

THE BATTLE OF THE BANDS

ConFest Musics and the Politics of Authenticity

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The Australian alternative lifestyle event ConFest (Conference/Festival) harbours a dynamic 'underground' music culture. This article investigates the role performed by musics in efforts to establish and maintain 'sanctified' space, and a concomitant sense of community, at Australia's principal alternative cultural pilgrimage destination. The performance, aesthetics and sociality of musics are pivotal in struggles over the definition and purpose of ConFest. Musical performance on-site provides a dramatic context for the amplification of a spectrum of discourses and practices held to be 'pure', 'natural' and/or 'sacred' by alternative lifestylers and marginal youth milieus. During the late 1990s hostilities erupted between event-publics as electronic and acoustic musics were appraised, with their relative in-/authenticities reproved or harnessed to independent claims as to the meaning of the event. Circumscribing an authenticity war waged between rival music cultures, I detail ConFest as a contested space, a polymorphic pilgrimage site which, while host to a sometimes volatile constituency, possesses a potential to resolve conflict and achieve workable solutions.

(Research for this article was conducted between 1994-1999 for a PhD in Anthropology [St John, 1999]. The article draws on fieldwork conducted on ConFests held on the Murray River near the southern New South Wales towns of Moama and Tocumwal; Down to Earth [DTE] email-group discussions; and archival research conducted during this period. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from DTE members and ConFesters are taken from interviews with the author. I use pseudonyms throughout unless informants have either requested or agreed to the use of their proper names.)

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Facilitated by the Melbourne based Down To Earth Co-operative (DTE), ConFest has operated since 1976, attracting well over 100,000 participants. A product of local and international radicalism, it is a variation on a genre of post-1960s events¹ attractive to alternative lifestyle pilgrims. The majority of ConFesters are disaffected expatriates who, in the argot of anarcho-mystic Hakim Bey, are “disappearing themselves from the Grid of Alienation and seeking ways to restore human contact” (1993: nd). In an immediate “DiY community” (McKay 1998), where barriers between artists and ‘users’ of art are dismantled, liberation of event-denizens is potentiated via their disengagement from commoditisation. At ConFest, the artist is not a special sort of person, but every person is a special sort of artist (Bey, 1991: 70).

ConFest, thus, can be likened to Bey’s anarcho-liminal ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone’ or ‘TAZ’ (1991). Yet its apparent TAZ-status is somewhat complicated. The event hosts a matrix of camping, workshop and performance zones called ‘villages’ (eg Music, Spiral, Lacedweb, Tek Know, Forest, Art, Labyrinth, CIDA², Hybrid), each exerting gravitational influence on self-designated lifestyle ‘tribes’. These social and aesthetic aggregations are indeed ‘tribe-like’ in the sense of dispersed micro-groups, each possessing fairly discrete systems of values and ethics, expressive of an “empathetic sociality” and organised to fulfill the desire to *be together* (Maffesoli, 1996: 11)³. Given the organic matrix of performative venues and heteroglossia of ‘neo-tribes’, ConFest approximates a TAZ-complex – a periodical pilgrimage site consisting of a conurbation of festal tribes.

Over the course of research it became transparent that ConFest was not, in the sense held for pilgrimage locations, “impregnated by unity” (Turner and Turner, 1978: 255). Indeed, when considering ConFest in total, Victor Turner’s “communitas” – described as a “relatively undifferentiated community, or even communion of equal individuals” (1969: 96) – is a less than accurate heuristic device. Neither Turner’s idealistic communitas, a trope popularly applied to alternative cultural events (cf. Newton, 1988; Hetherington, 1993; Lewis and Dowsey-Magog, 1993; St John, 1997), nor the romantic ‘Utopia Now’ of Bey’s anthemic TAZ, are applicable without considerable qualification. This is the case as ConFest is a community under dispute, a contested site, an “alternative cultural heterotopia” (St John, 1999 and 2001). Indeed, as participants rally around variant apprehensions of the event, the experience echoes that reported of other pilgrimage destinations where devotees, taking up vantage points in a struggle over meaning, “try to dictate how the event is to be interpreted” (McClancy, 1994: 34). The debates raging over that which constitutes proper ConFest music provide a particularly pertinent case for ConFest’s status as a contested community.

Reminiscent of the clash over musical styles between traditionalists, supporting Mas bands, and younger British-Caribbean sound system enthusiasts at London’s Notting Hill Carnival throughout the 1970s and 1980s, for over a decade ConFest has been a centre of hostility between converging festal-tribes over genre, style

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and aesthetics of musical performance. While there is evidence that ‘staged music’ performed at the ConFest Music village is perceived to pose a threat to ConFest’s spontaneous folk ethos⁴, electronic music at the “rave-derived” (Luckman, 1998) Tek Know village constitutes a particularly sharp locus of division. The loud, relentless pulse of electronic/techno music, the associated synthetic alterant and non-renewable energy use, and the music’s apparent impact on wildlife; are all cited by opponents to justify its exclusion or restriction. While electronic music enthusiasts seek to authenticate their pursuits – even making claims for its spiritual efficacy – others remain sceptical. “I don’t like it,” states ConFest co-ordinator Laurie Campbell:

. . . it’s a waste. It’s a guru thing . . . It has an Apollonian inspiration. It’s just fucking horrible. It kills everything around.

For Les Spencer, “despite their smooth loving tongue . . . [the] techno people”:

. . . have shown callous disregard for everyone not at their do. It is totally invasive. It is totally at odds with the ConFest Spirit. Have them do their do miles away . . . EVERYTHING at ConFest is SUBJECTED to it. I FOR ONE LOATH SUBJUGATION. You can not get away from it. (Les, DTE email-group 14/10/97)

While these co-ordinators take the zero-tolerance approach, others draw astute comparisons between the contemporary reactions of some older DTE members and the hysterical response to the ‘evils’ of rock music by the parents of 1950s’ and 1960s’ youth.

TRANCE DANCE: SLIPPING OUT OF THE NETS

So what exactly is this contested phenomenon? Techno music has been a feature of ConFest’s sonic geography since Moama Easter 1995, when a clandestine dance party emerged adjacent to the market, near the event’s epicentre. Although the party and subsequent techno events have featured DJs utilising various techniques and displaying preference for different non-vocal styles, the orientation, under the seminal influence of DJ Krusty, has been to Trance Dance⁵. This is essentially the dance party atmosphere exemplified by the Rainbow Dreaming village (Tocumwal, Easter 1996) and Tek Know village (Moama, New Year 1996/97). Consisting of a main dance floor and ‘chill’ area, each with a few DJs playing sets, the more populous Tek Know village possessed conventional rave-derived topographics. While in the ‘chill’ DJs played ambient tracks (with limited bass and breakbeats) or ‘live’ sets (ie tweaking synthesisers), the main floor accommodated a trance or, more specifically, a psychedelic trance soundscape⁶.

Owing much to the hippy-traveller ‘Goa-Trance’ tradition (Cole and Hannan, 1997; Chan, 1998), psychedelic trance (or psy-trance) possesses an inherent thematic journey. Hypnotic, with accelerating rhythm and incorporating ‘ethnodelic’ (ie Eastern and/or indigenous) scales and samples, in conjunction

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with organic and natural sounds, this machine-driven music is functional. Reflecting Krusty's declared passion for 'transformational ritual', the trance events were 'no-spectator' style odysseys. Throughout the night, and with a celebrated peak at sunrise, village habitués 'tranced-out' to a stock-in-trade metronomic four quarter beat overlaid with exhilarating arpeggios and infused with tribal or world music samples. With a 10-kilowatt sound system pumping 140 beats per minute through their bodies, participants – often with the assistance of psychedelics (usually LSD), ecstasy (MDMA), cannabis or nitrous oxide – were launched into ecstatic states.

Since its arrival at ConFest in the mid 1990s, this controversial music scene has been targeted for elimination. Yet, with its adherents "prepared to drift, to slip out of all nets, to nomadize, to never settle down" (Bey, 1994: 44), it has, nevertheless, demonstrated a notorious recalcitrance. The sequence of events transpiring between 1996-97 is revealing. In mid 1996, Krusty attempted to shift the Trance Dance party assemblage to the Winter Solstice Gathering (WSG) organised by DTE. At a regular general meeting prior to the event, the WSG was cancelled with director David Cruise arguing that the proposed event's flyer – which featured an image of, and reference to, psilocybin ('magic mushrooms') - jeopardised DTE's family/community reputation. Manning the moral barricades, and protecting the community from the techno space-invader, DTE stifled an alternative outlet for dance culture. The decision eventually backfired when it became apparent that this culture was not going to disappear quietly, if at all.

Events came to a head at Moama Easter 1997 when efforts to eliminate techno music necessitated a confrontation with Krusty and Clan Analogue⁷ who were collaborating with the Metamorphic Ritual Theatre Company to stage the *Labyrinth* – a three night interactive ritual initiation cycle weaving "a multi-cultural and multi-subcultural tapestry of ancient mythologies and modern technology" (from promotional material: nd)⁸. The *Labyrinth*, however, was constructed on the site's highest region. Together with Krusty's time and power excesses, this provided the context for the ensuing 'theatre'. As the bass penetrated the festival from atop the *Labyrinth* hill into late morning of April 1st, one opponent claims he attempted to find the generator and "stab the beast in its belly". Another vigilante was convinced that the number of noise complaints justified his actions: driving his car into the *Labyrinth* honking the horn in an effort to drive off with the generator in tow. Commenting on the matter, Laurie was:

. . . interested in getting an off knob. And, not just an off knob during the festival to turn them off when they're running late, but an off knob to have them not in the festival at all.

Later, at Gum Lodge 97/98 (near Tocumwal), the CIDA village was home to the solar powered stage and a smaller trance event on New Year's Eve. During the night the battery was damaged by unknown assailants, incapacitating the sound system for an hour. This proved to be a significant affront to those who subscribe to the therapeutic and spiritual qualities of the music and dance, and who inter-

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preted it as an act of aesthetic terrorism carried out by older non-understanding members of the ConFest community – by ‘the parent culture’ of DTE. For CIDA co-ordinator, Mardo (who has claimed that “dance is a very very spiritual thing all through history, and [that] this is just the modern version of a trance”), this sabotage justified a ‘workshop’ conducted by a band of direct activists the following afternoon⁹. This ritual of resistance saw a sound system ‘fire up’ on the beach, a designated quiet area.

Attempts to suppress techno have been continually resisted by its young adherents (an approach summarised on a T-shirt I noticed on one enthusiast which declared ‘Ungovernable Entity’). The persistent desire to experiment with electronic music and new technologies has inspired mutations and innovative manifestations. Like reggae sound systems in the Notting Hill Carnival, and ‘underground’ dance parties in the UK, the ConFest Trance Dance party could be:

. . . compared to the mythical many-headed Hydra, a creature which captivated and entranced, only to make disappear all those who beheld it, and which mutated inexorably, by growing new heads, when its protagonists attempted to destroy it. (Gore, 1997: 51)

The ConFest dance party, like raving, is, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari, a ‘desiring machine’. The dance is ‘rhizomatic’ and it “cannot be killed off [since] its stems will inevitably proliferate despite pruning” (Gore, 1997: 57). Though observing Bey’s counsel “to slip out of all nets” (1993: nd), this libratory ‘deterritorialisation’ is variously manifested. Thus techno-tribes have disappeared (evading restriction and control)¹⁰, engaged in confrontation (eg the beach action described above) and achieved compromise (see the discussion of Hybrid below).

THE TROUBLE WITH TECHNO(LOGY)

The objections ranged against techno-trance are that it represents a violation on physical, aesthetic and/or moral grounds. A solid contingent of ConFesters regards the techno assemblage to be physically invasive. They cite the *Labyrinth* drama and beach action as evidence of internal colonialism, dismissing those responsible as selfish and deceitful. According to David Cruise, while protagonists try to “convince themselves and everybody else that it’s a religious experience, and that it has . . . spiritual merit”, it is little more than an “intrusion”:

It’s like smoking. If you smoke indoors, you breathe out and everybody else has to breathe it in. And techno is a very invasive process, ’cause it uses very high power levels of sound, which not everybody finds – if there’s a word called discordant . . . not many people find it very cordant. And you can’t escape it. Particularly on these type of sites, because the low frequencies propagate over the flat areas and they go for miles. So you’re stuck with ‘voouur voouur voouur’ whether you like it or not . . . so I find that it’s a very arrogant, aggressive, selfish process.

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Here, allusion is made to the relentless low-pitched bass rhythm characteristic of much dance music. At a distance, the bass is all that is usually heard. Experiencing an aural armada invading his beachhead at around 140 bpm, Cruise is typical of those for whom 'repetitive beats' signify something akin to physical assault and for whom the word 'techno' (along with 'doof') has become a label of derision. Connoting 'inauthentic' or 'foreign', the term 'techno' is wielded by the likes of Cruise with the intent of admonishing its proponents.

The music's apparent absence of 'authenticity', particularly in relation to aesthetics or style, is a regular article of protest. The common view is that techno poses a danger to ConFest's folk or 'earthy' communality. Various assumptions are held about the assemblage's (in)authenticity. In the following comment, techno is seen to be aesthetically misplaced:

The house-like disco at one end of the festival does not have the earth/beat energy that one goes to ConFest for. There are thousands of discos but only one ConFest . . . Also, any pre-recorded music saps the energy from the creativity and life that was so much a part of ConFest. (Letter from A. Palmer to DTE: nd)

Of the city, it is thus an urban profanity disrupting the spontaneity of ConFest's rural idyll. Pre-recorded tracks mixed and manipulated by DJs are presumed to compromise the purity or 'feel' of live happenings¹¹. Thus, another e-mailer laments the dearth of musicians who "used to wander around various camp sites playing guitars, flutes, penny whistles, singing songs [and] ballads in the QUIET peaceful TRANQUILITY of the evening" (DTE, email-group 25/8/98). Bilby expresses a profound uncertainty about the technology driving the music:

I'm not entirely sure that I trust the machinery that the trance inducing stuff is coming out of. It seems to me that there is a lot of powerful machinery being used . . . It's really alien, and it's really machine driven, and it's . . . opposed to a lot of the values that I think we need to be preserving if we've got any chance of continuing existence on this planet. You know, this sounds a bit wild eyed and dramatic, but I don't trust techno. I don't trust it at all.

Indeed complaints about the technology upon which trance techno relies are not uncommon. It is often argued that the music, reliant upon diesel generators and, therefore, the consumption of non-renewable fossil fuels, depends upon ecologically unsustainable technology. Yet critiques of technologism often extend to charges of 'inappropriate technology', which, as Ross (1992: 513) points out, rest upon dubious dichotomies: nature/technology, purity/artifice, holism/science. Indeed, technophobia built upon such dichotomies potentiates Luddite-like behaviour such as the nocturnal decommissioning of the CIDA sound system.

One example of the "inappropriate technology" incrimination came in the form of a polemical document distributed prior to Moama New Year 96/97, after the Tek Know project secured nearly one third of DTE's village budget for that event.

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Denouncing the techno assemblage as yet another form of parasitic, alienating Western technology, Les Spencer (1996) argued that the ‘trance’ to which the music’s producers and consumers lay claim is specious. It was argued that this form of music is “a-rhythmical” and disharmonic:

Our bodies are organically rhythmical. We respond to cord and withdraw from discord. We like harmony and withdraw from disharmony . . . The techno-format is a-rhythmical (absence of rhythm) and discordant, either with or without simple down beat under-rhythm. From a distance this down beat sounds like industrial noise. In techno, up beats are virtually non-existent. The up beat is the spiritual. The up beat is for lightness and celebrating. The down beat is grounding. It is also the beat of the war dance. (Spencer 1996: 1)

This high-tech European derived music evidently generates ersatz trance only, while the:

. . . techno-trance process typically involves moving to trance via sensory overload – beyond threshold typically via the a-rhythmic and discordant . . . [t]he indigenous trance dance tradition is typically complex rhythmic and poly-rhythmic (multiple variations on a base rhythm). [It is] rarely, perhaps never a-rhythmic and discordant. (Spencer, 1996: 1-2)

Above all, ‘indigenous music’ is esteemed because it is not “amplified, pre-recorded, technical and machine made” (ibid: 2). Genuine trance, it is suggested, “can be explored without any power at all. Indigenous and tribal people have been doing it for over 40,000 years” at no cost (ibid). And it is festal-tribes such as those constituted at Spiral and Laceweb villages (located in ConFest’s ‘quiet zone’) that are perceived to facilitate authentic trance experiences. At the Spiral village, in a drug, alcohol and generator-free community performance zone, drumming impresarios and skilful rhythm collectives converge to generate hypnotic pulse “African trance dance style” (Prion, Spiral co-ordinator), launching dancers into states of ecstasy.

Spiral is, according to Prion, about recreating “sacred space in our community as a whole”. Facilitated by a collective, many of whom are in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions and broken relationships, the village features a medicine wheel, a broad ring of sticks and rocks with a centrally positioned pole functioning as a “dance, drumming celebration space” (ibid). According to Daemian – who first organised such a ritual space at the ConFest held at Bredbo (New South Wales) in 1977 – the medicine wheel is a “ritual healing circle . . . based in the common lore of virtually every tribal culture and every timeless spiritual culture” (Daemian, 1987:5). At Birdlands (near Tocumwal 95/96), the Spiral medicine wheel, purposefully fashioned to resemble Indigenous North American and Celtic practices of contriving “sacred space”, was “initiated into the four directions [in] an opening ceremony” (Prion). Such a space is designed to effect healing via

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“primal drumming” (ibid). As Prion comments, “the symbol for the spiral is the snake – and that’s working with the kundalini and the primal drumming is working down in the base to get people connected to the earth, in touch with themselves”. Such percussion also provided the soundscape for firewalk rituals at ConFests in 1996 and 1997.

At sites like Spiral, African drums (such as the dombek, which is often used as an accompaniment to belly dancing), clap sticks and the didjeridu (a form of “appropriate technology” according to Neuenfeldt, [1998: 80]) were deployed within the context of an Indigenous North American-derived medicine wheel, ostensibly to augment an authentic trance experience. While “tribal and indigenous” music technologies have been argued to possess a “heart energy” (Spencer, 1996) celebrated as ‘real’ and ‘human’, a ‘sampladelic’ soundscape reliant upon electricity (and diesel) and sophisticated sound-sampling and mixing technologies has been viewed as artificial, a contrivance, at best, virtual. While sounds produced by drums, didjeridu and the human voice – championed at popular workshops called ‘Harmonic Choirs’ – are perceived to be immediate and ‘human’; the feeling is that synthesised or simulated sounds tend towards the impure.

Moreover, it is the primordial authority assigned to indigenous sound technologies which is perceived to enable legitimate transcendence. There is a sense that players and dancers can tap into a timelessness unavailable through digitalised sound reproduction. Accordingly, to “call trance induced by noise bombardment from electronic machines ‘ancient’ is nonsense” (Les, DTE email-group 27/11/97). By contrast, an altered state of consciousness triggered by hand drums and the drone-like pulsation of the didjeridu, perhaps within the ‘tribal’ and ‘ritual’ context of a medicine wheel, is subject to less suspicion and scrutiny since the putative primitivity – and relative immediacy - of such media suggests them as ‘natural’ trance inducers.¹² Indigenous instruments and their acoustics – essentialised as ‘pure’ and ‘natural’ – lend legitimacy to a performance, sanctifying space, sacralising the experience and fomenting participant’s spiritual maturity. Furthermore, ‘tribal and indigenous’ musics at Spiral, Laceweb and other enclaves within the designated ‘quiet zone’, are believed to enhance community.

While acoustic musicality, itself regarded a ‘healing-art’, is regarded as stimulating a localised, empathetic sociality, pundits are unwilling to permit ‘Trance Dance’ – or what they deride as techno – commensurate value. Indeed, the latter is deemed to have “little to do with communal bonding during the dance”:

The indigenous communal rejoicing trance dance has a preponderance of rhythmical up beats. People move into the dance connected to the community. The community, as community, pulses together in entering and sharing other realms of experiencing and understanding together . . . My personal experience of techno trance is profound dissociation from self and from others. It is not for me a ‘community building’ experience. (Spencer, 1996: 2)

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This is apparently unlike Laceweb (co-ordinated by Les Spencer), which, with its “celebration of play” and workshop space, explicitly accommodates drumming, didjeridu and dance along with “community healing action” (promotional material). It is thus promoted as a ‘real’ space to enjoin community – an ‘organic’ refuge from the reputedly cold, selfish, ‘noise’ of techno.

In addition to this, the received aural character of the techno assemblage has provoked some extraordinary reactions. For instance, frustrated by the way techno music has denied him his ‘basic human rights’ (to sleep, to choose, to be consulted), for one passionate opponent, electronic musicians are imagined to employ sinister ‘methods’ like those used in:

. . . *the interrogation of prisoners to destabilise and disorient . . .*
 [Indeed] *the way Techno has been done would be illegal under the Geneva Convention if ConFest were a prisoner of war camp!!! DTE must, therefore, “prohibit techno Nazis”.* (DTE email-group 30/8/98)

Other commentators are disposed to e-mail flaming the trance techno scene for the observed and assumed pathological ramifications of illicit drug (ecstasy and acid) consumption. In a microcosmic reflection of the wider societal ‘war on drugs’, the milieu is demonised as dangerous and seductive¹³. Echoing the anti-drug campaign slogan, one member of the DTE email list even uses “just say no to techno” in his signature file. Indeed, commentary is often paternalistic, warning of impending crises, and echoing the media-manufactured moral panics surrounding acid-house raves in the UK and their derivatives in Australia (Homan, 1998)¹⁴. Take the following predicted scenario:

Moama, ConFest, young people, techno, ecstasy, 40 degree heat, dehydration, death in the darkness and found in late afternoon, not sleeping it off, but already stiff. Headline “Five young teenagers dead at ‘Go to Heaven in 1997 Spiritual Festival’”. (Spencer, 1996: 1)

Although not in the same league as ‘Killer Cult’, ‘In the grip of E’ or ‘Rave to the Grave’¹⁵, the appeal to moral sensibility here, nevertheless, relies upon sensationalised concerns. For one contributor to the DTE News, who “felt dizzy” just looking at “the electronic set up” at Toc IV, “techno . . . can trigger epilepsy”. Indeed, kids are deemed to fall victim to this decadent and diabolical dance assemblage: “[o]ur young people are being misguided . . . [we must] get back Down To Earth” (Artemis, 1996: 5).

Another popular view is that electronic music attracts ‘the wrong crowd’ – hedonistic, insensitive, threatening. As techno-infidels trespass across their tranquil idyll, ConFest, or the significance critics invest in the event, is imperiled (cf. St John, 2001). The techno carnival is received as an incursion upon the ashram of ConFest – desecrating its purity, despoiling its ‘naturalism’¹⁶, inducing artificial ecstasy. To prevent such an aural and pharmaceutical menace from “endangering the sacred” (Sibley, 1997), the DTE ‘parent culture’ have been

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preoccupied with its identification, containment and prohibition – boundary maintenance strategies solidifying a community of opponents.

TRIBAL TRANCE

In response to “some of the old ConFest farts [who] think we’re just dicken’ around doing fuck all” (Krusty), Trance habitués hold that the experience possesses a communal depth, spirituality and legitimacy of its own. As Krusty contends, despite techno’s dearth of the kind of sophisticated stories Aboriginal peoples exchanged when “there was corroboree all over the landscape”, what adherents are doing is principally “the same today . . . coming together and dancing . . . communicating through dance”. Trance Dance is then perceived to trigger the unifying effervescence attributed to corroborees. Effecting an “empathetic sociality” of its own, according to Mardo, the electronic beat “brings every other individual around you into that same beat, brings everyone to that same level, and brings them together like a tribe”.

Before discussing the perceived effect of the music itself, however, there is need to give some discursive latitude to the lifestyle tribalism of the trance event – that is, the commonalities of value and substance which render enthusiasts’ desire to be together even more achievable. As a liminal rendezvous of ‘possees’, ‘sound systems’ and counter-tribes orbiting the contemporaneous trance scene, Tek Know is a proximate node in the ConFest environment. Attracting bohemians and activists alike, inhabitants are allied in their disenchantment with the parent culture. Here, the “elective centre” (Cohen *et al.*, 1987) of the disaffected is a festal-tribe, and the discourse and practice of habitués reveals intra-tribal commitment to, and/or sympathies for, ecological consciousness, Aboriginal land rights, new spiritualities, self-actualisation, consciousness-alterant usage, a carnal aesthetic and, of course, new technologies.

The Tek Know enclave signals a developed relationship between trance techno and alternative lifestyle tribalism, a contiguity which has solid foundations in the UK’s new techno-traveller (McKay, 1996; Collin, 1997; Reynolds, 1998), or ‘zippy’ (Ferguson, 1995) milieus like Spiral Tribe with their ‘terra-technic’ anarcho-mysticism and, more immediately, Australia’s feral sound systems like Vibe Tribe and Oms not Bombs (Strong and Strong, 2000). The connection was forged at clandestine free parties held in derelict warehouses in the UK; at idyllic, wild and venerated sites such as downs, beaches, henges, forests, bush and desert¹⁷; and in exotic destinations exemplified by Goa, India (hence ‘Goa-Trance’). The popular phrase ‘psychedelic trance’ intimates a further connection¹⁸, as does the hippy-derived appropriation of ‘tribal’, ‘ethnic’ or ‘primitive’ imagery and style customary to trance milieus (cf. Hutson, 1999). The alliance of semi-nomadic anarcho-hippies and techno-tribalism can be further described in local spiritual-transcendental events like the annual Earth Dance (a synchronised global benefit event for Tibet), technopagan full moon ‘doofs’ held by “tribedelic . . . feral hippy frequency cults” in the Northern Rivers region of

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NSW and in the bush near state capitals (Castle, 2000: 147) and Victoria's Tranceplant eco-reclamation parties. An eco/techno alliance is further detectable in determinably confrontational events like the techno 'terra-ist' occupation of metropolitan traffic lanes performed by 'Reclaim the Streets' adherents (Jordan, 1998; Luckman, 2001) and descent upon threatened heritage sites (e.g. the Goongerah Forest festivals and the Earthdream 2000 pilgrimage).

Although Tek Know is remote from the commercialisation characteristic of techno-culture, and the style restrictions and exclusivity of club culture or clubbing (Thornton, 1995; Malbon, 1998), visual style is certainly not ignored. While participants ascribe to the most sartorially insane body-rigs and outlandish adornments, if there exists an haute couture, it is demonstrably anti-consumerist. While the relationship between musical taste (trance) and visual style is not "quintessentially fixed" (Bennett, 1999: 614) – since Tek Know habitués are primarily bricoleurs nostalgic for a panoply of styles and cultures – a homological conveyance of a neo-1960s style (and thereby ethos) is most prominent.

Despite conspicuous display, the trance dance floor, like that at Tek Know, is a space which offers participants the possibility of 'dissolving' into the body – one's own, and that of others. One can be induced into an ecstasy of selflessness and feel profoundly connected to those who are on the same 'track', who share the experience. Surrendering to dance technologies (e.g. the music, lighting and perhaps alterants) occasions the dissolution of ego, or the disassemblage of otherwise requisite egoic proclivities among dancers. Krusty is at pains to differentiate psy-trance from other genres like drum 'n' bass or jungle. Rather than being "a cold, repetitive, technical kind of thing [it possesses] . . . a fabric of intellect, colour . . . nuance [and] a lot of heart":

. . . working from the body [you can] allow yourself to move into a state of bliss, or, if you like, ecstasy. And that's what dance does. And . . . the heartbeat drumming, which is the bottom end of the techno, the 'doof', starts to sink and align the whole energy system of the body to a rhythm . . . So you really can let go of a lot of your cognitive presence and just allow yourself to be open. And, in a ritual sense, if you're coming into the space and people are energised either through the dance or the energy from working with psychedelics or shamanistic herbs . . . you get a special energy that starts to lift. There's some therapy going on there in a way, because people can really release. (Krusty)

For Krusty and others, trance dance, therefore, can induce trance states – and thus possesses healing potential. It is not difficult to perceive how the programmed bass-line – typically a metronomic 4/4 beat – in dance music may induce forms of effective impact associated with transition (cf. Needham, 1967), especially as low bass frequencies "enter the body", its visceral rhythms (arguably) approximating the maternal heartbeat (cf. Rietveld, 1998a: 148). Blissful, ecstatic and transformative experiences are frequently declared – the claims of enthusiasts

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corresponding to those identified by Hutson (1999: 63): “open-mindedness”, “improved consciousness”, “inner peace” or “spiritual transformation”. Yet such an experience is decidedly collective. Posting a retro-Durkheimian perspective, Shell writes:

Once you've experienced the collective trance state brought on by dancing to repetitive beats in the bush, you begin to understand the collective consciousness that develops between people around you.
(1998: nd)

The experience is akin to that which Melechi has described as a Dionysian “ritual of disappearance” where one can “disaccumulate culture” and “hide from the spectre of a former self” (1993: 37). In this de-individualised realm: “nobody is, but everybody belongs” (ibid). At ‘Rainbow Dreaming’, at the Trance Dance village at Tocumwal Easter 1996, it was envisaged that a “new tribe” would form: “all colours, all races, all as one” (from promotional material). In this temporary trance community, where “the body moves beyond the spectacle of ‘the pose’” (Melechi, 1993: 33); where the penchant for “whole body vibrations . . . allow no hierarchising or privileging of any given body part” (Gore, 1997: 64); where females are rarely constituted as subjects for the male gaze; a quality of safe anonymity was experienced. Sharing such an experience, an intimate fellowship was potentiated between dancers whereby standard markers of separation based on gender, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, were dissolved – if only briefly¹⁹. Constitutive of a “desubjectified state of something like rapture . . . a communal state of euphoria” (Jordan, 1995: 129)²⁰, this temporary ‘fluoro-Rainbow tribe’ was an ideal candidate for Turner’s spontaneous *communitas*. Yet, while participants may achieve momentary communality in such enclaves, this was not, to draw upon Pini’s observations (1997: 124-5), just a collection of human bodies, but a “mind/body/technology assemblage” – perhaps a *techno-communitas*. At Tek Know and ‘Rainbow Dreaming’, with the use of advanced audio technology, smoke, stroboscopes, psychotropic decor, fractal slide projections, fire sculptures and industrial-art installations, an instance of “an erosion of the limits between the corporeal and the technological” (ibid: 125) was realised.

SACRED DANCE: RECLAMATION AND SACRALISATION

Reclamational and re-enchantment themes permeate the trance party scene, and they are certainly no less prevalent at ConFest. According to its techno-pagan architect Krusty, the purpose of *Rainbow Dreaming* was to “create a sacred space for people to find their own sacred dance for healing themselves and the planet”. In promotional literature prepared by Krusty it became apparent that this sacred space would be established via inventive reclamation – reclaiming a putative past. Appealing to atavistic demands, the literature stated that:

The all night dance ritual is a memory that runs deep within us all, a memory that takes us back to a time when people had respect for

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our great Mother Earth and each other. A time when we came together as one tribe united in spirit. We understood the cycles of nature and the power of the elements. We danced around fires, we chanted and we drummed, invoking the great spirit to empower ourselves and our community.

It thus ignited nostalgia for connectivity with nature and fellow humans, connections that are thought to have been severed or forgotten. There is little doubt about the causes of such a circumstance:

Then one day a new force began to take control and these great rites of community empowerment were suppressed. Our sacred sites where we once danced all night into ecstatic trance had been taken over by a new order of worship.

Sympathy for the imagined ecstatic predilection of a beleaguered pre-Judeo-Christian religiosity is thus expressed. Yet, though a “new order” had deflated “the spirit of the people”, history must run its course:

. . . gradually the spirit of the people would return as they recognised the sacred power of trance, once again opening up the channels to the Great Spirit . . . The temples may have changed but the sacred earth they dance upon is still the same.

Sacralisation and remembering via ‘trance’ are possible again. Trance dance, regarded as “an ancient Shamanic practice which invites Spirit to embody us; to heal us through spiritual ecstasy”, is authorised as a practice employed by indigenous people worldwide “for over 40,000 years”²¹. And, Krusty along with other ‘techno-shamans’ and esoteric engineers would use digital audio technology, computer generated projections, conceptual and ambient lighting, and scrap metal installation sculptures to create a sacred space for a “modern day ritual”:

. . . where we can join as one tribe to journey deep into trance states just as our ancestors did long ago . . . This will be a shamanic healing journey in the traditional sense, with people tuning in en masse to the dance energy: working from the physical to access the emotional transcending to the spiritual.

In the “futurist pre-modernism” (Rietveld, 1998b: 261) of trance dance, an imagined past is reclaimed to assign meaning to the present – an all night dance ritual. And the desire to (re)connect with primal ‘roots’, ‘the Great Spirit’, ‘nature’ and fellow liminaries is facilitated via state-of-the-art technology, a fact which renders these cyber-primitivists a rather controversial constituency within the ConFest ‘counterscape’.

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REBELS, DIASPORAS AND HYBRIDS

As various claimants have become embroiled in hostilities over the meaning and purpose of ConFest, several outcomes have been observed. As was noted earlier, acts of intolerance gave life to recalcitrant 'doofs' within ConFest's precincts. Reacting to affronts to their spatial and identity practices and refusing attempts to regulate their lifestyle pursuits, techno tribalists have been demonstrably insubordinate and seditious. This was the case with the Gum Lodge beach incident, and was apparent at Tocumwal New Year 98/99 when a 'rebel' sound system powered by a car battery pumped low dbs in a clearing near the eco-radical Forest village (which was set up adjacent to the 'quiet zone'). Such bands of "sonic squatters" (Balliger, 1995: 230) represent the sudden reappearance of 'the disappeared'.

Internal disquiet over amplified electronica has also generated a steady exodus of participants over Easter and New Year. While performers, healing artists, young families and others 'troubled' by techno (the 'acoustic diaspora') have often emigrated to Earth Haven²² for a more peaceful experience, sound systems and dance enthusiasts (the 'electronic diaspora') have demonstrated their preference for earthcore. Indeed earthcore, Australia's largest independent 'electronic music and lifestyle festival', has been the most significant beneficiary of the ConFest music wars. By New Year 1998/99, these departures had a noticeable impact – with ConFest attendance levels halved from the previous year. In response to the dis-banding of ConFest, a decidedly anti-techno ConFest Committee, attempting to appease the acoustic diasporics, decided upon an 'unplugged' event for Easter 1999.

Although the Easter 1999 ConFest was a successful non-amplified event, the anticipated return to previous attendance levels – achieved through the exclusion of amplified, specifically electronic, musicians – was not attained²³. Prohibiting amplified music did not appear to be the solution. It was likely that many ConFesters, seeking respite from the regulation of their lifestyle, had 'disappeared themselves' to earthcore. Yet, since earthcore was only 2.5 kilometres distant from ConFest that Easter, such disappearance proved paradoxical. Indeed, as Krusty had by then been appointed co-director of earthcore, as the bass from the main sound system was clearly audible at ConFest, and with some participants commuting between events via a courtesy bus; one was presented with the distinct sensation that *Tek Know*, to the chagrin of anti-techno stalwarts, had hardly 'disappeared' at all.

Finally, in response to escalating tensions, and motivated by a desire to achieve an integral community, various members of DTE and its ConFest Committee have deemed it necessary to band together in order to resolve conflicts through compromise. Raven is one such advocate of this approach. For him, ConFest is:

. . . where people come to express themselves no matter what their background or tastes are. And I believe we should cater as much as possible to any new ideas . . . and help young people to get out there and be creative . . . I don't think we should fight it. But we should

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also encourage the techno people to come and have a look at the sort of thing you can do with drums and didj, and bits of wood banging together, and bits of metal banged together. Because I believe they can incorporate more live art into the techno performances, take it down a notch on electric power, and put some human power in there . . . I think we can educate them – they can run on lower power, more efficiently.

Indeed, as an autonomous community, despite the dissonance, ConFest possesses a unique tolerance for diversity, an organic capacity to forge practical working solutions. Amplified electronic music has retained a presence in the festive community in the late 1990s, albeit in rhizomatic adaptations. On the one hand, it is widely perceived that trance techno can be accommodated on site²⁴. DTE has acknowledged that sites where amplified music can be acoustically separated from ‘quiet areas’ are preferable. On the other hand, by applying for lower budgets, adopting ‘appropriate technology’, and through processes of fusion and amalgamation, dance music facilitators have demonstrated a co-operative approach.

Conversion to wise energy usage through the employment of a solar powered, soft tech assemblage (at CIDA, Gum Lodge 1997/98), and the concomitant decrease in decibel output, have represented one area of compromise. Another important move has been towards the provision of interactive ‘hands on’ workshops²⁵ and the encouragement of amateur DJs and combined techno-acoustic performances (incorporating live drummers and didgeriduists) at events such as ‘Hybrid’ (in Easter 1998 and New Year 1998/99) – a collaboration which, by virtue of having a “human feel” rather than just “having automated rhythms” (‘Hybrid’s’ 1998/99 budget proposal)²⁶ – has actualised a music-dance experience that, while not without its detractors, has been widely held to be more ‘appropriate’, ‘live’ and ‘folky’.

CONCLUSION

As the row between resident music publics demonstrates, ConFest occasions a collision of sacralities and a clash of communities. Rival festal-tribes mobilise their physical and intellectual resources to delineate the event’s acceptable parameters, and thereby articulate contrary versions of the community. Competitive promotions have been launched wherein ‘techno’ is wished out of existence or ‘Trance Dance’ is highlighted as an integral component of the total experience. On the one hand, for one reason or another, trance techno is regarded as a form of ‘internal colonialism’. With physical, aesthetic and moral objections ranged against it, it is a violation. For ‘techno’-phobes, acoustic and, more to the point, ‘indigenous’ music technologies are valorised as ‘real’ communal triggers and ‘natural’ spiritual media, amplifying the sacred; while electronic technologies and musicians are devalorised as conductors of discord – a discrimination justifying curtailment and prohibition. On the other hand, for

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habitués, trance dance is a highly valued experience with a logic and sacrality of its own. Enthusiasts, too, enlist valorised indigenous signifiers to validate the experience. According to techno-narratives, the range of technologies upon which trance dance relies enables reclamation of an imagined pagan past. And the desire for its performance has triggered a repertoire of tactics resistant to exclusionary strategies.

ConFest's melees over musical authenticity have generated a spectrum of results. Although this marginal maelstrom has produced plenty of casualties – there being both elective and assisted 'disappearances' – inter-tribal goodwill has ensured resolutions and appropriate adaptations. While a politics of authenticity has necessitated internal disharmony, inciting the evacuation of purists, 'adversaries' within this autonomous event-space continue to seek alliances, to forge a temporary community founded upon co-operation and compromise. Indeed, the 'deterritorialised' acculturation in musical performance and boundary ambiguity exemplified by 'Hybrid', evokes the 'triumph of community' of which Anthony Cohen (1985) speaks. It is apparent that, although advocates of disparate musics give expression to their differences; in this case at least, recalling Cohen "they suppose themselves to be more like each other than like the members of other communities" (1985: 21).

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ENDNOTES

1. Possessing unique characteristics of their own, these include the international Rainbow Gatherings, England's Glastonbury Festival, the US techno-pagan Burning Man Festival, and the Australian folk-derived festival at Woodford (previously Maleny) Queensland.
2. CIDA – Concerned Individuals for Direct Action.
3. By contrast to the relative fixity and longevity of pre-modern or 'traditional' tribes, such postmodern or 'neo-tribes' are temporary, unstable, and reflect a populist movement tending toward rediscovering "mutual aid, conviviality, commensality [and] professional support" (Maffesoli, 1996: 69).
4. Present from the late 1980s, the Music village, it is argued, constitutes a site for 'stars' to entertain relatively passive audiences, for billed 'artists' to be the subject of adoration. Criticism parallels the observed trajectory of the Fire Event (Lewis and Dowsey-Magog, 1993) at Maleny where individual genius was seen to have triumphed over a deeply communal process. According to critics, Music is little more than a transference of the pub scene to the bush. Here, what Les Spencer refers to as "staged music" (1995) sanctions passive spectatorship. By contrast, accommodating what Spencer calls "communal music" (ibid), ConFest's Fire Circle enervates the dissolution of performer/audience distinctions. Fire Circles, sites of mass participation hand drumming marathons, have

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been particularly resonant sites for the expression and maintenance of a ConFest folk ethos.

5. The term is used by Krusty, aka DJ/producer Paul Gaffney, co-director of the independent electronic music festival, earthcore, and co-owner of Melbourne's GreenAnt label.
6. As a sonorous and social experience, the roots of the ConFest trance party lie in UK 'acid house', itself infused by elements of New York's disco ('garage') scene with its DJ aesthetic, the Afro-American techno of Detroit and Chicago's queer 'house' scene (all influenced by avant garde European electronic dance music of the 1970s). As much a party (an all night hedonistic 'dancesphere' enhanced by the drug ecstasy), as a set of production and playing techniques (sampling, sequencing and mixing) made possible by the availability of a series of cheap and accessible technologies; 'acid house' was activated by the attempt to "relive the jouissance" experienced by British tourists on the Spanish Balearic island of Ibiza (Melechi 1993: 30) – the nadir of the so called 'Second Summer of Love' (ie 1988).
7. Clan Analogue is a national collective of electronic artists who facilitated 'PolyTechnic' workshops involving teaching synthesiser skills. Rather than playing automated rhythms, their idea was to generate electronic music with "a human feel". With one person playing a base 'groove' and other ConFesters encouraged to 'tweak' a number of synthesisers, all constantly monitored and mixed to maintain "respectful musicality", they boasted that the overall effect may have been "the most "live" electronic music in Australia" (from interview with 'Spaceship' Joe, Clan co-ordinator, and budget proposal).
8. The collaboration took place as a result of music budget limitations enforced by a small band of DTE techno opponents. Drawing attention to this episode, director Richard Martin contended that a form of 'generationalism', such as that described in Mark Davis' *Gangland* (1997), characterises the way "a particular class of volunteers, who call themselves 'the workers', operate to actively squeeze out the possibility of the Trance Dance workshops" by limiting the village component of the ConFest budget such that funding the music stage or techno becomes unfeasible (Richard Martin, DTE email-group 13/8/98).
9. Curiously, as it is subject to interventions and regulations, trance dance becomes a 'ritual of resistance'. This parallels circumstances in Britain where the state's repressive licensing laws and draconian Criminal Justice Act (CJA) of 1994, effectively politicised dance culture (Rietveld, 1998b: 255). For example, under sustained police pressure, the Blackburn warehouse parties of the early 1990s mutated from entertainment to movement (Hemment, 1998: 218). Historical precedents are easy to locate. As Stallybrass and White convey (1986: 16), since the Renaissance:

. . . carnivals, fairs, popular games and festivals were very swiftly 'politicized' by the very attempt made on the part of local authorities to eliminate them. The dialectic of antagonism frequently turned rituals into resistance at the moment of intervention by the higher powers, even when no overt oppositional element had been present before.
10. Yet, this is less than straightforward as disappearance may be the result of enthusiasts 'disappearing themselves', or being actively 'disappeared' by antagonists.

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11. An objection paralleling that of rock patrons and aficionados who venerate 'live' musical 'happenings', expressing their contempt for "disc cultures" (Thornton, 1995: 8) and the non-vocal textural prioritisations of 'dance' music (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999: 68-72).
12. For relevant discussions on the didjeridu's reputation as a transcendence device, see Neuenfeldt (1994: 90-2) and Sherwood (1997: 147-9).
13. The excesses of 'techno culture' is an issue skilfully narrativised by Reynolds who writes that the "pharmacological reality" of the "post-rave" (a combination of "fake ecstasy, cocktails and tolerance of E's effects") sees a host of zombie-eyed and burnt-out punters attempting to relive earlier peaks (1997: 104-5).
14. Indeed, DTE's attention to techno can be compared to the moral outrage that fuelled the Tory government's commitment to legislation (the Criminal Justice Act) criminalising free raves (and new travellers) in rural Britain. The condensed topography (of Britain and ConFest), and the concomitant increase in the likelihood of spatial transgression, are similar factors in both cases.
15. British tabloid headlines (Thornton, 1994: 183).
16. Similar arguments are found within the far from homogeneous dance music scene itself. As Reynolds observes, the culture is "a fractious confederacy of genres and sub-genres, metropolitan cliques and provincial populisms, purisms and hybrids" (1998: 416). He explains something of the disputation between producers of 'hardcore' techno (especially the Dutch-derived 'gabbahouse' which sometimes clocks in over 200bpm) and 'intelligent' techno ('deep' and 'progressive' house, and 'trance'), and between exponents of 'jungle' and 'drum 'n bass' genres. In both cases, the earlier genres are considered to have become too 'dark' and 'brutal', their scenes too aggressive and 'druggy'. Both latter genres have attempted to 'clean' genre-scenes or revive roots through infusions of 'jazz/funk' "naturalism" (Reynolds, 1998).
17. Selecting 'dancescapes' in possession of significant natural and/or cultural heritage value serves to sacralise, and thereby authenticate, the dance experience.
18. As Cole and Hannan (1997: 11) point out, the structure of trance music itself is influenced by one key component of the subcultural assemblage – the acid trip: the "wild chaotic noise elements in the texture of the music . . . together with the constant use of filter sweeping and other signal fluctuating affects" are the aural equivalents of the visual aspects of the psychedelic LSD.
19. Although the constituency was almost largely Anglo.
20. An experience of empathy is often intensified by the rave utopiate ecstasy (MDMA). Reynolds (1998: 408), using a passage from John Moore's *Anarchy and Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days*, intimates that the effect of MDMA resonates with the 'peak' of Mystery rites:

The initiate becomes androgynous, unconcerned with the artificial distinctions of gender . . . Encountering total saturation, individuals transcend their ego boundaries and their mortality in successive waves of ecstasy.

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21. The universalistic property of Shamanism is thus evoked to legitimate the experience. The trance-narrative avers the ultimacy that indigeneity – both native landscape and peoples – holds for many contemporary dance enthusiasts. Indigenisation (or Orientalisation) in dance narratives, event promotions, decor, and sampling together with the presence of planned and impromptu acoustic musicians like hand drum percussionists (e.g. djembe, tabla) and didgeriduists at dance parties, effectively sanctifies space and sacralises experience. And it achieves this in ways which parallel New Age evocations and performative practices.
22. An alternative lifestyle festival modelled on ConFest. Spiral is one significant Earth Haven immigrant.
23. Attendance was below 2,000 – halved, again, from the previous Easter. As ConFest is DTE's sole source of income, ticket sales are crucial. Financially, the event was a disaster for the public co-operative.
24. A view supported by a DTE survey conducted in 1997 where two thirds of the respondents supported the presence of techno – albeit with noise and time restrictions.
25. Instruments employed included several early Roland analogue synthesisers and drum machines. Used to produce early house music, Japanese instruments like the Roland TB-303 bass synthesiser and TR-808 drum machine, are well in demand as 'warm' and 'simple' computers (cf. Rietveld, 1998a: 126-7).
26. Hybrid incorporates "all technology without bias (from fire to wood to wire and electronics)" (from village budget proposal).

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