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THE ECSTATIC DANCE OF BURNING MAN “PERMISSION TO TRANSCEND”

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An examination of the emergence and evolution of dance sub-cultures
throughout the history of the Burning Man event

In the summer of 1990 the San Francisco chapter of the Cacophony Society announced in its newsletter that *Zone Trip #4, A Bad Day at Black Rock* would take place over Labor Day weekend near Gerlach, Nevada in the ancient dry lake bed known as The Black Rock Desert. The Cacophonists, “a randomly gathered network of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society,”¹ would gather for such eccentric events as evening storm drain tours dressed in formal wear and waders, reading Proust as a group while walking in the park, or playing midnight urban golf.

On September 1, 1990, two local Bay Area tradesmen, landscaper Larry Harvey and carpenter Jerry James, who for years had gathered with a group of friends to ritualistically burn an effigy of a man on Baker Beach in San Francisco, combined forces with Cacophony founder John Law and a group of his adventurous “free spirits” to travel to the desolate Nevada lakebed commonly referred to as the *playa*. The Cacophony tradition, whenever traveling to a new and unexplored territory, was to establish the edge of the Zone with a line, which in this instance was a line carved in the chalky alkaline clay of the vast dry lakebed. Upon their arrival at dawn on that late summer morning in the Black Rock Desert, eighty-nine intrepid souls held hands and as one took a step across the line and unknowingly gave birth to what would later become one of the largest experimental temporary communities on the planet, *Burning Man*.

There were only two rules that first year in the desert: "Don't interfere with anyone else's immediate experience" and "no guns in central camp."²

Flash forward twenty-two years to the 2012 *Burning Man* event, which hosted over 600 Theme Camps and an estimated 52,385 attendees in what is now known as Black Rock City, a highly articulated civic design of expanding concentric streets laid out in an arc occupying two-thirds of a complete circle. *Burning Man* operates under a “gift economy” where a diverse multitude of theme camps offers a myriad of participatory activities, free of charge. One might learn to juggle at *Circus Boot Camp* or have a bungee battle in the *Thunderdome* at *Camp Death Guild*. Black Rock City, or BRC as it is commonly referred to, offers many civic essentials: a Department of Public Works (which for weeks prior to the event creates the layout and general infrastructure of the city); a volunteer “police force” of informal mediators (The Black Rock Rangers); an emergency services department (replete with three urgent care facilities and emergency vehicles); and even an airport.

The cultural evolution of *Burning Man* over the last two decades is clearly evident when one contrasts the initial anarchic days on the *playa* with the present time. Twenty years ago, firing live ammunition at the *Drive-By Shooting Range* and *Golf Skeet* was the accepted norm, whereas today participants may begin their day making pancakes with their children at *Kidsville*, take in a lunchtime lecture on Unified Field Theory at *Fractal Nation*, and complete their day with a transcendent conscious dance session at *RhythmWave*. In its pre-*playa* dawn the *Burn* was merely a gathering of a few Dadaist-type San Franciscans, on a cold and fog-shrouded Baker Beach, burning a stick figure of a man on the summer solstice. *Burning Man* has become a yearly \$23 million operation with over 40 full-time employees possessing the dual identity of being one of the world's greatest parties and the largest transformational festival on the planet.

In the September 1990 issue of *Rough Draft*, the printed newsletter of the Cacophony Society, the activities for *Zone Trip #4* were listed as ranging from creating a ritual celebration upon entry into the *Zone* to erecting a main campsite “in the tradition of modern Dadaistic nomadic Gypsies.” A semi-formal evening cocktail party was also announced. However, there was no mention of dance of any kind. In fact, it seems that the construction of a brick oven for baking bread had the high honor of being one of the capstone activities that first year in the desert.

Dance on the *playa* was a “slow-starter,” arriving on the coattails of a somewhat malnourished rave scene evidenced for the first time in 1992 as a “small rave camp”, planted about a mile from the main encampment, “glomming parasitically onto the Porta-Johns.”³ This camp was organized by Craig Ellenwood of the early Oakland acid-party raver crew Mr. Floppy's Flophouse and featured the first ever DJ on the *playa*, Theodore Jonathan Hommel aka Terbo Ted. Early *Burning Man* concept artist Charles Gadaken wrote of this original rave camp: “I remember going out to the rave camp, it was five guys, a van, a couple of big speakers, a card board box covered in tin foil, colored lights and a strobe light.”⁴

The population of the non-*Burning Man* affiliated *Rave Camp* steadily grew from 1992-1995 as more and more “ravers” were lured to the desert by the increasingly powerful amplified music provided by the San Francisco-based soundscape producers S.P.A.Z. (Semi-Permanent Autonomous Zone) and Wicked Sound Systems. As the decibel levels increased, so did the distance between *Rave Camp* and the *Burning Man* main camp.

Burners and *Ravers* commonly drove at high speeds between the separate encampments at all hours, leading to the tragic events of the 1996 *Burn*. In that year three people were seriously injured when a car traveling back from *Rave Camp* ran over a tent and crashed into another car. This incident, combined with the motorcycle death of neon artist Michael Furey, while playing “chicken” with a moving van, contributed to the possibility that this Dadaist-inspired *Zone Trip* had finally come to end.

The years 1997-1999 marked major changes in the leadership and structure of *Burning Man* and its seemingly hostile relationship with the rave/dance culture. By this time, the size of the event had expanded from the original 89 participants to 8,000, in two separate

camps. The dangers of mixing camping and open *playa* reckless driving that resulted in injuries and death could not continue. Organizer Larry Harvey and company realized that a choice had to be made: adapt or close down the event.⁵

To comply with increasing requirements by both county and federal agencies and to manage the increased liability load, the organizers formed Black Rock City, LLC. Driving on the open *playa* was banned, which led to a tentative agreement that the members of *Rave Camp* could join *Burning Man* but would not be listed as an actual theme camp. The Bureau of Land Management warned Larry Harvey that raves would not be tolerated and so a compromise was brokered that allowed the *Ravers* to stage a one-night-only event entitled *Community Dance*, that would take place immediately after the burning of the *Man*.

An official city map was drawn up that led to the designation that high-decibel sound camps be placed at the edge of Black Rock City with their now immense sound systems focused away from the center of the city towards the open *playa*. These progressive changes did little to eliminate the level of friction that had built up between the late-arrival ravers and the long-time original burners who yearned for the good “ole” days of the *Drive-By Shooting Range*.

It is important to note that the perceived prejudice of *Burners* against *Ravers* was based in some part on a culture clash of representative musical preferences more so than movement styles. Old school *Burners* felt more culturally defined by heavy metal and the element of fire and may have felt threatened by the emergent psychedelic trance and lasers. This culture clash was epitomized in an epic “performance art” event that occurred on the night of the *Burn* in 1997. On the one side were long-time *Burners* Chicken John, director of *Circus Redickulless*, a 1990s punk talent show, and Jim Mason, Stanford educated anthropologist turned machine artist. On the other was Goa Gil, avowed *hippie* and early pioneer of psychedelic trance music.

While Goa Gil was playing his post-*Burn* set at the *Community Dance*, Jim Mason followed by a group of *Burners*, drove up in his “Veg-o-matic of the Apocalypse”, a large mechanical drill, mounted on a pair of rusty metal tractor wheels and rigged with a fire cannon. In his 1998 essay *Trial by Fire* Robert Gelman wrote: “The tool of devastation on wheels cut a path through the crowd of dancers to a position directly in front of the DJ console on stage...Chicken John jumps onstage and insists to the DJ, ‘Play some Led Zeppelin!’ The Veg-o-matic lets out a motorized groan and a flaming belch in response....’Burn it!’ the mob chants. ‘BURN THEM!’” Goa Gil calmly stared into the nose of the fire cannon and in true pacifist style continued to “spin his set,” at which point Jim Mason reluctantly backed down and summarily drove the “Veg-o-matic” to his next target, a 20,000 lbs. ice ball entitled *Temporal Decomposition*.

This historic “not-so-performance art” battle between the *Burners* and the *Ravers* marked the beginning of a major philosophical change in the ethos of the event. The “us vs. them,” “old vs. new” mentality gradually gave way to a burgeoning “come one, come all” credo that inspired the development and implementation of the ten core principles that

guide *Burning Man* to this day. These ten “function follows philosophy” principles—radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leave no trace, participation, and immediacy—have since become the perennial backbone of this yearly temporary community in the desert.

The period of philosophical evolution and civic development that followed this epic “mock battle” between the *Burners* and the *Ravers* can objectively be considered the official arrival of dance on the *playa*, albeit as an inseparable byproduct of the electronic dance music/rave culture that had politely “slipped in through the back door” of the *Burning Man* event.

By the late 1990’s, Black Rock City had fully instituted the first principle of radical inclusion, evidenced by the rapid proliferation of highly eclectic theme camps with names such as *Camp Auntie Gravity’s Galactic Gazebo of GODZILLA*, *Camp Arthur Murray School of Trance*, and *Alien Chess Camp*, to name a few. In 1996 there were 130 registered theme camps, servicing a city of 8,000 participants, and by the year 2000, the numbers had swollen to nearly 500 theme camps with a city population of over 25,000. These alternative-culture-seeking temporary residents of the desert began to fondly refer to the *playa* as “home” and to everywhere else as “the default world”. With this expansion came a veritable smorgasbord of participatory offerings, many of which involved dance-related activities. Dance on the *playa* had rapidly become ubiquitous. *Sacred Dance Society Camp*, *Drum and Dance Camp*, *Move Camp*, *Camp Dance Face*, and *Black Rock Dance Collective* were just a few of the many opportunities that had become available for *Burners* to explore a myriad of movement related practices.

Parallel to this rapid expansion in dance-based theme camp culture was the evolution of the original *Rave Camp* itself. By 1999, *Rave Camp*, formerly segregated and quarantined miles away from the center of Black Rock City, had morphed into a variety of sound camps specifically placed in parts of the city called Large-Scale Sound Art Zones. As the underground rave scene back in the “default world” evolved into the massive and highly profitable “Club Scene” in metropolitan cities across the globe, the *Burning Man* sound camp/rave scene mirrored this real world growth with the emergence of well-funded, high-powered sound camps catering to literally thousands of participants, heroically “dancing ‘til dawn” to the soundscapes of the world’s most popular club DJ’s.

A list of these sound camps that emerged out of the Large-Scale Sound Art Zones in years 2000-2004, reads somewhat like a Beat poem. *Lush*, *Illuminaughty*, *Disorient*, *Oacious*, and *The Opulent Temple of Kaos*. To this day, Larry Harvey and the *Burning Man Organization* (commonly referred to as BMORG) and the *Burning Man Arts Foundation* do not define sound camps as art projects and therefore have never financially supported their existence. Each of these camps has risen and fallen on the fundraising abilities of their founders and patrons in the non-gift economy “default world.”⁶

Syd Gris, a San Francisco child psychologist by day and DJ and promoter by night, and his close friend Rich Martin, a fabricator and “techie genius,” used the fundraising and networking power of Syd’s company, Opel Productions, as the driving force behind their co-founded sound camp *Opulent Temple*, arguably the most recognized sound camp in the history of the event. The year 2012 marked the tenth anniversary of *Opulent Temple* at *Burning Man*, and this sound camp has been a major contributor in the evolution of dance on the *playa*. Syd’s credo is that *Opulent Temple* offers “...a space for sacred dance to world-class music...a gift to our community and to ourselves, and we work hard to bring forth a play space to touch the heart and see things clearly. The goal is to connect and awaken, and to bring the fruits of that to our relationships to each other and the world all year round.”⁷ These words of inspiration and transcendence are not exactly the litany one might expect from an electronic music DJ, particularly in light of the negative stereotypes commonly associated with both the historic underground rave party scene and its offspring, the more contemporary “above ground” and highly-commodified dance club scene.

Concurrent with the rise of *Opulent Temple* as the pre-eminent venue for the all-night dance club scene was the arrival and growth on the *playa* of the dance form known as “contact improvisation.” The arrival of C.I. at *Burning Man* directly coincided with the construction of the newly designed and massive Center Camp in the year 2000. Without any official announcement or proclamation, the central open-air space within the new pavilion very quickly evolved to become a daily movement laboratory for the practitioners of contact improvisation. As the number of C.I. dancers increased over the next few years, it became apparent that a new sub-culture or “tribe” had congressed and needed an official home. Enter C.I. instructor Karl Frost, a world traveller and highly respected master teacher with a degree in Physics from U.C. Berkeley. Karl founded *Contact Camp* in 2005: “... a nexus for exploring the art of contact improvisation. Come for daily classes in contact improv and related arts (contemplative movement, authentic movement, contact yoga, etc.), as well as contact jams(open space for investigation/practice/play), labs, or just hanging out with others interested in the possibilities of contact. All are invited to come play, whatever experience level, body type, or ability.”⁸

This last sentence in the *Contact Camp* description resonates deeply, both then and now, with the ethos of the *Burning Man* event. “All are invited to come play, whatever experience level, body type, or ability.” This egalitarian invitation to the masses can be considered a figurative “tipping point” in the history of dance on the *playa* in that it coincided with a veritable flood of instructional and participatory movement-based offerings. AcroYoga, Embracing Awkwardness, Combat Improv, Shakti-Shiva Dance, and Nurture Dance are just a small sample of the classes and workshops that began to be offered to any and all in Black Rock Desert, and the imaginative and eclectic list has grown steadily to this day.

Burning Man has lived through, and consequently grown out of a multitude of official titles and assorted descriptions over the years: *Zone Trip #4*, *Black Rock Arts Festival*, *Burning Man Arts and Culture Festival*, *Mega-Rave*, *Hedonist’s Paradise*, *Techno*

Hippie Village, Desert Sex Party. There are twenty-six years of empirical evidence and thousands of testimonials that can support any one of these titles. However, a recent descriptive title has gained traction in anthropological circles: *Burning Man—Transformational Festival*.⁹

Incorporating participant-driven art, ceremony, healing spaces, music circles and a wide variety of forms of creative and spiritual expression, transformational festivals invite us to “...come together and inspire and empower each other to be our best selves, our brightest selves, to find our place in value within a community, to step into our leadership and our mastery and to start to create real change.”¹⁰ Jeet-Kei Leung, author of the soon to be published book *Dancing Together into The Great Shift: Transformational Festivals & The New Evolutionary Culture*, describes these festivals as “...healing containers supporting spontaneous episodes of healing catharsis and clearing out unexpressed emotional trauma that is often bottled up in our mainstream society. In these supportive and resonant energy fields, we realize that it is safe to let our guard down and speak and act from our hearts. These gatherings create a safe testing-ground in which to explore the co-creation of a new reality and new ways of being with one another.”¹¹

Camp RhythmWave, established in 2007, is a representative example of this form of “healing container.” Camp founder Jennifer Paige describes *RhythmWave* as “...an intensely interactive external collaboration of inner beings in the flow of creation. An ever-changing, living system of awareness, connection, movement, music, and the rhythms of life. We interact, grow, and create abundant life through conscious movement and expression.”¹² The term “conscious dance” has been adopted in the last decade as an umbrella term for the many dance meditation forms that have evolved out of the archaic practice of ecstatic or trance dance. *Camp RhythmWave* is home to a myriad of these ecstatic dance descendants with titles such as *5 Rhythms, Dancing Freedom, Embody Grace*, and *Sweat Your Prayers*.

Mirroring a tradition dating back over 30,000 years, a conscious dance leader or facilitator, as they are called, takes on the role of modern day shaman guiding the practitioners in a series of danced rhythms. This active dance meditation, combined with music and breath, “shifts the brain wave patterns from the day-to-day cognitive beta state, to the more meditative and insightful alpha state. The terms *trance* and *altered state of consciousness* refer to brain waves resonating at this alpha state.”¹³

At the beginning of each conscious dance session, participants choose or “set” an intention involving some aspect of their life that they would like to change or understand more deeply. At some point in the conscious dance session, the participant reaches an alpha or “dream” state in which the censorship filter of societal norms is abated. The dancer, feeling empowered by the dynamic and unified rhythms of the group, reaches an ecstatic state of realization, awareness, and transcendence. This ephemeral and spiritual state of clarity and purpose is simultaneously grounded in reality by the inherent physical actions of the participant’s body. Moreover, when the dancer later returns to the cognitive beta state, there remains a residual physical imprint of the danced ecstatic experience.

The phenomenology of a conscious dance session at *Camp RhythmWave* can be viewed as a figurative blueprint for the process of human transcendence:

Step One: strip away all modern societal norms. There are no phones, televisions, media, political or social hierarchies or commodified brands on the *playa*.

Step Two: establish an uncensored and non-discriminatory environment. *Burning Man* is a come-as-you-truly-are event. Age, race, religion, and sex are superseded by personal choice and action. Men can be women, old can be young, and anyone can supportively partake in all manner of rituals and practices.

Step Three: provide the opportunity for immersion in the natural elements. Air, earth, and fire are each represented in the wind, the dust, and the many burn rituals, and water is a pre-requisite of entry to the event.

Step Four: create a safe container for practice. *RhythmWave* provides a 1400 sq. ft. sprung Bamboo floor, which elevates participants above the astringent alkaline soil. A 2000 sq. ft. shade structure covers the entire dancing area for protection from the harsh desert sun. Events are barefoot only and the floor is swept free of dust many times daily.

Step Five: honor the gained knowledge of the past while creatively implementing the tools of the present and intentionally progressing towards an evolved future. As they are dancing in a conscious dance session, participants are avidly following the directives of the revered facilitator/shaman, kinesthetically experimenting in the provided container of vibrant floor, rhythmic sound, and natural environment, and passionately setting an intention of heightened awareness, spiritual catharsis, and personal growth.

The singular most common stereotype expressed by those who have never attended the *Burning Man Festival* is “Hippies on drugs dancing in the desert.” A perfunctory glance at a conscious dance session at *RhythmWave* would more than likely cement this stereotype in the viewer’s mind: a group of eclectic and scantily clad people, barefoot and flailing about with random abandon, often holding hands, embracing, and even kissing, all to the repetitive sounds of psychedelic trance music, while being led by a guru-type figure.

And yet, upon deeper investigation, this stereotype can be methodically amended. The “people” are most likely openly creative and responsible individuals with “default world” titles such as doctor, writer, and teacher. The clothing is commonly chosen more for comfort and ease in the arid desert environment and is unaffected by societal fashion norms. The philosophical environment is one of unbiased, egalitarian freedom where age, race, sex, and religion are non-factors in the participatory rule system. The leader may actually be a real guru with years of experience and gained knowledge, speaking

guiding words of ancestral wisdom, accompanied by ancient and authentic trance rhythms, captured and digitized in the past twenty years and re-mixed into contemporary “techno mash-ups”. And the event may very well have some entheogenically enhanced participants. However, it is more than likely that the majority have consciously altered their states through spirited and intentional action.

Burning Man historian Brian Doherty writes that: “Burning Man’s vibe, though, is not all love and encouragement. It tiptoes on a knife-edge between two dominant alternative outlooks in American underground culture. They can be roughly characterized by punk and hippie. Burning Man is full of people openly embracing either possibility...torn between an attraction to the aggressive wit and piquant tomfoolery of the punk mentality and warm sincerity and endearing openness of the hippie one.”¹⁴

Doherty’s characterization of this underlying duality in *Burning Man* culture is contextually helpful and yet partly misleading. When confronted by the metaphorical “knife-edge” that ostensibly separates the punk from the hippie, the *Burner* from the *Raver*, the participant is not obligated to choose a side. The core of the *Burning Man* ethos is that everyone actually does have the power of choice, at all times, in an environment of immense diversity. One can go “punk” on Monday night, burning giant ice balls with a flame cannon, and go “hippie” on Tuesday night with a shamanic healing session at *HeeBeeGeeBee Camp*. In a utopian gift economy, an effective infrastructure and support system that not only invites but also encourages every participant to freely choose their actions offers possibly the greatest gift of all.

So if you ever happen to find yourself at *Burning Man* and you are faced with difficult choices, you might just choose to do it all. On Monday, allow yourself to “fly that freak flag” and with a not-so-guilty pleasure, burn something while you are wearing a pink bunny suit; and on Tuesday, head on over to *RhythmWave* for a morning set of ecstatic dance, where you might just also make the choice of giving yourself permission to transcend.

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- ¹ Gilmore (2010:27)
 - ² History of Burning Man 1990-1996 Wikipedia
 - ³ Doherty (2004:67).
 - ⁴ Edgecentral Blogspot: Begoggled in the Mega-Vibe: Burning Man (2011).
 - ⁵ From the article *Hot Mess* by Brad Wieners: Outside Magazine (August 24, 2012)
 - ⁶ From the article *Burner Season* by Steven T. Jones. East Bay Guardian (2004)
 - ⁷ From Opulent Temple website: OpulentTemple.org: Opulent Temple 2012 Line-up
 - ⁸ Burning Man: Theme Camps and Villages (2005).
 - ⁹ *A Journey Through Transformational Festivals* (Trailer) See also *Symbiosis and Lightning in a Bottle*
 - ¹⁰ Jamaica Stevens, producer of Tribal Convergence. (2012)
 - ¹¹ TedxVancouver(2010)
 - ¹² Burning Man: Theme Camps and Villages (2012)
 - ¹³ Berggren (1998:68)
 - ¹⁴ Doherty (2004:173)

- *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* by Lee Gilmore (University of California Press, 2010)
- *This is Burning Man: The Rise of a New American Underground* by Brian Doherty (Little, Brown and Company, 2004)
- *The Tribes of Burning Man: How an Experimental City in the Desert is Shaping the New American Counterculture* by Steven T. Jones (CCC publishing, 2011)
- *Circle of Shaman: Healing Through Ecstasy, Rhythm, and Myth* by Karen Berggren (Destiny Books, 1998)