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Holy Bass: Spirituality in Electronic Dance Music Culture

Malone H. Walker

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ABSTRACT

Throughout human history, religious systems have provided individuals with basic knowledge and guidance used to understand and navigate the world. The modern world is no different with people searching for the sacred in new ways and different places. This thesis examines Electronic Dance Music Culture as an example. In order to study spirituality in EDMC I conducted an ethnography of EDM artists. In doing so I set out to answer these questions: How do the facilitators of EDMC conceptualize spirituality and how do those processes interact within EDMCs? So the focus does not lie in discerning a unifying spirituality of EDMC but in teasing out the impact of EDM and EDMC on individuals in the personal construction of their spiritual selves. I draw upon ethnographic research to explain how the creators of EDMC conceptualize and construct spirituality in open-ended ways. I found that the DJs and producers have a dual relationship with the scene as specialist and member both creating, facilitating and engaging.

INDEX WORDS: Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC), Religion, Spirituality, Cultural anthropology, Music, Dance culture
HOLY BASS: SPIRITUALITY IN ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

by

MALONE WALKER

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HOLY BASS: SPIRITUALITY IN ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

by

MALONE WALKER

Committee Chair: Faidra Papavasilious
Committee: Emanuela Guano
Louis Arthur Ruprecht, Jr.

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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DEDICATION

For Katie. Thank you for helping make all of this happen.
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INTRODUCTION

The bass hits my face before diffusing through my chest and into my limbs. I can feel the sound waves crashing over my body. This is not sound you hear but sound you feel, sound that permeates your very being. Nashville’s Bridgestone Arena is full of 20,000 people for the fourth New Year’s Eve in a row, many returning after their unforgettable experience with Bassnectar the year before. Bassnectar plays for two hours, somehow managing to seamlessly connect each song, sound, and/or mix as if they were always made to be together. Many of his songs start out with a deceivingly calm introduction, lulling you into a safe place before bringing you to the edge of discomfort with loud, repetitive, crashing beats. Just when you do not think you can take anymore the bass drops and the whole world makes sense again. For most of Bassnectar my mind is in the music, there is nothing but the sound and me. When my eyes are open I soak in the lights and visuals, when closed I see the music. I can feel the music, and it connects me to the entire experience and everyone around me. It is emotional, aesthetic, and meaningful.

Drawing on the works of others (Gauthier 2005; Hutson 1999 & 2000; St John 2006; Takahashi & Olaveson 2003), I argue there is a spiritual aspect to the Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC) experience that makes these events intensely meaningful for many participants. The purpose of my study is to explore the spiritual and religious aspects of EDMC through the DJ. Throughout human history, religion has provided individuals with basic knowledge and guidance used to understand and navigate the world. Some (Cimino & Smith 2007) claim there has been a popular exodus from religion towards secularism, while others (Tacey 2004; Turner 2011) argue there has been a resurgence in religious or spiritual interest and participation in the modern world. Gary Laderman’s work on religious life in America is helpful to this study. He
sets aside the term ‘religion,’ instead conducting a cultural thought-experiment investigating cultural scenes involving ‘the sacred.’ Laderman argues there is “more to religious life in America than belief in God” and that the sacred is everywhere and in everything, not only in music but also film and science (2009:xiv). This research examines Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC) as an example. EDMC combines elements of music and religion to create an experience full of meaning. While spiritual aspects of EDMC have long been recognized (Gauthier 2005; Hutson 1999 & 2000; St John 2006; Takahashi & Olaveson 2003) I focus on the DJs in both their role as facilitators and as participants in a community of alternative spirituality. Electronic Dance Music (EDM) and thus EDMC is about more than just the music, it is about the experience and the lifestyle and also a broader framework for living. It is about living the way that works best for you, while also treating others with respect. It is a place people go to feel comfortable and safe; yet it is also a place many go to escape the current world through party and play.

Electronic Dance Music is an umbrella term used to describe danceable music created by electronic means. The term emerged in the U.S. in the early 2000s and was quickly adopted by the music industry in a progressively commercialized EDM scene. Previously, the grouping of genres (trance, house, dubstep) would not have been beneficial because the physical music scenes were very much determined by the genre of music being played. Although the term EDM lumps many unique genres together, it is an effective way to discuss the music and its scene today as many events are centered on EDM, not specifically trance or house, and feature a variety of genres. Today the global electronic music industry is estimated to be worth $6.2 billion, including revenue from festivals and clubs, recorded music sales, streaming service fees,
and sales of DJ software and hardware (Watson 2014). The high value placed on this industry shows the effective commercialization of electronic music.

Research into raves and electronic music shows that many people who participate in these events have spiritually meaningful experiences. Previous work has focused on the meaning and significance of the ritual behind dance experiences, but this thesis instead examines the impact of the music and corresponding EDMCs both on and off the dance floor. This research assesses the conceptualization of spirituality among DJs and Producers and seeks to understand how those processes interact within EDMCs. Thus, the focus does not lie in discerning a unifying spirituality of EDMC but in teasing out the impact of EDM and EDMCs on individuals in the personal construction of their spiritual selves. Religion is an historically important component of the human experience, and this study illuminates the role spirituality and religion play in EDMC. Through this study I contribute to an understanding of today’s EDMC and also the changing nature of religious and spiritual experience in modern American society. The artists I talked to express themselves through their music, offering listeners a piece of themselves in each song. Their songs are not noise but meaningful sounds intended to make people feel something. Their music brings people together in mind, body and spirit. EDM events have the potential to be spiritually meaningful, especially in contexts where the audience can become fully immersed in the sound. The artists occupy a unique space within EDMC, creating the music and interacting with people in the community.

Our modern world is characterized by the persistence of long standing religious traditions among the emergence of many new movements. Through my research I have found that EDMC is not any kind of official movement but its events and communities offer a context that has the potential to produce a spiritually enriching experience. People are becoming increasingly
dissatisfied with the offerings of institutionalized religions and seeking more personal experiences with the sacred. The sacred exists in EDMC, in the festivals filled with thousands of pilgrims, the clubs with loyal followers, and in the music itself. EDMC is not the only solution but it has emerged as a valid outlet. The loud repetitive music, flashing lights, visuals, group dynamic, dancing and psychoactive substances can facilitate trance states allowing individuals to become lost in the moment. In this disconnection they find connection to the world and those around them – something shared by artists and participants.

In the first chapter I trace the history and origin of rave culture and EDM in global and national contexts, defining the rave and post-rave era in which EDM currently operates. I also explore the role of the counterculture narrative at play in creating the current scene. In addition, this first chapter introduces the DJs and producers responsible for the production of EDM. The next chapter reviews the relevant literature primarily within sociology, popular culture studies, anthropology and religious studies. There is a great deal of work on the emergence and decline of the rave (Anderson 2009; Collin 1998; Hunt et al 2010; Leloup 2010; McCall 2001; Reynolds 2012; Sicko 2010), which contribute to a better understanding of the current EDM scene. Texts from studies seeking to understand the relationship between spirituality, religion and EDM are also valuable in seeing the ways in which participants view the experience and its spiritual aspects. The final section explores studies concerning drug use in general and studies related to popular culture and music. In the next chapter, I describe the ethnographic research methods used, the justifications for those methods, and the limitations of this study.

In Chapter 5, I present the ethnographic component of this research. Drawing on the help of my informants, I present a definition of EDM. Then, I set the current EDM scene in terms of its physical settings and social scenes, including those in Atlanta. This enables me to look at the
current state of EDM, both in popular culture and as an industry. The next section presents the DJ and Producer, examining their roles in the creation of community and the production of EDM. In Chapter 5 I also look at the role of spirituality and religion in the creation of EDM as well as the production of EDMCs. For many, there is something sacred in the music itself, before you even consider the experience. Outside of the music, EDMC is a sort of community of differences, brought together in the search for truth, purpose, recognition, and validation.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a background to EDM and EDMC that is necessary to understanding the current nature of the scene. First, I trace the emergence of the rave to today’s scene, which is dominated by clubs and festivals. Next, I reflect on the prior work done on raves as youth and/or countercultural movements and the implications that has on those in the scene today. Then, I introduce the DJ and producer, presenting previous interpretations from rave or EDM-related research. This chapter also confronts issues of religion and spirituality within electronic music contexts as well as psychoactive substance use. The present work draws on a number of approaches developed over the course of anthropological history. Outside of anthropology, this thesis benefits from a range of disciplines including religious studies, sociology, ethnomusicology, and popular culture.

1.1 The Rave and Post Rave Eras

Today, younger generations flock to music festivals, concerts, raves and other shows. Some of these events feature Rock music or Rap music, but a growing number feature Electronic Dance Music (EDM). EDM emerged from the electronica genre and is characterized by a prominent bass line accompanied by a series of both instrumental and synthetic sounds. The
cultures surrounding EDM are referred to as Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC). EDMC indicates (or references) the cultural elements – or practices, behaviors, sentiments, values, rituals, etc. – associated with EDM. That being said, there are many EDMCs characterizing or belonging to many EDM communities, so EDMCs refers to the highly diverse nature of the scene. My descriptions of EDMC in the American South are not indicative of the culture as a whole, although some common elements may exist throughout. Places where this culture is concentrated and easier to observe include events with EDM such as raves, festivals, and shows. Traditional Raves are somewhat secret underground parties usually occurring late night until sunrise in unlicensed venues. Raves in the traditional sense declined during the 1990s because of unfavorable legislation and consequentially rarely occur today. The term ‘Rave’ has become more of a marketing tool than an accurate descriptor, which is surprising considering its origin. Derived from a French word for a dream with roots in the Greek word for delirium, 18th century understandings of ‘rave’ are tied to words like rabid, rabies, and ravenous which referred to wild, violent, and mad distracted, roaming behavior according to an English Etymology text from the 18th century (Lemon 1783). The meaning of rave evolved in the early 1900s to reference temporary popular enthusiasm, and by 1926 ‘rave’ was used to describe a highly flattering review (Harper 2015). ‘Rave’ did not mean a wild, rowdy party until the 1950s and 1960s and is believed to have come from the British slang term ‘rave-up’ used in the 1940s (Evans 1992; Harper 2015). It was not until the 1980s, with the rise of London’s illegal warehouse party scene, that the term ‘rave’ became known as a massive party featuring loud, fast electronic music generally associated with psychedelic drugs (Evans 1992; Harper 2015). In this paper, rave refers to both early EDMC rave events, specifically dusk to dawn illegal style events, and rave-themed events in operation today.
There is a great deal of literature on the emergence and decline of the rave (Anderson 2009; Collin 1998; Hunt et al 2010; Leloup 2010; McCall 2001; Reynolds 2012; Sicko 2010) that contributes to a better understanding of the current EDM scene. Raves have been occurring for the past 15 years in the industrialized west (Papadimitropulous 2009:68). Raves are parties featuring loud, repetitive, electronic music that is included under the EDMC umbrella. The rave scene emerged in the late 1980s (Hutson 2000:35 & Gauthier 2005:229) based on purely underground events, “providing a radical shift from rock’s structure of identification and contestation through spectacle format” (Gauthier 2005:220). These events were underground in the sense that they were held outside of the confines of the law, often in a field or an abandoned warehouse or factory. The radical shift from rock is significant in the changing focus from the individual to the community as a whole, as indicated by the interest in rock stars to a dancing crowd. As law enforcement and government bodies found ways, primarily through moral panic related to drug use, to restrict these underground events, people in the scene found new ways to keep having them. In the mid-1990s the scene moved to nightclubs and has today become a regular theme in nightclub events. However, there are also festivals throughout the world that enable participants to spend a few days in an EDMC-centered environment. “Ravers follow on from hippies and punks,” both having alternative values and lifestyles (Martin 1999:84), and rave culture “shares numerous similarities with the counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s” (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003:82). Some of those similar features include an emphasis on achieving altered states of consciousness and experimentation with psychoactive substances (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003; Hutson 1999; Gauthier 2005).

The predecessors of EDM include Northern Soul from England in the 1960s and Disco from the U.S. in the 1970s (McCall 2001:13). McCall argues that Northern Soul first belonged to
working class youths in northern England who embraced African American music along with the substances speed and hash (2001:13). Disco emerged in conjunction with the gay pride movement in New York, becoming a safe haven for African Americans and gays away from a “heterosexist mainstream society” (McCall 2001:14). The era of dance music was an era of social change and freedom in the form of dance. By the late 1970s what was left of disco was a homogenized version of the original, no longer concerned with transgression and emancipation but being cool ‘Saturday Night Fever’ style (McCall 2001:16).

EDM emerged out of the early genres—like techno, house, trance—and other alternative electronic music styles. Experimental genres paved the way for EDM, its musical origins developing alongside cultural ones. Drawing from preceding music cultures like the hippies in the 1960s and disco in the 1970s and 1980s, EDM is now a global phenomenon, but many of its earliest roots can be traced back to the U.S. Raves, all-night parties featuring DJ performances in unlicensed venues, were essential in the formation of what is known today as EDM. Anderson defines a rave as a “grassroots-organized, antiestablishment, unlicensed all night dance party” featuring EDM (2009:4). This definition encompasses the social aspect of early electronic music, one that “emerged during the repressive Thatcher and Reagan eras” in the U.K. and U.S. (Anderson 2009:4). These repressive eras were characterized by Drug War rhetoric and increased anti-drug task forces aimed at protecting youth. Anderson argues that these parties were responses to cultural tensions, but the governmental response treated them as social problems needing to be controlled (2009:4). The rave scene can be traced back to four related movements in New York, Chicago, Detroit, and the Ibiza-UK connection (Wilson 2006). In the 1970s the New York dance scene was centered on gay African Americans, and the provision of a safe place to be oneself. In the 1980s Chicago house music, named after the warehouses in which
it was first played, catered to a mostly African American gay crowd and was initially about a feeling and an attitude, not a genre (McCall 2001:17). Allured by the secretive, after hours nature of the scene, Chicago house parties eventually attracted straight white youth, who permanently altered the scene (McCall 2001:18). Techno originated in Detroit but has long since been used as a blanket term for electronic music, much like EDM (McCall 2001:19). The third movement was based around techno in Detroit, with DJs trying to add more futuristic sounds to the mix (Collin 1998:23). The final location was Ibiza, with a constant party scene influenced by hippies that moved there after the 1960s, and the U.K., where working class youth were becoming deeply involved with the emerging underground.

Electronic music, though shocking at first, slowly became absorbed into mainstream culture, being used in work out routines and commercials (Connell and Gibson 2003:207). In his work on the appropriation of oppositional cultural commodities, Hebdige argues that subcultural styles may originate as symbolic challenges but are quick to be converted into mass-produced objects (1979:96). This process was accelerated with increasing controls on dance music related events by authorities, when the parties were incorporated into “existing nightlife infrastructure” (Hunt et al. 2010:59). As anti-rave related legislation rose, the drastic decline of raves forced electronic music into other more legitimate venues, legitimate in the eyes of the law. Clubs started to feature EDM, festivals began inviting DJs and producers to perform, and soon EDM festivals emerged. Further developments in communication technologies, tourism and international travel packages helped spread dance-club culture globally (Hunt et al. 2010:60). Magazines first offered information on the global dance scene, but the Internet would soon provide unimaginable access to music scenes everywhere through blogs, videos and music.
Today raves exist only in name, however the term rave is recognized as a party that will last into the morning and features EDM. Some scholars still study the rave in those terms, but the majority have moved on to the study of clubs and/or festivals, especially when the concern is public health associated with substance use. I argue that EDM is in the post-rave era because I understand raves as unlicensed events connected to the cultural contestation relevant during their emergence and that changed when the music moved into licensed, legal venues. Early raves involved a sense of community and involvement different than the widely advertised events today. They were invitation-only and the location was secret until a few hours before, which resulted in a sense of community different to the one present in the scene today (McCall 2001). Additionally, the post-rave era is characterized by commercialized productions.

After conducting research in Detroit, Ibiza, and London, Tara McCall used online testimonials and surveys to look at the rave scene, which she argues is retreating back into the underground with its wild fashion, drugs and hypnotic music (2001). In her analysis, McCall (2001) examines the dance aspect of the EDM experience in terms of rational versus non-rational understanding. According to McCall (2001), dance is marginalized in the Western world and construed as hedonistic. Acceptable forms of dance conform to accepted social scripts on how the body ought to move, like the movements found in ballet or jazz dance. In order to understand the dance involved in the Electronic Dance Music world, we must first look at dance in non-rationalist terms and accept that this form of movement may involve several elements of art, ritual and play. McCall (2001) also discusses the relationship between Rave culture, the industrialized west, and drugs. The industrialized west is closely tied to rituals surrounding drugs as well as systems that deem particular substances acceptable for relaxation, rituals, health, enlightenment or even escapism (McCall 2001). This drug-centered aspect of Western culture is
often ignored when popular culture and the media become involved in the depiction of Rave Culture. While the rave experience may be viewed as a drug itself, the phenomenon is also closely associated with the evolving nature of ecstasy drug culture (McCall 2001). Drug culture, like dance culture, in the Western world is tied to concepts of productivity where the concern is with the effectiveness of production in the economy. Dance and drug culture challenge that productivity by encouraging activities that compromise an individual’s ability to engage in the production of goods or commodities. There are accepted forms of ingestion like substances considered medical, and Rave Culture challenged those notions by supplying an event based on the consumption of illicit substances accompanied by unscripted forms of dance. New technologies of modernity are also involved in the Rave Culture phenomenon. It is a product of modern technological innovation. These interactions are new and not yet fully understood (McCall 2001). The Internet has also created new spaces where interactions between these cultures’ members can take place. It creates new and semi-permanent spaces for individuals to congregate. This confirms the community and simultaneously sustains and grows it. The Internet has located a previously secret, hidden culture (McCall 2001). According to McCall (2001), Rave Culture has largely moved into the mainstream and should no longer be considered a hidden subculture. The rave is evolving and adapting as the context changes. As a result, the movement shapes itself according to its environments and members. And so the post-rave era includes elements of the rave and rave culture into new, legal contexts accompanied by illegal drugs and unstructured dancing.

In another study, sociologist Tammy Anderson argues that the rave has declined in Philadelphia based on fieldwork completed there and interviews gathered from Philadelphia, Ibiza, and London (2009). The decline is based on generational schism, commercialization,
cultural hedonism, formal social control, and genre specialization (Anderson 2009). The generational schism between the old and new members of the scene results in age-based groups and divisions. Music industry commercialization has seeped into rave culture, challenging much of the ideology upon which the rave was built. Next, Anderson discusses cultural hedonism within rave culture, describing many of its practices as self-destructive, eventually leading to an exodus from the scene. Formal social control though local, state and federal legislation has made the production of rave events more difficult to sustain. Finally, Anderson cites genre specialization as another reason for the decline of the Philadelphia rave scene. As specialization occurs, sub scenes develop, further dividing the rave community.

In an earlier study, Collin (1998) presents a social history and genealogy of dance and ecstasy culture. He details the rise and fall of particular DJs along with other major players in the evolving music scene. Collin (1998) looks at the phenomenon as an evolving youth movement among other counterculture/sub-culture movements interacting with the mainstream. Simon Reynolds, a music journalist, uses personal experience and 10 years of interviews to trace the evolution of rave music and dance culture (2012). Reynolds focuses entirely on the hardcore aspects of the rave scene, believing the more experimental aspects of any movement are what influence change (2012). Reynolds (2012) discusses the potential spiritual power of the rave in reference to personal experience and ethnographic information. He does discuss the spiritually beneficent potential of ecstasy and its anti-conformist role in a hierarchically rigid culture, which closely relates to understandings of altered states of consciousness as well as drug use. Reynolds (2012) mentions a Church of Ecstasy in which rave style worship is encouraged with the holy sacrament of ecstasy. It could be used to facilitate trance meditation acting as an entheogen, bringing individuals closer to the divine. This idea is interesting in theory, but in reality the rave
exists as a sort of secular religion based on an anonymous utopia, in which individuals and sites change on a regular basis (Reynolds 2012).

One issue with these texts is their inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to define the rave/EDM phenomenon. They may provide functional definitions to help the reader better understand the writings, but there is an overall clear message that this rave/EDM phenomenon does not and cannot have a clear definition. Its participants know the phenomenon, although varied at that, is always changing and evolving according to the surrounding culture and the needs of its participants. The definition is made more difficult by the fact that it is largely an experience incredibly hard to describe or define. The final theme found throughout the texts is the necessity of mentioning drug use within the phenomenon. It is a part of the culture, whether it is instrumental is still debatable. The drug aspect of EDMC is deeply intertwined in its historical happenings, and a full analysis of the culture and the experience requires acknowledgement and attention to the drug aspect of the experience.

1.2 Youth and Counterculture

Electronic music and the rave have long been the subject of a number of studies dealing with youth and countercultural movements, especially when it was still in the underground, shrouded in secrecy. Studies that present ravers from the perspective of youth studies start out with limitations in the way they choose to frame the population. Before knowing anything about them, scholars have grouped these individuals into the youth category, placing them in a liminal life stage. This section seeks to understand how scholars have treated youth studies within rave and electronic music culture, if youth is understood to be a coherent, identifiable population.

Early studies of the rave viewed it as countercultural, or outside of the mainstream in beliefs, activities, and practices. Daniel Martin (1999) considers raving to be “the largest, most
dynamic, and longest lasting youth sub- or counterculture of the post-war era” (77). Its practice and values, combined with the number of people involved, make it a global phenomenon that challenges “many aspects of dominant western culture” (Martin 1999:77). It has been over a decade since Martin made this statement, and main events may no longer be called raves, but EDM is larger than ever and still growing. According to Martin (1999) the relationship between rave cultures, the media and government illustrates its power. The raver becomes “the morally corrupt, potentially insane” individual “set up against normal, sane society” in this dichotomy that is the rave versus the other, or mainstream culture. Therefore, the media and the government have no choice but to save the raver from self and society. By involving the consumption of illegal drugs and dancing, rave culture threatens the integrity of mainstream society, making it the target of the media and the government. The music does not glorify the individual, nor do individuals dance to be on display; people dance to lose and ultimately find themselves (Martin 1999:93). “In dancing to lose the self, ravers achieve a kind of liberation in an escape from identity,” referred to as the vibe (Martin 1999:93). For Martin, then, the rave is a form of “dissent and resistance though its avoidance of control because the experience is not understood” (Martin 1999:96).

For over 5 years EDM has been making its move from the underground into the foreground. The rave and EDM emerged out of the countercultural underground in the 1990s, but it has experienced a number of transformations and in some way declines. Parts of it have become mainstream, popularized and valorized by mainly white middle class America, especially in the college-aged party scene. EDM has become a regular in the Top 40, and assorted EDM-themed parties are widely advertised on college campuses. While people in EDMC today are still far from being countercultural, there are aspects of its culture
misunderstood in mainstream culture. EDMC may be more popular and mainstream than it ever has been before, attracting a larger number and wider variety of participants, but it remains somewhat subversive in the eyes of many.

1.3 DJs and Producers

DJs have not been disc jockeys for quite some time now; today, most DJs have gone digital, meaning many no longer use actual records, discs or CDs. That being said, there are a few DJs still using records or CDs, but they are the minority. All but one of my informants, who uses CDs, use computers to create their music. The ability to beat match by ear without programs that automatically syncs songs was a valued skill before the arsenal of DJ software was created, and only one of my informants continues to do it manually, though at least three know how.

When people talk about EDM they usually talk about DJs, but DJs are no longer the electronic music stars they were in the past. Today that spotlight goes to producers, who employ the same techniques used by DJs but are more involved in the sound engineering aspect of music creation. While DJs take existing songs or mixes and add effects and/or distortions, producers have the capability to build sounds and songs from the bottom up. Making EDM songs requires a computer, software, and a number of other technologies. Visually, during development in software, the music looks like staggered layers of a cake. Artists stack and stagger sounds and beats on top of each other to build these mixes, controlling every aspect of each individual layer, from pitch to wavelength. Unless the artist booth is visible, it can be hard to tell what kind of equipment someone is using, but as long as there is music playing that is all that really matters to most participants.

Music journalist Simon Reynolds also (2012) explores the role of the DJ in his social history and genealogy of dance and ecstasy culture. Reynolds examines the rise and the fall of
DJs and other major players in the evolving electronic music scene. For Reynolds the DJ provides a concrete example where one can view the physically changing landscape of music culture. Artists creating original works were once lauded for their abilities, but slowly the DJ emerged, first playing original music on its own, soon finding more and more ways to transform it and make it their own. The emergence of the DJ facilitated a new vision of music as a process, rather than an object with potential problems still trying to be solved. New technologies have created and since transformed the DJ and have also produced a new music industry (Reynolds 2012).

Scott Hutson (1999) studies the relationship between shamanism and the DJ, determining technoshamanism—the DJ as “harmonic navigator” in group mood and mind—to be the answer (Rushkoff 1994:116,121). For Hutson the DJ becomes “a mixed symbol of human and machine,” essentially synthesizing “our desire to be spiritual with our rootedness and dependence on the material” (Hutson 1999:71). This human-machine synthesis serves as “a model for how the soul can be integrated” (Hutson 1999:71). Hutson understands technoshamans as high priests leading people on a journey with music, dancing and lights to a place where individuality is left behind and communitas is achieved. The DJ as a shaman is custodian of ecstatic techniques, taking followers on a mental and emotional adventure that transcends their ordinary definition of reality (Hutson 1999:71). The technoshaman creates a framework for spiritual healing through the rave process. Takahashi and Olaveson also discuss the “pivotal role” of DJs within rave experiences “as the leader of the congregation and master of the ceremony” analogous to religious ritual (2003:86). DJs become “technoshamans” because they “regulate not only the mood, but also the physical experience” through the music (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003:86). The technoshaman is
a combination of machine, spirit and being, supposedly working towards leading the audience to integration of the self through personal and group experiences.

Jean-Yves Leloup, a journalist and writer in electronic music, has followed the movement of music in Europe since the 1980s and noticed drastic changes in the musical landscape. Leloup (2010) examines Electronic Music in the new digital technological landscape. His main points include the aesthetic revolution and the democratization of the digital. New digital formats are transforming foundational aspects of the music industry, especially the album, and creating a completely new landscape (Leloup 2010). This new landscape comes with its own new set of rules contributing to the new and changing landscape of digital media. It emphasizes shared creations, widespread sampling, mixes and remixes, DJ rule and a new sort of micro-economy. Maybe most fundamental is the change in the relationship between artist and audience, which is completely transformed, placing more control in the hands of the listener. Additionally, the DJ is functioning in a way that appears to take over the artist role, but the DJ is opposed to filling that role with so much emphasis on the self (Leloup 2010). The democratization of the digital puts electronic tools into the hands of many and facilitates easier diffusion, exchange, and listening. It also transforms the relationship between the audience and the music, allowing listener’s easier access and control over the music they choose to consume (Leloup 2010).

The DJs originally played existing music, creating mixes first combining songs and eventually transforming those songs into their own unique creations. In one interpretation the DJ facilitated a remodeling of music as a process rather than an object (Reynolds 2012). In another, the DJ is a “technoshaman,” synthesizing human and machine as “harmonic navigator” of group mood, mind, and physical experience (Hutson 1999: 61; Takahashi & Olaveson 2003). The final
perspective argues that the new relationship between artist and audience promotes the democratization of the digital, giving performance ability to many (Leloup 2010).

1.4 Religion and Spirituality

Since its beginning, anthropology has been concerned with religion, ritual and the nature of religious life. Early definitions focused on the content and distinguishable features of religion. Edward B. Tylor (1873:21) restricts religion to the belief in spiritual beings. Emile Durkheim (1912) redefines religion as belief in the sacred, opening up the inclusion of inanimate objects, human beings, and gods. Later approaches include more individualistic interpretations acknowledging the role of individual experience. An interpretation by James Frazer (1985) refers to religion as the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in relation to “whatever they may consider the divine.” Bronislaw Malinowski (1984) argues that religion promotes social solidarity through the performance of psychological functions that aid individuals by helping them to cope with stress. For Malinowski, religion reduces individual anxiety enabling unimpeded solidarity. Drawing on the works of Durkheim, Frazer and Tylor, E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1976) argues that religious practices must be understood in their own context. Evans-Pritchard did not propose a general theory of religion but a theory of religions among the Azande and Nuer. Victor Turner (1967) believes in the centrality of ritual in the maintenance of the social order. For Turner, rituals serve as symbolic action, tools operating to reproduce the social order. Religion, in Turner’s perspective, is ritualistic, and his work on religious belief is less developed than his work on religious practices like ritual. Particularly helpful in this study are definitions from Anthony Wallace (1966) and Clifford Geertz (1977). For Wallace (1966), religion is built on rituals unified by myth and mobilized for the achievement or prevention of change in the position of humanity and nature. Geertz explains religion as a system of symbols
that hold the ability to produce long-lasting moods and motivations and provide “conceptions of a general order of existence” in a way that makes them seem natural and “uniquely realistic” (1977:90). What Wallace and Geertz manage to capture is the functional and processual aspect of religion, which is key to understanding religious experience. In each perspective religion is understood as connected with either ritual or the non-empirical.

More recent strategies in religious studies incorporate concepts of the sacred within dialogues on religion and spirituality in a post-secular world. The secularization thesis, the belief that as societies progress through modernity, religion loses authority, has been disproven in the persistence of multiple forms of religious life (Laderman 2009; Margry 2008; Tacey 2004; Ter Borg 2004). Critical here is the view of religion as “not as an historical institution, but as an anthropological constant” (Ter Borg 2004:109). Regardless of labeling, evidence of religious life persists across time and space. Psychologist David Tacey (2004) attributes this persistence to a ‘spirituality gap’ between existing religious and secular professionals and the greater soul-searching community. This gap has resulted in a spirituality revolution involving a ‘democratization of the spirit’ where the individual becomes the spiritual authority (Tacey 2004:3). Spirituality in this context “seeks a sensitive, contemplative, transformative relationship with the sacred, and is able to sustain levels of uncertainty in its quest because respect for mystery is paramount” (Tacey 2004:11). Anthropologist Peter Jan Margry (2008:327) argues that the failure of existing churches and religious movements to meet the needs of their people has encouraged many to seek what he calls “new itineraries into the sacred.” These itineraries are essentially “new forms of religiosity or personalized attributions of sacredness” in the form of pilgrimages or journeys into realms considered opposed to everyday life (Margry 2008:34). Meerten B. Ter Borg (2004) claims that a ‘disembedding’ not ‘secularization’ is occurring. In
what Ter Borg (2004) calls ‘wild religion,’ new forms of religiosity are considered disembedded in the sense that they are not tied to a centralized authority and are in no way considered official. Like Tacey (2004), Ter Borg (2004) also argues that the individual becomes the authority. Sociologist Bryan Turner (2011) draws upon the works of Emile Durkheim and Alasdair MacIntyre to construct an understanding of religion that incorporates the processes of modernization. Turner suggests modern individualism and communication technologies have weakened “the authority of collective religious belief” through the destruction of the roots of belief and the circumvention of social relationships.

Gary Laderman examines the nature of religion without God and religious traditions defining it as “an ubiquitous feature of cultural life, assuming many expressions though tied to and inspired by basic, universal facts of life and fundamentally biological phenomena in human experience” (2009:xiv). The resulting religious life involves “multiple forms of cultural activity” within both the mundane and unexplainable experiences, “wide-ranging rituals and myths” that “provide profound yet practical fulfillment and order,” and communities connected through “sacred bonds that shape identity” and provide a larger framework for living (Laderman 2009:xvii). This work relies most heavily on Laderman’s understanding of the sacred, “a word like religion without a fixed universal meaning or reference that everyone will agree on, but nonetheless a word signifying religious cultures or communities tied together emotionally and cognitively, but also spiritually and materially by vital rituals, living myths, indescribable experiences, moral values, shared memories, and other commonly recognized features of religious life” (Laderman 2009:xiv).

These interpretations acknowledge the persistence of the sacred as well as the power of its transformative capabilities. Laderman (2009) argues the sacred has infiltrated nearly every
aspect of American life from various music scenes to sports, film and celebrity worship. EDMC is but one realm offering “new itineraries into the sacred” available for individuals to choose (Margry 2008:327). If existing options fail to meet people’s needs, individuals will seek out alternatives, like EDMC, finding more satisfactory ways to incorporate the sacred.

1.5 Religion and Spirituality in Raves and EDMC

Studies concerning the culture and religion of EDMC are primarily distributed under four categories: ritual/festal, musical trance, community ‘vibes’ and ‘tribes’, and ‘spirituality of life’ (St John 2006:1). EDMC has traveled from disco, through house and rave, to post-rave forms, its current state. The rave is no longer the only feature of EDMC, and new forms of experience, from shows to festivals, have emerged. Early research focuses mainly on the rave and implications of that experience, while more recent studies acknowledge the impact of these experiences on individuals once they leave the dance floor. This thesis builds upon those later works in its pursuit of a better understanding of spirituality through a number of people who create the EDM necessary for the existence of EDMC.

Within the issue of ritual, the primary perspective taken by anthropologists and sociologists (Gavanas 2008; Hutson 1999; Margry 2008; Martin 1999; Takahashi & Olaveson 2003) is based on Victor Turner’s (1969) work on ritual process. Arnold van Gennep (1959) first presented work on rites of passage through its ritual process involving separation from the group, transition to a new state, and incorporation or reincorporation within the social order. Expanding on this, Turner focuses on the transitional stage, what he referred to as the liminal period. Liminality refers to the transitional period in a rite of passage in which the participant is without social status or rank. In this liminal period social structure is undone both through physical and symbolic separation from society. In this anti-structure, temporary negation, individuals exist in
a space outside of society. Liminality is fused through communitas, the ritual fusion of individuals into a collective identity. Through this transformation individuals come to recognize and reaffirm basic structural cohesion. Liminal experiences result in communitas, a special relationship and sense of togetherness felt as a group. EDMC relies on rites of passage in the form of EDM experiences that allow individuals to reach communitas, effectively incorporating those individuals into EDMC. Turner’s understandings of liminality and communitas are important, but the liminal spaces participants’ reach in EDMC is the objective. In EDMC communitas is not part of a larger rite of passage reincorporating individuals back into society.

Communitas is colloquially termed the ‘vibe’ in EDMC, and has been addressed by several scholars. Takahashi & Olaveson (2003:81) describe “the vibe as a kind of energy pulse which cannot be expressed or understood in words but as something which can only be physically experienced.” Daniel Martin (1999:94) describes the vibe as something that occurs with individuals dance to lose the self, achieving liberation from identity. Anna Gavanas (2008) relies on experience as an EDM researcher and DJ in her interpretation of communitas within the EDM scene. What participants know as the ‘vibe’ or ‘energy’ is for Gavanas (2008:127) “a spiritual connection between crowd and DJ mediated through bodies, sound and technology.” The vibe is an energy that goes beyond the sea of bodies, yet simultaneously ties them together as one.

Using ethnographical and theoretical approaches, Peter Jan Margry (2008) relies on Turner in his interpretation of pilgrimages, or new journeys into the sacred. Margry (2008:17) defines pilgrimages as spiritually or religiously based journeys to a place that is considered “as more sacred” than everyday life that provide individuals with spiritual benefits. The pilgrimage in Margry’s understanding is analogous to EDMC festival journeys as well as rave and club nights that contain the essential component of pilgrimage, the crossing of either geographical or mental
borders (Margry 2008:324). Margry looks at Turner’s communitas through pilgrimages, defined as a religious or spiritually inspired journey to a sacred place that offers healing (2008:21). Shrines and pilgrimages possess qualities “which enable them to generate, stimulate or revitalize religious devotion and religious identity” which explains why in the 19th century the Catholic Church used the pilgrimage to combat enlightenment, rationalism and apostasy (Margry 2008:15). In the 20th century, following the Russian Revolution during the Cold War, the pilgrimage was used as a tool to counter atheist political ideologies and secularization (Margry 2008:15). Margry puts an emphasis on rationalism, science and medicine, which have altered perception of pilgrimage but not resulted in its disappearance (Margry 2008:33). Pilgrimages involve journeying to a place considered more sacred than that of everyday life and have been used throughout history “to heal or cure in times of widespread sickness” (Margry 2008). Great scientific advances have removed the occurrence of many epidemics and diseases, but afflictions have emerged to replace them (Margry 2008:33). Festivals that feature EDM may serve as pilgrimages for attendees, but why is attendance necessary in the first place? Or why do individuals feel they need to attend these events? According to Margry, incentive to pilgrimage in the modern world is “formed by health and social insecurities, a fundamental lack of confidence in social and political systems, and the desire for and in the transcendental” (2008:324). While not all EDMC events require the crossing of geographical boundaries, there is always a movement over mental borders, an aspect of pilgrimage Margry defines as essential (2008:324). Festivals and even smaller scale events function as pilgrimages by offering participants access to new itineraries into the sacred.

The following perspectives draw on studies of raves or EDM that discovered spiritual or religious themes in the communities of interest. In their ethnographic study of the central
Canadian rave scene, Melanie Takahashi and Tim Olaveson (2003) demonstrate the meaningful and spiritual nature of many raver experiences. Interviews with participants in the scene revealed seven central themes of the rave experience including: connectedness, embodiment, ASC (altered states of consciousness), spirituality, personal transformation, utopian models of society and neotribalism (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003:72). Feelings of connectedness bring participants together on more than a physical level. Raves also provide a place for individuals to express themselves in new ways, physically and ideologically. They also give access ASCs and alternative forms of spiritual knowledge and experience. According to Takahashi & Olaveson (2003:82) ASCs are fundamental to rave culture and carry on from the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, which also focused on experimentation with psychoactive substances and ASCs. Individuals also experienced personal growth and transformation. Rave scenes can also resemble utopian models of society for its members, offering an imagined place where everything is perfect. There is also evidence of neotribalism because participants tend to reject mass society, preferring smaller tribal social networks that exist in the rave scene. They argue that these themes are core elements of new religious movements, revitalization movements and nascent ritualizing, seeking to place rave culture within a pre-existing category (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003:90). Takahashi & Olaveson use these categories, all elements Grimes considers part of ritualizing phenomena (Grimes 1990:10), to capture “their nascence, their self-conscious creativity, and their definitive place on the (often stigmatized) margins of society” (2003:75).

In event marketing, promoters “often employ elaborate, overt religious iconography to foreshadow the more the more spiritual nature of the rave experience on offer at the event” (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003:82). Hutson (1999) explores the complexity of rave economies and all that is involved in marketing, lighting specialists, design, production and sale of clothes,
graphic design and printing of fliers, etc. For Hutson (1999) Rave culture exists in opposition to mainstream culture but has undergone a degree of commercialization in the process of its development. Event marketing and production are integral parts of today’s EDM events. It in part determines the perceived vibe or ethos of the event, the people attracted to it, and the audience.

Panagiotis Papadimitropulous (2009) explores the role of ‘psychedelic trance’ at modern raves from ethnographic fieldwork of electronic music scenes in Goa and non-industrialized societies in West Africa like the Fon in Niger, the Dogon in Mali and the Shilak in Nigeria. In those contexts trance plays an important role in providing meaningful experiences that bring people together (Papadimitropulous 2009:70). The author believes that dancing done at raves can cause trance states in participants facilitating a qualitative change in individuals that can be perceived as religious or transcendental (Papadimitropulous 2009:67). Papadimitropulous seeks to understand the relationship between trance dances in non-western societies with similar practices in industrialized western societies. In non-western societies similar forms of dance experiences, those found in the rave, are often viewed and accepted within institutionalized forms of shamanic religious norms. In many non-western societies dance is accepted as religious in nature, but the western definition of religion does not typically allow for the legitimization of such a ritual. Papadimitropulous argues that people involved in the ‘psychedelic trance’ dance scene believe that their rituals, the rave, connect individuals to perceived primitive, tribal cultures relying on shamanic rites with little understanding of the traditional societies and practices they wish to emulate (2009:69). In contrast, individuals in the western world often depict ASC as an “anti-social mode of being and it is thus not highly valued,” proved by the
classification of rave and similar movements as marginal and countercultural (Papadimitropulous 2009: 73).

Scott Huston (1999:56) examines the nature of spiritual healing in rave subculture based on participant observation in Nashville and San Francisco, semi-structured interviews in those cities, Internet testimonials, and techno discography. Huston (1999:58) describes the rave experience as ‘hyperreal’ in the sense that there is a complete sensory overload reconstructing the dance floor “into a magical megasurface” that exists to deliver pleasure. Huston (1999:55) connects the rave with features of hippies, as both focus on the spiritual journey and ASC. The rave becomes a more direct source of spirituality opposed to organized religion (Hutson 1999:61). In his research the term spirituality refers to the quest for meaning (Hutson 1999:61). Hutson (1999:66) argues that a rave is like communitas because it is not permanent, with events that must end and a community that is always changing. The ephemeral nature of the rave apparently explains why few permanent rave communities exist. This access to states of communitas nurtures the soul of ravers, making the experience therapeutic by easing the stresses of “entering a world of wage slavery, underemployment, and shrinking opportunity” (Hutson 1999:41,66). Hutson (1999:71) derives the following themes about raving: increases self-esteem, releases fears and anxieties, brings inner peace, and improves consciousness. Through raves participants transcend the self and become something greater in communitas, creating meaningful symbolic experiences.

Just a few years after Hutson’s study, research in organized religion indicates a continued desire for a more experiential, direct religious/spiritual relationship with the divine. Tanya Luhrmann (2004) contends that what is religious depends on social context. According to Luhrmann (2004:526-7), people are seeking psychologically anomalous experiences due to the
following: radical technological innovations altering the conditions of perception; TV, music, and the internet offer different subjective realities based on being in one’s own world; and the “attenuation of the U.S. relationship,” making it more vulnerable, thinner and weaker, than ever before. She argues that people are generally lonelier with more people living alone, inviting fewer friends over, and going out with friends less (Luhrmann 2004:527). Luhrmann’s research in evangelical Christian communities depicts metakinesis as the dynamic aspect of religion (2004:522). It is the mind-body states that are identified both within the group and individually as the way to recognize God’s personal presence. Drawing on Luhrmann’s work, people in EDMC use music, dance and often psychoactive substances to facilitate trance-like states, metakinesis, which do not connect individuals to God like in the evangelical Christian community but become the greater source of spirituality.

In the study most relevant to this thesis, Graham St John (2006) traces work on EDMC relating to the expression of religious and spiritual culture. Drawing on Heelas and Seel’s (2003) ‘spirituality of life’ concept, involving a rejection of dictated, religious life for a subjective/expressive spiritual, individualistic life, St John (2006) describes dance culture as part of a cultural change refocusing on more personal experiences. Three major developments created the context for dance culture to emerge. First, EDMC originates from disco, techno and bridges to the 1960s experimental consciousness movement deeply connected to trance culture, and inspired by the works of Timothy Leary and Aldous Huxley (St John 2006:13). According to St John, this trance culture valorizes Pagan and Earth spiritualties, emphasizing reconnections with the past that were believed to aid in “ascension beyond the human condition of the present” (2006:13). Additionally, EDMC appropriates other cultural traditions (dharma, chakras), remixed with religious iconography (statues of the Buddha, images of Hindu deities) and popular science
fiction or off-planetary themes (aliens, space travel) (St John 2006:13). Second, the development and adaptation of digital electronics has been central to the development of expressive spiritualities, which enable more purposeful and structured ASCs (St John 2006:14). The third element furthering the ‘spirituality of life’ concept is consumer capitalism, enabling accelerated global flows of information, technologies and people (St John 2006:14). ‘Spirituality of life’ and the three developments discussed by St John most closely resemble the results of this thesis.

‘Spirituality of life’ captures the participant’s rejection of authoritarian religious life for a more ambiguous, personal spiritual experience. The three developments described are also present in the festival, rave, and club scene today. There is continued interest in experimental consciousness related to trance and drug culture and the appropriation of other cultural traditions, religious iconography for aesthetic value, and science fiction or space related themes.

EDMC acts as a loose cultural framework in which individuals feel that they have the freedom to be their nonmainstream selves. EDMC offers a context that relieves the pressures of the outside world and its familial, educational and financial demands. EDMC is full of a variety of peoples with a variety of beliefs and values, but there is a general consensus of what the group is against. It is against the world that tells children that college is a prerequisite to success and that truth is found through institutionalized religion. EDMC may not culminate in a utopia, but it is the better alternative for many. Charles Taylor claims that persons can suffer real damage if people around them offer a confining or demeaning image of themselves, referred to as misrecognition (1994:25). The damage Taylor speaks of manifests as oppression, effectively “imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (1994:26). Individuals in EDMCs find due recognition within the community that may not be available to them elsewhere, providing people with collective identities (Appiah 1994:159).
These perspectives demonstrate that EDM facilitates a context in which individuals are temporarily free from the restraints of societal norms and practices. The impossible becomes possible and the unacceptable acceptable. As soon as you step into an EDM event or festival grounds, reality has essentially changed and, within this separate space, a new cultural schema becomes valid. These places act as liminal spaces in the sense that they do not quite fit into any particular sphere of socially acceptable behavior. Spirituality and religion have a role in the ephemeral EDM spaces but also outside of these spaces in a way that is reflected in its creators and participants in their individual spiritualties.

1.6 Psychoactive Substances

Throughout these works authors mention the obligatory topic of substance use. Whether or not its use is instrumental is debatable, but it is an important component of the culture. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of EDMC is its relationship between altered states of consciousness (ASC) and psychoactive substance use. While the consumption of psychoactive substances—those that alter perception, mood or consciousness—is not required to reach altered states, it can facilitate and enhance the overall experience, especially in EDM contexts (Gauthier 2005; Hutson 1999; Martin 1999; Papadimitropulous 2009; Winkelman 1996). MDMA (known also as Molly and/or Ecstasy) has been the primary substance associated with EDMC since the early 1990s, although other substances are also present in the scene (Hutson 1999:57). When used in EDMC, MDMA “breaks down individual inhibitions and subdues the dominance of the ego” (Hutson 1999:57); induces “feelings of empathy, energy and love” (Martin 1999:81); and “lets ravers partake in its sensuous, empathetic glow, and thus plays out an integrating role” (Gauthier 2005:244). MDMA is a “large and influential part of the culture” (Martin 1999:81), acting both as a dance drug, allowing users to dance through the night, and an emotional catalyst, increasing
the feelings of empathy and love crucial to the scene. By participating in the hidden, illegal, aspect of the experience, individuals join a community of people who are actively seeking ASC in order to completely immerse themselves in the here and now and possibly create a better future. It is certainly true that “some seek to legitimize consumption within rave culture,” but this mainly “reveals a social interdict that ravers transgress and that requires justification when facing the outside world” (Gauthier 2005:229).

Human beings have had a relationship with psychoactive substances since prehistory (Guerra-Doce 2015; Saniotis 2010; Winkelman 1996). Drawing on four types of archaeological data, Elisa Guerra-Doce (2015:94) provides an overview of worldwide use in prehistory including: macrofossil remains of psychoactive plants, psychoactive alkaloids in artifacts and skeletal remains, residues suggestive of alcoholic beverages, and artistic depictions of mood altering plant species. There is evidence of peyote use in Texas and among aboriginal groups (Boyd & Dering 1996). In prehistoric South America, coca leaves and calcite were discovered in Nanchoc Valley, Peru (Dillehay et al. 2010), while evidence of coca chewing was found in dental remains (Indriati & Buikstra 2001). Cannabis has been used in the steppe regions of Central Asia for millennia (Merlin 2003). Burial sites in Europe and Russia contain charred hemp seeds dating to the third millennium (Sherratt 1991). And finally, mushroom figure statues have been found in prehistoric sites in Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador, indicating the existence of sacred mushroom cults (De Borhegyi 1963; Schultes 1998). These examples are just a few of many, indicating a wide spectrum of use in preindustrial cultures. Based on archaeology, ethnographic accounts, and iconographic evidence in prehistoric societies, Guerra-Doce proposes that psychoactive substances were understood as entheogens, valued for their role in belief systems (2015:105). These substances were not menaces to society,
but beneficial in socially constructive ways (Guerra-Doce 2015). As an ongoing issue in society, Guerra-Doce argues that there might be something to learn from these prehistoric societies, which integrated many of these substances into their cultures.

Mind altering substances have been part of American culture since early settlement (Inciardi & McElrath 2004). The pharmaceutical industry prevailed largely unregulated until the problematic use of tonics, salves and syrups encouraged the creation of government policies beginning in 1906, which were intended to combat widespread use (Inciardi & McElrath 2004). One of the most important policies implemented was the Comprehensive Drug Abuse and Control Act of 1970. This act established the drug scheduling system still in existence today that defines offenses and penalties associated with the manufacture, distribution, dispensation, and possession of drugs by schedule. The government’s response to MDMA “embraces a particular form of governmentality and discipline based on morality and social control” in a culture that highly values productivity (Martin 1999:82). Drugs are to be used for medical reasons, not for fun. Substances considered culturally acceptable to consume in recreation—like caffeine, alcohol and tobacco—are understood differently than their ‘drug’ counterparts.

Without legitimate outlets to explore ASC as well as drug-induced ASC, contemporary youth cultures seek other options, like EDMC. Additionally, “the typical human pattern of use in infrequent ceremonials reflects the adaptation of the tolerance effects, as well as the psychodynamic need for their [psychoactive substances] use” (Winkelman 1996:42). The need for their use stems from the therapeutic nature involved “through provoking integrative exchange of information, they change experience and awareness, disrupting habitual experiences of the world and dissolving ego-centric fixations in altering the relationship between consciousness and unconscious processes” (Winkelman 1996:42). Through use, individuals are able to reach
therapeutic mental states that allow for new forms of understanding.

Before reviewing the scheduling system and its relevance, a general understanding of substances we refer to as drugs is necessary. Inciardi & McElrath define drugs as “any natural or artificial substances (aside from food) that by their chemical nature alter the functioning of the body” (2004:xvi). Psychoactive drugs alter perception and consciousness, sedatives induce calm and relaxation (alcohol, barbiturates, tranquilizers), stimulants increase brain and CNS activity (amphetamines, cocaine), and hallucinogens “produce mood and perceptual changes” (marijuana, LSD, psilocybin) (Inciardi & McElrath 2004:xvi-xvii). The major substances present in EDMC—MDMA, LSD, Ketamine, Methamphetamine, Marijuana, Cocaine, Psychedelic mushrooms, and Nitrous oxide—can be found in Schedule I and Schedule II. Their placement in the scheduling system suggests that these substances are some of the most dangerous in existence, with a high potential for abuse and little to no medical use. Despite their legal status, their use is prevalent in the EDM scene where. MDMA is the drug most commonly associated with EDM and the Rave and was known early in its existence as ecstasy. MDMA was first created in 1914 but its modern history did not start until Alexander Shulgin rediscovered it in the 1960s (Zervogiannis, Wiechers, and Bester 2003). It did not become popular for its therapeutic and recreational abilities until the 1970s and would eventually become a ‘street drug’ much like LSD (Zervogiannis, Wiechers, and Bester 2003). Before it gained widespread use as a recreational drug, MDMA was used in clinical settings under the guidance of psychotherapists (Reynolds 2012). MDMA is known as Ecstasy and is found in the form of pressed powder pills of different colors, often with shapes stamped into the surface. It is comprised of MDMA along with other substances ranging from methamphetamine, cocaine, and/or other adulterants. MDMA increases feelings of happiness, increases empathy and sociability, heightens sense of
touch, boosts confidence, allows for better communication, and facilitates collective awareness (McCall 2001) The use of ecstasy and MDMA became common in the 1980s and actually grew following its designation as illegal and Schedule 1 in 1985. The production and thus use of ecstasy tablets has declined and evolved. MDMA is most commonly referred to as Molly in the EDM scene today. Molly can be presented in powder form as a fine, white substance. As Molly became more and more popular, and federal authorities cracked down on its production and distribution, adulterants became more common in this ‘pure’ white powder. Today, powder molly is still sold, but the highest quality is associated with molly sold as crystal rocks. In both powder and crystal forms, adulterants are possible and frequent. Substances like methamphetamine, 2CE, MDA can be added to MDMA to increase profits without compromising effectiveness. Molly allows its users to transcend insecurities and anxieties surrounding self-consciousness and social norms, while making individuals more empathetic. Dosages last anywhere from 3 to 7 hours, but re-dosing, or taking additional doses after the first, is common practice.

Unlike MDMA, which is more of a special occasion type of substance, partly because of its intense effects and tolerance, marijuana is used more frequently and is often in the background. Cannabis, or marijuana, is a flowering plant containing a psychotropic compound commonly referred to as THC. Tetrahydrocannabinol is the main active ingredient in cannabis and it contains mind-altering qualities (Jacquette 2010). It is currently classified as a Schedule I drug, meaning it has a high potential for abuse and no medical value (Inciardi & McElrath 2004). Halnon (2004) explores the ‘420’ aspect of marijuana subculture. According to Karen B. Halnon, the marijuana-associated ‘420’ has become a popular, yet secret, collective identity. The term ‘420’ has meaning for many members of the marijuana subculture. Its meaning is symbolic in the
enactment of ritual according to times, holidays and festivals – it is during these events that the secret world makes itself known (Halnon 2004). The term ‘420’ creates a sort of “collective conscious” in which group members are connected through the ‘420’ association whether it is on April 20th, at 4:20AM or PM, or it is at a ’420’ related festival or event, events that are becoming more and more widely popular (Halnon 2004). Additionally, when widely used and well known, ‘420’ becomes part of a secret language or code that acts as a symbol in in-group communication. “Secrets create a social boundary between outsiders and insiders” and facilitate group cohesion (Halnon 2004:147). Halnon’s work (2004) with the ‘420 nation’ showed that this smoker identity has the ability to cultivate support but maybe more importantly reinforce pot smoker identity, community, solidarity and reality itself.

Drug use is an inevitable part of EDMC, but also of human existence. Human beings will always find ways to alter their states of consciousness, whether it is through marijuana, alcohol, coffee, long distance running or the trance you enter and do not remember on your drive to work or school. “90% of the societies represented in the Human Area Resource Files” practice some form of consciousness alteration, proving that the practice of seeking ASC is not uncommon (Papadimitropulous 2009:70). The ‘drug problem’ plaguing the “US and other industrialized societies” “reflects one consequence” of this lack of legitimate institutionalized forms of ASC (Winkelman 1996:47). It is important to note that when employed in legitimate religious settings, the use of psychoactive substances is infrequent and non-addictive (Winkelman 1996:47). When used “in the context of healing, a ‘wholeing’ of the individual” occurs (Winkelman 1996:47). “Societies which repress and outlaw their use risk their powerful personal effects forming the basis of counter-cultural opposition” (Winkelman 1996:47). Kenneth Tupper argues that entheogens, psychoactive plants used as spiritual sacraments, can serve as tools for a richer
cosmological understanding of the world (2002). Entheogens have the capability to effect a purposeful change on the mind and body acting “as mediators between mind and environment” (Tupper 2002:502). Tupper reasons that modern societies are missing the ritual contexts that ensure safe ingestion and psychologically productive, cathartic experiences (2002:502). Christian Muller introduces the idea of drug instrumentalization providing a new neurobiological framework theory for non-addictive psychoactive drug consumption (2011). According to Muller, non-addictive drug use is more common than addictive patterns, leading to effects useful to personal goals related to survival and reproduction (2011:295). The use of psychoactive substances appears to be inevitable among human societies, and Tupper and Muller demonstrate theoretical frameworks for non-addictive, societally accepted use. There has also been an increase in research on the clinical uses of psychedelic substances in therapeutic settings (Friedman 2006). Participation in EDMC or raves is generally frowned upon by the greater public because of its association with drug use, which is opposed to mainstream values and is against the law.

1.7 Conclusion

In the first section this chapter examined the evolution of the rave scene from its emergence to its current state in the post-rave commercialized era. EDM emerged from many musical and cultural movements from New York disco to Chicago house. Previous studies place current scenes in the historical context EDMC emerged from. It provides an understanding of what previous scenes involved and where EDMC came from. Finally, these examples of previous rave communities exist as ideals within current EDM communities. The next section explored the youth and countercultural aspects of the rave and its previous place outside of mainstream culture. Largely viewed as a youth culture, the people being studied are usually
understood as occupying transitional stages in life. This is especially limiting for discussions surrounding professionals like DJs who spend a large part of their lives in the scene. Though the rave and EDM had countercultural roots it still maintains many characteristics of countercultural movements (unstructured dancing and drug use) despite its recent entry into popular culture. The third section described the DJs and producers. The EDM artist plays an important role in the scene as technoshaman and master of ceremony. The DJ has also created a new relationship between artist and audience as well as remodeled understandings of music as a process rather than an object.

Religion is obviously not going anywhere, and religious institutions will remain major social institutions throughout the world. Human beings must reconcile their existence with knowledge of the world, but “if existing churches and religious movements” fail to do this satisfactorily; human beings will seek other options (Margry 2008:327). Cross-culturally minded definitions of religion are necessary in order to analyze the religious aspects of EDM not only in the experience but also in life outside of that experience. The first section traced the development of anthropological understandings of religion before introducing more recent anthropological studies and religious studies theory. This thesis draws on works (Laderman 2009; Margry 2008; Tacey 2004; Ter Borg 2004) establishing the persistence of religious life in the modern world. EDM exists as a new form of religiosity, offering access to sacred experiences considered more spiritual, and thus individualistic, than religious. ASC is a central aspect of EDM and has emerged, in part, as a response to the neglect of ASC by other legitimate social or religious institutions in the western world (Winkelman 1996). The second section addresses primarily literature relating to rave, dance, and EDM scenes (Gavanas 2008; Hutson 1999; Martin 1999; Papadimitropulous 2009; St John 2006; Takahashi & Olaveson
2003). The primary focus of these studies was ritual, trance, community and spirituality – all interconnected and elements of EDMC across the globe. These works provided a background of the scene and a general understanding of spiritual experiences within EDMC experiences. They present the almost magical nature of EDM scenes that provide a physical and social space outside of the norm while also interpreting the impact of these experiences once individuals leave the dance floor. Although in its own section, the topic of psychoactive substances is connected to religion and spirituality as well as rave and EDM cultures. The use of mind-altering substances is a significant feature of many religious groups and plays an important role in EDMC as well.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

My first taste of EDM came in my senior year of high school in 2009, but it would be at least another year before I attended any live event. After my first Bassnectar show in 2010, I finally understood the meaning of ‘face melting,’ an experience brought on by feeling loud music resulting in perceptual loss of space and time. Pretty Lights was the first time I was mesmerized by the combination of lights and EDM. I never went to any raves, clubs, or festivals for practical and financial reasons until I moved to Atlanta, GA in 2013. Before beginning this research my involvement in EDM, and thus EDMC, had been primarily limited to shows featuring individual artists in Tuscaloosa or Birmingham, Alabama, EDM-themed fraternity parties, and social gatherings with friends. Outside of those shows, EDM maintained a strong presence in my life as I spent many days tethered to my iPod or computer, absorbed in the sound. Even though the Tuscaloosa, AL EDM scene was lacking, friends in Richmond, VA, Suwannee, TN, and Tallahassee, FL became intimately involved, keeping me up to date on the happenings
of EDM. The relevance of these connections is that while I may not have been directly involved in their EDMC experiences, I definitely heard about the festivals and shows they were attending, constantly receiving new information as well as music suggestions. I have never stopped listening to EDM and do not intend to anytime soon. During the final semester of my undergraduate studies, one of the required courses within the Religious Studies department was centered on canon, understood as a set of prescribed rules or guidelines. As our final project, we were required to create our own personal canon, and as I thought back to my childhood, adolescence and teenage years I was surprised to realize that music, not literature, was a defining feature in each period. I expected to realize a list of texts and/or quotes that helped me through transitions and hard times, but it became clear that what I valued most was the music that essentially constituted the soundtrack of my life. It was my music choices that I used to define me, show how I wanted to portray myself and, ultimately, show how I wanted to live my life as well. I will not go any further into past music identities, but end by saying that EDM currently holds an important space in my life. For me, it is at the same time an escape from the overly complicated modern world, the location of a judgment free community, a place for me to explore life’s possibilities, and music that sometimes helps me get through the day.

This research employs two ethnographic methods: participant observation and semi-structured open-ended interviews. Ethnography enables a more thorough understanding of EDM through the people that make EDM possible, its musical artists. I also gathered information from public online websites and event marketing. The production companies that put on festivals, shows and regular fan events put a great deal of effort into advertising and a lot can be learned from the presentation, iconography, language, and visual themes of the posters, pictures, videos, and other sources. Flyers often depict “elaborate, overt religious iconography to foreshadow the
more spiritual nature” of events (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003:82). This can precondition the experience by stressing “sheer sonic, visual, and tactile assault on the senses in their flyers” (Takahashi & Olaveson 2003:82). There are many websites and online communities run by and made available by EDM fans for EDM fans, like blogs and group sites providing information. Companies involved in EDM (DJs, producers, record labels, associated commodity sales) have blogs or at least websites, which enable advertising and marketing.

2.1 Interviews

I limited the study population to members of the Electronic Dance Music community. I interviewed a total of 15 DJs for anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Individual response time to the questions varied. A few gave short answers and were reluctant to expand, while others gave lengthy answers, barely needing a prompt to get started. There was definitely a difference between the ‘veterans,’ who gave long, detailed responses, versus the newer DJs who were less sure of themselves, or at least their responses, as authoritative figures on EDM. Specifically, I spoke with individuals who either have previously been or currently are DJs, or individuals who create and/or mix the music. I then further narrowed enrollment to participants that have played in Atlanta within the last year to ensure recent involvement in the local festival, show and rave scene. This sample contained representatives from several EDM genres, styles, and backgrounds. The participants were all adults, ranging in age from 19 to 36 years. Additionally, most events with EDM occur in places where age limits are present. The race of informants was predominantly white, with the exception of one black and one mixed race participant. My participants were all male, neglecting the female perspective, but could arguably be representative of a male dominated scene (Gavanas 2008). This research fills a gap in the scholarly work on the subject, as its focus is on EDM DJs and producers and the impact of EDM
outside of musical contexts.

The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured in the sense that questions and time guides were in place (Bernard 2006). I asked the same questions to all participants concerning their experience as an artist, knowledge of EDM, and religious/spiritual preferences. This method allows for a full range of responses from different people through the same questions. Some questions were elaborated on and others left up to interpretation. Interviews took place in a location of the participant’s choosing including Skype, phone, and locally (in the Metro-Atlanta area). Two individuals preferred to respond via email, sending typed out responses to the interview questions. The interview form appeared to have directly affected the general length of responses as well as individual comfort level. Skype interviews provided video face-to-face interaction and resulted in the most productive conversations because individuals were in the safety of their own homes and we could see each other. The local interviews, what I was originally looking for, occurred at coffee shops and on the campus of Georgia State University. The public nature of these meetings resulted in general discomfort because of the personal nature of the questions, especially those phrased with the words feel, religion and spirituality. After asking those questions, the participants would often look around to see who was sitting within earshot. The majority of discussions were via telephone, which did at times make recording more difficult, but the responses were no less valuable. The email responses were thorough and no less insightful, but I missed the opportunity really ‘get to know’ those two participants.

I recruited participants through social media sites like Facebook and Soundcloud. EDM DJs are public figures and as such maintain a public social media profiles, making initial contact relatively simple. I sent private messages to potential participants through Facebook and Soundcloud using professional accounts and profiles. Facebook was the most successful after
Soundcloud, who threatened to shut down my account for sending too many identical messages. The contact method unknowingly skewed the resulting responses towards mostly local artists and individuals checking their own social media accounts. The replies came from some booking or social media agents but primarily the artists still reading and answering their own messages. In one case, I was informed an agent screening messages discouraged one artist from contacting me. The agent was unsure of any ulterior motives aimed at tearing down the scene and producing a negative piece of publicity. He still wanted to participate, so all further contact went through personal channels, avoiding his professional profile and email. I asked individuals if they were interested in participating in a study about spirituality in EDMC and was met with several responses. Some individuals wanted to schedule right away, some wanted more information and the majority did not respond. I explained that I was interested in their relationship between EDM and their role as a DJ as well as their religious and or spiritual affinities. Several asked questions about the concepts of religion and spirituality. I defined religion as something nearly intrinsic to the human experience that occurs in many forms not necessarily restricted to ‘Western’ monotheistic notions of religion. Most importantly, I asked what spirituality meant to them.

In order to fully understand their relationship with EDM, I asked my participants how and why they first became DJs and/or producers. A number of commonalities between my participants emerged, pointing me toward understanding why my participants became DJs in the first place. To give a better idea on how and why my participants became DJs, as well as an introduction I will give a brief description of their stories.

Sean (22) Sean has been DJing and producing for four years after attending an underground event. He has been half of a two-person group since he made the transition from metal to EDM. Sean taught himself how to create electronic music and currently performs on a part time basis. He loved the more positive atmosphere of EDM that punk lacked. Sean was born with one arm and feels as if he has found acceptance and normality in EDMC.
Mark (20) DJ and producer Mark has been performing for six years and started working full time on his music within the last year. He taught himself on the computer and his career took off after being signed to a music label.

Charlie (26) Charlie is a full time producer that has been working in this industry for seven years. He has worked for years in the scene as a promoter and began creating music at home long before his first performance.

Dylan (25) Dylan started DJing and producing on a part time basis about three years ago. Dylan got his bachelor’s degree in percussion and is currently working on his master’s in music industry degree. After playing drums in bands and studying percussion for years, Dylan searched for music that would offer greater flexibility with less official structure. He took a few classes that taught him how to use the necessary software.

Vincenzo (24) Vincenzo has been DJing and producing for about a year and a half. After working for nearly six months he was able to make his music career a full time endeavor. After playing in a rock band for seven years, Vincenzo started making music electronically because of the comparative freedom it offered as well as the potential for career growth.

Tyson (27) For 11 years Tyson has been DJing and producing. His music is his full time job. After several experiences in disjunctive rock bands and a few EDM experiences, Tyson was drawn to the more solitary aspect of music creation offered by EDM.

Nate (27) Nate has been DJing and producing for four years. He is part of a duo that was performing full time until a few months ago. Nate took a few sound engineering classes in college that gave him a head start in the music game after his partner took him to his first event.

Scott (19) Scott is a full time DJ and has been working for about two and a half years. Attracted to EDM by the intoxicating sensual experience, Scott bought some equipment as a joke but decided to become a DJ after realizing it was an opportunity to fulfill his dream of performing music for people.

Lucas (32) Lucas is a full time DJ and producer. He is part of a trio that has been working together since he started creating EDM 15 years ago. Lucas taught himself how to DJ and produce music after feeling disconnected with his band mates. He wanted to pursue a career in music and saw electronic music as the best outlet.

Ryan (24) Ryan has been a DJ for four years. He currently performs on a part time basis. Not long after discovering the rave scene, Ryan decided to dedicate his time to learning how to DJ. Ryan has been diagnosed on the autism spectrum with Asperger’s and feels a passion for EDM that he has never felt before. Being a DJ allows him to challenge himself in new ways.

Mack (25) DJ and producer Mack started creating music about eight years ago. He performs occasionally and considers himself part time. Mack started creating EDM after falling in love with the music and the scene after a few months of regularly attending events.
Will (20) Will has been a DJ and producer for five years and is part time. He started making music on computers as a bored high school student but had been playing instruments and performing in bands for years. He began to seriously work in EDM because he felt like it was the next logical step in his musical life.

Davis (22) Davis started DJing and producing around four years ago. He is an artist part time. Davis started playing the piano at age four and has been drawn to music ever since. He taught himself how to DJ and produce and is attracted to the genre bending and blending of EDM.

Allen (32) Allen has worked as producer and promoter for 12 years. He is full time. Allen started creating music after becoming involved in the scene as a participant.

Brandon (33) In the scene for 18 years, Brandon is a DJ and producer. He has become a full time music professional within the past year. Brandon started out as a DJ but has a sound engineering degree and became a producer after realizing he had to create his particular brand of EDM, drum and bass.

2.2 Participant Observation

As a full time student I was unable to spend every week Monday through Saturday attending EDM events but did attend a number of events to ensure I saw the variety of environments and experiences in places where EDM is featured. I ventured to three weekend-long festivals, 12 shows featuring a particular DJ, three events advertised as a rave, and three EDM clubs in the Atlanta area. All participant observation was done in the United States in and around the Atlanta area. Atlanta is a currently an EDM hotspot and so a prime location for this research. I used participant observation at several EDM festivals, shows, raves, and clubs. Participant observation involved the observation of EDM-oriented events through the eyes of a participant. I purchased tickets, attended these events, listened to the music, and interacted with the crowd, while making sure to pay special attention to the DJ. While attending events, I focused on being there and wrote about the experience afterward. Garcia (2013) mentions the importance of letting these events be what they are and staying in the moment, so I focused on the event while there and instead completed formal interviews outside of that context.

I carried out participant observation at public locations with events featuring Electronic
Dance Music. These events were festivals, shows, raves and clubs in and around the metro Atlanta area. Festivals occur annually and require a great deal of preparation for the organizers and participants. Depending on the type of event, the number of participants ranged from 100 to 130,000. Smaller shows hovered around 200-500, larger clubs under 1,000 and festivals from 40,000 to 130,000. The number of DJs performing at these events varied from two or three at smaller shows, sometimes five at clubs, anywhere between 15 and 25 at raves, and nearly 100 at festivals. Study sites included nightclubs, other venues with shows for individual artists, and festivals in and around the Atlanta area. The clubs provide rave ideology centered experiences emphasizing aspects of rave garb, themes of self-expression and being in the moment, and nightlong parties scheduled every weekend. Shows for individual artists are scheduled regularly. Shows can be any night of the week, are more casual dress wise, and individuals typically go to see specific artists. Though the experience is absolutely part of the allure, the opportunity to hear a particular artist is what attracts people. While clubs and shows offer nightlong experiences, festivals offer weekend long journeys into EDMC. Participant observation involved minimal social interaction and consisted of primarily unobtrusive observation and participation. This meant that I attended events as part participant, part researcher. I observed the venue, the artists and my fellow attendees, but I also found myself lost in the music. This method helped paint a picture of the EDM experience in its various forms. Choosing one type of study location or venue would have made the research process simpler, but does not reflect the day-to-day realities of the DJs relevant to this study.

2.3 Role and Experience as Ethnographer and Member of the Community

For some, my music experiences confirmed my status as an EDMC insider while for others it signified my status as a newbie attracted to the new mainstream sound of EDM. While some
participants’ lists of favorite people in EDM echo my own, others consist of names I have never heard of before. As such, my previous experience was at times cultural capital helping me gain rapport and at others indications of my relative newness (5 years) to the scene. Overall, my status and experience helped in interviews and in navigating various environments.

Previous experience and involvement in EDM influenced my selection of events and day-to-day navigation at various stages in larger contexts. Participant observation did not involve the ingestion of any drugs, although I have had prior experience with many of the associated substances. Those experiences did not always occur at events featuring EDM, but EDM was an important aspect of those journeys, providing guiding melodies in the background. Previous experiences with drugs did allow me to more easily and accurately observe drug use among participants. I recognized: little baggies full of powders, capsules, pills, and dried mushrooms; sheets of foil lined with LSD tabs; hats lined with blunts or joints; and socks bulging with sacks. I could tell when a group of people was trying to hide a ‘bowl’ of cannabis or ‘pack’ an electronic vaporizer with cannabis concentrate. I could also more easily identify people rolling, tripping, or having other substance related experiences. In interviews, my experience with EDM at shows, festivals and previous drug exploits could be drawn upon when necessary to gain rapport and place myself within EDMC. I only mentioned previous substance experience when participants explicitly asked, though a few clearly assumed I had it.

2.4 Challenges and Limitations

There are ethical and practical challenges to completing ethnographic research in EDM contexts, and I designed this study to work around them, using the work of ethnomusicologist Luis-Manuel Garcia (2013) and anthropologist Alice O’Grady (2013). Garcia lists a number of challenges in conducting research in nightlife environments, several of which are relevant to this
study. The first challenge is respecting nightlife and avoiding interfering with it; this is why
interviews and recruitments should not take place at events where participant observation occurs.
This leads to a general rule of no photos, which excludes wide shots of the crowd that do not
focus on any particular individuals (Garcia 2013). Next, Garcia discusses establishing trust in the
underground, which is less of an issue for this study since potential participants are DJs that want
exposure and maintain regular public presences on social media. Another challenge lies in
respecting the fun, which again emphasizes the importance of maintaining the event energy and
vibe. For me this meant that I do not tell people I am conducting participant observation, not to
be deceptive but to respect the fun and the experience. That is also why recruitment was not a
part of participant observation.

The next challenge identifies working in noisy, chaotic environments (Garcia 2013). It is
important to ‘go with the flow’ and accept that the work environment involves sometimes loud
and energetic crowds of people. There will be a lot of people, it will be densely crowded, it will
be loud and you will feel the music. Earplugs are helpful when the music is too loud, and staying
hydrated is a must in hot, humid and overcrowded environments. After one particularly bass
heavy event, I bought myself a few pairs of earplugs and never left home without them. I gladly
chose the goofiness over the continuous ringing in my ears that lasted days after shows and
festivals. Garcia (2013) also mentions the costs of nightlife. Participation is monetarily expensive
over time. Festival prices range from $100 to $400 for 2 to 5 day events, shows for individual
artists range from $20-$60, night club events carry fees from $5-$40 depending on production
costs, number of artists and venue. Researching EDM can quickly become expensive, so I spaced
participant observation at events between July 2014 and December 2014 to allow for time
between events. Some events are more expensive than others, so I attended fewer festivals than
shows and other functions. The final challenge Garcia lists is physical exhaustion, which must be accepted as a reality and accounted for in scheduling (2013).

O’Grady (2013) explores the difficulties of conducting research in festival contexts. She specifically focuses on the problems surrounding performance research, and her response is practice as research, or the practice of “being at play” to understand performance based experiences (O’Grady 2013:31). Being at play involves individuals letting go of structure and entering a world characterized by a sense of flow. This method is particularly helpful in EDMC where dancing and ‘flow toys’ are present. Many festivals goers bring different varieties of poi, hoops, staffs, LED lights, gloves, and Toro flux to make their experience, and usually the experience of others, more enjoyable. Even outside of these flow arts there is an element of play in costumes, general attire, and festival acceptable behaviors. Festivals involve play and observation requires participation and the experience of flow (O’Grady 2013). I have not tried most of the ‘toys’ listed above, besides the Toro flux, but have been mesmerized by masters of poi, hoops and LED gloves, as well as many beginners. I consider these experiences, along with dancing and becoming lost in the music, to be the type of immersion O’Grady (2013) discusses in her performative research method using practice-based methodologies. Flow is a central component in EDMC in dance and toys, and these experiences are best understood through personal experience.

Over the course of my ethnography, I have run into several problems that may affect the overall outcome of my research. First, despite my efforts, I was unable to interview any female artists. I made contact with several but was never able to schedule any interviews. This restricts my understanding of EDM artists to the male perspective, which, as I have previously mentioned, is dominant, but there are still women in the artist role. Secondly, I regret that there
was no artist centered participant observation. It would have been helpful to not only explore
music making on my own, but to also to view others as they create the music. Additionally,
participant observation allowed me to see the artist performance and the participant experience
on the participant side but did not quite capture the non-general admission, behind-the-scene side
of events. This study examines the relationship between electronic dance music cultures and
spirituality through interviews with its DJs and participant observation at events featuring EDM.
My decision to only interview DJs provided a clear sample, but time permitting, I also would
have liked to interview participants about their experiences in the scene. In participant
observation my interests were not so much in the behavior of individuals but the general
atmosphere and vibe of the event. Time permitting, not only would participants be interviewed in
addition to DJs, but online testimonials would be consulted as well.

3 ETHNOGRAPHY

In this chapter I define EDM and its culture with the help of my informants, also referred
to as participants, artists, and producers; present my own experiences in the scene throughout this
research; discuss the role of dance, trance, and the vibe; consider the role of drugs; examine
EDM’s movement into popular culture; and establish the potential for spiritual and/or religious
experience in the given context. The following sections provide in depth descriptions of the
EDM artist, their role as ‘technoshaman’, and the ‘democratization of the spiritual’ in EDMC.

3.1 Defining Electronic Dance Music

Electronic dance music is simply music created by electronic means. According to several
participants, a lot of popular music today can be considered electronic dance music. Throughout
my interviews, artists used the terms EDM, electronic music, and dance music interchangeably,
although there was stigma associated with the term EDM. To better understand the term EDM, I asked them for a definition and an explanation of what it meant to the participants. Producer Charlie understood EDM as “an umbrella of all the genres…everything from dubstep to German bass.” DJ/producer in Louisiana, Sean said, “anything that’s made on a computer can be considered electronic music.” Will, a DJ/producer in Rhode Island, captured the complexity of the scene in which “standards for defining the genre or style of music have become very blurred.” Several of my informants harbored negative feelings towards the EDM acronym; however, Brandon, in Myrtle Beach, SC, called “EDM…a corporatization…It’s a word that corporations use to market it…it’s just totally become pop music. EDM is used by the Coca-Colas and Pepsi Colas to make a pop fad.” Lucas, a DJ/producer located in LA, said that “if you talk to anyone from England or Europe about this they’re going to laugh because they’re going to thinks the concept of EDM is hilarious. To me it represents that aspect of dance music that’s popular.” Ryan in Atlanta stated EDM “is really like my life. I don’t really do much outside of [it]…I’m either mixing music, listening to this music, I live and breath this stuff.” Similarly, Tyson in Atlanta addressed both the complexities of the EDM acronym and its role personally in his life:

People are kind of weird about this now and I don’t understand why. I’ve always called it EDM because it’s electronic dance music. For me it is everything, it is me, it is my life. It has completely changed everything about me. Spiritually, EDM is everything – it’s not God but that is what I use to connect with God…This is my divine path, this is what I was born to do.

Defining EDM can be difficult, but the complexities truly emerged when I asked the artists about their genre within EDM. Before presenting the perspectives of my informants, I will list the major subgenres and their defining characteristics often lumped into the EDM category with average bpm (beats per minute) listed.
**House** (120-130bpm) – A style of music using synthesized drum and bass lines, sparse repetitive vocals, and a fast beat.

**Techno** (120-150bpm) – A fast, heavy electronic dance music with few or no vocals. It incorporates elements from funk and jazz and is comparatively repetitive in its style.

**Trance** (125-140bpm) – Characterized by hypnotic rhythms and sounds. Tracks usually consist of repeating melodic phrases that build up and down. In trance music the lyrical content is second to the melody.

**Dubstep** (140bpm) – Usually instrumental music with a sparse, syncopated rhythm and a strong bass line.

**Drum & Bass** (150-180bpm) – Dance music characterized by bare instrumentation consisting of electronic drums and bass. Known by some as jungle, this genre is heavy on the bass and songs are around 150-180bpm.

**Garage** (130bpm) – Garage tracks usually feature percussive rhythms, cymbals and beat-skipping kick drums. Vocals used in these songs are often dissected and pitch shifted to complement the rhythmic structure.

**Trap** (70-110bpm) – Characterized by its aggressive lyrical content and sound often sampled from hip-hop or rap. It usually contains 808 kick drums, heavy sub-basslines, hi-hats, and layered synthesizers.

**Hardstyle** (140-150bpm) – This genre usually consists of a deep, hard-sounding kick drum, basslines, synth melodies, and detuned and distorted sounds.

**Breakbeat** (140bpm) – Breakbeat features breakbeats with a repeated sample of a drumbeat usually forming a fast, syncopated rhythm. It uses a kick drum and snare drum in its beats.

**Downtempo** (90-120bpm) – Music with a relatively slower beat incorporating genres like jazz, bossa nova, and dub reggae. It is sometimes referred to as chill or downbeat and is often used as background music.

**Livetronica** – A style of music combining elements of electronica with those of jam band music. Any electronic music accompanied by live instruments.

To get a complete picture of the components of EDM, I asked participants what subgenre they most closely identified with. Will does not “like to get into subgenres, simply because there’s so much arguing in the scene about them” but gravitates towards anything with “a lot of sub bass.” Most were able to associate themselves with either one or several sub genres. Sean said he was
“more of a heavy dubstep person.” Mark, based in Alabama and Tennessee, prefers “bass music in general” but makes dubstep, trap, juke footwork, trill music, glitch hop, stating “usually genres are based on tempo and the noises incorporated in the genres.” Atlanta native Mack “loves house music.” Scott, located in North Carolina, does not “align [himself] with one subgenre” and prefers varying the styles used when he plays. Brandon presented a sort of test based on genre, but it applied more to participants than artists:

Ask younger kids what their favorite type of EDM is. If someone tells you that oh, I love EDM trap, that’s it, then right there is going to show you that they’re brand new. You can tell if someone’s really narrow minded about what sub genre they like that means they’re a newb, because anyone who’s been in the culture that long cannot appreciate everything that went down in it.

Brandon has been a part of the scene for nearly two decades and refers to his music in terms of Drum and Bass rather than EDM, but he still listens to and appreciates EDM in all of its forms. His statement implies that newer fans who only listen to one genre are missing something by restricting themselves to one genre and therefore do not truly understand what EDM is truly about. Several of my informants have clear preferences, but genre blending is at the core of EDM. Tyson echoed a similar concern while discussing his preferences and style: “trance is the main one, but a good DJ is going to play numerous different styles in EDM. Only a crappy DJ is going to play nothing but electro or nothing but psytrance.” For participants and artists alike, the genres chosen become an important part of individual identity, placing people in particular subsets of the culture, and can be, at times, a form of cultural capital. Depending on whom you are talking to, genre preference can have greater implications on the type of person people think you are. As demonstrated through the DJs and producers, there is a general understanding among my informants of what EDM is (electronically produced music that is danceable), but what is considered good is subjective.
3.2 Festivals, Shows, Clubs and Raves

EDMC can be anywhere EDM is being played. This includes festivals, shows, clubs, and everyday life. For many participants, and likewise for the professionals that make a living playing EDM, it can become a lifestyle. Anthony Giddens defines a lifestyle as “a cluster of habits and orientations” that provides “a certain unity—important to ontological security—that connects options to a more or less ordered pattern” (1991:82). EDMC provides this “more or less ordered pattern,” giving some individuals access to security, transcending the physical and founded upon a collection of “habits and orientations” (Giddens 1991:82). This collection for the EDMC lifestyle includes: the variety of events that exist to showcase DJ/producer talents; iconography and fashion employed by participants, promoters, and artists alike; material culture like flow toys, flags, and totems; and the drugs that helped create and reshape this culture.

To better understand the world of EDMC, I attended a variety of events featuring EDM. This included several festivals, shows, clubs and events advertised as raves. TomorrowWorld music festival was the largest, attracting over 150,000 people from all over the world over a 4 day period. Its theme was “The Arising of Life,” and its video advertisement called for people to join together to create a better place. Its mantra is “Yesterday is History, Today is a Gift, Tomorrow is a Mystery.” It invites “People of Tomorrow” to join the here and the now, for at least four days, and claims to offer a temporary alternative to the outside world. The journey, a term they use to describe the experience, begins before you arrive with elaborate ticket boxes that come in the mail including a key to unlocking Happiness. Event marketing and production are integral parts of today’s EDM events. It in part determines the perceived vibe or ethos of the event, the people attracted to it, and the audience.

Heading to TomorrowWorld, I drive down the winding wooded path on dirt roads, clouds
of dust greeting me and billowing towards the cars following. It takes nearly 10 minutes to drive
to the box office, here I obtain tickets, parking passes and trade in American dollars for
TomorrowWorld currency. You leave money behind, and this ticket system allows patrons to
access their money through the essential wristbands required for every attendant. These
wristbands allow access to the venue and campground and even serve as credit cards. After
passing the box office that looked like a pop-up version of Disney World, I continue down the
dirt path in a line of cars headed for the campsite. Before parking, the car is inspected, where
volunteers rummage through belongings looking for glass, one of the main items prohibited
because broken it can cause problems and injuries. After a maybe 60-second inspection, I am
motioned through and continue down the path towards the parking area. I load up the collapsible
wagon and begin toting belongings towards the multi-colored arched entrance. What looks like
hundreds of balloons tied together mark entry into festival grounds, but I head towards a smaller
entrance intended for campers. At first it looks like the lines are long, but it’s just people sitting
around outside the entrance with their stuff, presumably waiting for the arrival of people. I
weave my way through the people and a lone cop with police dog; the dust is already in the air,
and it is only day one. I pass the empty amnesty bins, where individuals are encouraged to
deposit their illegal substances before entering the grounds. I move on into the campground,
passing through one more security checkpoint where glass liquor bottles litter the ground. I
continue to drag the camping gear towards the campsite where the tent is already set up in the
easy tent camping area. It is almost like checking into a hotel; they take name and information,
and someone leads the way to the tent.
In the morning I wake up to the sound of music, people have already begun day two. I walk through the lanes of tents and sleepy people towards the closest information station, what looks like a log cabin. The station sells basic camping supplies but also distributes the daily newspaper, detailing featured acts and schedules as well as the events of the day before. I grab a copy of the paper and walk past people heading towards the stage located within the campgrounds with their yoga mats. Each morning there are a variety of yoga and exercise programs available for campers. I walk back to the tent and prepare myself for the day. I adorn myself in tie-dye and other colorful clothing with ‘heady’ messages, valuing my token Grateful Dead tie-dye shirt purchased from Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco. I am among colorful ensembles and plenty of kandi, bracelets, necklaces, headbands, cuffs, and masks made out of plastic beads. Kandi is associated with rave culture and is based around the PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) mantra. People generally create their own pieces of kandi, making them unique and personalized. People trade kandi by completing a secret handshake of sorts. First, you make a peace sign with your hand and touch your two fingers to the person you are trading with. Then, you bring your hands together to form a hear shape for love. Next, in unity, you lock fingers.
And finally, with respect, you trade the kandi over clasped hands placing it on the arm of your new friend.

Hordes of attendees swarm the venue decked out in apparel that ranges from the usually absurd (teletuby costumes, skin suits, monkeys chasing human bananas) to the casual (denim). In this realm the absurd rules, and people are lauded for their outfits and costumes. This festival is set in a moderately wooded area, meaning many of the stages provided natural cover from the heavy heat of the sun. Go pro cameras, cameras, phones, and selfie sticks are everywhere. Social media, the Internet and EDM are deeply entwined as individuals seek ways to remember and document their festival adventure. In a way it is almost as if they wish to immortalize the experience. I wander through the expansive grounds to each of the five stages. The main stage is a massive volcano, towering above the grounds at over 400 feet wide and 100 feet tall. It ‘erupts’ with what looks like fireworks and confetti multiple times a day. There is also a stage
with large Buddha statues made to look like a giant temple, which as far as I can tell is for aesthetic, not religious reasons. Another stage is covered with what looks like large picture frames. The frames contain dozens of LED screens and provide quite a visual show throughout the day and into the night. Throughout the day flow artists entertain people on the stages, and people dressed in costumes on stilts walk through the grounds.

Figure 3.3 TomorrowWorld Main Stage
With such large grounds, so many people, spotty phone service, and unreliable access to electricity, one method of keeping friends close is through the use of a totem, sign, flag or other object fastened to a pole hoisted into the air. Some of the signs employ pop-culture references; others signify a particular group, family or clan. These totems provide information on where a particular group is; some call themselves tribes, but also serve as conversation pieces with the rest of attendees. So why did over 100,000 people come from all over the world to spend a weekend on this temporary compound? It is a music festival, but music is clearly not the only draw. People attend events like these because of the overall experience they offer – an out of this world weekend experiences allowing individuals to abandon the issues and stressors of reality and to escape into a fantasy world where the only thing that matters are the people you meet and the music planned for later. Though the overall experience is key to festivals like this, it does not take away from the powerful effect these DJs, producers, and other artists (mostly male) have on the masses of people there to hear their sounds. The overall experience is tied to something
understood by participants as the vibe. The vibe is like an emotional energy felt in the atmosphere. The vibe can be good or bad depending on the environment, the music, and the people in attendance.

While it doesn’t quite compare to the size and scope of TomorrowWorld, Counterpoint attracts nearly 40,000 individuals over a weekend and features three stages. I camp again and meet my neighbors, a large group of friends that go to festivals together from North Carolina. Their campsite includes a rather large sitting area, equipped with its own carpet (no shoes allowed), bench, couch, and plenty of chairs. While their people come and go, anyone is welcome to enjoy their shared space, and it feels as if every time I come back to the campsite there are different people in there. There is usually someone always smoking marijuana, if not at that campsite then at another because the smell is always in the air, but I also encounter people using molly, LSD, cocaine, and psilocybin mushrooms among others. Each morning I sit outside the tent eating breakfast and napping, preparing for the day and evening ahead. At least once a day someone walks by asking if I need one of the substances listed above, although they also mention ketamine. After the festival I hear there were also people with nitrous tanks, selling balloons full of the substance. One guy walks by offering to test people’s molly; none of the neighbors have anything with actual MDMA in it, and, according to the tester (on day three), he has only encountered one substance that actually contained a trace amount of MDMA. Security was much tighter at TomorrowWorld than at Counterpoint, where I do not see any substances confiscated throughout the entire weekend. In comparison to TomorrowWorld which has security stationed all over the place and on the prowl, Counterpoint is relatively lax. I barely see security, but I do see medics patrolling the grounds regularly. On Sunday a group of security and medical staff drive by in a golf cart asking people to try to keep hiding their illegal substances for
one last day. On the last day people are no longer trying to hide their substance use; it is almost as if they have forgotten that it is illegal.

Two steep hills separate campgrounds from festival grounds, and I pass art exhibits, Ferris wheels, and food and clothing vendors on my way to the stages. At TomorrowWorld it can take ten to fifteen minutes to travel from stage to stage, but at Counterpoint it is possible to see all three stages at once most of the time. Unlike TomorrowWorld, which feels like a combination of field and forest, Counterpoint is located on and around a horse track and is a large cleared space with little tree cover. To counteract the openness and sun exposure, there are several oases scattered about, massive tents offering shade from the overbearing sun that are usually full of people during the day. There are people decked out in everything from the absurd (unicorns and fairies) to the casual (jeans and t-shirts). On the Sunday before Memorial Day people decide to put on the stars and stripes, wearing flashy, patriotic clothing. It is filled with momentary celebrations of the bizarre accompanied by universal acceptance (by other attendees), all the while being serenaded by bass, beats, and rhythms. Festivals like this are carnivals of stimulations, where attendees hop from one attraction to another seeking something that will take
them out of this world and into something new and unknown, whether it is a game, flow art, or music. At one stage in the middle of the afternoon I sit under precious shade near the main stage. As a popular act starts people start making their way towards the music. I hear a one person say, “let’s go closer I need to feel the sound” as they join the sea of people moving to the beats. There is a bit of a difference in the experience of enjoying the music in the mass of people at the stage versus sitting, standing, or dancing in the back with a little more space. In the crowd you are in the heat of it all, you feel the music because you are physically closer to people and the speakers, but you can also feel the energy of those around you. It is not visible, but it is there, an experience that exists outside of the self yet simultaneously creates connections with those around you.

Imagine Music Festival debuted in 2014 and hosts nearly 15,000 attendees. Held inside the city limits of Atlanta, it has a bit of a different festival feel being surrounded by a city instead of a forest. You do not traverse grassy fields but use existing walkways to travel from area to area within the three parks enclosed to make the festival grounds. It has a fantasy underwater
theme and incorporates aquatic design elements, creating a magical underwater setting. There are even girls walking around dressed as mermaids throughout the weekend. Decorations, underwater plants and jellyfish, look great during the day but even better when they light up at night. The main stage is blue with a wave-like canopy and a massive geometrically designed orb. The other stages are named Amazonia and Imaginarium but have little decoration outside of their name and sponsors. Set along water features, there is a location set up for flow artists featuring fire poi, fire breathing as well as fan dancing. Although not a camping festival, Imagine feels like a temporary home each day and night. Day festivals do not offer the same kind of camaraderie found at camping festivals since you leave at the end of the day, but it is still there. As soon as the car is parked and I head towards the entrance I feel it, there is a vibe that makes me smile and I do not even really know why. All I know is that what awaits me inside is wonderful, real and hard to explain.

The shows I attend feature specific headlining artists and several others considered openers, who were there to prime attendees for the main act. The Tabernacle opened in 1910 when a pastor and physician bought the property and began using it as a medical center and nursing school. It also operated as a Baptist Church with an active congregation of over 4,000 members, to give an idea of its size. After the congregation relocated in the mid eighties, the building lay vacant until the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games, when it was converted into a House of Blues club. When the Olympics ended, the building continued to function as a music venue under a number of different owners. The Tabernacle offers more seating than most music venues with three floors of balconies with a fair amount of standing room on the ground floor. I have attended over five different shows at the Tabernacle, and there is usually always some sort of VIP or reserved seating area in the first two rows of the lower and middle balconies. With the
exception of a Halloween show, the outlandish attire common at festivals and raves is generally absent from this venue, although there is always a person or two with some kandi and many people sporting snapback hats with hat pins. Although technically a smoke and vapor-free facility, I have never been there and not seen someone smoking or vaping, and the smell of marijuana is usually present in the air. When sitting in any of the balconies, it is hard not to notice the imposing speaker systems located straight ahead, not only because they are huge but also because they are also unbelievably loud. Massive arcs of speakers suspended in the air shake the building. One night I leave a trap show a little early because the bass is too heavy, meaning it is almost overpowering, creating a pounding in my head and my body that is uncomfortable. As I walk to the car I look back and see the fire escape vibrating from 100ft away. The venue feels old and its past as a church is not lost to attendees. In a way it almost enriches the experience being in what used to be a church. Like previously mentioned, I buy tickets for the headliners but spend hours listening to the openers who set the mood and get the audience hyped for the main event. It also gives participants time to catch up with friends and figure out where they want to be when the music starts, although some enjoy the upstairs seating before going back downstairs for the main act.

The EDM club experience varies depending on venue, technically Kingdom Rave and Iris fall under the same categories but cater to different crowds. Kingdom Rave usually has entrance fees a little lower than Iris but is also trying to attract crowds starting at 17. Iris events, on the other hand, require patrons to be 18 and attract a different and usually older crowd. It is also more expensive than other club venues. Both feature multiple rooms with different genres of music. I did not even realize Kingdom Rave has a bar the first few times I went – you do not see anyone drinking at this venue, and each time there I have been offered molly by multiple people.
The DJ sets [mostly by males] melted into one another in a way I’ve never experienced before. It only takes seconds for artists to hook up their equipment and begin playing. There are no breaks between sets, and artists play nonstop into the early morning. Kingdom Rave is a club advertised as a rave and is thus treated as such. People don rave gear from Pokémon and anime to kandi. The colors are bright, the clothes are sparse, and the vibe is alive. The energy is high as people move from stage to stage, often going outside to smoke cigarettes. Iris is run by the people that put on Imagine Music Festival so has a lot of the same vibes as the festival; it is well organized, and, unlike Kingdom Rave, offers VIP experiences with access to tables, seating and drink service. Iris feels like a club, and the dress is characterized with less rave attire. The Iris website describes the dress as “casual with a touch of class and creativity.” Iris girls walk around in colorful bras, matching bottoms, and fishnet stockings. EDMC provides a potentially spiritually meaningful context with its stages with spiritual or religious themes, dancing to lose the self, use of mind-altering substances, transformational marketing messages, and the adoption of rave themes like PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect).

3.3 Dance, Trance, and the Vibe

Dancing is an important part of EDMC, not just because it is hard not to dance to some of the music. It provides the physical aspect necessary to stimulate the body and facilitate trance experiences. Dancing enables participants and artists alike to get lost in themselves but also in the experience. It is based on individual movement, yet connects people to each other through the vibe. The vibe is eternal; it exists whether one chooses to be aware of it or not. So there is always a vibe, but it is always different depending on the music being played, the surrounding environment, and the people present. At the festivals I attended people walked around with totems and t-shirts with messages about spreading good love and good vibes. Good vibes are
associated with love, kindness and respect while bad vibes are tied to anger, selfishness, and disrespect. It feels almost as if these events gather thousands of like-minded individuals bringing similar energies to the same location. That heavy concentration of people there for the music and communal experience carry energies resulting in good or bad vibes. When the vibe is good the environment is friendly and conscientious, while bad vibes often unfriendly and judgmental. That is why the vibe at shows and festivals feels so tangible and real, it may not be visible but it exists and absolutely affects the overall experience. To ensure I captured the meaning and essence of the vibe, I asked my informants to explain and define the vibe. A common theme emerged when a number of participants referred to the vibe as an energy. To demonstrate this I present a few responses to my question about the vibe.

**Tyson** - “It’s all about the vibe. Vibe is a real thing, like where you’re at, the lighting, the smell. All of that plays a role in what’s going to end up coming out of you (as an artist) when it’s all said and done. It’s the way you’re feeling at that moment. The way you feel because of the lights, because of the air. Anything you can pick up with your five senses has to do with the vibe.”

**Ryan** - “The vibe is just the general feel of energy given off at events.”

**Sean** - “The vibe’s full of energy. Like it’s a happy, energetic vibe.”

**Brandon** - “The vibe is unexplainable, you never know what’s going to happen when you walk into a show to see a DJ. The vibe is constantly changing and you just have to be in tune to it and roll with it.”

**Lucas** - “I would say this is like a semi-conscious energy/feeling between people. Much like digging into the sixth sense/aura extra-sensory communication that we’ve barely tapped into in this age, bad vibes/good vibes only affect one if they’re receptive to them, but generally if everyone is having a good time it puts off good energy thus good vibes.”

**Will** - “Vibe is a term that’s thrown around a lot, and it seems to have different connotations and meanings wherever I go. I think, for most people, vibes are a way to communicate with others, sometimes complete strangers, and share emotions without having to speak. It’s a multidimensional term.”

These statements show that the vibe in invisible yet also tangible in a sense. It cannot be touched
but is clearly felt. It is also hard to explain but more easily understood in the proper contexts; context is key. Another aspect of the vibe is its constantly changing nature. They describe vibe as something that is felt individually yet connects groups through its shaping of communitas. It brings people together in common unstructured experiences where the focus is on maintaining the good vibes and avoiding the bad. The vibe is an energy that takes participants to the liminal spaces they are seeking. This liminality is not a stage participants go through on their way to reincorporation but the objective.

3.4 Drugs in the Scene

In order to fully grasp the relationship between EDMC and drugs, I asked my informants what they thought about this relationship. Views on drugs among EDM artists are varied but tend to support the idea that although drug use is an inevitable part of the culture and does provide a means to enhance the overall experience, use is not required to be a part of the culture. There are those more critical of the drug aspect of EDMC. Allen, a DJ/producer based out of Miami, refers to drugs as the negative side of EDM. Allen says “I’ve been in this industry for 11.5 years and I’ve never touched a molly, I’ve never wanted to.” Others feel EDM has received a bad reputation. Sean feels “like it’s not as bad as people are making it out to be. Almost every single show I’ve ever been to I was completely sober. I had the best time of my life.” Charlie, Will, and Lucas saw the relationship between music and drugs in general, stronger than the relationship between EDM and drugs. According to Scott, “drugs are a very real part of the EDM scene, but they’re only an aspect. They don’t encompass it all.” Mark notices “a lot more of the younger crowd” involved in the drug side of EDM mentioning “a disconnection between drugs and music” on the musician side. DJs and producers have expressed the importance of staying clear-headed during performances. Outside of marijuana and alcohol, EDM musicians avoid the use of
substances during their sets. Several people I talked to discussed their decision to stop consuming drugs altogether but made regular references to marijuana, a substance not always lumped into the drug category. There is a general consensus within EDMC, probably increased by changing legislation, that marijuana is not dangerous and somehow less illegal than other substances. Whether true or not, it is still illegal at the federal level. At many shows I attended, the air was filled with marijuana smoke and aroma with a little cigarette smoke as well. Security would approach groups or individuals smoking marijuana, and it was surprising to see how many people seriously said – “it’s just weed” like that was going to help their case. Alternatively, Dylan believes drugs to be “a main part of the scene.” In his view:

> The problem is the people that want to legitimately do something about drugs because we’ve got to get past, as a society, the idea of prohibition. It’s never worked and it’s not going to. Drugs are a part of the scene that will always be there but if we just think of drugs in a separate way then we think about alcohol or pharmaceutical drugs and pharmaceutical drugs kill more people than heroin each year and that’s terrifying. When we were growing up there was like nothing worse than heroin and then now we see that the things we are being prescribed are worse than heroin? I fully believe if you’re going to do anything from an Adderall to heroin, know what you’re doing. Make informed decisions about your life. It’s a battle for education, which our country always seems to be losing.

This argument correlates with the idea of regulation and education over prohibition, an approach often referred to as harm reduction. Not all substance use is abuse, and regardless of the laws in place, individuals will continue to consume them. The most effective approach of the federal government would be to reevaluate the antiquated scheduling system currently in place that would allow medical testing to begin, starting the process of legalization of medicinal or recreational substances.

I also asked how the artists felt about playing for an often-intoxicated audience. While it bothers a few, most accept the role and use of drugs as an unavoidable reality. Tyson believes
that “a not so sober audience is usually a really good audience.” Although he knows it can become a problem for some people, he attributes that to personal struggles and not the substances themselves, believing that it is not the drugs but the people that have problems with themselves. The only thing that bothers Tyson “is being here in Atlanta and seeing the same people always like that.” Again, his concern is not about the substances themselves but the health and wellbeing of its users. Ryan was more concerned with the fact that people using drugs are often attending events for the wrong reasons, even though that is how he started out in the scene. By wrong reasons he means attending for the drugs and drug-fueled experiences but not the music. His issues with substance use are not so much related to wellbeing but to the people there to listen to his music. He says “when you stare at the crowd and they all have the same expression on their face they’re all doing the same thing and it’s just like they’re all one entity in that sense.” He wants people to be there for the music and to experience it in their own way, not in the way whatever drugs they are own leads them. Brandon says drugs are “just part of the game,” though he does tell a story about a recent experience that made him question his career:

I just recently played in Houston and this is the first time it really affected me that I could remember. I’m at a downtown rave club underneath a bridge like an underground venue that’s really dark and kind of grimy. The majority of people that are in there are not old enough to drink so there’s not a lot of drinking going on. They’re all doing drugs out in the open, not even trying to be down low about it. Nobody was bad there weren’t any fights or drama it’s just I’m openly seeing kids in front of the DJ both that aren’t old enough to drink snorting stuff right there. I’m like wow so as it went on we played and they were just zombies. There were people dancing and having a good time but they’re zonked out and don’t know what they’re listening to. I could play anything but to get a reaction from them would have to play Ricky Martin or something to be like huh? I felt bad about it and it’s just like wow this is what I’m doing, going out and playing this music to a bunch of America’s corrupted youth?

For Brandon this particular show was an eye opening experience and created some concerns about the scene in which he is playing. He talked to the promoter about it, who told him it came
with the territory. He has been an artist for nearly twenty years, but this experience stood out because of the younger crowd and obvious consumption of drugs. There is a difference then between using drugs to enhance the experience and using drugs as the intended experience. People attend events for a variety of reasons, but implicit ‘rules’ do exist. For nearly all the artists I talked to, it is acceptable for participants to go to events and consume drugs to enhance the experience but not for people to come only for the drugs. While drugs are an accepted part of the scene, my participants do not believe they should be the primary focus. Like Ryan, Brandon is concerned that people are there for drugs but also that he is contributing to something that feels wrong. Vincenzo also says that drug use is “always going to happen.” He attributes it to a preexisting connection between drugs and music that enhances the experience to the point of “creating a different kind of experience.” While a few people clearly have concerns, it is not enough to make them abandon their music careers or the scene. Only two people expressed being bothered by the drug use, the others were more accepting because it is an established part of the scene that is clearly not going anywhere. Ultimately, a set of unspoken rules defines what the artists consider to be a good, or authentic, scene. What is authentic is the perceived norm for the scene. In terms of drug use, use is fine as long as it is not the main focus and remains a safe way to enhance the experience. Drug use that enhances the experience is acceptable but drug use that numbs the experience is inappropriate. Participants that come only for the drugs are understood to not be there for the right reasons - the music and the communal music experience. Regardless, my informants were clear that drugs should not be the primary focus. The overall issue was not whether or not substance use in the scene is valid, but how those substances are used within the scene to create an authentic community.
3.5 Popular Culture, Music and the Mainstream

When I asked about the relationship between EDM and popular or mainstream culture, there was a general consensus about the rise of EDM, in terms of music and culture. This move into the mainstream has beautified, commercialized and corporatized EDM compromising its authenticity but creating an environment supporting the growing number of artists. Mark said that EDM was “rising rapidly right now.” Charlie believes EDM and popular culture are “definitely intertwined” to the point where “it’s kind of hard to differentiate [between electronic influence and pop music] for a lot of people.” Scott too states that EDM is “becoming a much more prominent part of popular culture. It is now common to hear EDM music in TV commercials and see products with endorsements from celebrity DJs and producers.” Holding a more apprehensive view on the connection between EDM and popular culture, Sean said that EDM:

Is starting to become popular culture…and in a way it kind of sucks because it seems like it’s actually taken away from it a little bit. If you went out back when I was going out in 2011 they didn’t have the same type of people that are going out now to them…groups that are there now for the girls and the drugs…not for the music and the night.

He expresses lament for the scene in the past, which he believes to have been more authentic when it attracted people who felt out of place in the world. Sean dreams of a mythical golden age for raves, a time when people threw massive parties, came together, and truly embodied the PLUR ideal. Democratization of music makes access to technologies and its entry into popular music culture has brought on growth within the scene but that growth also threatens the authenticity of the scene. With similar concerns, Brandon said EDM is:

Part of popular culture. It was initially something that started in the underground when it was raves and not just a lumped sum of electronic music you had your house your techno, breakbeat, drum n bass. I see EDM as like Wal-Mart moved in and took over the mom and poperies with festivals. I see EDM as being in place
by corporate America basically moving in on our culture. It’s got people that are
going through it just because it’s cool and that’s the total opposite of how the rave
scene started. It was for people that weren’t cool, people that were outcasts.
Places where they could feel like one.

Tyson too felt that:

It’s here. It’s in our popular culture now. It’s the thing to do…To be honest it
breaks my heart because I’ve been into it for so long that it always had that
underground thing. I remember in high school nobody listened to that stuff, I did,
it made me feel special and now it’s just everywhere.

People who have been in the scene for a few years depict frustration in the increasingly
beautified, commercialized and corporatized face of EDM. Lucas does not “want everyone to
think it’s girls wearing next to nothing and furry boots…yea there are [those] aspects…but at the
same time there are just people who show up in jeans and a t-shirt and are part of the culture
too.” There is absolutely a general sense of loss of the authentic scene as well as reluctance to
accept EDM’s move into popular music culture because it has created an image of EDM as a
more homogenized sound and brought in an influx of ‘cool’ people. For music, EDM pop stars
rule the scene, creating music that, without differing lyrics, sounds the same. It also means EDM
is presented as a homogenized sound which fails to capture its unique essence. As far as
attendees go, as EDMC becomes more and more popular, the ‘popular’ people enter the scene.
What used to be a place of refuge for those that did not feel understood by society has now
become a scene for the ‘cool people’ they were trying to avoid. This is accompanied by a
drastically growing industry, in part because of this move into popular music culture. According
to Lucas, “events now are what events back then almost wish they could have become.” They
have become better because they are “not as grimy, better security, people being looked after,
food vendors, infrastructure, just more professional but not the point where you feel like you’re
just being sold something, where the vibe’s lost.” They have improved in this sense because
there is more corporate money put into infrastructure, security and the musical acts.

When I asked my informants about the future of EDM both as music and as a scene, the majority of participants responded with predictions of its rise and fall. This question, more often than not, also resulted in a reply focused on its popularity and mainstream aspects. However, Dylan predicted that EDM would change the greater music scene industry forever:

[EDM] did for music...like the first distorted guitar sound people didn’t like and now it’s one of the most expected sounds that you can hear and the sounds that electronic music has brought about will be infused in popular culture forever...I think its effect will last forever but the massiveness and amount of money that’s in the scene right now will certainly start to fade.

According to my informants, EDM is currently in the ‘cool’ bubble in popular culture that will most likely soon burst. Referring to the popularity of the scene, Brandon believes there will be a temporary influx of “all the beautiful people and their beautiful lives” leaving the “lifers” behind. Some people will stay around and the majority will leave, but it is huge for the music industry in general, not only for today but also for its future. EDM has impacted music, and it is something that will be reflected in popular music trends. Right now, EDM is at a peak but will surely fall as the cycle continues. Several fear EDM is becoming too big in popular culture and may lose popularity too soon. While it is not ideal, it would not mean the end of EDM but instead a move back underground, back to the background, which some would not mind. At this point popular culture and EDM are one and the same; it is a good time to be involved in EDM, especially as a DJ. They all agree that EDM is in the popular culture spotlight, and many predict its fall, whether it is in the near future or not. They speak to EDM’s cyclical nature, as its predecessors before it have acted similarly. Original forms of the rave might have been parties thrown for a good time rather than to make profit, but over time the scene has changed. In the post-rave era it has become one with corporations. People attending EDM events and creating the music may seek
the same things ravers of the past wanted, but are now met with an increasingly corporate-run world of EDM, even if it is hidden well beneath the façade of freedom.

3.6 Meaning Making in EDMC

EDMC is one reason people seek festival, show, and club experiences. They can be powerful experiences in people’s lives, enabling them to cope with the difficulties faced in their lives. Festivals can be powerful experiences and to a lesser extent, so can show and club experiences that offer shorter escapes, but escapes nonetheless. These events allow individuals access to a realm outside of the mundane. In everyday life, individuals are unlikely to don the banana suit, Native American headdress, obscene amounts of plastic beads, anime characters, Pokémon characters, electrical tape bras, and body paint. EDMC provides individuals with a space in which the abnormal becomes normal. People are respected and lauded for their outlandish attire. People can adorn themselves with artist merchandise, plastic beaded jewelry (kandi), costumes, and many other garbs that may not be considered acceptable in everyday life. EDMC enables a fair amount of freedom in which individuals are able to express themselves, at least materially, in new and different ways. Dylan says:

While I don’t do kandi, I do collect hatpins…and I have pins that mean stuff to me because of the person that gave them to me. It is another little sense of community to me. It’s just like if I see a dude at Wal-Mart with pins on his hat I’m like hey man what’s going on like we can talk and it’s not a marking but a way inside the scene for you to recognize each other.

Hatpins, colorful metal pins with various designs, were available at most outdoor, daytime events I attended, primarily festivals. Like kandi, the colorful beaded jewelry that individuals make and trade, each hatpin tells a story. The items become symbolic of something greater, of a friendship or experience that can be carried around and remembered, hat pins on a regular basis, kandi reserved for more EDMC style events. Festivals, with their mostly obscure location and multiday
set up allow the most freedom, followed by rave themed parties that last into the morning to
clubs that might have a dress code.

Several of my informants consider the participant side of EDMC to be an escape from
society. Nate’s festival experience echoes Margry’s (2008) depiction of pilgrimage as a place
considered more sacred than everyday life:

I’ve definitely had some awesome times at shows, but at the same time a festival
is like an endeavor…I think that for some festivals can almost be like going to
church. That’s what it’s like for me, I’m not a very religious person but whenever
I come back from a festival…I came here to lose my mind but when I come back
I’m going to pick up the pieces I want to take back and leave the rest behind. So
it’s a service to some. We all deal with headaches and life and shit and
everybody’s got to find a way to reduce them.

That being said, it is interesting that people looking for an escape from society choose to
purchase tickets to an event that involves being essentially locked inside chain-link fences for
four days. There is more freedom found in this context because the festival is on private grounds,
but there are also more people watching. Security guards, police, and medics patrol the grounds
looking for anything suspicious throughout the weekend. The same is true about shows, clubs
and raves that also maintain a security presence. Despite this, EDMC is meaningful for many of
its artists and participants. Charlie likes that at events:

You can stand beside someone and dance and bump into them and you’re not
going to be like you stepped on my shoe…The atmosphere is completely different
than the outside world, because the outside world is not a pretty place. I think
that’s why people are drawn to it so hard, it’s because of that connection you have
with a stranger. It’s a release; it gets you away from the real world.

Charlie is drawn to the sense of community and solidarity found in EDMC. There is a strong
sense of community and solidarity found in EDMC with its offerings of meaningful relationships
and therapeutic experiences. Tyson says, “when you start really becoming a part of that culture
and going to these parties it’s going to change you.” Those changes might be good (in the form
of a more positive outlook on life) or they could be bad (related to substances), but they are changes nonetheless. The events become places considered sacred realms, or at least a better alternative to the outside world. The music, the overall experience, and for many, the drugs are part of EDMC and are what make it so special to so many.

EDMC offers a context for spiritually meaningful experience aided by the use of spiritual and altered states imagery. To better understand how the artists understood other visual aspects of the experience, I asked participants about their views on the spiritual and altered states imagery. Most viewed it as enriching to the overall experience. Shows, but mostly festivals, spare no expense to create almost magical environments with ‘floating’ mushrooms and gods, goddesses, and temple-like structures that add to the vibe. Davis said the imagery is peaceful and ultimately soothing. For Davis the spiritual imagery enhances and almost reinforces the message of positivity and love he views as central to these events. Lucas said it “definitely helps enhance the experience for all festival goers and really helps add to the ‘vibe.’ I haven’t attended TomorrowWorld but I can vouch for Insomniac for having great decorations and making for a great experience.” Tyson said it “is great because that’s what it’s all about is elevating yourself to a new state of consciousness. I don’t do drugs anymore and I feel like I can get there naturally now. Like the music does it for me so that and that imagery definitely helps take you there.” So, the imagery can enhance the experience on an individual level, but, according my participants, it also has implications for the community as a whole. Vincenzo said

The stuff they have at the big stages and stuff is good because it’s putting on a show like people at the circus. Electronic shows they have a lot of lights and glitz and LED screens and stuff and fireworks and smoke and all these machines. You know TomorrowWorld had a big book and stuff that closed, that’s good and that’s putting on a show. People want stuff that’s pleasing to the eye as well as to the ear and that’s something that’s important, so it really makes sense to give people something on the visual level. You want to feel, not in your own world but you
want to feel unity you want to feel unified, connected to another person. You want to feel you're part of everyone else and you're just enjoying yourself. That's how electronic music should make you feel, it shouldn’t make you feel like you hate the world or hate for people.

Does employing spiritual and altered states imagery help individuals tap into something greater than themselves? For Will

It’s a direct reflection of the community that attends them. Like the scene as a whole, festival goers love feeling like a unit, something larger than a field with a stage and some speakers. Being a part of a community is what electronic music is all about for many people.

For Will and Vincenzo, the use of spiritual and altered states imagery helps create a more meaningful group experience by connecting the electronic music world to larger ideological systems. That being said, the only information depicted is the image, statue or figure; there is no explanation or guarantee that participants even know what they are seeing or what it means. However, they do respect the connection to spirituality related to moral ideals in the scene. Other informants were less comfortable with the imagery, not because of issues with content but because of its surface level message. Ryan felt that the imagery has been coopted more because it is aesthetically pleasing than because it is inherently meaningful. Brandon had problems with the imagery but cited different reasons

It’s definitely there and now that I think about it it’s kind of like brain washing. It’s part of the whole act now. Don’t get me wrong, if I’m at a show playing or just there I’ll notice some of the stuff that’s going on with the surroundings or light set up and I’ll be like man that was a great light show or that was great graphics but that’s really about as far as I go into it. It’s so important especially at the big festival industry. It’s so important that the live visuals and representation, they probably spend more on that than the actual music now and that’s crazy. It defeats the whole purpose of it. It’s whatever part of branding, marketing getting people to see shiny stuff.

Though Ryan viewed the use of imagery more as cultural appropriation, Brandon felt that it diminishes the focus on the music and ultimately is the result of increased commercialization.
Whether the imagery is personally meaningful to individuals or not, it is indicative of the syncretic nature of spirituality in EDMC.

3.7 EDM Artists: DJ and Producer

The DJs are people with unique stories and introductions to EDM music and development. With the exception of one informant that uses CDs to play his music, few EDM artists today use actual discs or records because it is expensive but also requires a tremendous amount of skill and timing to achieve the same sound now available from computer programs and software designed to weave together music and sounds. Many DJs have turned in their turntables for controllers, “a set of pads that launch different clips.” Nate considers himself a ‘controllerist.’ He explains how his process is different:

What a controllerist like myself does is a little different than what normal DJs do. We take clips, the samples, and we don’t use anything that spins, you press buttons but the buttons you press launch different clips or different sounds and we’ll launch one to ten clips at a time and those clips combined will make its own sound.

The term DJ is often accompanied by the term producer. Technically, DJs create mixes by combining different songs, sounds and vocals, the individual pieces called samples. Producers often do everything a DJ does but also create some of those sounds, whether they’re instrumental, synthetic, or other. Ryan described the difference:

With DJing you’re trying to take all of the sounds that have already been created and mesh them into something that you can consider beautiful or artistic in a sense. The way I DJ I usually have two or three tracks playing at one time, trying to create one consistent melody with the three of them that are going to make an interesting audio experience. As a producer you’re creating the sounds that people are going to be using. It’s all involving sound design.

DJs absolutely employ technology to create their sounds, but there is a significant amount of skill and specialized knowledge involved in becoming a professional. The computer and related software is necessary, but there it is a learned skill involving the dissection of songs for sounds,
the search or creation of synthetic and musical sounds, and the seamless stringing together of multiple beats and bass lines. Whether trained in a classroom or self-taught, individual background and preferences play a role in professional development, style and success.

Nearly all of the artists I talked to have been involved in music for their whole lives. Dylan is a DJ from Montgomery, AL currently working on a master’s degree in music industry. After taking a computer programming and software class, he fell in love with the process and began creating mixes. He plays shows and festivals around his full time school schedule. Brandon, based out of South Carolina, has loved the music since high school, received a sound engineering degree, and worked in the music recording industry for years before becoming a full time DJ. Sean remembers growing up with EDM, his mom pushing his stroller around at events, and became a DJ duo with his twin brother as soon as they could afford the equipment and could teach themselves. Charlie has worked for eight years as a producer with a background in piano music theory. He has held many jobs in the nightclub scene including as a promoter and currently helps with event production. Will became a DJ because he wanted to create electronic music. Their paths to the EDM scene have been different, but all were inspired by a love for music in general. What attracted them to EDM was the greater degree of musical freedom allowed in comparison to other genres along with the social aspect that provided them with a community.

EDMC is also a DJs work place, and so DJs must learn how to navigate the musical world. Will believes festivals are different, each with their own atmosphere and vibe. Regardless, it is important to have the support of the local community when putting on large events like this. He prefers smaller, more private, enclosed venues with a greater focus on the music. Dylan says that festivals allow for more artistic expression, but, when performing as a DJ, there is
always a struggle between artistry and entertaining. Do you play the songs that are you, or do you play songs everyone will know and love? DJs are artists but also entertainers; they learn to gauge the interest of their audience and, if necessary, adjust their music accordingly. Depending on venue, the marketed event, and the audience, DJs have a certain degree of artistic freedom but must make the people happy, not only because it is what they intend to do but also what they are being paid to do.

The full time artists I talked to spend more time working with managers and promoters. They also tend to have the financial support to produce music more regularly, often in professional rather than home studios. Full time artists with full time managers are also usually affiliated with a larger music agency. This gives them easier access to bookings providing them with more regular work. Part time artists were either students or worked a part time job to help support themselves. With obligations outside of music and fewer managers, these artists have to do more self-promoting. Self-promoting involves visiting venues and meeting with the staff or handing out flyers. With work, sometimes school, and self-promoting there is less time to work on music and perform. Part time artists also tend to have closer relationships with local venues and music communities possibly because they do less touring and more self-promoting in a place where they have an established presence.

Becoming a DJ or producer is not the glamorous life many believe it to be. Mark says that the younger crowd is more interested in the drugs and the party aspect than the music, creating a sort of disconnect between what he sees as EDM and how he sees these people experience EDM. For Sean being a DJ is less fun and more work. There is always the pressure of being professional knowing you are always being watched. He’s critical of the more corporate, mainstream aspects of EDM because they focus on the money while neglecting the
music. The traveling aspect of the DJ experience is rough, especially if you are a part time DJ without travel funding. Brandon no longer goes to shows or events unless he is performing because he says he is too old for it. He believes events today focus more on the production experience and less on the music, making the events less appealing to him. With the exception of three participants, the remaining 12 mentioned not being interested in attending events as purely a participant. In comparison, the three have arrived to the scene and their DJ profession more recently than the 12, suggesting that over time the ‘magic’ of the participant experience fades, but it is also a result of tight knit artist communities that operate behind the scenes. Besides those three, individuals explained that going to events made them feel jealous, they tended to focus more on the music than anything else and preferred to avoid the general admission side of events. It is also possible that after experiencing the ‘VIP’ side of the experience artists prefer to at least have the ability to participate in EDMC from behind the scenes. My informants are negotiating their position as artist, employee and participant. They are there for the music but not always from the participant side.

To understand the world in which my informants navigate, I asked about the artist community and its organization. When I asked about EDMC, the responses were mostly positive and included comments about togetherness, solidarity, friendship and family. I received different types of responses when I asked about artist communities:

Sean – “I feel like it’s kind of cut throat where I live. I have a close group of producer friends but a lot of them won’t give away their secrets and they’re weird about stuff, but there is a community.

Scott – “A lot of us all hang out with each other. We’re all at the same clubs all the time so you find people to hang out with there.”

Ryan – “There’s definitely a close circle of us. We all know each other and whatnot. There are sub cliques within the community and it’s essentially like high school. It’s loosely by genre but we all talk to each other when we’re all out at a show.”
Brandon – “There’s a community and a business and just because you’re in one doesn’t mean you’re in the other.”

Dylan – “It is somewhat defined by independent labels.”

Will – “There are countless communities of DJs that work together to strengthen the electronic music scene. Local crews constitute a large portion of them. Some are more difficult to become a part of than others. It all hinges on who you know and how hard you work.”

In contrast to EDMC that incorporates participants, the artist communities are smaller and more exclusive. There are ideals of equality but social cliques exist and the business side of the industry is competitive. Artists must also think about the business side of everything. In order to play, unless you have a booking agent, you must get yourself out there and make yourself known to the people ‘running the show’.

These perspectives demonstrate the complexities between the production and consumption of EDM. For some DJs the magic of the EDM scene has faded, and it has become a job. Others are more critical of the commercial aspects but continue to be a part of the scene because it still has value to them. It is clear that there has been a transformation in the relationship between music, community and production, but it has not impacted the scenes popularity or growth. The DJ/Producer navigates the music industry in search of musical freedom, independence and the opportunity to make a living doing what they love. At the same time, DJs/Producers also respond to the pressures imposed upon them by the industry and their fans.

3.8 Role in the Scene: The ‘Technoshaman’

To understand how my informants saw themselves in the scene, I asked them how they saw their role. Sean said he’s there “to spread the positivity.” Similarly, Ryan said his role is “sharing my love for music with people in hope that inspires them.” Scott stated it is his
responsibility to “set the mood, creating a soundtrack for the experience because it’s definitely the job of the DJ to read the crowd and see what they’re feeling.” Scott’s response here most closely resembles the technoshaman concept that they are there to regulate mood and mind through the music played. Besides those three, the remainder of my informants responded in reference to their popularity on the local or national level.

To better understand the relationship between ‘technoshaman’ and the audience, I first asked about the relationship between the crowd/room during sets. Ryan said

I kind of lose myself when I’m DJing. I just become one with the music and for the most part I have no perception of time or anything else around me until I’m done with my set. It’s more of expressing how I’m feeling alongside with getting this crowd as ramped up as I possibly can.

Sean said, “I feel a part of them.” Like Sean, Tyson “becomes one with everybody in that audience.” For Scott it depends on the environment and his mood:

Usually I see myself as being there to create energy within the crowd. Other times I’m just there to create an ambiance. Sometimes though, I don’t even think about the crowd. There are times that things in my life are getting to me and I’ll get on stage and just play whatever I’m feeling. Those are the sets I feel most satisfied at the end of.

Alternatively, others described the experience in terms of their job. David felt “like it’s my responsibility to make sure everybody’s having a good time.” Mark said

It’s always about the crowd. I mean I play what I want because it’s my music and I produced it but I try to play things that are more relative to the crowd at the time. You gotta do what the crowd wants, that’s what you’re getting paid for.

This suggests that although many artists feel deeply connected to the crowd they are playing for, it ultimately depends on the environment and the individuals making up that environment. I then asked my informants what they thought of the term technoshaman. No one had heard it before, so I gave a brief explanation. Not all of my informants were completely comfortable with the term technoshaman, but when asked about their role in the scene provided a response close it its
Brandon and Lucas expressed concerns with the term. Brandon said the term technoshaman was ridiculous. After I explained it he said:

That is absolutely awesome but I don’t know that it would just be a DJ that could do that. It’s probably a team of people that work towards having the party set on this night and having this light up, this person play at this time and who’s it going to be the preacher of that hour. It wasn’t just because it was Tiesto at midnight. It’s because there’s a 300-person team planning that whole experience. It’s so much bigger than the one performance of a single DJ.

Brandon did not agree with the use of shaman in the term and felt like it was more of a marketing technique than an accurate descriptor of the DJ. He also felt that these experiences go beyond a single set and rely on the entire production team setting up each event. He did not feel it was fair to give all of the credit to the artist when so much work goes into setting the stage. For Lucas the term was outdated.

My initial reaction is it feels trapped in the past just from having the word techno in it. Otherwise it seems somewhat apt for the way casual fans would perceive electronic music DJs. In reality most DJs/producers are just people on stage playing music, with less conscious regard for what the crowd’s mood is. Most top-tier/massive-crowd DJs pre-plan their sets, with no regard for what the crowd is actually feeling at the time. Technoshaman would be more apt for the way things were in the late-nineties, not how they are now in the shadow of EDM as a pop-movement.

These responses came from those who have over a decade of experience. They have seen the rise and fall of several scenes and treat their involvement as part of their profession. They are disillusioned with the current state of the scene and are reluctant to accept anything that might be constructed only to draw people to events. Brandon objected to the use of shaman because it indicated that a single individual was involved and Lucas was conflicted with the use of the term techno and saw it as part of earlier scenes. The rest of responses were more positive and inspired in depth descriptions of what a DJ does or is supposed to do. I did not talk to any artists at the top-tier/massive-crowd level, so perhaps it is smaller artists that continue to read the energy of
the room as they play their music. Will said, “it definitely embodies what DJs are built to do, create an experience based on the vibes and reactions being given off by the audience.” The following perspectives closely resemble Hutson’s (1999) own description of the technoshaman.

**Sean** – “We’re in charge of the energy and everything in the place. Pretty much the perfect set to me is the set that starts you off slow and it writes a story and it brings the energy up and gently brings you back down. It’s like a roller coaster, one minute you might be crying and the next minute you might be happy as heck dancing.”

**Scott** – “You lead the crowd through whatever the vibe is but at the same time I also think it’s a two way street. On the one hand the DJ does kind of control the crowd and you do set the mood, but at the same time you’ve got to read the crowd and see what they’re feeling. You’ve got to see where they’re ready to go and take them there.”

**Tyson** – “That’s what DJing is really all about. It’s about the vibe, reading that crowd and playing the right stuff at the right time.”

**Vincenzo** – “As a DJ if someone’s on the dance floor it’s not about you staring at your computer looking for songs to play. What you have to do is slowly bring it up and then bring it down and that’s how I build my songs. I start out in a way that’s calming and then slowly build up the action, create the chaos, and then bring it back down to a tone that elevates the crowd. You have to understand the crowd.”

These perspectives show that many of my informants take their role as master of ceremony seriously, not only because they want to keep getting work but also because they love being a part of something greater than the self. Sean, Scott, and Vincenzo depicted DJing as taking the audience on a journey, guiding their mood and emotions through the night. It is also clear that ‘reading’ the vibe of the crowd is of central importance. Understanding the energy of the crowd is key to a good performance. They do not pre-plan their sets but instead come prepared to work with the crowd, since their job is to take them on a journey. Like Scott says, it is not a one way street; an artist in this genre cannot play whatever they want but must work with the people they are there to play for, guiding them through the night. Performances are dialogues between technoshaman and audience. Artists become priests performing specialized magic, guiding the congregation on its journey. These priests hold the key to meaningful sounds, communicating
with the congregation and taking them to another realm.

3.9 ‘Democratization of the Spiritual’

The term religion proved problematic for many I talked to. I asked my informants about their religious or spiritual belief systems, the religion they were raised in, and their relationship between EDM and spirituality. Although Nate did say “religion doesn’t necessarily have to be within the boundaries of a certain context. Religious experience is something you can experience through a lot of things.” He was the only individual that expressed an understanding of religion closely resembling my conception in this study. When asked about religion and spirituality, most responded by immediately saying that they were not religious. Instead, they preferred to associate their beliefs with spirituality, as it felt safer, freer and unconfined by any particular institution or entity. For example, Brandon commented:

I was fascinated by the Bible when I was younger [I] didn’t obey it but it just blew my mind that someone made rules that nobody could prove. I believe that there is possibly a higher power out there [but] I don’t know what it is and I don’t think that anybody else has the right to say my God’s right and your God’s wrong so I just keep it more spiritual.

For most participants, the term religion referenced Christianity. 11 participants were raised in Christian households, two were Jewish, one was agnostic and one atheist. My participants were not afraid to admit their belief in the supernatural whether it was an energy or a being but they were reluctant to restrict those beliefs to any particular faith. Sean explained why he thinks we have religion “to deal with the dark, scary void that is death. Can you imagine not living for anything and just thinking about whenever you die it's over with. [It] just does not sound right.” And explains his problems with it:

I believe in a higher power, it might be another dimension or something but I don’t really believe in the story that they have now. There’s too much bloodshed in religion. Religions have always killed people so how can you be somebody that preaches all these good things when you’re friggin’ murdering people all over
religious stuff. I believe in a higher power but I don’t think it’s how we see it or how the stories are written.

Nate also explained what he believes to be the reasons people turn to religion and his own concerns:

I feel that religion has a lot of constructs and when people can’t accept not knowing the answers or the unknown they turn to something like religion to give them those answers. I’m not sure those answers are necessarily the most correct and so I agree with following moral codes and moral standards and being a good person but I don’t think there should be a guideline for that.

As one would expect, the religious and spiritual surroundings of the artists I talked to affected their spiritual trajectories later in life. Negative experiences stood out as decisive moments when individuals chose to abandon their prescribed faith and seek alternatives. Those negative experiences were generally characterized by some sort of hypocrisy occurring during childhood making them question those in positions of authority. Scott’s father is a pastor “I think it’s made me more critical of Christianity. I saw a lot of hypocrisy growing up and in a lot of ways I feel as though Christianity was forced on me as a kid, so eventually I rejected in and spited it.” Others drew on more specific examples to explain their disdain for institutional religion. Dylan quit going to church after an eye opening experience with one of the leaders at his church:

The day I quit going to church, Assembly of my junior year and one of my friends got too drunk [and] passed out in the bathroom and her date was like well I don’t want to get in trouble so I helped get her to the ambulance and followed them there, her date who I went to church and whose dad was like a Deacon in the church didn’t get there until an hour and a half later. His dad, his son was football quarter back and perfect in his dads eyes, sat there and told me that I was the one that gave his date all the alcohol and it was my fault and that I would learn to admit it and I told him to fuck off and the next day at church I had to acolyte and his wife was the one that did all of that stuff so that was the day I left.

Tyson’s negative experience came a littler earlier:

I went to Catholic school [but] my family wasn’t Catholic. If anything, going to that school made me hate religion even more. Telling an 8 year old you can’t have the body of Christ is pretty bad. My brother and I had to watch the entire church
go up there and me and my brother were the only ones [that couldn’t]. I don’t know if Jesus was real, the only thing that I can conclude is that something major happened 2,000 years ago. So there’s no way to tell which way was which but if Jesus is the Messiah and he saw that, wouldn’t that bother him? There’s this 8 year old kid not being allowed.

Experiences like these left a distaste for institutional religion but a thirst for something else. In discussions about beliefs I was constantly reminded that religion had no part. Brandon said he believes: “in science and karma, I don’t subscribe to any religion, but I don’t doubt that there’s a higher power.” Charlie said, “I’m not a very religious person at all, I would definitely say I’m more spiritual…I just live by karma.” Sean said his beliefs are “like PLUR but mine is peace, love, and triangles. There’s three sides of a triangle the bottom holds it together and that stands for unity and the two sides stand for respect and responsibility which lead to a greater point in life.” Sean lives by the mantra peace, love and triangles. He has made some modifications to the PLUR model (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) with his triangle. Mark called himself a possibilitist, saying “I believe in the possibility of everything instead of denying the possibility of one thing. So I don’t knock anyone’s religion [and] I don’t accept any one religion. I just believe that whatever’s out there might be out there.” In response to the question about his belief system Dylan replied:

I believe that we are all connected universally. I think that there is certainly something larger out there. Now whether that is an energy that connects us all or whether it’s an actual kind of God like person that I’m unsure of and I think that generally on Earth we put too much concern on that. We put too much concern on what’s happening next and I just take care of those around me, I treat everyone with respect regardless of what you believe and that’s kind of my religion.

These descriptions of their beliefs describe a nascent spirituality of peace and inclusion through the development of community based on solidarity. One individual said he was an atheist, but the remaining 14 believed that there is something out there greater than ourselves, whether they know what it is or not. Others connected their spiritual beliefs directly with EDM. Sean said:
I didn’t even really start thinking about it until I got into the EDM scene and that’s because a lot of people were telling me about it. And there is a lot of talking that goes on about religion in the EDM scene like every person you talk to has different beliefs and stuff. I’m actually missing my left hand and have been my whole life and that’s why I love the EDM scene so much. It was the only place I felt completely normal. It’s almost like people don’t even notice it and it makes me feel whole again.

Mark said: “I feel like there’s a spirit inside me that becomes elevated when I’m listening to electronic music.” For Tyson:

This music is my connection spiritually. I’m not a fan of organized religion by any means. I can’t consider myself a Christian based on certain ideals, mainly the whole burning in hell for eternity thing. But yea, organized religion is definitely not a good thing in my opinion. I use this music as my connection to the spiritual, to God. I feel like I’m on this path with him and it’s too strong to ignore but that’s what I’m here for. Even if there is no God what it has done for me, my life, and my well being is so amazing and impactful that I just don’t care anymore. It’s real to me and it makes me a better person, it makes me happier.

Vincenzo was the only participant to deny a relationship between EDM and spirituality, although he did see a relationship between spirituality and music in general. Vincenzo expressed feeling that particular music was therapeutic but did not feel that EDM had done that for him. Many did express belief in a relationship between spirituality and EDM. The connection between spirituality and EDM was less clear but definitely exists. Lucas described the religious aspects of EDM by saying “I feel like there’s a community sense in that because a lot of religious organizations are built very hard on community so that’s what originally attracted me to it.” The community aspect of EDM was important to most regardless of their current participation outside of performing.

Psychoactive substances also play a role in the spiritual aspects of EDMC, giving individuals access to altered states of consciousness. Several cite their introduction to hallucinogens in EDMC as contributing to their interest in spiritual matters. Mack said “My
religion is probably acid, I used to be an atheist until I took acid.” He then described a particularly transcendent experience with DMT:

When I smoked DMT like a gram at one time and like you go towards the bright light and then you’re tripping balls it’s the same shit that Christians describe and then my brain came back on and I was like I’ve seen it. I think consciousness can exist outside of the body but I’m not religious, it’s just experience. House music is all about transcending and it’s all about looking inside and knowing how to enjoy life and live in the moment and I like house music because it’s a feeling. There’s this thoughtless ego in it like rock music is like this anti music. It’s about me and my experience and people associate to that, but house music takes the ego out of it and brings people together.

Mack’s experiences with hallucinogens profoundly affected his understanding of consciousness, one deeply connected to his love for EDM. Another example Davis said, “it’s definitely a contributing factor just for the fact I got into psychedelics. I’d say it was that in combination with the people I’ve shared experiences with, the whole like united feeling of being at a show.” For Ryan, EDM is his passion:

It’s kind of got me in a much better mind state than where I was before I discovered this type of music because I would definitely have described myself as lost. When I finally discovered EDM and the ability to DJ I got a passion, something I’m working towards. It’s just something that helps me express who I am and essentially helps me get all my emotions out.

EDM offered Ryan a framework that helps him make sense of himself and his place in the world. Dylan also finds comfort in EDMC exemplified by his statement:

Honestly, around Montgomery you don’t see a lot of [doing good for others and caring for others]. Everybody’s kind of out for themselves and you begin to think that maybe I’m the crazy one. As I started to do [EDM] there’s so many people out here that believe me, and that are like yea dude that’s how it should be and there wasn’t even a question. It’s definitely affected me.

My informants identified as spiritual but not religious and referenced their distaste for the perceived authoritarian nature of religion. Instead, they chose the word spiritual because it felt safer and offers more freedom. EDMC serves as an example of what Tacey (2004) refers to as a
‘democratization of the spirit’ within a greater spirituality revolution where the individual becomes the spiritual authority. As spiritual authority people are free to choose their beliefs around a more experiential and personal relationship with the sacred.

They may not know exactly what they stand for, but there is certainty in the things they are against. EDMC is not a religion in that it does not have an institution or doctrine but it does have the capacity to give individuals new paths to the sacred. It could be considered an example of what Ter Borg (2004) calls ‘wild religion,’ or one tied not to a centralized authority or considered official in that sense. It is what Hutson refers to as a more direct form of spirituality (1999:61); it focuses on the establishment of personal relationships with the sacred through ASC (Luhrmann 2004). Perhaps the most accurate descriptor is the ‘spirituality of life’ concept from Heelas and Seel (2003). My informants have rejected dictated, religious life for a more expressive, spiritual experience (Heelas and Seel 2003). Whether it is wild religion or not, existing institutional religious options have failed to meet the needs of nearly every artist I talked to, and the EDM community and experience have become an outlet for many to access the sacred. EDMC provides potentially spiritual contexts giving people a location for temporary resistance. These spaces and the resulting experiences help audiences cope with the realities of everyday life. The artists benefit from being a part of that therapeutic experience, sharing their music with receptive audiences, and participating in communities. EDMC provides a realm in which syncretic New Age spiritualities thrive and help participants and artists better understand their place in the world. By being a more permanent part of a larger community striving towards an ideal world based around peace, love, unity and respect, artists are able to feel like they are a part of something larger than themselves. Many artists have found their calling in EDM and seek to share their love, knowledge, and understanding with others to create a better world.
There is no type of spiritual consensus, but several themes are present. EDM conjures feelings of emotion and deep connection within its creators, listeners, and communities. The DJs I have talked to create this music because it is a part of them. When they share songs, they are sharing a part of their heart and soul with the EDM universe. EDMC provides a support system based on the principles of inclusion, acceptance, difference, unity, and self-expression. It does not exist as its own religious or spiritual framework, but it supplies a context in which countercultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs are welcome. Individuals seek comfort in EDMC from what is believed to be an overly competitive outside world. EDMC gives its members a space to find validation and recognition unavailable in the outside world. Spirituality in EDMC may manifest itself in specific context, but those experiences, for both audience and artist, carry meaning once both on and off the dance floor.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Music plays a role in people’s lives on a daily basis, from the person using music as their alarm in the morning to the one listening on their way to work to the DJ creating music in their studio. Music is relative, what is pleasing to one person may be noise to another (Haviland 2002:400). Nonetheless, it exists as a form of communication, crossing the boundaries of verbal communication, circulating “often abstract emotion rather than concrete ideas, and is experienced in a variety of ways by different listeners” (Haviland 2002:401). Music has been a part of human societies across cultures for thousands of years. It can be used to entertain and comfort and also for social or political purposes (Haviland 2002). It can also be a “powerful identifier,” providing a way for individuals to identify with each other, bringing groups together often against dominant cultural groups (Haviland 2002:404). The artists I talked to express
themselves through their music, offering listeners a piece of themselves with each song. Their songs are not just noise, but meaningful sounds carefully crafted to make people feel something, anything, in what my participants described as an overly competitive world. Their music brings people together, in mind, body and spirit.

Research into raves and other electronic music cultures indicates that these musical events have the potential to be spiritually meaningful on and off the dance floor. The relationship between EDM artist and audience is greatest at these events when the audience can become fully immersed in the sound, but definitely exists in the digital world as well. The artists occupy a unique space within EDMC, creating the music and interacting people in the community.

I began this thesis with a history of the rave and electronic music before defining this as the post-rave era. Early forms of EDM emerged with the rave, but as drug hysteria grew with increasing legislation punishing those throwing unlicensed parties, EDM made its way into new legitimate venues like clubs and festivals. Then I presented works detailing it in youth and countercultural studies that provided valuable background to EDMC. Raves and EDMC have long been the subject of youth and countercultural studies, seeking to understand the phenomenon from a preventative public health point of view. At the end of the first chapter I explained the EDM artists, the DJs and producers that create and play music for the EDM universe. DJs use existing songs and effects to seamlessly mix sets while producers are able to create and modulate sounds. In the literature review I presented works on religion and spirituality, raves and EDMC, and psychoactive substances. Religion and spirituality have been long been a popular topic in anthropology focusing on ritual and its performative aspects. Within religious studies religion is also understood as part of the human experience and has entered the realm of the secular world. Most works discussing religion and spirituality within rave and
EDMC focused on ritual and trance. Psychoactive substances are also a part of EDMC, having maintained a place in human societies for thousands of years. While these substances are not integral to experiences, they do absolutely enhance them. Then I explained my research methods involving interviews with DJs and producers and participant observation in EDMC. The next chapter relied on fieldwork and interviews to describe EDMC, its meaning and its context. EDM is a relatively new term referring to a number of electronic music genres and, for many artists, is associated with the move towards corporatization. It also discussed the role of the vibe, drugs, popular culture and meaning making in EDMC. The vibe is energy present in EDM and EDMC felt and transmitted by both participants and artists. Again, drugs are definitely a part of the culture but not the culture. My informants believe that EDMC is becoming too popularized for the sake of mass consumption. This last chapter drew upon interviews to explain the artist, technoshaman, and democratization of the spiritual. The artist must navigate the music industry in search of success as well as musical freedom. Their role in the community can be described as that of a technoshaman, guiding them along their journey to enlightenment. The democratization of the spiritual implies that the people have taken control over their spiritual selves, creating their own systems from different belief systems.

The modern world is characterized by the persistence of long standing religious institutions among the emergence of many new movements. Through my research and the research of other social scientists, I have found that EDMC is not any kind of official movement, but its events and communities offer a access to a potentially spiritually enriching context. The authority of religious institutions may be on the decline, but the human need to be spiritual has not disappeared. Rather, the sacred persists in places previously considered mundane. It exists among what is perceived to be part of everyday life, among college and pro football fans, movie
fanatics, and even in shopping malls. People are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the offerings (service, spiritual, personal) provided by institutionalized religions and seek more personal, tangible experiences with the sacred. The sacred also exists in EDMC, in the festivals filled with thousands of pilgrims, in the clubs with its regulars, and in the music itself. While not the only solution, it has emerged as a legitimate outlet. The loud repetitive music, flashing lights, visuals, group dynamic, dancing, and psychoactive substances can facilitate therapeutic trance states. These trance states allow individuals to become completely lost in the moment, losing track of space and time. In disconnection they find connection to the world and to those around them having similar experiences. Outside of trance experiences EDMC also offers a community of people offering inclusion, acceptance, difference, unity, self-expression, validation and recognition. Through inclusion people feel like they belong, not only to a group but also to something greater than themselves. People are accepted for who they are and are received as suitable to join the group. Differences are not only accepted but also lauded and respected. Like inclusion, unity offers individuals the feeling of belonging to something greater than themselves, as part of a complex whole. Self-expression is valued in both physical and ideological forms through thoughts, ideas, art, music and dance. People are encouraged to not only be themselves but also to physically express themselves. Through validation people are able to confirm their self worth, and in EDMC people find a space in which they feel valued or worthwhile. Finally, people also find recognition, feeling that they have found acknowledgement among a group. Communities in EDMC offer these things to both artists and participants.

Through my ethnographic research and the research of social scientists around the world, I have a better understanding of the relationship between spirituality, EDM artists, and EDMC. I believe that with studies like mine, we may better understand the role of the sacred in new realms
and use this understanding to better interpret the role of spirituality and religion in the modern world.
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