
TRIBAL REVIVAL: WEST COAST FESTIVAL CULTURE

KYER WILTSHIRE AND ERIK DAVIS

Santa Cruz: Tribal Revival & Kyer Photography, 2009

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Despite the advent of digital recording devices of every size and shape (read: camera phones), there have been not nearly enough attempts to adequately document in brilliant photography and text the electronic festival underground along the West Coast of North America. Though Burning Man is quite possibly one of the world's largest if not most significant gatherings of freak culture and various media abound that render spectacular its participants, there are few attempts to portray such electronic cultures in a thoughtful and insightful form. The same can be said for documentation of similar festivals up and down the left coast, from Shambhala in BC to Faerie Worlds in Oregon and Harmony Festival in Northern California. With *Tribal Revival*, something of this archival mission has succeeded, with 200 pages of colour photography documenting several years of festival culture and expression from the West Coast, circa 2002 through 2009.

Initiated by and featuring the exquisite photography of Kyer Wiltshire, *Tribal Revival* is split into three main sections, each introduced by an essay by the ever-intriguing Erik Davis, author of the seminal *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (1998) and a slew of other texts exploring alternative culture, music and technology. Davis opens the book by exploring what the festival means to its inhabitants:

Festivals can be a wild time, but for many participants the festival is also a vital space of cultural invention. Within the environs of the gathering, half sacred and half imagined, another possible world appears. Despite the variety of festivals and clans, certain values come to the fore: community over consumerism, the power of the

feminine, the wisdom of consciousness exploration, and the ethical call to develop a hands-on harmony with the earth (24).

To this end, Wiltshire explores these themes in turn. Something of the book's significance is also given some thought in the Introduction by Johnny Dwork, who as a "producer of neotribal festivals" speaks of the "magical vibe" inherent to collective creation of shared ritual experiences. Praising Kyer's work—his touch and persuasion behind the lens—Dwork writes how the still images presented within present their "real-life subjects as *mythopoetic* avatars...demigods that channel or embody certain creative muses that are beyond, greater than, and different from their everyday selves" (19). Though Dwork's definition of mythopoetic differs from my own (he calls it "the quality of gracefully manifesting one's spiritual potential"), it is precisely this axis of *mythos*, the creation of the imagined but nonetheless real, in its tangible effects and memory, and *poesis*, the art of invention that strives beyond craft, the art of formative creation itself, that generates the means as well as, providing some insight into the ever-mutating ends of neotribal cultures.

“ Wiltshire’s work overcomes the usual barriers to capturing the mass dance experience of interlocked enthusiasts, taking us into the heart of the dancefloor

The first section covers all manner of Avatars, from masks and garb to two subsections on the performance of collective virtual worlds and real dreams. Everything from full-page portraits of mudmen, faeries, goddesses to elven and imaginary creatures in their native environments grace these pages. Opening the second section, Play, is a double-page spread of a double rainbow above an ecstatic crowd at Burning Man in 2007. From here, winged performers, alien acrobats and otherworldly yogis begin to enter the frame, with a thoughtful section on festival Kids—the future of imaginative culture—followed by body blue performers playing with Hoops. Undoubtedly the next few pages will inspire many, focused as it is on Eros, with all manner of Burning Man's erotic nighttime world on display, from cowboy cages to writhing fire-spinners. Indeed, nudity is so casual and accepted throughout this book that the particular emphasis on Eros as a section develops how the naked body is seen and enjoyed in different ways. My only comment on such nudity is that while female breasts are in, not enough images of the full body, male or female or otherwise, are depicted without some subtle censoring of the lower naughty bits. Save for one particularly interesting picture of a male BDSM performer in scrotum-stretching apparatus, there aren't quite enough manbits to say that Kyer's lens is an equalizer in this respect.

Kissing elves and naked, biking grannies follow, only to lead into one of the more difficult and intangible arts to capture, that of Music. But Wiltshire certainly does this well, as he does with all of his photographs of the ethereal and split-second motions of an evolving subject. While some images are portraits or set-up for the shot, many are evidently not, capturing in the freeze the motion of an organic and complex field of festival actors. Documentary photography is never easy, and night-time, dance-crazed, psychedelic inflected photography is often a complete mess. “You had to be there”, we all say. Wiltshire’s work overcomes the usual barriers to capturing the mass dance experience of interlocked enthusiasts, taking us into the heart of the dancefloor, as well as above it, able to see the intermingling bodies, visual projections, stage, speakers and lighting as the crowd nearly throngs off the page.

Not only humans grace the paper, as Wiltshire explores Live Art, a unique form of improvised visual art performance prominent at worldwide psychedelic music festivals, with artists using paint, airbrush, aerosol or other media to create work that often intends to capture the psychedelic state of the body’s energy patterns and chakra fields. Luminiscent body-painting and airbrushing dovetails alongside creative uses of costume, with a few interesting pictures suggestive of steampunk subcultures.

The third and last section, Rite, ties together the underlying motivations that drive tens of thousands of participants to orientate their entire lives around alternative festivals. Composed of pages devoted to Prayer, Transformation, Fire, Goddess and the New Dawn, these pages try to combine all the preceding elements into a gestalt of the total experience of what Wiltshire calls “tribal revival”. In this sense, the outward manifestations of the tribe in movement and worship are depicted in photographs that both capture tidbits of detail—such as the shape of praying hands—to the mass, whirling formations of fire worship, desert sun salutations and ritual dance.

Throughout the book the informative words of Erik Davis offer an introductory commentary to the phenomena depicted, but also a persuasive one well worth reading as a scholar. For example, in the Fire section, Davis meditates upon how “Fire is the essence of the rite. All the other elements came to our ancestors ready to hand; only fire had to be tamed, or rather, since you can never tame it, fire was the original ally, the original pact” (172). Though Davis’ exuberance is perhaps a tad debatable—certainly agriculture, housing and irrigation, to name a few other elements transformed, also had to be tamed, as earth, air and water—Davis is right in focusing on how fire is a contemporary rite that has emerged from traditional practices only to be reinvented into a new connective force that expresses the intangible nature of the festival itself. Fire consumes itself; it destroys what it makes in its bright heat. And more so than the other elements, fire draws us all in, around the fire, to bear witness to its dangerous exuberance and to test our limits of control. In short, though it may be ancient in some ways and native to many cultures worldwide, in others the obsession with fire rituals and fire dancing is very much one born out of modernity’s demise (or whatever you’d like to call the latter end of the 20th century). That fire was used by fascist organisations in the early 20th century in their authoritarian rituals and is

used today to symbolically demonstrate the continuing spirit of such mainstream events such as the Olympics (yes, the Nazis introduced the torch relay), demonstrates its inherent characteristic as a malleable element, an icon open to its neopagan reinvention. There is very much an ontology to the primal destructive/creative force of the flame; it is about, as Davis writes, “*being with the fire*”.

All of *Tribal Revival* bears forth similar conclusions: it is about *being with* the desert, with others, with the world in all its forms, and whether that be a flaming pirate ship in the desert or a prayer circle in the forest, it is about *being with* the full expression of our creative being on this planet that allows each of us to be *without*, to step outside of ourselves and become all that is other and alien to our humdrum existence, to be with others being without, including the upcoming generations, that marks all the potential of what post-EDMC culture and its variants has to offer.

THE TRIBES OF BURNING MAN: HOW AN EXPERIMENTAL CITY IN THE DESERT IS SHAPING THE NEW AMERICAN COUNTERCULTURE

STEVEN T. JONES

San Francisco: Consortium of Collective Consciousness (CCC) Publishing, 2011

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Steven T. Jones’ book is in many ways summed up by the signs marking the entry to the festival site identified by Larry Harvey—event founder and general king pin—as his favourite: “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. What happens in Black Rock City goes everywhere” (175). *The Tribes of Burning Man* follows Steven Jones (aka. playa name Scribe) own personal journey on and off the playa from around 2004–2010 as a central participant in San Francisco’s contemporary counter-culture. As a journalist and editor for the local *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, this book grows out of being a voice not so much for but from the burner community. Jones offers us excellent coverage of the event’s history, such as the growing pains around the “Ten Principles” and other significant changes in the level of organisation underpinning the event following the death of a burner in 2004. However rather than being a dry chronological narrative, *The Tribes of Burning Man* emerges contextually embedded in both a rich discussion of contemporary debates around

the event's nature and future and even richer accounts of Scribe's own immersions in the world of Burning Man.

Although the vaguely Maffesolian metaphor of the "tribe" is tinged at times with elements of tribe *qua* traditional peoples—at least when it comes to the "feather and leather" (14) look popular on the playa—Jones offers a counter-perspective to critiques of Burning Man. Critiques, such as that offered by noted US cyberlibertarian and long-time burner John Perry Barlow, who called for a boycott of the event, rejecting it for "leeching" the creative and political energies of the community (23). However, in Jones' book, Burning Man is clearly framed as more than a "weekend warrior" experience offering up a Bakhtinian pressure valve release of resistant energies. Rather in its focus on the active and lively San Francisco scene and its year-round preparation, Jones explores how the annual festival on the playa is for many burners simply the culmination and focal point which recharges batteries for an all consuming commitment to a different way of being in the world. Here we see how the sometimes life-changing epiphanies experienced on the playa have been turned by some participants into beyond-the-event personal missions and where the renewal of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) experience afforded by the time of the playa is transmuted into bigger and wider commitments to collective organisation and social movements. Jones particularly emphasises the work of Burners Without Borders, formed in 2005 when groups of burners went straight from Nevada to Mississippi to help clean up after Hurricane Katrina. This spin-off collective has become for some a long-term commitment to bring the skills borne of planning, building, improvising and breaking down a city in the desert, to relief efforts. Jones also discusses Black Rock Solar which installs solar panels for community groups at a highly subsidised cost enabled by volunteer labour.

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The art versus rave dichotomy which seems to underpin much of what's been written on Burning Man is manifest here; not surprising given the "barely concealed hostility of Larry and the Borg" (27) to dance camps. However, *Dancecult* readers will be happy to hear that this book, while open—as a good journalist should be—to all sides of the debate, is written by an enthusiastic dance tribe central player. In this way, the book is a refreshing counterpoint to Bowditch's (2010) more anti-rave and more scholarly-focused book *On the Edge*

of Utopia. As a committed raver and member of those tribes behind the playa's most iconic rave camps (e.g. Opulent Temple), Jones instead offers a raver's perspective on the playa experience, not to mention the gossip on which big name DJs are divas versus those who really get Burning Man and thrive on its energy. Jones is also keen to put on record the important off-playa fundraising role played by the tribes in raising money to fund the on-playa art. A particular focus too is Jones' own embedded journalism or participant observations as a member of the Flaming Lotus Girls; this provides valuable insight on the art funding structures facilitated by Burning Man. The rave versus the rest lines in the dust are here explored given they remain at the heart of key debates and factionalism in the event's recent organisational history, as played out among community leaders in San Francisco during the period Jones spent most closely researching this book (129).

The particular strength and value of *The Tribes of Burning Man* lies in its insider point of view which offers an open account of the world of the festival not only on the playa but also during the annual life cycle of preparations, fund-raising, planning, design, building, transport, not to mention organisational and scene politics and egos, which, after all, are the behind the scenes' life and soul of any event on this scale.

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DISCOMBOBULATED: DISPATCHES FROM THE WRONG SIDE

SIMON A. MORRISON

London: Headpress, 2010

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Discombobulated is an eclectic collection of fifty dispatches which take a look at Simon Morrison's global voyage (from 1999 to 2006) through the weird and wonderful offerings of clubland. His G&T-fuelled anecdotes (originally appearing in *DJ Mag*) are the product of journalism meeting autoethnography. The dispatches capture the writer's varied and reflexive encounters while giving voice to those he meets. Morrison's use of alliteration, metaphors,

rhyme and wit, not to mention his not-so-scant use of lurid language, help document his nocturnal adventures and make this book an enthralling read. The dispatches are not ordered chronologically as a travel journal might appear, heightening the discombobulated feel of the prose. Instead, the dispatches are categorised under headings such as “Wrong”, “On a theme of travel”, “Spoofs” and “The Most Wrongest”.

Enter a hedonistic playground where random is the order of the day. This ambitious work spans clubbing hotspots across the globe. To cite a few, Morrison’s discombobulated encounters include posing for snaps with gangster Dave Courtney in Plumstead; trying on wigs with transvestite Foo Foo Lumar; being on board a ship full of pirates and reliving the Hacienda in Manchester; almost being caught by bouncers for buying drugs off a non-drug dealer in Luxor casino Las Vegas; a drunken camel ride in Egypt, being entertained by female hostesses in a KTV bar in Shanghai; staying at Ibiza’s infamous Pike’s Hotel and partying at Pacha; and sipping Moët at Kylie Minogue’s 34th birthday bash in London. Morrison’s exploration of club culture extends beyond the confines of club space. We follow Morrison’s clubbing trajectory through pre-, in- and post-club spaces (Moore and Miles 2004). The dispatches contribute to our holistic understanding of the clubbing journey whilst highlighting the blurring distinctions between these spaces (Measham, Aldridge and Parker 2001). Collectively, these dispatches are what characterise the Wrong Side as a demarcated space away from the moral Right Side. Morrison writes “The Wrong Side is that hazy place you find yourself late in the proceedings: you don’t know how you got there...you sure as hell don’t know how you’re going to get out...and you’re resigned to just kicking back and enjoying the ride” (140).

“ *Discombobulated* is a fun and light-hearted read capturing the emergence and establishment of clubbing and electronic dance music culture as a vast and often highly profitable global business.

A fast-paced, humorous and vibrant tone with an all-star line-up is set in the opening chapters of the book. Whilst in Foo Foo’s Palace Morrison states “clubland doesn’t have to be built on a bedrock of seriousness; there is equally room for boudoir and silliness (sic)” (13). Reflecting the playful ethos of clubland itself, Morrison adopts a role not to be taken too seriously, where being accused of “pissing around in Ibiza” (129) is not a worry. Enjoying the ride is not viewed as a distraction or something to be editorially cut from his clubland tales but instead forms an integral part of his adventures. Often discussed in

relation to drugs research is the tendency for writers to produce sanitised accounts of their fieldwork whilst neglecting the role of pleasure (Holt and Treloar 2008); this aspect of clubland is a feature most definitely not omitted from Morrison's accounts.

The writer suggests that thanks to globalisation and low-cost airfares, travel to foreign lands to go clubbing has never been easier. However he also notes that increasingly globalisation has given birth to homogeneous and unauthentic template cities (Roberts 2006). Drawing on his time in Shanghai, he writes "The afternoon unwound with us trying to seek out 'the real Chinese shit' and ended up with us in a shopping mall. And I'm looking around thinking... hang on... there's Starbucks, there's McDonald's...we are in China right, not China White?" (195). This development is also mirrored in clubland where he notes "The more I travel the more it becomes obvious that electronic music is pulling the world together...And I don't mean that in a hippy dippy way, it's more that when you're on a dancefloor and you're spangled, you sometimes forget whether you're in Moscow or Manchester, such is its connecting power" (26). The dispatches highlight how the spread of electronic dance music across the globe has contributed to the McDonaldization of clubland on the one hand whilst simultaneously leading to increased diversification on the other, reiterating the view that "even though certain elements may be common to dance and club culture across the globe (eg. music, fashion and drugs), nightclubbing has not become a homogenous global culture" (Rief 2009: 3).

Credit must be given to Morrison for covering a lot of ground in his work, not only geographically but also in terms of the range of scenes and spaces he visited. However, it could be argued that the dispatches offer nothing more than cultural snapshots which cover the breadth of the globe but lack depth. There are some destinations (such as Manchester and Ibiza) where a fuller picture begins to emerge due to repeat visits but the dispatches are best viewed as "postcards from the edge" (157) with limited space for elaboration, amounting to mere glimpses of locations. The level of contextual insight becomes questionable as most of the dispatches are tales of Morrison's own insobriety or of the morning after the night before, written from inside (and often about) his hotel room. Although the centrality of alcohol in clubland is discussed throughout the book and brief reference is made to illegal drugs (spliffs, pills and magic mushrooms), the writer misses an opportunity to further investigate the differing drug cultures situated in the varied spaces he inhabits. Further, Morrison's insider status as journalist permitted him access to the finest clubs, VIP areas, hotels and impressive celebrity interviews. Limited attention is paid to the regular "live for the weekend" clubber. Instead we get a view of clubbing from the privileged VIP area of the club. Despite these shortcomings, *Discombobulated* is a fun and light-hearted read capturing the emergence and establishment of clubbing and electronic dance music culture as a vast and often highly profitable global business.

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FILM

BASSWEIGHT

DIR. SURIDH HUSSAN

UK: SRK, 2008.

<http://www.thesrk.com/#313607>

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Bassweight is a DVD documentary on the electronic dance music genre dubstep. The documentary is produced by SRK, who describe themselves as "a creative studio that flows between the epicentres of London and Jakarta". Their website reveals a diverse array of global media projects, some corporate and some art driven. The studio's high production values are evident in the documentary and the global overview of dubstep's impact. The footage is slick, highly stylised, and utilises an array of post-production tricks. The audio content is also of a high quality in keeping with the often-pristine production values evident in many dubstep tracks. Dubstep is a fairly recent manifestation of what author and journalist Simon Reynolds (2009) refers to as the hardcore continuum. Although this concept has been critiqued, it provides a useful insight into the evolution and mutation of a key strand of UK electronic dance music.

The documentary commences with time-lapse footage of crowds at dubstep raves and shots of the urban environment over the initial credits. The narrative thread begins with a tour of Croydon, with DJ and producer Plastician (Chris Reed) as the tour guide and former Big Apple record shop (now home of the shop, Mixing Records) as the destination. In dubstep mythology, Croydon has become the equivalent of Clarksdale in the history of the blues, whilst Big Apple assumes the role of the mythical crossroads. Reed takes the camera crew around the area pointing out small unassuming local venues that hosted early dubstep club nights. He comments on the negative police attitude to an early dubstep night which had a predominantly male audience; the scene was apparently heavily gendered at its inception. In fact, the only female included in the documentary (apart from shots of a few girls dancing at club nights) is *BBC Radio One's* Mary Anne Hobbs. Reed infers the genre started in Croydon but struggles to note many sites of historical interest. The documentary then includes various producers and MCs noting the centrality of Big Apple to the early dubstep scene. The shop and its clientele are referred to as a community. Producers Skream and Benga are then interviewed (in black and white for some reason) after a sound bite from Mary Anne Hobbs explaining the genre's focus on sub bass. This leads neatly into Skream discussing the genre's focus on low frequencies, ascribing this in part to the bass-heavy sound system in Big Apple and the sub bass capabilities of sound systems in influential dubstep venues. Benga and Skream explore the development of a strand of UK garage into dubstep and acknowledge that although they initially tried to make garage tunes, their lack of ability to reproduce the style precisely led them to focus on the exploration of sonic avenues opened up by their production mistakes. The narrative then progresses to pirate radio station Sub FM. The focus is on the Boomnoise and Sgt Pokes show which features interviews with producers and guest mixes, unlike the standard pirate radio show format.

“ This documentary adds to what could loosely be termed an emerging canon of films that explore dubstep.

Mary Anne Hobbs discusses her initial discovery of the genre and her subsequent exploration of the style's origins. She notes that the style emerged slowly out of the “dark garage” made by producers Zed Bias, LB, Oris Jay and Steve Gurley in 2001. This variant was championed by the club night FWD at the Velvet Rooms in London. Dubstep gradually developed from this stylistic template. Skream comments on Horsepower Productions as a key influence on his music; they are noted as playing an important role in the genre's inception. Benny Ill from Horsepower Productions is then interviewed and mentions their sound system roots.

DJ and producer N-Type is the next interviewee. He recounts his DJ career from bedroom DJ at the age of 14 to pirate radio station stalwart on Delight FM and Rinse FM, from where he has established himself as an international dubstep DJ.

Deopah—who ran the now defunct dubstep website Barefiles and label Baredubs—discusses dubplates, arguing that a mastered track on vinyl is preferable to an unmastered CD for DJ purposes. There is then a brief discussion of analogue versus digital, which is fairly pointless given that dubstep is resolutely digital in its production. Why not a mastered CD? Vinyl is often valorised and fetishised and this debate is worth a thesis in itself. The next segment takes us to Transition Mastering where the proprietor Jason explains what mastering entails. Transition is a key mastering facility in the dubstep genre having traded since 1998. It occupies a role that the (also London-based) mastering facility Music House played for drum ‘n’ bass, acting as a key facility for cutting dub plates. Jason demonstrates the cutting lathe and explains that Transition has a dialogue with its customers in terms of trying to assist their clients to produce professional sounding productions. He explores the exclusivity a dubplate offers, noting how dubplates were initially prevalent in reggae sound system culture and highlighting how this aesthetic has made its way into UK electronic dance music culture. After this tour of London’s dubstep landscape, *Bassweight’s* footage shifts to Amsterdam for a Deep Medi (Digital Mystikz) showcase at the Melkweg, with an appearance from Goth-Trad (Takeaki Maruyama), a Japanese DJ and producer. This segment begins to explore the genre’s dissemination internationally. In common with jungle/drum ‘n’ bass and unlike UK garage and grime, dubstep has been embraced by global audiences.

From this point onwards *Bassweight* jumps around somewhat hyperactively in terms of geographical location. We return to the flat in Croydon for more pirate radio footage. Goth Trad features again, followed by a brief interview with The Bug (Kevin Martin) who explains how Steve Goodman sparked his interest in the genre. The film cuts to shots of Denmark, from where Kraken Recordings DJ and producer 2000f demonstrates his detailed knowledge of the UK music scene. He delivers a concise Reynoldsesque chronological synopsis of UK urban music: “1988 acid house, hardcore, early breakbeat, jungle, speed garage, 2-step, grime, dubstep, sub-low etc”. 2000f also notes how various UK bass music styles have spread internationally, with producers in other countries creating their own music using UK genres as production templates. This is one of the interesting points about dubstep. Its production aesthetics have filtered through to other genres in a similar way to jungle production techniques some years earlier. *Bassweight’s* focus then shifts to Finland and DJ Tes La Rock, and from here briefly visits Russia where Kode 9 is being interviewed. The film revisits Kode 9’s studio again, where Steve Goodman provides a more thoughtful and coherent interviewee than many of the other protagonists, commenting on how dubstep is becoming “generic” and centred on the wobble bass trope.

This documentary adds to what could loosely be termed an emerging canon of films that explore dubstep. *Dubfiles* was released in 2008 and in common with *Bassweight* focuses on dubstep and its international dissemination. Soul Jazz released Bruno Natal’s *Dub Echoes*

in 2009 and whilst this film does not solely focus on dubstep, it includes the genre in its discussion of cultural and production practices linked to dub reggae. Herein lays one of *Bassweight's* weaknesses. Whilst well produced and fairly informative to the uninitiated, apart from 2000f's comments it makes no links to any styles earlier than garage, omitting any exploration of the genre's influences from Jamaican musical practices and aesthetics. It is this lack of contextual focus that reduces the usefulness of the film as an educational resource, although my students certainly enjoyed watching it.

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