

Yesterday's party

Restrictions on venues and concerns about drug use have aided in the collapse of the electronic music scene, which boomed in the 1990s

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Somehow, somewhere along the way, electronic music events got a bad rap. Commonly referred to as raves, the events do not happen as frequently as they once did, leaving those with a love for loud electronic music struggling to ensure these events can live on.

The last all-ages electronic music event in Portland took place Feb. 12, and it didn't go quite as the promoter had planned.

Ernest Ryan had been planning a two-room electronic music event for Friday, Feb. 11, but lost the venue he was going to use less than three weeks before the event was to take place. The Internet message board for the Northwest electronic music scene, nwtekn.org, erupted in cries for something to be done because, as one poster put it, "Portland needs this party."

Ryan said he was lucky enough to be able to use another venue that had its own insurance policy because, had he not, the party would surely have been canceled.

Lost venues and other complications are to be expected in a scene built around DJs setting up turntables in abandoned warehouses and calling it a rave, and Ryan, who DJs under the name DJ Wiggles, said the current silence of the electronic music scene is part of a cycle he has seen during his years as a DJ and a party promoter.

But some fear this silence could soon become deafening, as event promoters across the Northwest continue to scramble to ensure electronic music events can take place, despite the heavy economic and societal factors that some say weigh against them.

Music, drugs and money

Ryan said the decrease in popularity of electronic music events has left a core group that is involved with events purely out of love for the music.

Jed Black, who threw parties in the Portland and Salem areas for several years and DJs under the name Elektrokid, agreed.

"The people who are in going to these things are kind of like the die-hard kids who have been going forever," Black said.

Media reports in the past few years have depicted electronic music events as safe havens for drug dealers, and the deaths of two teenagers at Portland events in the late '90s and early 2000 brought a level of public outcry that did not previously exist, Ryan said.

"The deaths definitely did some damage," Ryan said. "You start doing something that supposedly threatens the livelihood of kids, and that's a huge deal to people."

But event promoters say the main purpose of electronic music events has always been to play and listen to electronic music, and drug use is something that goes along with any music scene.

"In the rave culture it's more accepted, and it's more open," said Zach Gibson, who operates Next Level Events in Seattle and is known throughout the Northwest as DJ Ryle. "Drugs are a part of any culture, and when you have a subculture like rave culture, things are going to get exaggerated."

Ryan said he doesn't feel drug use is as



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Turntables are a necessary addition at any electronic music event, though many DJs are experimenting with other instruments like CDJs. CDJs perform like turntables but function like CD players, allowing performers to incorporate songs they've written into their sets as most budding songwriters are not able to get their songs pressed on vinyl.

prominent in the Portland electronic music scene as it once was, partly because of the attention given to events and the decrease in event popularity and attendance.

"The raves have always been kind of an escape for younger kids," he said. "You could go and immerse yourself with a thousand other kids. The containment level just wasn't as feasible as it is now."

Black agreed, adding that the decrease in popularity of events could be a result of the "grotesque amounts of ecstasy" being consumed during the peak of the scene's popularity in the '90s.

"Mass ecstasy use probably contributed to why a lot of the younger kids got completely burnt out on (electronic music events)," Black said.

Gibson said the ratio of drug users to non-drug users at Seattle events has remained about the same, but that the ratio is probably fairly close to the ratios in other areas of American culture.

"Granted drugs aren't as freely available as they used to be; I also think they're not as good as they used to be," Gibson said.

But the Seattle scene is much different than Portland, Black said, and the level of drug use in the cities is incomparable.

Drug use has gone down in Portland, Ryan said, and many involved in throwing the events that made up so much of the Portland electronic music scene in the 1990s have stopped out of pure disinterest or because of financial problems.

"The first thing that killed the scene was the money got pulled out from under it," Ryan said.

Personal loans and insurance plans were much easier to obtain a few years ago, Ryan said, and both those things are important to an electronic music event's success.

"It's definitely a vicious cycle to where promoters can't spend the money that's needed for a good production, and the kids that go out wanting something really good don't get what they want," Ryan said.

Portland's electronic music scene reached its zenith in the mid-1990s, Ryan said, with more than 1,000 people attending parties nearly every weekend.

"You really had the budget to do a good production because people were coming," Ryan said.

The popularity of events in Portland inspired many people to try their hand at throwing shows in Eugene, said Coral Breeding, who has been involved with events in Eugene for several years, and DJs under the name Juicebox.

"It was back when there were lines going down the street and around the block," Breeding said. "It really stimulated a lot of growth down here."

Breeding said he sees one of the main problems for promoters trying to throw parties in Eugene as being the lack of available venues, which he said is a result of the financial problems event throwers experience and of the reputation for drug use and flagrant disobedience that electronic music events have garnered during the years.

Black said he is no longer interested in throwing events because of the huge financial

risk that now comes with doing so.

"The financial risk involved to throw a significant rave in a warehouse just outweighs the benefits," Black said. "A lot of promoters feel like they've been benefactors to the rave scene long enough."

The RAVE Act

Rumors continue to circulate in the electronic music scene about the applicability of the Reduce Americans Vulnerability to Ecstasy Act, which holds promoters who throw events where drugs are consumed responsible for the illegal consumption.

Breeding said the RAVE Act has yet to be seen as a threat to event promoters throughout the state.

The act had difficulty making it through Congress and eventually passed after it was attached to the Amber Alert bill, a bill that deals with child abductions and the sexual exploitation of children.

Breeding said the language of the act is so vague, its applicability to the electronic music scene is minimal.

"It's got a bunch of loopholes that don't really work for it," Breeding said.

Ryan agreed. He said the RAVE Act does not factor in to most promoter's decisions and is largely irrelevant to the Portland scene because there are bigger cities with larger electronic music scenes that the federal government would target before focusing on Portland.

"Unless you're a drug-dealing promoter, you have no worries in Oregon," Ryan said. "If anyone has to worry about the RAVE Act, I think it's the promoters in the cities outside of Portland."

Gibson said the RAVE Act is not something event promoters in Seattle worry about because it's not enforced and the chances of it being enforced are slim.

Gibson said he does more than most event promoters in Seattle to ensure a drug-free event by searching attendees upon entry and having professional security guards at every event.

"I do everything I can to curb (drug use), but at the same time there's only so much you can do," he said.

What does the future hold?

Opinions differ on where the electronic music event scene is headed, but most involved agree something needs to be done to ensure people who want to listen to loud electronic music with lots of other people in a party-like setting are able to do just that.

Ryan said he started going to electronic music events more than 10 years ago and has seen the popularity of the events rise and fall.

"It did the exact same thing that's happening now; it almost died," Ryan said of the music scene. "This is the second rotation and cycle of the scene."

Ryan agreed that event-goers and event-throwers are as much to blame for the financial difficulties that have marred it in past years.

"If people were more willing to help lend a hand and throw down to make the scene better and not better themselves or their

position in the scene things would be a lot better," Ryan said. "I think that's almost more than the money thing."

Gibson said one of the main problems with Seattle events is that some of the people putting them on don't understand the amount of work that goes into a quality show and put on events that do nothing but "continue to contribute to ruining the scene."

Gibson said the initiation process in the electronic music scene has also changed.

"A few years ago when you got initiated into the party scene you had someone to walk you through it," Gibson said. "Now people just go and they have no knowledge of the history of the scene; they have no etiquette of how to go to a party."

Gibson said the future of the Seattle electronic music scene lies in the club scene. Every other major city made the switch from all-ages electronic music events to 21-and-over clubs a few years ago, Gibson said, but the existence of NAF Studios, a legendary venue in Seattle that hosted events every Friday and Saturday for countless years, allowed all-ages events to happen in Seattle years after they disappeared from other cities.

NAF hosted its last electronic music event on Sept. 27, 2002, and Gibson said the only way the Seattle scene can survive economic and societal factors without an all-ages venue like NAF is to move into the 21-and-over clubs.

"We're continuing to have the same problems that we've been having, and at this point, no one is stepping up to make things better," Gibson said.

Gibson said the switch to the club scene is an inevitable one that needs to happen but "Seattle is being very stubborn about making the transition."

But Black and Ryan said what's going on in Seattle is not relevant to the Portland scene because of the differences in demographics and the number of people interested in electronic music in the two cities.

"I personally don't think that the club scene has anything to do with the rave scene in terms of raving," Black said. "Anything that's centered around alcohol and materialism like the club scene is it's bound to create a dichotomy between the two scenes."

For the Portland scene to regain the popularity it once had, Black said it is crucial for the younger generation of electronic music fans to step up and start throwing their own events.

"As long as there's nothing holding us back from throwing clean, legal, all-ages dance events they will continue to happen forever here," Black said, referring to the lack of city ordinances that prohibit all-night dance parties.

Although event promoters in Portland and Seattle may have different ideas as to what direction the electronic music scene is destined to go in, everyone seems hopeful that events will continue to take place.

"I think eventually the popularity will be a lot bigger than it is now," Gibson said. "But the whole 2,000 person thing in an unregulated warehouse is gone."

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