same day for drug possession. For the Pines, a tiny but internationally notorious community, the scandal had become unmanageable and far too visible to the outside world; 1998 was not the first year that drug overdose had been an issue. Accusations that the GMHC was encouraging irresponsible sexual behavior and drug abuse led the organization to permanently cancel the Morning Party.

In hindsight, the Morning Party was a disaster waiting to happen. A typical Pines summer weekend involved no fewer than two dance events per day from Friday to Sunday. Because of the ubiquitous house parties and the sexual action in the Meat Rack, participants can go full throttle from Friday through Sunday.

Partying in the same place for so long is potentially disastrous no matter where it takes place, even more so in the Pines with no standing police force. The distinction between party space and public (read sober) space is undermined, especially in the Meat Rack next door. It is easy to imagine oneself immersed at all times in the world of the carnivalesque. Participants may feel that they never have to fret about the personal accountability demanded by convention and by force of law when re-entering public sober space between venues. Large numbers of visitors with no connection to the local community only reinforce the lack of accountability.

The Winter Party in South Beach is also a beach party on a Sunday afternoon in a weekend full of dance events that go nonstop from Friday to Monday. What makes the Winter Party different from the Morning Party is its location in a much more public space. A hospital is minutes away. Unlike the Pines, South Beach is not a predominantly Gay male enclave, and it has a visible police force. There is much more of an obvious need to carry oneself with at least a minimum pretense of sobriety. In turn, this keeps the most flagrant violators in line because, for some Circuit queens, fear of arrest is perversely greater than fear of dying.

By 2000, the problems that haunted the Morning Party were evident everywhere in the Circuit. Larger numbers led to less personal accountability for a significant number of participants. GHB was used irresponsibly by too many men. This occurred with ever-increasing frequency and severely damaged the credibility of Circuit parties as harmless fundraisers. From 1997 to 2003, the Gay male club scene across the nation was inundated with ever-increasing numbers of men being hospitalized for GHB overdose. The scene was getting the wrong kind of national attention.

Although some participants see 1998 to 2001 as the golden age of the Circuit, it was also the Circuit at its worst. For too many participants, the Circuit became a safe haven for bad behavior.
2001: Downsizing

Over the years since the early 1990s, Circuit parties had been growing in size, extravagance, expense, and ambulance runs. Since 2001, however, the scene has been down-sizing. Numbers have been lower at most of the parties. Some events have disappeared altogether.

This is due in part to bad publicity. The Circuit world lost even more credibility in 2001 when professional journals published two articles about excessive drug use and sexual behavior during Circuit parties. The reports sparked a series of investigations by health officials, law enforcement personnel, Gay/Straight media, and evangelical Christians. On June 20, 2002, the national newspaper USA Today had an article about the Circuit and rampant drug abuse (Leinward 11).

Four days later, The O'Reilly Factor television show featured a live-cast debate concerning the same issue. The debate was between two Gay men, Richard Elovich (pro-Circuit) and Michelangelo Signorile (anti-Circuit), which degenerated into a shouting match between them. O'Reilly, a conservative pundit who is not known to be a supporter of the Gay community, appeared to be delighted with the fracas.

In some ways, however, the questionable public behavior of Elovich and Signorile may have helped the Circuit and the Gay community. The spectacle of two Gay men sassing each other as an amused conservative commentator watched them go at it probably led many Straight Americans to laugh at Gay folk and Circuit parties rather than condemn them.

Bad press did not stop there. In August of 2003, The O'Reilly Factor featured another debate about Circuit ethics, this time focusing on the Orlando Gay Days Circuit weekend. Martin Mawyer, president of the Christian Action Network, claimed that Disney World was irresponsible when it allowed a Circuit party on its premises. He then showed footage from One Mighty Party (a Gay Days event held in Disney World) to illustrate Gay depravity. Chris Alexander-Manley, co-owner of Gay Days, Inc., pointed out that the footage had been digitally modified so that shirtless men appeared to be completely naked as they danced together. In a case of mutually-contradictory spins, Mawyer portrayed the parties as more decadent than they really were, and Alexander-Manley glossed over the more scandalous aspects of Circuit parties in the Magic Kingdom.

29. Mattison 2001, 119–26; Mansergh 2001, 953–58. The Mansergh et al article indicates that there is substantial drug use and sex during Circuit weekends. The abstract concludes that "Intensive, targeted health promotion efforts are needed" (Mansergh 953). The Mattison et al article states, "Circuit party attendees are well educated and financially secure. Party drug use is high ... [party drugs] are associated with various measures of unsafe sex. More comprehensive research on club drug use in Gay men is required" (120).
In Palm Springs, problems with GHB almost ended Jeffrey Sanker’s White Party. From 2001–2003, Mayor Will Kleindienst attempted to have the event cancelled permanently, and Sanker understood why. “He had every reason” to shut the party down, said Sanker (interview, September 2007).

In addition to GHB overdose, irresponsible crystal methamphetamine usage further undermined the Circuit. The popularity of crystal meth as a sexual enhancer as well as a stimulant changed the sexual dynamics of the Gay male community. Instead of going to the bars or Circuit parties to “hook up,” men would go online to Internet men-for-men sites, make their selections, and bypass the bar/Circuit scenes completely. But even though fewer men were attending the Circuit because of sex, drugs, and the Internet, the Circuit was nevertheless blamed for encouraging men to become addicted to crystal.

The backlash was inevitable. Even before 2001, the federal government has been waging an aggressive campaign to eradicate the Rave scene because of drug use associated with it. Since the rationale behind this campaign was to save the youth of America from drugs, the older, Gay-er Circuit community has not been targeted with the same vehemence. It was only a matter of time, however, before the Circuit faced the same pressures as the Rave community, but from other Gay men and Christian homophobe groups as well as law enforcement.

In 2002, the final big event of Gay Days featured a typical pat-down for illegal substances, but with a new feature: police were on hand to arrest anyone caught with drugs. This was a departure from the usual protocol, which was to forbid the offender from entering the party and confiscation of illegal substances.

Drug scandals are not the only things that have hurt the Circuit; commercialization of the Circuit has disillusioned many of its original founders. Many of the people who originally threw these parties are tired of the hassles, time, and financial risk that they face when they put on an event. In-fighting that occurs among members of Circuit organizations can be relentless and devastating. There has been more than one instance of illegal profiteering by unscrupulous people within organizations.

Since 2002, many Circuit parties have ceased to exist. The Columbus Red Party and its successor, Chrome Party, are finished. Atlanta Hotlanta, Chicago Fireball and Pumpkinhead, D.C. Colors of the Fall, Cleveland Erie Party, Detroit Motorball, San Francisco Hell Ball, Austin Splash and Perfect Day, and Louisville Crystal Ball ended.

30. After an unsuccessful attempt to pass the RAVE (Reduce America’s Vulnerability to Ecstasy) Act in 2002, Congress passed the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act in 2003 by quietly placing it within the Amber Alert Act for missing children.
A History of the Circuit(s)

Fewer dance clubs outside of LA, San Francisco, NYC, Fire Island, Chicago, and Miami are hiring Circuit DJs on non-Circuit weekends. This is due in part to concerns with Circuit music as an inspiration for irresponsible drug use, especially with the rise in crystal meth addiction among Gay men.

Other parties have modified their status to keep themselves afloat. LGBTQ groups involved with community awareness and political activism are sponsoring Circuit events as fundraisers. In 2004, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) took over the Miami Winter Party. The NGLTF also sponsors a beach party on Fire Island called Ascension. The Philadelphia Blue Ball merged with the Equality Forum. And although there are currently no Circuit parties in their traditional birthplace of Columbus, Ohio, the annual Qualia Festival of Gay Folklife follows Circuit sensibilities and throws fundraiser dances with Circuit DJs during its festival weekend. This modest event is all that survives in the city that supposedly started it all.

Perhaps the biggest problems faced by the Circuit is the troubled economy of early twenty-first century America, the resurgence of politically-motivated homophobia, and the rise in martial patriotism after the attack on Manhattan on September 11, 2001, an echo of conditions that led to the end of extravagant drag balls in the 1930s. The country went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, which in turn fed a growing homophobic movement led by war-supportive Christian extremists and organizations such as Focus on the Family.

**Unexpected Allies and the Second Rebirth**

Police in cities that host Circuit parties are often those parties’ allies. Since the law enforcement officers must deal with the violence of some Straight crowds at concerts and sporting events, the refreshingly well-behaved participants in Gay Circuit parties have inspired law enforcement officers for years to overlook all but the most blatant displays of drug use. Police tend to be tolerant and even supportive of Circuit events, which often provide them with off-duty employment as security. Local law enforcement personnel have everything to gain by coordinating their efforts with, not against, the Circuit.

Circuiteer-journalist Scotty Van Tussenbrook described the following conversation he had with police at a Circuit party:

> While attending the White Party in Palm Springs, I found myself standing next to a couple of off-duty cops who were hired as security. I asked

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31. The NGLTF was founded in 1972 as a national LGBTQ civil rights organization.
32. Centered in Philadelphia, the Equality Forum’s mission is to advance national and international LGBTQ civil rights.
them what they were thinking. The woman officer replied, “Oh, this is our favorite party of the year!” and the (presumably) Straight male officer with her nodded. The man said that at most Straight parties and sporting events they have to prepare for lots of “incidents”—fights, drunkenness, drama. “But we never get any of that at the White Party,” the woman added. “You guys just show up, take off your shirts, look pretty, and dance. It’s fun!” (personal communication, November 2002)

In many places, law enforcement officers tend to keep away from Gay functions. This may be due to homophobia and the Gay bubble. But many law enforcement officers recognize that there is a lack of disruptive violence at Gay male establishments, thus lessening the need for a strong police presence.

In *The Soul Beneath the Skin*, David Nimmons gives statistics from different cities that verify the remarkable lack of violence in the Gay community, including the bar scene (13–39). Nimmons also quotes police officers:

“You want proof? Just ask any New York cop,” says NYPD Sergeant Rodriguez. “They traditionally say Gay Pride is one of the most enjoyable events they attend. Cops will tell you they love doing it. Some cops will do anything not to work certain parades in the city but they are happy to work Gay Pride. Sometimes you get an initial homophobic response, sure. But once they’ve done it, they realize it’s a safe day.” (21)

Many police departments have no desire to cause problems for Circuit parties, which are often a welcome alternative, in terms of law enforcement and extra cash for officers, to more violent Straight events and nightclubs. Although no longer in the form of bribery and hush money as in times past, monetary benefits associated with supporting Gay festive culture is still a factor in maintaining cordial relationships with law enforcement. 33

Bucking the trend for Circuit parties to downsize or even disappear, parties such as Alegria in NYC-Rio and the Salvation parties originating in London are immensely popular. Like traditional Circuit parties, these events do not depend on a single physical location. They differ from the typical Circuit event in that they may occur more than once a year.

There are signs of alternative Circuits that step outside of the narrow racial and body-sculpted aesthetic of the first and second Circuits. Seattle has a party called Northern Exposure, which avoids references

33. Politics, however, can change enforcement policies. For the last few years, there have been attempts in some major cities, particularly New York, to crack down on Gay dance venues.
to the standard icon of a chiseled male torso. There is also the Circuit-esque Lazy Bear Weekend in Guerneville, California. Northern Exposure and Lazy Bear might be called Bear Circuit parties, well within the tradition of Leather-based Circuit events but with absolutely no inclination to fit in within the mainstream Circuit’s body fascist ideal.

There is also a circuit for Black men, dance parties thrown in conjunction with Black Gay Pride celebrations in cities such as D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, and Toronto. At this point, I do not know if this African American/Canadian circuit will become the newest incarnation of the Circuit because there may not be the same premium placed on DJ culture.

Internationally, the Circuit is growing. There are Circuit parties on every continent except for Antarctica. Cape Town in South Africa has the MCQP (Mother City Queer Projects) Party. Hong Kong had a White Party weekend and Taipei had one called Winter White, both held during Christmas. Thailand had a Circuit party called Nation that lasted for six years. Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia hosted the Princefest, perhaps the first event of its kind in a predominantly Muslim country. The current scene in East and Southeast Asia is volatile, however, and parties wink in and out of existence after only a few years, or even one season.

The Circuit is on the high seas. Atlantis Cruises offers what has been unofficially called week-long Circuit parties onboard their ships, complete with renowned DJs and theme parties. The Caribbean and the Mediterranean are accessorized as fabulous backdrops to enhance the cruise-liner-as-Circuit-party-venue.

Several events tend to be heavily dependent on the vision and direction of one charismatic person, such as Jeffrey Sanker, Johnny Chisholm, Mark Baker, and Ric Sena. As with the demise of the Columbus Red Party after the death of its founder, Corbett Reynolds, some events may last only as long as their charismatic mentors are able to produce them.

The Circuit’s folk media reflects both the downsizing of the second Circuit and the recent upswing. Until fairly recently, there was growing pressure on Circuit-based businesses to find new sources of revenue as numbers of participants fell and Circuit events disappeared. Plenty of male participants did not identify themselves as Circuit boys, and the word “Circuit” had stigma attached to it that is so great that many of the major parties no longer identify themselves as Circuit parties.

The hardcopy magazine/website Circuit Noize has also been moving away from the word “Circuit.” Circuit Noize started out in 1995 with the subtitle, “A Rag Custom Designed for Crazed Party Boys.”
When the Circuit increased dramatically in numbers and events over the
next few years, the subtitle became “The Premier Guide to Circuit Events
Worldwide.” Circuit Noize modified its subtitle again as the Circuit
began to decline in 2004 to “The Premier Guide to Dance Events
Worldwide.” In 2007, the magazine finally changed its name to noiZe
Magazine, subtitled “Celebrate Explore Live.”

Editor Steve Ceplenski explains the name change in the premier
issue of noiZe Magazine (Spring 2007):

> Just as being gay becomes less and less of a marginal cultural phe-
neson ... the Circuit has also become just one part of a larger gay
ulture. The issues that once seemed Circuit-centric—such as world
avel, attending festivals and dance events, taking cruises, and cel-
ebrating our lives—now have a broader, more varied appeal to the
ascendant gay community at large. As a result, we here at noiZe feel
that the time is right to recognize that our focus is no longer solely
Circuit events, but lounges, bars, clubs, all types of music, healthful
living, and a wide variety of dance events. (8)

On the other hand, EDGE online magazine has embraced the word
“Circuit.” EDGE began its “Circuit Parties” section in 2006. Jake
Resnicow, EDGE editor, describes the rationale for starting a section
with a stigmatized label:

> When I joined EDGE in April 2006, we were just getting our feet wet
in the Boston market, and we knew our vision was to provide up-to-
the-minute coverage for the GLBT community that was better, faster,
and more edgy than anything else out there. To fully embrace all
aspects of the community and stay true to our mission, we recognized
the importance of creating both “Nightlife” and “Circuit Party” sec-
tions. Although we acknowledged some correlation between the two,
there remained a strong demand for genuine, edgy, front-line coverage
of national events. We valued the importance of capturing the less-
talked-about aspects of the Circuit—global celebration, major fund-
raising, and phenomenal music. From New York’s still-ever popular
Alegria to the crown jewel of fundraisers, the White Party Miami,
there has been no question that the Circuit is still very strong. (inter-
view, January 2008)

JustCircuit.Mag, a new hardcopy magazine, debuted November 2007,
reflecting the recent upswing in the Circuit’s popularity. Shane Rogers,
the executive editor, describes the creation of the new periodical:

> We’ve taken an unusual course in that we have gone from website to
hardcopy/online magazine. In doing so, we are expanding the product
to reach every possible person in our extended community. Despite
having fewer readers than the Web site, the magazine gives our message about the worthiness of the Circuit a permanent place in history. For instance, you’ll be able to find a copy of JustCircuit.Mag in the Library of Congress long after we are all gone. (interview, January 2008)

A Third Circuit?

There is also the possibility of a third Circuit, one that is more open to Straight people. This is a movement that has roots going back to the first days of the Columbus Red Party some thirty years ago.

The movement to actively encourage Straight people to attend Circuit events also occurred in Montreal with the merging of Circuit and house cultures in parties thrown by the Bad Boy Club Montréal (BBCM). The nascent third Circuit has its own yearly calendar of festivals in Montreal (Bal des Boys; Red, Hot and Dry; Black and Blue), the biggest being Black and Blue, held in early October. Black and Blue is one of the largest and most elaborate Circuit parties in the second Circuit as well, but differs from Circuit parties in other cities because so many Straight people are participants (about 50 percent of the crowd).

In addition to what the BBCM is doing, two other major events in Montreal can be considered Circuit parties. The first is Bal en Blanc, Montreal’s White Party, which has Gay sensibilities but 85 percent of the 15,000 or so participants are Straight. The second is the Grande Danse, a massive outdoor party that goes from noon to 11:00 pm on the Sunday of Montreal Pride Divers/Cité Weekend. This is the biggest dance party I have ever witnessed in my life. On the afternoon of August 5, 2007, the space for the Grande Danse was the size of six football fields and was packed with what must have been 50,000 revelers, the vast majority of them Gay men, all of them dancing to the music of DJ Stephan Grondin (Montreal). It was part of a multi-event, mega-street festival that had plenty of Straight people in it, perhaps 20 percent overall of the 100,000 or so attendees. The entrance fee of $2 was optional.

Still in the shadow of the second Circuit, the third Circuit is slowly making itself known outside of Quebec. In an article entitled “Reinventing the Circuit,” the late Steve Kammon describes it as “the next level”:

The most obvious way to grow these events is nothing new—Black and Blue in Montreal and Sydney Mardi Gras have been doing it for years. But it’s never been done in America. We have never invited straight people to the parties of the Circuit. If our signature events could evolve
into mixed events that offer a new kind of energy and which are bigger in scale and even better production standards, it would reinvigorate the scene. (24)

Kammon is not entirely correct; Reynolds, Chisholm, and Sanker have made it a point to invite Straight people to their events. The difference is the higher rate of integration (50 percent Straight as opposed to 5–15 percent) that Black and Blue has achieved over other events that encourage Straight patronage like Halloween’s in New Orleans, White Party Palm Springs, White Party Miami, Winter Party, Black Party in NYC, and the former Columbus Red Party.

This third movement is a reflection of the wholesale acceptance of the Gay community in popular culture during the early 1990s and the creation of “mixed” Straight/Gay dance clubs with Circuit sensibilities in major cities. With the existence of Circuit-like clubs and events in Toronto, NYC, Montreal, and Miami that cater to both Straight and Gay crowds, this may be the beginning of a true inter-city movement of revelers, DJs, and Gay sensibilities that would extend to other cities and mark a new phase in Circuit culture. In this third Circuit, one hears a greater range of musical selections than at the typical Circuit event, and there is a greater tolerance for diversity.

In order to survive, most Circuit parties will have to be more than just refuges for cracked-out Circuit queens. Those that are not fundraisers will be more vulnerable to negative portrayals and crackdowns. Parties situated in community-based festivals stand a better chance. Many people feel that the age of the mega-party with 15,000 to 20,000 participants has seen its heyday. Smaller, more intimate, parties appear to be the wave of the future, with an even more open and inviting attitude toward Straight Circuiteers.

There is animated discussion among people in the scene concerning the newest crop of Circuiteers (between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five). Some of my sources say the drug use has gone down, while others feel that drugs still abound, but that there is a different set of favorites, which are liquor, cocaine, whatever Mom and Dad have in their medicine cabinet, and the occasional ecstasy pill.

Angie Denmon of Chisholm Productions (One Mighty Party, Halloween’s in New Orleans, Pensacola Memorial Day) confirms that, from what she has seen, the younger generation is a refreshing change. “There are less ambulance runs,” she told me. “I see fewer boys doing the cryptic walk (that marks GHB overdose). Hopefully, the Circuit veterans will see what they already know: less is more.” Denmon has nothing but praise for the newcomers:
They are much more into the music. My job is to greet everyone and make sure they have a good time. When I get there, I can tell that the energy they bring affects the DJs and the music they play. Because of the young ones’ enthusiasm, the DJs are smiling more! This means that whatever feelings the intoxicants are supposed to make, the music can do it instead. That way you have a safer, more fun, less drama-stricken event (personal communication, August 2007).

Jeffrey Sanker finds that the younger generation favors liquor and Red Bull, while the older generation of Circuiteers is mellowing out. “There is a rise in liquor sales,” he said, and bottle service (purchasing a bottle of liquor and carafes of mixers for customers who sit at tables) is increasing for the older set (interview, September 2007).

Steve Ceplenski, has a lot to say about the new kids on the dance box:

The old Gay scenes and the new Gay scenes are different. Lounges, chill hangouts, restaurants and coffee houses are the new hangouts. There is, recently, a larger influx of the 20–something to the traditional benefit and Circuit events—mostly the innovative ones, outdoors, etc.

For Ceplenski, youth is measured by behavior, not years:

You become old when you become jaded.... even if you don’t think you are. If you’re at an event, and someone is running up to the stage to see the performer (irrespective of their age), they are below the line. If you’re walking away from the stage rolling your eyes at another diva singing, you’re old, irrespective of your age.

Inclusion is definitely a trademark of the young:

They don’t have to be at a 100 percent Gay venue or event. The “Castro clone” of the 90’s (beefy White boys) is replaced by waify White boys, hopping cute Asian boys, and sexy Latin boys. They want their Straight friends and co-workers to feel comfortable joining them.

So far as intoxicants, Ceplenski cautions against making too many sweeping generalities:

I think it is regional, both statewide in the USA and continent-wide elsewhere. Clearly, our drug laws have not reduced the consumption, but they have replaced previously high quality products with fake and many times dangerous impurities. GHB seems to still be widely popular, with a resurgence of drop incidences at events. Tina has become stigmatized to the degree that it remains strong in a few large cities, and has ravaged straight Middle America more. Alcohol
is definitely on the upswing – for the younger crowd it is relatively cheap, and legal.

“There are fewer drugs and an unwillingness to try,” Ceplenski said. “But,” he warned, “sloppy drunks are not a pretty sight either” (interview, September 2007).

One spot that appears not to have changed for the better is Fire Island. During the 2007 Pines Party weekend, there were multiple overdoses on GHB. A few weeks later, the Ascension Party weekend was marred with continued overdoses and, unfortunately, a GHB-related death. Reports from participants say that it was the older, not younger, guys who were irresponsible with their use of intoxicants.34

The rediscovery of alcohol as the major drug of choice (along with an upsurge in cocaine and Red Bull to counteract alcohol’s damaging effects on coordination and awareness) is perhaps a necessary measure to protect the new Circuiteers from police scrutiny. A person with liquor-breath is less of a target. One collaborator told me that many participants take their ecstasy pills before going to a function, and then ride that buzz with vodka and Red Bull for the duration of the party. That way, there is nothing on one’s person (other than perhaps some selected prescription medications, such as Xanax, Vicodin, Percocet, Ritalin, and Valium) that could get one arrested.35

The Metrosexual

As it integrates Gays and Straights, the Circuit coincides with the rise of the metrosexual, a Straight man with Circuit sensibilities. The metrosexual is, in fact, a child of the Circuit.

With the advent of Gay-based comedy shows, “reality TV,” Gay cable channel, and sympathetic presentation of Gay issues in the mainstream press, Americans are becoming more familiar with the Gay community, and some Straight men are choosing to abandon their heteronormative heritage and adopt Gay sensibilities. There is talk about the new urban man, dubbed by British writer Mark Simpson as “the metrosexual,” who dresses with care and affects a Gay look regardless of his sexual proclivity: “Metrosexual man might prefer women, he might

34. There was also a corresponding increase of arrests, harsh treatment of some participants, and even violence on the part of police officers during Ascension weekend. These incidents on Fire Island—and a rather tense relationship between authorities and many clubs in Manhattan—does not, however, reflect trends in the nation as a whole.

35. Because of the upswing of prescription medicine-as-intoxicants in the club scene, it is common for police to arrest people, especially young people, caught with such drugs without a pharmaceutical bottle labeled with their name to show that the drug was prescribed to them.
prefer men, but when it’s all said and done nothing comes between him and his reflection” (Simpson 209).36

In popular usage, however, the term refers solely to Straight men. In The Metrosexual Guide to Style, Michael Flocker sees the metrosexual as Straight but with a Gay male nonsexual orientation:

The new breed of man is one of style, sophistication and self-awareness. He is just as strong as his predecessor, but far more diverse in his interests, his tastes and most importantly his self-perception. Secure in his masculinity, he no longer has to spend his life defending it ... the walls separating straight men from their gay, fashion-forward brothers are beginning to crumble. (xiii)

The “newness” of copying Gay men’s sensibilities in dress, manner, and physique for Straight male consumers is questionable. One need only look at the Baroque Age in terms of its aesthetic sensibilities to find tantalizing signs of earlier alliances. More recently (and with more direct proof), Susan Bordo traces some of the origins of metrosexual sensibilities back to 1974 when Calvin Klein visited the Flamingo, one of the original Manhattan/Fire Island Circuit clubs:

Sex, as Calvin Klein knew, sells. He also knew that gay sex wouldn’t sell to straight men. But the rock-hard athletic gay male bodies that Klein admired in the Flamingo did not advertise their sexual preference through the feminine codes—limp wrists, raised pinky finger, swishy walk—which the straight world then identified with homosexuality. Rather, they embodied a highly masculine aesthetic that, although definitely exciting for gay men, would scream “heterosexual” to (clueless) straights. (Bordo 401)

The biggest change since Klein’s “discovery” and commodification of early Circuit sensibilities into designer jeans and underwear is that the general public now realizes that a rock-hard masculine body is no longer the sole domain of Straight men. It is becoming commonplace for people to assume that a muscular man who looks too good must be Gay. With this realization in mind, the typical Gay-mimicking metrosexual would not wish to appear out of shape any more than appear underdressed.

Circuit masculinity, with its privileging of muscle and macho, was born in the club tradition witnessed by Klein in 1974 and is becoming as commercially exploitable for stylish Straights as it is currently for Gay male consumers. More than a few metrosexuals have gone to

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36. Simpson portrays the metrosexual as a commodity fetishist, not a lover of dance. I feel, however, that the existence of the Circuit in almost every major city for the last fifteen years has made its mark on popular culture and the metrosexual image.
Circuit parties or, if not quite ready to go that far, have gone to Gay clubs such as those in Miami, Toronto, New York, and Montreal that feature Circuit DJs and sensibilities. The Circuit and the metrosexual “movement” are blurring Gay and Straight boundaries, but with a notable difference. Their novelty is not so much in the blending of sensibilities but in the reduction of stigma attached to trendy urban homosexuality and the recognition of the masculine Gay man by Straight men as a positive role model.

Because the Circuit is so unabashedly masculine, and because young Straight men increasingly question the violence-tinged standards of heteronormative masculinity, I expect to see more Straight metrosexual men at Circuit parties. Like Gay men (and female Circuit girls), they, too, can enjoy ecstatic male-bonding camaraderie without having to worry about violence.37

The Circuit is currently making a modest comeback across North America. Within the last three years, White Party-Vegas, Wonderland in Los Angeles, Ascension on Fire Island, and One Night Only in Los Angeles have arrived on the Circuit scene. Austin Splash has been resurrected. Houston Jungle, Dallas Purple, Miami Winter and White, Halloween’s in New Orleans, Orlando One Mighty Party, Vancouver Pride, Boston Pride, and Philadelphia Blue Ball are on the upswing. In Mexico, Latin Fever in Puerto Vallarta is still going after a decade.

The parties are returning to their roots as festivals for music and the joys of dance rather than sites for dangerously reckless behavior. “We have not had a single ambulance run from our party in the last three years,” said Jeffrey Sanker about White Party-Palm Springs (interview, September 2007).

37. I also recommend that the Circuit community refrain from calling our Straight girlfriends the unflattering name of “fag hags.” Since so many of these women think, act, and dress with Gay sensibilities, it would not be inappropriate to call Straight women “metrosexuals” as well as Straight men.
Well, I guess a lot of the Circuit for me was incredible sex. But, of course, I’m a great dancer and love dancing. I also happen to love sex!

I started going to Circuit parties in 1988. I think that was my first Saint At Large White Party. I remember going with my friend Rodney. It was at the old Saint and the dome was still there, I think. Maybe the dome was gone. Anyway, Saint did have parties for at least two years after the Saint officially closed. I’m not sure what they did with it the rest of the time. I do not remember my first Black Party—hardly surprising.

My first out-of-town party was White Party in Miami in 1993. Great way to start. I kept accelerating party-going. Palm Springs White Party in ‘95—I stayed with a friend who had a condo in Palm Springs. I remember it because I got four hours of sleep the whole weekend, I think. Also, hanging out at the pool was really fun, and there was an incredible sex party at [redacted]’s old estate. Very glamorous!

Oh yeah, I think even my first Miami White Party I went to MBHB [Miami Beach Hard Bodies exclusive orgies]. Those were the most amazing parties. Yeah, total body fascism, but amazing crowd. You had to go to an apartment in SOBE [South Beach] and be “inspected.” If you passed, you paid twenty dollars and got directions to the house. It was in a really nice house with a beautifully landscaped pool area. Pretty amazing to be in a house like that with sixty-five super-hot guys! Also: Phoenix Rising. Best parties I’ve ever been to still, with possible exception of [redacted]’s post-Morning Party parties at their private home [Fire Island Pines]. I remember walking in while these super-hot guys from out of town were begging for a ticket. They were offering sex in return for entry! One year, when the Morning Party was in front of Beach Hill, some LA boys rented the house facing the party and had a huge sign made that covered the whole front of the house that said “No New Yorkers Allowed.” That’s how pissed they were at what they considered the lèse majesté toward their august bods, not getting into the post-party.

There was a party on July 4th weekend, which used to be bigger than Morning Party weekend on Fire Island, when [redacted] gave a party at his house, started at midnight. He served an ecstasy punch. I had two tiny cups, was so high I left and went dancing at the Pavilion, came back at 3:30 AM and the party was raging. Sex all over the house.
Like most people, I eventually cut down on my Circuit travels. There was a question of time. Also, recovery. Money. Most importantly, my partner was ill with AIDS, which would eventually kill him in 2001. After attending Mardi Gras in Sydney in 1998, I felt that I had pretty much done the Circuit anyway. After that experience, anything would be downhill. For the next two years, I traveled to Montreal for Black and Blue, generally considered the apex of that particular party. The first year it was held at Olympic Stadium and was truly incredible. Every time I looked up, I saw something else that was astounding, whether it was larger-than-life Balinese puppets wending through the crowd or a drummer high atop a huge carriage being pulled by several people. The next year, it was in the parking lot and was a bifurcated dance floor—never a good idea, since Gay men always think the other space is better and keep moving back and forth. That year, a girl in line asked my friends and me where we were from before announcing she had come from Toronto “for the rave.” I think that was the year the party tilted very slightly toward non-Gay attendance. I kept trying to dance with the most gorgeous men wearing the skimpiest outfits only to have their friends politely tell me they didn’t swing that way. Frustrating!

There’s no question that the Circuit per se has changed. I won’t say it’s gone downhill, just evolving. Everybody in every situation harks back to some mythical Homeric Age when all was golden, and it’s no different in the Circuit. For young guys coming of age, it’s just as magical. And I don’t look back and think that the Old Days were all so much better than today. My theme is *La Cage’s* “The Best of Times Is Now.” In the ’70s, Gay men had much more attitude than they do now. If you didn’t look a certain way, dress a certain way, drink a certain beer, smoke a certain cigarette, you weren’t desirable. In the ’80s, it was all about whether you had “it” [AIDS] or not. The ’90s were the apex of body fascism, the heyday of the jackbooted Nazi party thugs. So even though the big arena events may be on the wane and the mid-sized cities don’t get their theme parties as they did back in the day, that doesn’t mean there isn’t plenty of fun and camaraderie to be found on the dance floor.

By the way, I don’t think Tina [crystal meth] ruined the scene. I’d say Tina was more a reflection of what was happening at the time. After all, meth has been around since World War II!