Believing in the Beat
The Religiosity of Electronic Dance Music

A Senior Thesis by
Lauren Kathleen Gill

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Professor Travis Zadeh, Advisor
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ABSTRACT

Electronic dance music is a musical and cultural phenomenon that has seen a drastic increase in popularity over the past decade. As such, it has received nominal serious academic inquiry in regards to its heavily present religious features, which appear most prominently in electronic dance music’s live setting. Building upon my fieldwork at electronic music shows and festivals as well as interviews with a variety of participants, I have illuminated its religious elements, which range from the ritualistic manner of dancing it produces to the ingestion of consciousness-altering substances, the unique, ineffable experiences that it generates.

Based on my findings, I have concluded that electronic dance music is highly religious. I have employed thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Thomas Tweed to illustrate the connections between religiosity and electronic dance music, as seen by established scholars. Additionally, I have made a comparison between the features New Religious Movements and electronic dance music, finding significant limitations.

Furthermore, I have conducted a critical study of the religiosity of electronic dance music, deducing through interviews and fieldwork its abundance of religious features, as seen in its performance and experience.
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“You’re either on the bus or off the bus. If you’re on the bus, and you get left behind, then you’ll find it again. If you’re off the bus in the first place—then it won’t make a damn”- Ken Kesey

INTRODUCTION
The Preparation

It was the Labor Day weekend of 2012 in which I attended my first electronic music festival, Electric Zoo, on New York’s Randall’s Island. I had previously attended festivals with a variety of genres of talent such as Bonnaroo in Tennessee, Outside Lands in San Francisco, and Firefly in Delaware. However, little did I know that what I experienced over that weekend would eventually become the inspiration for my senior thesis. To understand the focus of the following paper, it is important to first understand my personal connection with my topic. While this thesis will explore the religiosity of dance music, I think that it is necessary to explain what exactly I have experienced with the music that made me so clearly see this connection.

When I attended Electric Zoo, I was not aware that I was at the beginning of my thesis journey. I emerged from the three-day festival in awe about what I had just experienced. Never had I been to a festival in which everyone was so genuinely kind and excited about the music. What I saw that weekend was not people just going to “get messed up,” or experiment with drugs, but people who fully immersed themselves in the beautiful whirlwind that is dance music. Everyone was supportive of one another and I would not even be able to count the number of times I looked around and just locked eyes with people smiling, silently acknowledging that we were in this
moment together. I noticed how dance music creates a unique community for which acceptance is the only entry requirement. I noticed how everyone danced without inhibition, with the DJ leading the massive crowds in this ritual. Most of all, I noticed that everyone just loved the music. Young or old, new to the scene or veterans, the crowd bathed themselves in the uplifting melodies or wobbling beats. I left New York that weekend and headed back to school excited about what I just had been a part of. I hadn’t just been part of a festival, I had been a part of a phenomenon. And that phenomenon was dance music.

Over the course of the next few months, I would continue to attend shows, taking in every genre from progressive house to trance. I especially became fascinated with trance because of the unique community that it seemed to form. At these shows, people were so nice and so open to sharing their experiences with others. While I see the community component to be a part of all dance music in general, I believe that trance is the strongest example, that I’ve encountered, of the power of community building that dance music generates. I will explain why this is so in the following paper. Building upon my coursework that I had encountered with the academic study of mystical experience, I arrived at my thesis topic in late October. I realized that the experiences that I had undergone and the experiences that I saw occurring around me were strikingly similar to in many ways to William James’ definition of a mystical experience, as elaborated in his book, *Varieties of Religious Experience.*¹ I realized that there was a deep connection between religious experience and dance music, and that there was a great deal left to explore.

As there has been little scholarship on the topic of the various forms of electronic dance music and religion, I arrived at the conclusion that the only way to properly provide these experiences with credibility would be to interview people who had been a part of the dance music phenomenon. Over the course of February and March, I interviewed seven different participants about their experiences with dance music and DJ/producer trance duo, Tritonal. I conducted the Tritonal interview over e-mail, as I also did with three participant interviews. The other four interviews were conducted in person, recorded, and transcribed. Each interview lasted about forty-five minutes. I contacted three of the participants, requesting interviews, knowing that they possessed previous experiences with dance music. The other four were recommended to me as being involved in the scene by either the initial interviewees or people I knew.

I went into each interview with broad questions so that the participants had the opportunity to freely talk about their experiences. I found this approach to be effective in bringing out colorful and honest answers from the interviewees.

The interviews laid the groundwork for my trip to Miami over March break. I attended the first weekend of Ultra Music Festival, which is billed as the largest electronic music festival in America, hosting 330,000 attendees over the course of two three-day weekends. The festival grounds are located in Miami’s Bayfront Park and consist of seven separate stages, including a main stage and mega-structure arena. Having attended Electric Zoo in September, the feel of the festival was nothing new to me, but it was the first time that I had attended an electronic music festival while I was working on my thesis. As a participant-observer, I witnessed the undeniable power that the music held over the crowds. I saw how the lights transfixed everyone around
me, and the way that a smile would instantly become plastered over someone’s face when the DJ dropped their favorite song. Everything that I was hearing in my interviews came to life before my eyes, whether it was a sea of people moving in unison or just two people sharing a special moment together. My fieldwork at Ultra Music Festival was integral to the way that I thought about the electronic music experience in relation to the experiences of the interviewees. Their words were no longer memories of the past, but real experiences that were taking place right in front of me.

Aside from Ultra Music Festival, I attended a number of other events over the course of my thesis work that contributed to the way that I thought about electronic dance music. I will mention them throughout my thesis, and in an attempt to avoid confusion. I will now briefly explain what these events were. Even though I was not in the midst of my thesis work when I attended Electric Zoo in September, it served as one of the central inspirations for my thesis. As I explained earlier, Electric Zoo opened my eyes to the influence that electronic dance music can have on people, and because of this, I, and three of the interviewees, will make a number of allusions to the festival. Another event that I attended this winter as a participant-observer was celebrated trance trio, Above & Beyond’s Anjunabeats (Above & Beyond’s renowned trance label) Volume 10 Release show at Roseland Ballroom in New York City in February of 2013. Attending this event was important because it was the first time that I really took notice of everything that the interviewees talked about both with regards to trance and the power of an Above & Beyond show. In the first chapter, I will discuss the strength of
the trance legends’ visuals in evoking emotion, and this strength was certainly undeniable when I saw them in February.

Another show that I will discuss is Dutch trance great, Armin van Buuren’s *A State of Trance 600*, held this spring in New York City’s famed Madison Square Garden. Van Buuren hosts a weekly radio show in which he plays the latest and greatest in trance music, titled, *A State of Trance*, which airs on Thursdays. Every fifty episodes, he goes on a *A State of Trance* tour, bringing along other trance artists, to different cities around the world that have campaigned for a stop. At the end of March, in celebration of its 600th episode, Armin van Buuren brought *A State of Trance* to Madison Square Garden. He was the first trance producer/DJ to headline and sell out the arena, a historic feat for not only trance music, but also electronic dance music as a whole. At this event, I witnessed the sheer energy that trance music can produce. I had never been part of an electronic dance music event in a sold out arena, as opposed to an open-air festival, and seeing all of the attendees in that enclosed space, all around and above me, dancing along to the music was a sight that will forever be engrained in my memory. *A State of Trance 600* in New York City once again illustrated the way that dance music can bring people together and served as a significant part of my fieldwork as I continue to think about its relationship with religion.

For me, these events transformed the way I approached electronic dance music, and as such, a few words should be said about the category of electronic dance music, which is often abbreviated as “EDM.” In the course of my research and interviews with participants, I have come to realize that “EDM” is synonymous with the branding of electronic dance music in an attempt to mass market it to a commercial audience. It is
not the type of terminology generated from within the community of participants that goes hand in hand with the unique and special experiences that come with electronic dance music. Therefore, I feel it necessary to clarify that when I use the terms, “dance music,” “electronic music,” or “electronic dance music,” I am referring to the actual music. I may also refer to the music by genres, such as trance, progressive house, or dubstep, for example, all of which will be defined in the first chapter. When I refer to “EDM,” I am talking about the commercialization of electronic dance music. This is an important distinction to make, since I would not wish to reduce the extraordinary experiences of the interviewees to something as impersonal as the mass-marketing of the phenomenon often suggested in the category of EDM.

While I do make a number of references to the hippie movement throughout this thesis, it is not a central focus of this paper. Rather, the music and the festivals of the 1960s and 1970s offer an interesting site of comparison, which even some of my interviewees at times mentioned, going so far as to call electronic dance music a “neo-hippie” movement. It is not hard to see many parallels between the two, particularly as some symbols, associations, and forms of community that resonate with hippie counter-culture are reconstituted within the festivals and concerts of electronic dance music. To this end, I do not seek to compare the electronic dance music community today with the festivals of earlier generations in a substantial manner, as the participants themselves only do so only in a rather topical fashion. Furthermore, there are also notable limits to such comparisons, particularly in the forms of music and dance practiced, the differing cultures of illicit drugs associated with them, and the
radically distinct social, political, and historical contexts shaping their respective enactments.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The interviewees came from a variety of backgrounds, which I will describe person-by-person in this section. In the spirit of the 1960s, which the electronic dance music culture has a number of nominal similarities with, each participant, except for Tritonal, who are a well-known DJ/producer duo, have been renamed with the name of a Merry Prankster to protect their anonymity. The Merry Pranksters were a band of hippies in the 1960s who were best known for travelling across America in their day-glo painted bus, ingesting LSD, all to the tune of rock music. They were led by the author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Ken Kesey.

TRITONAL: Tritonal is a DJ/producer duo consisting of Chad Cisneros and Dave Reed. They hail from Austin, Texas and produce trance music. They currently host *Tritonia*, a weekly radio show that airs on Sirius XM Satellite Radio, which is a selection of their favorite tunes of the moment. In the beginning stages of my interviews, I e-mailed a number of artists’ managers and press agents, hoping to send in questions about their experiences producing dance music. I received a reply from the manager of Tritonal, who then prompted me to send in questions that she would forward to Chad and Dave. Within a few days, I received a reply from the duo, who shed light on their music as well as the live experiences that they create.
“PAUL”: Paul was the first person that I interviewed. From previously talking to him about dance music, I knew that his experiences with it had left a lasting impression on him. His interview took place on February 10, 2013. Paul is from the Northeast and is 19 years old. He is a college student, majoring in a social science. In Paul’s interview, he was very clear about the impact that dance music, especially trance, had made on him. I could not help but notice how articulate he was, being that he was not given any of the questions beforehand. It was almost as if he had replayed his experience over and over again in his head, coming up with new ways to describe it each time.

“CAROLYN”: I knew that Carolyn had been involved with dance music and that she used to be immersed in the scene. Going into her interview, I was unaware of how dance music had affected her, only knowing that she had an in-depth background in it. She is 22 years old and is from the Northeast. Carolyn is a college student and majors in a natural science. Her interview took place on February 19, 2013. What stood out to me most in Carolyn’s interview was her ability to recall every single detail of her experience. Even years later, she still remembered the tiniest of details, as she made me feel like I was in those moments with her.

“NEAL”: Neal has a great deal of experience with trance music, having listened to it for around seven years In his interview, he shared, “I’ve only ever gotten into one subgenre ever, and that’s trance.” Neal is a 19 year-old college student, majoring in a social science. He is from the Northeast. His interview took place on February 22, 2013. Neal’s interview was important in that it showed me the power of looking at the
gravity of experiences as a whole and that sometimes overanalyzing is not necessary. He did not talk about the little details, but instead about the lasting impact that trance music has left on him.

“KATHY”: After interviewing both Paul and Carolyn, they told me that I should interview Kathy. They told me that she was involved in the dance music scene, having gone to a number of shows. After hearing that, I contacted Kathy, whom is a 22 year-old college student majoring in a social science, from the Mid-Atlantic. Her interview was conducted on February 27, 2013. In Kathy’s interview, I noticed her awe at the dance music community. It was something that she kept bringing up, and something that will appear throughout this thesis.

“KEN”: I was put in contact with Ken through a mutual friend. He is both an avid music listener and a contributor to a popular dance music website. Ken is a 20 year-old college student from the northeast. He majors in a natural science. Ken’s interview took place over e-mail since we were not in the same geographic area, but nevertheless, his input lent insight into the dance music experience. Instead of sending back his answers question by question, Ken made his answers into a single narrative in which he addressed all that I had asked of him. This is significant to note because it illustrates how he thought of his experience as a fluent entity, incorporating all aspects that make up the magic of the dance music experience.
“JUNE”: When searching for people to interview, I was told that I should June would be a useful person to talk to. She is a contributor to a popular dance music website and is very invested in the trance community. She is an active member of the Trance Family, which will be described in detail in the first chapter. June is 22 years old and a social science major. She hails from the Northeast. June’s interview took place over e-mail. I sent her a list of questions and she responded with her answers. June’s interview was interesting in that she talked about the community being a huge attraction to trance music and the music aiding in the formation of that community.

“JANE”: I came in contact with Jane through an initial interviewee, who informed me that she has attended a large number of electronic music shows and is influenced greatly by the genre. Jane is a 20 year-old college student, majoring in a social science from the Northeast. Her interview was conducted via e-mail. The general theme of Jane’s answers was centered on the way that electronic dance music impacted her life for the better. She wrote about how she struggled with depression and how the music was helpful in alleviating this, which is important to keep in mind when thinking about the role that dance music can play in the way people view themselves and others around them.

As their descriptions reveal, there are a number of obvious similarities between all of the interviewees, which are necessary to take note of as a means of understanding the make-up of the electronic dance music community. The interviewees were all college students between the ages of 19 and 22 whose hometowns lie on the East

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Coast. Additionally, all of them are pursuing coursework in either a natural science or social science. However, while these commonalities exist between all of my interview subjects, it is not necessarily indicative of the broader make-up of the electronic dance music community. In my fieldwork, I have met people from across the country and around the world, illustrating that electronic dance music is relevant beyond just the East Coast. Furthermore, from my observations, the community is not solely made up of 19-22 year-old college students. Instead, the prime demographic consists of 18-25 year-olds, from a variety of socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Nonetheless, while my interviewees are not representative of the entirety of the electronic dance music community, they do represent a prominent group within it, as the music appeals to college students who are often in the midst of personal discovery. Even as the interviewees’ backgrounds are not representative of the whole, but only a group within the phenomenon, they still offered a wide range of responses that characterize its sum. As such, their responses were applicable in a variety of ways to the claims that I make about electronic dance music, illustrating their relevancy in regards to the broader movement.

**LOOKING FORWARD**

After I eventually arrived at the conclusion that I would be writing my senior thesis about the relationship between religion and electronic dance music, many people I spoke with were confused about how the two connected with one another. When people would inquire about my thesis topic, I would often be faced with blank stares and questions of, “How is that religious?” However, after completing my research, I
now have a difficult time thinking about how electronic dance music is not religious. From the dancing to the community to the music, everything about it is infused with echoes of religiosity. It just takes the ability to look outside of religion in the traditional, denominational sense to see it.

For you to gain a better understanding of what type of music I discuss throughout this thesis, when I mention artists or songs, I have included a supplemental CD. I will alert you to the track of music that you should listen to by including the track number in the body of the text. The media supplement is meant to enliven the descriptions that I have given about electronic music and to round out the material of this thesis, engaging directly with the music itself.

As a final point, before we set out on our journey through the world of electronic dance music, I must clarify that I have structured this thesis similarly to the way in which an experience at an electronic dance music show would materialize. In the introduction, I have explained the relevant information needed to understand the thesis, very much like how dance music fans would listen to the appropriate music to prepare for a show. In the first chapter, I will lay out the groundwork of what exactly electronic dance music consists of. For the dance music community, this would refer to the point in which everyone just arrives and is feeling out the scene or “just groovin’”. Next, I will describe the use of the drug, MDMA, often referred to in some contexts as Ecstasy, within the electronic dance music community and how it contributes to the creation of a unique experience. I have entitled this chapter “The Drop,” in reference to both the ingestion of MDMA as well as the point in the show when the DJ/producer hits a peak, sending everyone into an ecstatic state of pure happiness. In the third
chapter, I discuss the specific religiosity of electronic dance music. This comes after
the peak, and is the state of coming down from the euphoria. Finally, the conclusion
comes when the show is over and everyone is reflecting on how amazing the night was.
People talk about what their favorite part was or the new people that they met. This is a
time that allows for reflecting on a deeper level about what just happened. Lastly with
respect to the works cited, when I reference, “IDing the track,” I am referring to the
process in which a track of music is played in a live setting, but the title is unknown.
Until the track is given a title, it is known as an “ID,” an abbreviation for identification.
CHAPTER 1
Features of Electronic Dance Music: “Just Groovin’”

In mid-August of 1969, approximately a half-million people gathered in upstate New York for “three days of peace and music,” or more commonly known as Woodstock. Over the course of the festival, the concertgoers listened to an array of artists. While some promoted anti-war messages, others stuck to themes of unity and love. Whatever the goals of the artists, it was clear that all of these people were brought together on the farm by the alluring prospect of listening to music with one another. Many may have indulged in psychotropic drugs to enhance their experience, which contributed to the feelings of togetherness. Woodstock is just one example of the significance of music festival culture that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s which has continued to shape festivals today. In the midst of its historical context, the three days of peace and music that was Woodstock also served as a unifying force amongst those who opposed the Vietnam War and pledged love. The musicians brought masses of people together for these common goals and led them in a movement that upheld the ideals of peace, love, unity, and respect.

Fast forward to 2013. Masses of people gather at festivals and shows around the world to dance together to electronic dance music. DJs lead the immense crowds in time, accelerating the beat to a peak in which all of the built-up tension explodes. Amongst the crowd, some engage in illicit drug use, particularly, MDMA, an empathogenetic drug, which heightens their sensitivity to the euphoric energy of the

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music and flashing lights. The environment is primed for the concertgoers to undergo an experience in which they achieve a state incomparable to normative states of consciousness. The concertgoers feel a sense of unity with one another, as they uninhibitedly move their bodies to the beat of the pulsing music. Attendees trade bracelets as memories of one another and embrace the strangers around them. For the concertgoers, the ideals of peace, love, unity, and respect guide them in their choices throughout festivals, shows, and beyond. For them, dance music not only provides for an enjoyable night, but it also an important part of how they conduct themselves on an everyday basis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before moving into greater detail about the electronic dance music tradition, I should first provide an account of how the music became what it is today. It has often been characterized in music journalism as a whirlwind force that is taking music culture and society by storm.4 By understanding its history, we can reach a greater appreciation of why it is so significant and relevant today.

The genre of house music emerged out of disco culture in late 1970s Chicago. During this period, it was predominately popular amongst gay blacks, a group that was largely excluded from society. Dance music gave them a sense of togetherness and acceptance, something that was missing from life outside of the clubs.5 As Matthew Collin argues in his study of the movement, “Disco and house both mixed the secular,

the invocations to sexual abandon, with the spiritual, the wistful yearning for a ‘better
day’ when ‘we will all be free’. The genre of house music that came out of 1970s
Chicago was characterized by an electronically generated repetitive four on the floor
beats and a driving bassline that was reminiscent of disco music but with an added
kick.\textsuperscript{7}

Over the course of the 70s and 80s, electronic music became a staple of
European clubs, from underground music in Berlin to the party culture on the Spanish
island of Ibiza. Clubs such as Pacha and Amnesia played host to excited youths who
traveled across Europe with the sole intention of being part of the magic that was
happening on the dance floor.\textsuperscript{8} By the time the 1990s rolled around, disco music had
long been out, while electro and techno were in. Electronic dance music reached a
high point in the 1990s as underground raves in warehouses became a common part of
the culture. However, its popularity waned until it would reemerge in the 2000s with a
force greater than ever. Electronic dance music started becoming a part of mainstream
culture, which is defined as appealing to the masses, in the course of the late 2000s.
DJs/producers were back on top, turning out hits for pop artists and dominating the
airwaves. Publications such as \textit{Rolling Stone}\textsuperscript{9} and \textit{The New York Times}\textsuperscript{10} acknowledged the rising wave of electronic dance music, further catapulting it into the
spotlight. In 2013, electronic dance music is a prominent player in global music

\begin{footnotes}
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culture, with hundreds of thousands of people attending shows and buying the music of their favorite artists around the world, from the beaches of Goa and Miami, to the clubs of Paris and Sydney.

SOUND & SETTING

Electronic dance music today is more popular than ever, permeating into the mainstream press, radio, and festivals. The following pages will detail the most prominent characteristics of the electronic dance music movement by examining the sounds, setting, and overall experience of dance music today.

The defining attribute of electronic dance music is that it is generated by computers instead of live instruments. Within the genre of electronic dance music lie several subgenres, ranging from progressive house (listen to Track 1) to dubstep (listen to Track 2) to trance, which forms the central focus of this paper. Trance is characterized by its pulsing, repetitive beats that commonly range anywhere from 125-140 beats per minute and beyond, along with its synthesized harmony. As Neal, a veteran trance listener, put it in our interview, “It usually revolves around a build-up and one drop…A lot of people say it’s the classical music of electronic dance music.”11 (listen to Track 3) Songs sometimes include vocals, which are often uplifting and are centered on themes of unity and love. For instance, one of the most well-known trance songs, “Not Giving Up on Love,” (listen to Track 4) produced by the widely respected trance legend, Armin van Buuren, contains the lyrics, sung by female vocalist, Sophie Ellis-Bextor, “I’m not giving up, I’m not giving up on us/ I said I’m

11 Neal, interview by Lauren Gill, Record, March 22, 2013.
not giving up, I’m not giving up on love.”

These are representative of typical trance lyrics, if a song contains vocals at all, as it is not uncommon for tracks to be purely instrumental.

In contrast to the other subgenres of electronic dance music, trance differs because of the emphasis that it puts on producing emotion, whether that be through lyrics or melodies. According to one interviewee, Paul, “It’s the most emotional kind of dance music you can possibly make.” When asked for her definition of trance music, Kathy noted how it “Emits a beautiful positivity and is extremely uplifting in every essence of the word.” I attribute the emotion that trance is capable of producing to the way that the genre is focused on creating a deep listening experience that goes beyond instant gratification. Due to its moving nature, it is not surprising to witness a crowd going from pure bliss to tears over the course of a few songs. American trance DJs/producer, Chad Cisneros, of the duo Tritonal, described that the variation of their tracks depends on the mood that they are looking to evoke from their listeners:

Some tracks are written to deliver an energetic moment purely for a festival or club night, others are written to convey a message of hope or unity, a sense of togetherness. Some of our tracks are uplifting and somewhat inspirational either through lyrics or melody, while others a tad darker and melancholic.

Similarly, in the documentary, A Year with Armin van Buuren (2012) the famed Dutch DJ/producer Armin van Buuren stresses what he views to be the profound experience that the music produce, very much in religious terms:

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13 Paul, interview by Lauren Gill, Record, February 10, 2013
14 Kathy, interview by Lauren Gill, Record, February 27, 2013
15 Cisneros, Chad (Tritonal) interview by Lauren Gill, E-mail, February 09, 2013
Trance music has a special effect on people. It unites them in a way I’ve never seen with other types of music. It makes them ecstatic and has an almost religious effect. It’s extraordinary. I want people to go home feeling good. I want them to become emotional and feel liberated.\(^{16}\)

His documentary then goes on to examine the way in which his devoted fans dedicate themselves to trance and the unique experiences that it creates. Foremost, the film illustrates the extraordinary power of van Buuren’s music and live show on colossal crowds, as well as his journey as a producer in creating music that will generate such energy.

Depending on the type of event, sets usually clock in anywhere from an hour to more uncommonly, ten hours and beyond. Within the festival setting, there will often be a firm schedule that will place a DJ on a certain stage at a certain time. In such context, the DJ must adhere to the time allotted, as there will be someone going on directly afterward, as opposed to playing a show in which one or two DJs are the sole headliners. For example, on November 19, 2011, Armin van Buuren played a six hour set for Washington DC’s SuperGlow, hosted at the D.C. Armory, for a crowd of nearly 20,000 people.\(^{17}\) When he closed out Miami’s Ultra Music Festival in 2012 and 2013, he was only designated one hour.

These differences in the length of sets are important to point out with regards to setting. Given the large quantity of artists at a music festival, attendees are able to see a number of producers and genres within a single day. With the rise of electronic dance


music, solely electronic musical festivals have become more and more common around the world. Hundreds of thousands of music lovers flock to these festivals annually. The most famed American electronic dance music festival is Miami’s Ultra Music Festival, which is typically held at the end of Miami Music Week, with the exception of 2013, in which music week is sandwiched in between two separate weekends of Ultra Music Festival. Other notable festivals include, but are not limited to, Electric Daisy Carnival, which is held in numerous locations around the country during the summer, most notably in Las Vegas; Electric Zoo Festival, which is held on New York City’s Randall’s Island over Labor Day Weekend; and Electric Forest Festival, which takes place over the summer in Rothbury, Michigan. Long-running festivals like Coachella, in Indio, California, and Bonnaroo, in Manchester, Tennessee, which have traditionally showcased live rock bands across a range of genres, have also increasingly embraced the rise of electronic dance music, with Coachella’s Sahara Tent hosting a variety of prominent producers, and Bonnaroo’s late night sets giving them a chance to play until the sun rises.

Festivals offer a distinctive experience from one-night shows, in that attendees can see a variety of artists from a variety of genres all in one location over the course of a few days. This all-inclusive atmosphere is appealing to many music fans, because of the high-energy environment and community of people with like interests. Carolyn’s first electronic music festival was New York’s Electric Zoo in 2010, which has grown to be a prominent event since the year that she attended. She described her experience as such:

“The summer after my freshman year (2010) I went to Electric Zoo. I went with a friend of mine who is 2 years older who introduced me to this type of music.
We bought our tickets a couple of months earlier and they were fairly expensive but it turned out to be completely worth it. We didn’t really know what to expect because it was the first music festival for both of us and we didn’t particularly know all of the artists but when we got there, we looked at the list and picked out the artists that we wanted to see. We made priorities for those artists that day and throughout the day we traveled from tent to tent and of course it was very warm. It was extremely hot out and the entire island soon became a pile of dust. We most specifically wanted to see Paul Kalkbrenner and Pretty Lights as well as the headliners, which were Steve Aoki and Diplo. There were so many artists there that looking back we just tried to go from tent to tent\textsuperscript{18}

As evidenced by Carolyn, music festivals provide a special and long-lasting experience for attendees. Throughout this paper, I will discuss festivals and headlining shows, as both provide atmospheres that promote exceptional experiences, but in very different ways. While one may attend a festival to see a number of artists, attending a headlining show means that the attendee will often be able to see their favorite artists for an extensive period of time. The fans at a headlining show will usually be better versed in the music as well, since they bought tickets to solely see the artist that is playing.

Aside from the music, the production of a show has a profound impact upon the experience. The production can include anything from lights to lasers to pyrotechnics to images, such as animals, on LED screens. Legendary British trance trio, Above & Beyond, are known for typing messages onto the screen behind them while playing as a way of connecting with their crowd. The image below (Figure 1.) was taken during my fieldwork at Miami’s Ultra Music Festival. Above & Beyond (listen to Track 6) were the second to last act on the Main Stage and as usual, they communicated with their fans their excitement about being in Miami, connecting on a very intimate level,

\textsuperscript{18} Carolyn, Interview by Lauren Gill, Record February 19, 2013.
considering that the stage was packed with tens of thousands of people.

![Figure 1: A visual from Above & Beyond’s headlining show at the Main Stage of Ultra Music Festival 2013](image)

For Paul, the visuals while seeing Above & Beyond at Electric Zoo in 2012 resonated with him on a deep, emotional level:

> The main visual that really made me feel amazing, emotionally very sound, very happy, and very uplifted was the simple text on the screen, just typing it out, just being able to look at them and look behind them and see what they’re saying to everybody to the thousands of people out in the crowd, it’s just the coolest thing. To see them typing things on to the screen, just little messages in Arial bold font, just simple messages over visuals was like, it sounds so primitive, it but it worked, it was so effective.

Lights and visuals are imperative to creating the ideal environment for dance music (Figure 2). Often, the visuals correlate with the music, flashing with the beat and lasers painting the crowd during build-ups. The lights and visuals at Electric Zoo went as far as to mesmerize Carolyn:

> Moby was the headliner for the second night. He played this light show that I cannot forget today. It was a cyclical movement of animals, specifically big cats and elephants going across the screen in time to his music. It was so powerful because the lights blasted across ten thousand people in the middle of the night. It was so tangible in the air because
the air was filled with dust so the light caught the dust so it just felt like you could reach up and grab the light from the screen.

Combined with the pounding music, the visuals of electronic dance music festivals and shows not only evoke emotion from the audience, but also enhance their experience by adding a crucial element that differs from that of listening to the music in everyday life, as the music comes alive in a kaleidoscopic and radiant display of pulsating light.

![Image of a concert stage with lights]

Figure 2: This picture was taken at Above & Beyond's performance at Electric Zoo 2012's Main Stage, which is the show that Paul so fondly referred to throughout his interview.

**DANCING**

Throughout my time as a participant-observer, I have witnessed a very special connection between dancing and the music. As the crowd raises their hands in the air, they await the moment that the beat drops and all of the built up energy in the air is set free. When this moment occurs, some twirl around in delight, while others continue to keep the beat with their hands pounding on an imaginary drum. Some jump and down in the air and some prefer to stand stationary, tapping their feet along with the rhythm. Whatever dance style someone desires to display, one thing is for certain, it is an
important part of the dance music experience. This is a point stressed by Robin Sylvan, in her book, *Trance Formation: The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of Global Rave Culture*. “Ravers typically do not perform these dance movements because they are aesthetically pleasing to watch from the outside, but because they produce powerful somatic states experienced from the inside.”19 The diversity of dancing that takes place at electronic dance music shows illustrates the inhibition-free nature of the culture. People dance in a way that feels natural to them and to the music, rather than being self-conscious about what others around them may think. Paul noted that this carefree nature is what attracted him to the electronic dance music scene. When speaking about his experience at Electric Zoo, he remarked, “People were just dancing, nobody cares what they look like, nobody cares who you are or what you’re doing there, everybody’s just dancing.” Similarly, Ken remembered, “We just started breaking it down in a group of people, having an awesome time, not caring about anyone around us.”20 For Carolyn, dancing served as a means of bringing her closer to the music. She reminisced, “It was as if the music were inside of you and you were vibrating that music and you couldn’t stop dancing.” Dancing can also unite the community for the night as one, as Jane said, “Everyone feels the waves of music and we each let our bodies move with the crowd.” As I have observed, dancing is one of the most significant features of an electronic dance music show. It fuses the music with the body.

In my e-mail interview with them, DJs/producers, Tritonal, explained that they seek to bond with their crowd by creating an environment in which energy is chief.

20 Ken, Interview by Lauren Gill, E-mail, March 14, 2013.
Half of the duo, member, Dave Reed described that their crowds are “Purely energetic and passionate…When we step on stage, we know our audience is ready to dance.”

As such, they then try to build their set so that they can meet the crowd’s desire to keep moving. Dave continued to reflect on this in the following terms:

> When we’re at the moment of maximum energy, it’s incredibly intense for both us and our crowd. We build our sets in such a way as a roller coaster would run—we’re going up the hill and getting ready for the big drop. The best part of this is everyone gets excited at this point. Hands are in the air, strobes are flaring off, Chad and I are jumping, and finally, we the impact hits we have a full connection with our audience.

This focus on energy and the lack of self-consciousness expands beyond the dancing into other unique characteristics of the culture that will be discussed below. While it is difficult to assert that the style of dancing differs immensely in electronic dance music from other genres, the very explicit attempt to fuse the music with the body is a phenomenon that I personally have not witnessed in other concert settings prior to attending electronic dance music performances. It is important to note how dancing is even incorporated into the name, “electronic dance music.” This music is designed for dancing and it is a crucial part of the culture as well as performance of electronic dance music festivals and shows, allowing attendees to release the energy of the music into often very uninhibited expressions.

**ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE**

Before we move into the specifics that make up the eclectic and unique culture of electronic dance music, it would be helpful to discuss the interviewees’ introduction

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21 Reed, Dave (Tritonal) Interview by Lauren Gill, E-mail, February 09, 2013
to it, as this is representative of its interesting self-forming community component. There was an obvious trend across my interviews in that the interviewees were all introduced to electronic dance music by someone else, and that they in turn have introduced others to it, developing a notable cycle. Both Paul and Kathy named the legendary Daft Punk (listen to Track 7) as the electronic dance music artist that initially made them fall in love with the genre. Paul remembered how he was, “First introduced to dance music by my brother when he played, ‘One More Time,’ by Daft Punk…from a mix CD from his buddy.” As evidenced in my interviews, while the introduction to the actual music is imperative in becoming entranced by the scene, the live experience is what truly captivates them. Kathy, crediting her obsession with the music to the live experience explained how:

The sound system truly defines the difference between listening to [electronic dance music] as background music and really being and feeling a part of the music. There is an unspoken connection with the DJ and the other people around you experiencing the same sound waves and vibrations. Once you experience the electronic dance music world live, you are truly hooked.

This type of attitude was common amongst the interviewees, who felt that the live experience creates an addiction. After Ken saw Swedish progressive house phenom, Avicii, in the summer of 2011 on New York’s Governor’s Island, he became consumed by the scene. (listen to Track 8) “I was completely hooked,” he remarked, “Any show that I could attend, I did. I saw Avicii eight times in the next six months.”

Following the live experience, there is usually a tendency for the fans to inundate their lives with all things electronic dance music, broadening their knowledge and thus, enhancing the quality of their experience. As Paul reflected,
“Once you’re in the scene and you listen to enough electronic music, you can sift through the bad stuff and find the people who are making the real music with real emotion that have a really wonderful fanbase.” This progression was evidenced in both my observations of dance music fans as well as the interviewees, in that they were initially introduced to the music by a friend, became hooked by the live experience, and went on to a journey of discovering new music on their own.

Like any culture of music, electronic dance music possesses unique characteristics that shape its community and rituals. The longstanding mantra of rave culture, which fits within the array of subgenres forming the broader field of electronic dance music is “PLUR,” which stands for peace, love, unity, and respect. These ideals sculpt rave culture as well as the attitudes of the people who are a part of it. This is a point that Sylvan highlights in *Trance Formation*:

The peace and love part is an obvious throwback to the idealistic 1960s psychedelic hippie counterculture…peace here include both inner peace and outer peace. Similarly, love is not only self-love an love of other ravers, but also a higher, spiritual, unconditional love that is understood to be the true nature of all things…Unity refers not only to the experience of unity on the dance floor at raves in which social boundaries are transcended, but the application of that same unity to the whole world. Respect is both self-respect and respect of others, even if they are different.22

To better appreciate rave culture and its important place within the spectrum of electronic dance music, it is valuable to understand that PLUR is the guiding principle for the manner in which attendees strive to conduct themselves at shows. While it spans across all subgenres, the observance of PLUR is most prominent within the trance community. Consequently, the trance community seems to be comparatively more welcoming and accepting than people in other broad formations of electronic

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22 Sylvan, 139
dance music. Their widespread love of the music and the people around them is evidenced by a dedication unseen in other subgenres. As Paul explained, reflecting on his experience with trance firsthand, “The people who were around me could not have been nicer people. They could not have more excited for me that I was seeing [Above & Beyond] for the first time.” Carolyn shared a similar sentiment as she discussed how inclusive the people around her were, “Everyone is in the same frame of mind and everyone is there because they like that music, so you’re automatically friends with them even if you don’t know them and that’s really special.”

For these people that become “automatic” friends, as Paul put it, the exchange of kandi bracelets, which are pony beads, sometimes with messages, helps to cement the memory of the personal contact made at the show. On numerous occasions I have seen these bracelets swapped after two new friends engage in the PLUR handshake, which consists of shaping the hand into a peace sign and touching fingertips, joining the two peace signs as one. Next, each hand forms half of a heart, developing a full heart. After that, the two comrades in trance put their hands together, lock fingers in an embrace and slide their kandi bracelets on to the wrist on their new friend. Usually, the handshake is closed out with a friendly hug.

PLUR is not only an acronym for the way in which electronic dance music fans should act, but it is also the basis of this handshake in which concertgoers trade beaded bracelets cementing their new friendship. As evidenced in the above description, this can occur out of a simple act of kindness or at the end of spending a whole show with a new friend. In the handshake, the symbols for peace, love, unity, and respect are
formed between both hands and culminate with the trade of kandi bracelets, which can be saved as memories of the new person met.

The PLUR handshake would not be possible without kandi bracelets, which in addition to letters with saying, can also include artists’ names or various other symbols on them. Pictured below (see Figure 3) are examples of kandi, which I have collected during the course of my research. Note the prominent use of the peace symbol, which both picks up on the PLUR acronym as well as reconfigures a symbol strongly associated with the counter-culture peace movement of the 60s and 70s to entirely a new set of cultural and musical practices. Participants wear as much or as little on their arms, depending on preference, but trading is a notable part of the electronic dance music experience. However many they choose to wear, trading is a unique part of the electronic dance music experience that builds upon the unique nature of the trance community. This friendliness to complete strangers is usually unseen, making the PLUR handshake a notable characteristic of the electronic dance music experience that channels the hippie vibes of earlier generations.

Figure 3: Kandi bracelets that have been acquired during the course of my fieldwork
Aside from the larger significance that participants derive from the PLUR ritual, there is an unspoken bond that the music builds within the crowd, whether the crowd consists of veterans of the scene or those who are seeing their first show. This bond is reminiscent of Durkheim’s theory of collective effervescence. This theory revolves around the belief that when gathered in a communal setting, there is a feeling generated that is outside of the everyday existence. This feeling would not exist outside of a group setting. Collective effervescence is highly applicable to electronic dance music since festivals and shows take place for a large number of people. DJs play music for not one person, but many times, tens of thousands of people. When all of those people are gathered in one place and everyone is dancing along to the same rhythm and singing along to the same songs, the feeling that is evoked is special and unique. As Jane, who feels a special bond with the trance community elegantly put it, “We each get it. We have a common bond, and even if we don’t exchange any words, we walk past each other and can smile at each other, because we know that each person understands how powerful this music is.” Ken similarly reflected, “I started to realize how much I loved looking down in an arena or a festival and seeing thousands of people in sync. It is truly mesmerizing to see so many people believing in the same thing.” Both Jane and Ken’s words illustrate how the community feeds off of one another’s energy and creates a special experience as one.

This group sensation was something that Paul experienced when seeing Above & Beyond at Electric Zoo in 2012. When he recounted what occurred, he was

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confident with his word choice, illustrating that this probably wasn’t the first time he had thought about how the people around him made him feel. He recalled:

I remember looking around me and seeing other people who were super big Above & Beyond fans, people who have clearly seen them like ten or fifteen times. They knew every word to every song. I was just looking at couples, wives and husbands, literally just holding each other and crying. It was the most unreal thing I’ve ever seen.

Paul admitted that he had been to a number of concerts before, but he had never witnessed such a scene, remarking, “I’ve never seen that before.” Kathy also observed that the crowd was an important part of her experience:

It’s this constant back and forth of making sure that others are having the best time and they’re looking for you to have the best time also…I could have just as much as a connection with someone who speaks another language as with my best friend I went with...It’s a shared experience that is so unique to that one night, that one moment, that one song.

This sense of a mutual understanding with strangers through the music was stressed by all of the participants throughout the interview process. Carolyn shared, “You just felt like you were in this big family of people who were feeling the same way you were so you were immediately connected with them to the point where you didn’t even care who was standing next to you, you just wanted to hug them.” Ken added, “The sense of unity within electronic dance music is something that is unexplainable, something that takes being in a crowd of thousands of people listening to the same beat, watching the same lights, feeling the same thing, to truly understand.” As evidenced by the interviewees, a critical element of attending electronic dance music shows lies in being part of a community with the other concertgoers, even if just for that night.

Besides what takes place at shows that brings people together to build community, what happens outside of the festivals and concerts also sculpts the
electronic dance music community. In 2013, the internet is one of the most popular tools for bringing people together virtually, whether it be via e-mail, Facebook, or Twitter. The internet can be utilized by electronic dance music fans to share music, but it also can be used to listen to radio shows which are broadcast weekly around the world on a certain date and time. For example, Above & Beyond hosts Group Therapy radio, in which they play new and old trance tracks, including a guestmix by one artist per week. Their radio show is broadcast from 7-9pm in Great Britain, and from 2-4pm Eastern Standard Time every Friday. During this time, Twitter users use the hashtag “#ABGT” with their tweets about the show. Then, if someone were to search for the hashtag “#ABGT” on twitter, all of the tweets would correlate directly to the show and the song that is playing. Consequently, everyone around the world, no matter the time, is listening to the same exact song and reacting in the same moment, regardless of nationality, race, gender, and so on. Additionally, a live hub, which can be accessed during the show on Above & Beyond’s website, includes track listings correlating and the live Twitter feed. (See Figure 4) This provides for a unique experience, as users can interact with one another about their thoughts on the show and even send in tweets to Above & Beyond to be read on air. Twitter forms the basis for an online community for fans of the trio and trance in general. Paul, an avid listener of the show, shared:

As you listen to the music and see the tweets come up on the feed, you really start to get a sense for what Above & Beyond’s aim is for the radio show...The show truly becomes a group therapy session through the music that they play and the way they address the listeners intermittently throughout the broadcast. It all contributes to this sense of inclusiveness and community that I believe, is the entire mission of the broadcast.
As Paul explained, the community translates from a hashtag on Twitter to the universality of a moment. The radio show serves as a way for listeners to learn about new music together and interact with one another over the internet. This form of community building is not unique to electronic dance music, but certainly is a phenomenon that is rooted in the popularity of the radio shows, which regularly trend on Twitter during their airtime. Other notable radio shows include Armin van Buuren’s *A State of Trance*, and Tiesto’s *Club Life*, which are also archived as podcasts and come in at the top two spots of iTunes most downloaded music podcasts.

![Figure 4: The ABGT hub that can be accessed during the show. It includes a track listing and live Twitter feed](http://www.aboveandbeyond.nu/radio/abgt017)

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TRANCE FAMILY

Let’s take a journey away from the main stage of the Electric Zoo festival and let’s make our way into the Above & Beyond Group Therapy tent, located in the middle of two other tents pumping out electronic music. Once you step inside the tent you, immediately spot a Brazilian flag waving in the air with the words, “Trance Family Brazil” spray-painted over top of it. In front of them is a crowd of people in black jerseys with the words, “Trance Family New York” printed across the back. What you are looking at are those who call themselves “Trance Family.” Paul, who is a member of Trance Family New York explained that, “These people are so fired up about trance music and that’s their life. I don’t think that’s found in a lot of types of music, it’s just kind of trance music.”

Trance Family is a unique part of the electronic dance music scene, consisting of people who identify themselves as devoted lovers of trance. The group not only represents intense fans of the genre, but also brings people together for a common goal: to listen to trance. Another member of Trance Family New York, Neal, explained:

If someone hears about an upcoming show before another person, they will share it with everyone. If you’re going to a concert, you can tell a bunch of people you’re going and find a bunch of people who are also going…I like to think that I always know five people to my right and left.

This type of following, in which fans wholeheartedly devote themselves to trance music, is not seen across other electronic dance music subgenres, making it a distinctive feature of the trance genre that illustrates why it differs in terms of the community. June is an active member of the Trance Family, who explained, “Trance Family is a real thing. I find it so much easier to get along with and connect with
people who I know are involved in trance and enjoy trance since it is such a big part of my life.”

**MDMA**

The final feature of electronic dance music, which will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, but is essential to mention, is the use of drugs. Due to its ability to provide energy, enhance the perception and appreciation of the music, and produce a feeling of openness with others, MDMA,(3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methamphetamine) which goes by the street name “Molly,” is the most commonly used drug within the scene. To be under the influence of Molly is referred to as “rolling,” due to the intense array of emotions the drug can often elicit. Paul’s first experience on MDMA and its ecstatic and euphoric effects left a lasting impression on him:

> It’s hard to describe because everything feels so right, everything feels perfect. You feel so happy, you feel so energized, you just feel no aggression. You just feel calm, but very self-aware, but passionate at the same time. It’s this whole culmination of positive feelings in one drug, and that’s the thing that blew me away about it.

While many members of the electronic dance music community engage in MDMA use, it is not a defining characteristic, but something that is used to supplement the already intense experience. As Paul described it, “It’s like taking a highlighter and throwing it all over everything,” bringing out what is already there. MDMA’s history and effects will be studied in greater scope in the next chapter, but for now, it is important to keep in mind that the drug’s presence within electronic dance music culture is quite similar to the widespread use of marijuana and LSD by the hippies of the 60s and 70s, and the festival-goers throughout subsequent generations.
EXPERIENCE AND LANGUAGE

Now that I have provided the relevant background information about electronic dance music, with an emphasis on the trance genre, it is important to examine how these characteristics generate the experiences of its listeners. When combining the music, lights, dancing, and community, the effect is one that seems to leave a lasting impression.

When Paul described his experience seeing Above & Beyond at Electric Zoo, he radiated bliss as he recounted what he called, “A high point in my life.” He reminisced:

I just remember them coming on and just feeling overwhelmed with happiness. It was just a total surge and release of endorphins at one time and it was insane because I don’t think I’ve ever been happier in my life.

Paul described himself as an avid fan of Above & Beyond, admitting that the sole reason why he went to Electric Zoo was to see the trance producers. “I had been listening to them for about eight months and just fell in love with their music. The production quality is on par, the vocals are always amazing and it’s just deeper than most dance music,” he reflected. The trance legends did not disappoint Paul, delivering a set that he would not soon forget. Emotions went into overdrive when they dropped their hit, “Sun & Moon.” “It was probably the best song I’ve ever heard live in my life,” he passionately recalled. Another moment in their set that stood out to the Above & Beyond devotee was when the superstars closed out with “On a Good Day,”(Track 9) which was produced as part of their side project, Oceanlab. Paul
glowed with happiness at this point, as he brought back the memories of that night on Randall’s Island:

They didn’t even play the club mix, they just played the acoustic version. It was literally just vocals and piano and it was three and a half minutes of me basically crying and feeling so good at the same time. Everybody around me was doing the same thing.

While Paul’s experience was unique to him, others have reported similar feelings of overwhelming euphoria during electronic dance music shows. When reflecting on her experience, Carolyn also spoke about the impact that the Electric Zoo festival had on her. When asked about the moment that she considered the most special or unique at the festival the young woman immediately brought up seeing German techno producer/DJ, Paul Kalkbrenner.(listen to Track 10) While speaking about her experience, Carolyn would often smile to herself, as if reliving every beat over again in her head. “We were up at the front, right in front of him, looking at him sweat and work hard to make the music for us. I just felt so connected to the artist and I had never felt that before.”

Across these interviews, I couldn’t help but notice a common theme between all of them. While some chose to talk about their experience in great detail, and others could only muster a few sentences, it was clear that each of these people had undergone an experience that they truly held dear to them. This was evidenced by the smiles inevitably plastered across their faces or just the excitement that radiated from their voices while talking about that moment in which everyone was dancing or singing along. No matter what particular part of the show sparked it for them, everyone recalled being overcome with emotion.
One issue that arose for the interviewees when talking about their experience was the inability to put what happened into words. For each of them, the experience was not easy to talk about to those who hadn’t been there. They often felt like other people couldn’t understand the intense phenomenon that they had been a part of.

Neal noted, “You’ve got to be there, there’s no way around it.” While Neal embraced his trouble with language, others put in effort to make words work, but ultimately found that communicating their experience to others was futile. Paul remarked, “I think that the biggest challenge I had when describing my experience was the fact that other people just didn’t really understand it. They were just kind of like, ‘Oh, you saw Above & Beyond? They play this and that, cool.’ For me, it was so much deeper.” Carolyn faced a similar problem as she attempted to talk about her experience at Electric Zoo, “When I tried to tell people who hadn’t gone I just used a lot of adjectives like ‘it was awesome, it was so cool, or you wouldn’t believe it.’ You just can’t explain it because it’s such a personal experience.” Kathy attributed her difficulty in retelling how she felt to what she called the “transcendent nature” of the experience. “There’s something totally indescribable about the whole experience. There’s definitely sort of a transcendent nature to the whole thing that transcends words, transcends language.” Jane, who was overcome with emotion at a trance show this past fall also encountered that language could not accurately depict or capture her experience, “The feelings I felt that night and the overwhelming sense of ecstasy I experienced can not, in any way, ever be explained or described to anyone. I think that is because there is something so spiritual and personal about experiences like these.”
Given these accounts of the limitations of language, we see how the various experiences described are quite distinct from the attempts at describing them; in many ways for the participants the experiences themselves take obvious precedence over linguistic or cognitive means of trying to fable the ineffable, as it were. The various experiences are described as utterly unique to each interviewee and could not be reproduced into words. Collectively, the participants appear to have had very similar experiences, though how to test or confirm this other than in purely bio-chemical terms would be very difficult, as the language not only can not entirely account for what it is felt or perceived, it also in very noticeable ways shapes what and how we experience the world. The participants may have done their best to translate what was going on in their heads into a story that everyone could understand, though with clear difficulty. Nonetheless, we can not fully share these experiences, other than perhaps actually participating in similar contexts of performance. Even with employing the various linguistic strategies of analogy (this was like x or y) or apophatic discourses of unsaying (this was not like x or y), as explored for instance by the likes of Michael Sells in his comparative study of mystical experience, language faces obvious limits in the rationalization or communication of the transcendent.  

This claim can be made about not only musical experiences, but also most experiences in every day life. For example, you probably ate today. If you think about what you ate and try to describe it to someone, you surely cannot make them realize every single aspect of your eating experience. You can talk about how the food was hearty or delicious, but no one can really understand how it felt for you to eat except for you.

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Now, take your experience with eating and try to talk about listening to live music. Even though you do your best to use language to put your experience into words, others will fully not understand, other than recognizing that they too might have shared similar experiences. As such, the experience is far greater than what one could agonize over putting into precisely the most descriptive words. In the very tension between being and language, long explored in both philosophy and theology, experience is not only greater than words, it exists in an entirely ontological sphere. As such, I will accept and abide by the principle of the very separate nature of the two categories, as I seek to contextualize and understand the experiences illustrates throughout my research.

To close this chapter, I would like to reflect on the culture of electronic dance music. From my research, including both my interviews and fieldwork, I noticed that the culture is composed of defining elements that are present in every single show, and talked about by all of the interviewees. All of them talked about how the music is different from other subgenres of electronic dance music, and the way that the visuals and dancing brought them closer with the music. The strong experiential element is important to note. On one hand, it is frustrating to arrive at the conclusion that language will never be able to describe the interviewees’ experiences, but on the other hand, I would not dare to reduce their experiences to words that will never be enough. I, personally know how the experiences that electronic dance music generates are unique and I, personally have struggled to translate my experiences into language. Every time that I attempted to do so, I failed, and often was left with the feeling that I had just diminished what I had gone through. It is important to keep that in mind while
reading the remaining content of this thesis as I continue to describe the undeniable connection between electronic dance music and religion.
CHAPTER 2
The Drop: MDMA and “Pure Bliss”

OVERVIEW

This chapter will detail the use of MDMA in the electronic dance music scene, with regards to its history, effects, and role within the live music experience. However, before I begin, I think it is important to offer a brief explanation of why I have dedicated an entire chapter to the examination of MDMA. Too many times, electronic dance music is automatically associated with kids drugged out on Ecstasy. For instance, in GQ’s recent article about Swedish progressive house producer, Avicii, the reporter describes his fans as “Ecstasy-dosed, champagne-soaked masses.”26 When writing this chapter, it was my greatest fear that it would immediately characterize my interviewees in a negative light that furthers the stigma or negative associations of electronic dance music with MDMA. That is why I feel the need to point out that the interviewees are passionate lovers of electronic dance music that deeply appreciate the music, whether it be at a crowded festival or in their rooms through their headphones. Even as five out of seven of them said that their most special experience with dance music occurred while under the influence of MDMA, they also pointed out that they probably would have had the similar experiences without the use of controlled substances. For them, the drugs didn’t make the experience, the music did. Across a variety of religious traditions, such as some Native American tribes ingesting peyote

for its psychotropic effects, or some Hindu sects smoking cannabis, to hippies dropping LSD, often in the context of spiritual or “vision” quests, people have used a variety of substances as a means of aiding or heightening religious experiences. Based on my fieldwork and interviews, the use of MDMA appears to have been very similar with the respect to the transformative power and the otherworldly states elicited by the drug, which are meant to produce deeper cognitive states and to provide greater insight into daily life. While at electronic dance music events, I have witnessed a number of people under the influence of MDMA, and have observed that the drug creates a special connection between the user and the music. However, I have also seen people assume that someone is under the influence of MDMA, based on the way they are conducting themselves, only to find out that they are completely sober and still nonetheless having such a connection with the music. Therefore, my purpose in this chapter is not to make judgments about the use of drugs, but to explore the ways in which MDMA can aid in reaching a spiritual or unique experience, as described by my interviewees.

**HISTORY**

MDMA, (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methamphetamine) is a synthetic drug that was patented in 1912 by the German pharmaceutical company, Merck. At the time, the company also had cocaine and morphine to their credit as drugs they manufactured for medicinal purposes. MDMA was invented in an attempt to synthesize a new formula that would stop bleeding, but instead the pharmacologists stumbled on to the drug that would eventually get the world dancing.

Following its invention, MDMA hid from both the public and the scientific eye until the Cold War. Like LSD, it was studied for use of the United States government
during the Cold War against the Soviets, but it did not prove to be a tool that the military would utilize. Once again, MDMA went ignored until it was synthesized by a Californian chemist named Alexander Shulgin, who was working as an independent researcher when he discovered it in 1965.\textsuperscript{27} He believed its “Pharamacological exploration could yield more effective tools to pry open the doors of perception.”\textsuperscript{28} Mind altering drugs were nothing new to Shulgin who had previous experience with the psychedelic mescaline. While the chemist synthesized MDMA in 1965, he did not try it until 1967, in which he reported that he “Found it unlike anything I had taken before.”\textsuperscript{29}

Before we discuss the rest of the history that brought MDMA to where it is today within the electronic dance music scene, it will be of help to describe how the drug acts on the body and produces such a powerful experience. MDMA is a classified as a stimulant that is characterized by its ability to bring on mild hallucinations, euphoria, empathy, and energy. Additionally, it also causes rise in body temperature and increased heart rate.\textsuperscript{30} The strong feelings that MDMA produces come from the effect that the drug has on the neurotransmitters of the brain. Ingestion of MDMA causes the neurotransmitters to release an increase of serotonin and dopamine from the brain’s stores.\textsuperscript{31} Serotonin and dopamine are two chemicals that are associated with

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{28} Collin, 23.
\textsuperscript{29} Collin, 25.
\end{flushright}
pleasure and mood, and the surge of their release is responsible for the escalated levels of happiness and openness that users report feeling.32

Now that we understand the neurobiology of why Shulgin felt the way that he did upon first experimenting with MDMA, let’s return to the history of the now-storied club drug. In 1977, the chemist introduced the drug to psychologist, Leo Zoff.33 He was so enamored with the drug that he delayed his retirement and instead traveled around discussing the therapeutic benefits of MDMA with other psychologists and psychiatrists. Because MDMA causes a feeling of openness with others, the drug allowed for patients to uninhibitedly talk about themselves in therapy. Additionally, some believed that the drug would not only help those who were suffering from a wide variety of mental problems, including, but not limited to, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but that it would also enhance the quality of life for those who were already living healthily. By the time that Zoff had finished traveling around, it is estimated than nearly a half million doses of MDMA were administered by psychologists and psychiatrists with the goal of reaching an open channel of communication with their patients throughout the decade.34

Given its therapeutic use, many psychologists and psychiatrists fought to keep MDMA out of the eye of the public, in order to prevent its recreational use, so that that it would not be associated with motivations or practices that were in any way less than scholarly.35 Nonetheless, the former Harvard professor and guru to the counter-culture

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33 Benzenhofer, 1358
34 Collin, 26
movement, Timothy Leary, of LSD fame, called it the “Drug of the 80s,” and encouraged its use to be limited to those who would be seeking spirituality, rather than pleasure.  

This divide between those who were using it recreationally as opposed to those who were using it for research remains a prominent issue with MDMA in the present day. When I refer to MDMA being used recreationally, I am referencing its use in a non-clinical setting. This does not mean that it is any less important, but with respect to the terminology, I feel that it is important to mention that the drug is employed in various contexts.

After it was discovered that MDMA would be helpful for psychologists and psychiatrists, the Boston Group formed to further the use of the drug in this setting. This group frowned upon the idea of MDMA becoming a common street drug. At around this point, MDMA had acquired the popular name, “Ecstasy,” based on its ability to produce highly enticing states of euphoria and bliss. Next, the Texas Group, a collection of entrepreneurs from Texas, formed, which would then be responsible for mass producing Ecstasy and launching it into the club scene. MDMA was sold in clubs and bars throughout the south, often times outselling alcohol. Those who saw it as something beyond a recreational drug became infuriated at its “improper” use.

The buzz surrounding Ecstasy reached such a pitch that eventually the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) caught wind of the recreational use of MDMA and in July 1984 recommended MDMA be classified as a Schedule 1 drug, which

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36 Collin, 27
37 Collin, 28
39 Jennings, 2011
criminalized its illicit use, manufacture, and distribution.\textsuperscript{40} It is necessary to note that this took place during Ronald Reagan’s presidency, in which he waged an all out war on drugs. This classification sent the clinical community into a fury. Even though they attempted to fight for the decriminalization of MDMA for medical use, the DEA ultimately ended up overruling a judge’s verdict to continue research, and in 1986, Ecstasy officially became a Schedule I drug.\textsuperscript{41} According to the Controlled Substances Act, this means that it has high potential for abuse, no accepted medical treatment, and is unsafe for use.\textsuperscript{42}

**MDMA USE TODAY**

Now that we are all caught up on the history of MDMA, let’s fast forward to 2013. First, I would like to discuss how I am examining MDMA in the electronic dance music setting. To begin, I will offer a brief overview of the terminology that will be used throughout this section to provide a fuller background.

Even though MDMA and Ecstasy were used interchangeably in the last section, in common usage today they are not one and the same. While the Ecstasy that was referenced in the past used to consist of purely MDMA, the Ecstasy of 2013 is generally cut with other substances such as cocaine or methamphetamine. This means that Ecstasy is pressed into a pill with these other substances. Because of this, users can often feel more like they are on speed rather than the empathetic and blissful effects of MDMA. Some interview subjects did say that they took Ecstasy, so when

\textsuperscript{40} Collin, 32
\textsuperscript{41} Collin, 27-31
they talk about the drug, they are referencing the pressed and diluted pill form of MDMA.

The drug that is most prevalent in the electronic dance music scene today goes by the street name “Molly,” which is pure MDMA. This means that it is not cut with any other substances. With regards to terminology, Molly and MDMA will be used interchangeably through the rest of the thesis. Instead of a pressed pill, MDMA is distributed in powder or crystal form. This can be inserted into capsules for ingestion or in many cases, users will simply dip their finger into the MDMA and spread it across their gums. This method of “dipping” is most common since users have the ability to control how much MDMA they are ingesting over a long period of time, allowing for a more even “roll,” as they can regulate the quantity consumed. As mentioned earlier, users refer to their experience as “rolling” because of the roller coaster of emotions that the drug sends them on.

With respect to dosages, a single dose is recommended at 100-200 milligrams. Since users build a quick tolerance to the effects of Molly, heavy users will often indulge in anywhere from 200 milligrams to a gram over the course of a festival day in order to achieve desired effects. The dosages that are usually administered in clinical use often range from 50 to 75 milligrams, which do not give the full body effects of rolling.43

Given the ways in which MDMA makes users feel while taking in an electronic dance music show, there are a number of items that have become associated with the drug. Because one of the side effects of Molly is jaw clenching, users will often suck

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on lollipops, pacifiers, or chew on gum in order to alleviate its uncomfortable nature. Additionally, because the pupils of the retina become dilate while on Molly, lights often appear brighter, and some members of the crowd walk around with gloves that have lights on their fingertips and give private light shows to those that are rolling as a way to enhance the effects of the drug. Some who are under the influence of MDMA will wear glasses that refract the lights for a similar effect, while others will simply wear sunglasses to protect their eyes from the intensity of the lights. Finally, as Molly raises the body temperature and people are uninhibitedly dancing to the pulsing music, users must drink water in order to fight dehydration. It is a familiar scene to see a crowd full of water bottles, instead of alcohol, at electronic dance music shows.

THE MDMA EXPERIENCE

All of the interview subjects reported that they have tried MDMA at least once, and most were under the influence of the drug in the experience that they recounted as the most special or unique to them. While one might argue that the experience was only special because of the MDMA, I am not trying to make that distinction or to enter into a discussion of the normative uses of pharmacological substances for solely medicinal or clinical purposes, as constructed within either purely psychological, medical, or legal terms. As mentioned in the previous chapter, while MDMA did enhance the experiences of those I interviewed, they believed that they could have this same experience with the music without the drug. When Carolyn returned from Electric Zoo, she felt as if many people attributed her experience to MDMA. However,
she remarked, “I would want to say ‘no,’ the music was good and the drugs enhanced it.”

This section will detail how those I interviewed experienced MDMA, with regards to how it made them feel both physically and emotionally when listening to the music in a crowd setting. While reading, I recommend that you keep in mind that these are the interviewees’ descriptions of their most intense and moving experience with electronic dance music and it does not necessarily mean that every time that someone is under the influence of MDMA that they will feel the following sensations.

When the topic of drugs arose, the interviewees commonly marveled at the sheer power of the drug in eliciting emotions. Paul, still appearing dumbfounded by its strength admitted that Electric Zoo was the first time he experimented with MDMA. When he took it, he was not let down. “I’ve never felt anything like that, like drunk, that can do. It’s almost too good to be true.” While Paul felt enthralled by the Molly, Ken had a different experience upon ingesting it:

Within thirty minutes of taking the capsule I started to feel really anxious. I thought everyone was looking at me…While I was walking I started to feel this unexplainable warmth surround me. It might have been the drugs I took as I kept walking I realized it was the positive energy of the crowd.

While everyone’s initial experiences with the onset of MDMA effects may differ, once they surface, they deliver an extreme connectedness with the music and the crowd. Ken continued to describe that after he took a 200-milligram capsule of Molly he had a life-changing day, “I cried to a DJ’s music not because it was so beautiful but because the whole experience was surreal.” Similarly, Carolyn painted a detailed picture of how the music sounded to her while rolling:
The music just parades around you and it sounds so good... You realize that’s why they did that, that’s why the sound is like that, and it makes me feel so great when it’s like that. Then, when the bass comes on, it just vibrates your bones and your sternum is popping out of your chest.

Similarly as Carolyn experienced each particle of the music, Kathy felt comfortable talking to anyone while under the influence of MDMA. She remarked, “I’m more talkative and you’re way more open with the people around you.”

For the participants, one of the most attractive results of MDMA use is the lack of inhibitions while dancing. When attending an electronic dance music show, you will often see a wide range of dancing styles. These can include anything from standing still and swaying to the music to aggressive, quick movements. As MDMA helps to break down the barriers between individuals and the world around them, it is not surprising that all of the interviewees commented on the way in which they just let themselves go with the music. Ken remembered how “No one was looking at me. No one was giving a second thought to what I was doing. Everyone was completely hooked on the pulsating beats and melodies emanating from the DJ.” Paul also commented, “When I’m on Molly you just don’t care... You can just kind of focus on the music, the moment, and your friends around you.”

One of the characteristics of MDMA is the feeling of being “in the zone.” This refers to the sensation that takes place while rolling in which everyone is deeply entranced by their own dance moves and their own connection to the music. While it is possible to keep dancing with those around them, it is unspoken that everyone is functioning within their own bubble. Neal felt this way while seeing tech-house master, Claude von Stroke in a tent during the day at Electric Zoo. “It wasn’t crowded at all because everyone is in their own little groovy zone, doing their own dances.”
Like Ken and Paul, Carolyn felt an uncontrollable urge to let her dance moves loose. “When I was on Molly all I wanted to do was jump up and down and dance. And not just dance like how you would regularly dance, I mean move every inch of your body so that your toes were moving and your fingers and your neck.” From these accounts it is clear that MDMA enhances the dancing experience, urging people to openly move their bodies in ways that they may not have before ingesting the drug.

Since MDMA caters to the dancing that dance music suggests, it also provides energy for those who might have otherwise not been able to endure the all day or all night affairs. Neal remarked, “These things get tiring, so if you’re not on something to keep you up, your legs are going to get tired and you’re going to get tired.” For Paul, who had been on his feet all day at Electric Zoo, MDMA not only enhanced his connection with the music and those around him, but also gave him the boost he needed to keep going through the final set. “My legs were so tired but I couldn’t stop moving, I could not stop dancing.”

The ideal effects that MDMA have upon users in the electronic dance music setting make a popular drug within the scene. With the rise in popularity of the drug also comes with the risks. As with any controlled substance whose use is unregulated, it is possible to die from overdose or dehydration when indulging in Molly. Yet, as most of the interviewees stressed as they reflected on the dangers of the drug, when used in moderation, MDMA can serve as a powerful supplement to boost the already present sense of community and passion for the music that dance music brings about.

As I said at the beginning of this section, all of the interviewees did not attribute their experience purely to MDMA. Instead, they clarified music was at the
center of their experiences, and the MDMA just made it better. For Paul, who had been listening to Above & Beyond for months before he saw them, said, “I would have loved Above & Beyond regardless (of being on MDMA). They were the group for me to see and I just wanted to see them so bad.” June, who described seeing Armin van Buuren on New Year’s Eve 2013 as one of her most memorable electronic dance music experiences, was nearly sober, and still found great meaning in that night, explaining that it was “Easily the most memorable electronic dance music moment of my life. I was not under the influence of any drugs that night. There was open bar, but because it was so crowded, we weren’t able to get but one drink.”

For others, MDMA helped them realize that it was just as possible to dance and feel closeness with others even while sober. Kathy, who loves to dance regardless of being under the influence of a drug, shared, “You can totally dance exactly how you’re feeling. Everyone around you is supportive and doing the same thing.” She continued to explain that for the shows she had attended sober she felt “truly natural ecstasy.”

When Ken obtained a writing job for a popular electronic dance music blog it was required that he go sober to the events he covered. “While I was no longer influenced by drugs, the feelings were all still there. The desire to dance uncontrollably was still there.”

Additionally, I think it is important to note that while there is MDMA use amongst electronic dance music crowds, it does not mean that the producers are necessarily engaging in the drug. As Chad, from trance duo, Tritonal, said, “I don’t drink, I don’t do drugs, or party at all really.” He went on to explain how he draws inspiration for music from his spirituality, displaying that the use of mind-altering
substances is not necessary for the production of special experiences. Dave, Tritonal’s other member, added on, “It’s essential to nourish the creative mind and workflow to the optimum.” Hopefully these outlooks provide some clarity about the role of drugs within electronic dance music, as Tritonal illustrates that electronic dance music culture goes far beyond MDMA.

Therefore to close the section, I would like to make the argument that there is no need to make the distinction between being on MDMA and not being on MDMA as sculpting the experience. Clearly, the interviewees have illustrated that they do not rely on MDMA to enjoy electronic dance music shows. Instead, it merely enhances the experience and gives concertgoers the energy that they need to keep going. However, it does not “make” an experience, which is important to keep in mind when the inevitable question of if the experience was the experience purely because of the MDMA. If Paul had not taken MDMA before Above & Beyond would he still have been overcome with happiness? If Carolyn decided to be sober at Paul Kalkbrenner would she have still felt that connection with him? We will never know the answers to these questions, but I feel that they are not questions to concern oneself with. Every experience to every person is completely unique, and the factors that go into generating it are numerous. I believe that it is necessary to stay away from attempting to make the sober versus not sober argument in order to maintain the authenticity of the unique experience each person undergoes when attending an electronic dance music show.
CHAPTER 3
The Comedown: The Religious Features of Electronic Dance Music

It is Saturday night on New York City’s Randall’s Island. The 85,000 person-deep crowd at the main stage of the Electric Zoo festival is melodically singing along to British trance trio, Above & Beyond’s “Sun & Moon.” Look to the right, and there are friends adorned with glowsticks smiling at each other, arm in arm. Look to the left, and there is a woman in a furry panda hat, with beaded bracelets covering her arms, staring at the strobing red and green lights, as a tear trickles down her face. In front of you, there is a man with gloves that have lights on the fingertips giving a private lightshow to two mesmerized teenagers. Then, the music hits a peak, pulsing at 134 beats per minute, making the ground vibrate with each kick of the bass and unleashing the entirety of the crowd into a sea of dancers. The lights flash along with the music, keeping time for the eyes of everyone rhythmically dancing along.

For these concertgoers, the music reaches far beyond the conclusion of the show, it permeates into their lives and their notions of spirituality. According to Paul, “It’s probably the closest I’ve ever been to a spiritual experience.” For Kathy, it is an experience beyond the everyday. She shared, “I have had moments of spiritual awakening and there is unique notion of transcendence.” June remarked, “It’s a kind of experience different than anything else. I’ve never felt so loved and accepted by everyone around me.” These reflections are typical of what you would hear from most people after an electronic dance music show. This music has the ability to affect
people in a way that is unique to the genre and unique to the individual. While Paul and Kathy characterized their experiences as spiritual, June appreciates the community aspect of her experiences the most. However, the commonality between all of the interviewees was that no matter what part of their experience they held the closest, they ultimately held their experience as sacred.

Going into my research, I knew that many of the interviewees would talk about how special their experiences were to them. Having been to a number of festivals and shows, I knew firsthand how special these experiences could be. What I did not know was that across the board, every single participant would qualify their experiences as either being a large part of their life or even changing a large part of their life. The interviewees talked about how they felt at home at shows and how these shows were an escape from the everyday. It offered them somewhat of a sanctuary, because for that time when the DJ was playing this music, they could forget about all of the stress that was waiting for them after the last song fades away into the night. “I lose sense of reality. I forget that outside the doors of the venue, there is a world of violence and poverty. I forget that the next week, I have a final in class I even forget the things that make me worry the most in life,” reflected Jane. When I chose to write my thesis about the relationship with electronic dance music and religion, I knew that there would be a lot of similarities between the two in the most basic sense. This means that I knew that there was a ritualistic aspect, in that everyone danced to the same music. I also knew that there would be an experiential component that I could liken to the achievement of a transcendent, religious experience. However, I was not aware of the extent that these experiences played in everyone’s lives. They went beyond the dance
floor. Due to the significance that the interviewees claimed that their experiences had on their lives as a whole, I began to see more and more similarities with religion. Electronic dance music did not just affect them for the time that they were at shows, it affected them throughout the entirety of their lives.

DEFINING RELIGION

Religion can be defined in a number of ways. Scholars such as Clifford Geertz and Emile Durkheim have attempted to classify religion by offering their own definitions. While I will be exploring the relevancy of their definitions to electronic dance music, I will also be keeping in mind the limitations of their definitions. Even though Geertz and Durkheim are considered experts in their respective fields, I understand that they do not have supreme authority over the definition of religion. As Jonathan Z. Smith points out in “Religion, Religions, Religious,” just as society and culture change over time, the definition of religion also has changed over time. There are a vast number of definitions, by different thinkers in a variety of fields, and I am keeping in mind that to limit religion to just Durkheim and Geertz’s understanding of it would be both reductionist and naive. I was attracted to their definitions of religion because of how they sought to strip away or deemphasize the supernatural element. Additionally, they offer a religion outside of the traditional or nominal sense, which would consist of purely denominational or institutional commitments separating for instance, Christianity or Jews, and various spaces marked as holy, such as a cathedral.

or temple. Geertz and Durkheim, in their own ways, produce definitions that locate religion beyond these purely institutional or consecrated boundaries. By broadening the purview of religion, one can examine the various features of electronic dance, particularly the experiential dimensions, in terms of religious performance, which in turn offers greater insight into the actual phenomenon itself. As such, in the following section I will examine Geertz and Durkheim’s definitions in terms of electronic dance music, in an attempt to explain its various religious dimensions, as experienced by those I interviewed.

First, I will discuss anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion and how it can be understood in regards to electronic dance music. He defines religion as:

“1) a system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

To begin with, Geertz states that religion is a system of symbols. Within trance culture, there are a number of symbols that serve as representations of the experience that is brought about by the music. These symbols include, but are not limited to, kandi bracelets, artists shirts, water, and songs. All of these items stand for the experience that being at trance shows generate with regards to community, music, and MDMA.

Next, Geertz argues that these symbols establish enduring moods and motivations. Typically, fans of trance lead their lives according to the ideals of peace, love, unity, and respect, (PLUR) as discussed in the first chapter. Ken’s story

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illustrates how electronic dance music changed his outlook on life. “I had accepted myself, and that feeling was something I wanted to share with others. Putting people down was no longer fun or funny but mean and cruel.” He attributes this change in perspective to the acceptance that he felt in the electronic dance music community, thus demonstrating how his moods and motivations were sculpted by his experiences.

Geertz’s third point within the definition states that religion formulates conceptions of general order and existence, which is accredited to the tendency of humans to want to explain why something is the way that it is. Religion serves as a means to understand the natural world, make sense of suffering, and come to terms with the unfair nature of existence. For trance fans, the answer to all of these questions lies in their experiences with the community and the music. They function as an outlet to escape the mundane and appreciate the small moments of life. As Carolyn put it, “My experience made me think of all the little things around me. It made me realize that life is so beautiful and you can’t see the true beauty of it unless you are in that frame of mind.” For electronic dance music fans, being in an environment of perceived unconditional acceptance allows them to open up their minds to ideas and experiences that they may not have considered before.

Fourthly, Geertz positions religion as clothing the above mentioned conceptions with an aura of factuality. As I have come to understand it, religion performs the purpose of making all of the ideas surrounding it seem true. For example, Above & Beyond fill their shows with messages of unity and love, on top of the music that already professes those notions. The concertgoers are surrounded by the experience that Above & Beyond seeks to generate, so that the audience accepts what they are
feeling as real and genuine, as highlighted, albeit obliquely, by Paul’s reflection that, “I felt like I knew all of the guys. I knew all of the names, it felt like I was connected with them and to see them was the best thing for me at the time.” In Geertz’s terms, the experience as a whole enveloped Paul and brought him on a journey that he would look back on and regard as special.

Finally, Geertz asserts that religious moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. In trance, there is a genuine belief that the acceptance of others will allow people to realize their true selves. This has already been evidenced by the transformation that Ken claims to have undergone as a result of electronic dance music. He is not motivated by something that does not seem like it will never happen. Instead, he witnesses it in every show that he attends and in the people that he meets. Reflecting on his growth and awareness of others over time, he admitted, “I had come a long way.” Therefore, according to Geertz’s fifth declaration, electronic dance music provokes people to go through changes as they experience new moods and motivations that shape their lives.

After breaking down Geertz’s definition, it appears that there are a number of similarities between electronic dance music and what he calls a religion. It subscribes to all of the traits that Geertz believes are necessary in order for something to be religious, thus illuminating the possibility that people involved with electronic dance music are a part of a religion.

Even though we can find parallels between Geertz’s definition with the features of electronic dance music that position it remarkably similar to his conception of religion, there are serious limitations to such an exercise. By relying exclusively on
Geertz’s nominal definition, we encounter important ways in which such a line of reasoning breaks down. As I discussed earlier, any attempt to define something as broad as religion will undoubtedly come short in one way or another. Talal Asad sheds light on the limitations of Geertz’ definition of religion in the chapter, “Toward a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual,” in his book, *Genealogies*. Asad claims that Geertz does not take into account the historical component of religion, ignoring that it is constantly changing over time. Further, Asad characterizes Geertz’s definition as largely based upon a Protestant interiorization of religious experiences, which seeks to locate religion in a private, non-institutional space of the individual. He argues, “My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”46 According to Asad, Geertz fails to consider the full array of meanings that the category of religion has come to inhabit and his universalizing definition only reduces its complex nature.

Additionally, Asad critiques the anthropologist’s inability to bring together symbols with internal states of being, writing, “Geertz moves away from a notion of symbols that are intrinsic to signifying and organizing practices, and back to a notion of symbols as meaning-carrying objects external to social conditions and states of the self.”47 For Asad, Geertz does not make the connection between the symbols and the way that they are shaped by the internal being, which is problematic because society and the individuals within society play a large role in sculpting the meanings of symbols. Within the context of the electronic dance music community, the meanings of

47 Asad, 32
the symbols are formed by the personal experiences of each individual. What may be symbolic for one fan may mean little to another. As Asad points out, Geertz’s definition offers a rather one-dimensional understanding of the social function of symbols, further illustrating how his definition can fall short when thinking about it in terms of electronic dance music. Asad’s response to Geertz’s definition is significant because as with any piece of knowledge, it is important to look at critiques in order to make a well-informed judgment about its validity.

In order to gain a better understanding of the parallels between religion and dance music, I would also like to examine French sociologist, Emile Durkheim’s, definition. In his renowned book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim states:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.48

As with Geertz, I will now unpack Durkheim’s complex nominal definition as a means of understanding the relationship between electronic dance music and religion. The definition begins by claiming that religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. In dance music, the belief of unconditionally accepting others and the practice of going to shows to be part of a community is unified by an experience, sacred to many, that is produced when all of the elements of electronic dance music come together. These elements include the community, the music, the dancing, the setting, and sometimes, the ritual consumption of pharmacological substances. People believe in the power of the music and the way that

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48 Durkheim, 44
it can make them feel, driving them to attend shows. Once they attend the show, they take part in the experience that furthers the music and the community as a way to achieve something special together.

Next, Durkheim asserts that the sacred things are set apart and forbidden. The sacred, which we may think of with respect to the electronic dance music experience itself, is set apart from the profane, which are the activities that take place outside of the shows or festivals. Therefore, the components of going to a dance music show are not present within the everyday. They are something that is special and compartmentalized. Something cannot be sacred if it is constantly present. I would then be rather for Durkheim, classified as the profane.

Lastly, Durkheim argues that the beliefs and practices unite into one single moral community called a Church. While most may think about a church in the sense of a temple or a cathedral, for example, Durkheim’s definition allows for a church to expand beyond those traditional religious gathering spaces. When I think about attending Dutch producer/DJ, Armin van Buuren’s *A State of Trance 600* show at New York City’s Madison Square Garden, in March, the similarities between the arena and a church were undeniable. There, I witnessed 18,000 people gathered to listen to trance music together, at one of the most famous arenas in the world, as evidenced in the picture below (see Figure 5). In this arena there was a notable moral code, morality shaped by the ideals of PLUR and as the music played on through the night, an entire community that was created within the space united around what was happening in those moments. On that night, Madison Square Garden transformed into a church of trance. *A State of Trance 600* exemplified how a church can exist outside of the
traditional sense and bring people together under a common interest for a period of time. As June reflected, “I never thought that you could feel so close to people just because of one shared interest.” The live electronic music experience shares a number of similar features with a church, in that they both take place in communal settings primed for achieving unique experiences.

Yet, here too, we can find within Durkheim’s definition a certain move towards either reification or reduction, as the experiences were both much more than what can be merely summed up in a definition. Thomas Tweed, in his work, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, highlights Smith’s claim that “Religion is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore theirs

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to define.”50 As such, its definition will reflect the values and belief systems of the community that constructs it. Therefore, definitions of religion will change over time, as the values of the community progress.

Furthermore, Durkheim’s definition of religion should not be esteemed as the ultimate definition, as the term should be left open for both scholars and practitioners to apply as they see fit. Additionally, Tweed views religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows” which “intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and boundaries.”51 For him, this illuminates religion as a multi-faceted movement of various spaces and emotions. According to such a theory, religion is not static, but rather is constantly evolving and as such, point to the limitations of Durkheim’s stationary definition that tends toward ossification.

ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

When I initially thought about the religiosity of electronic dance music, I was aware that it was not religious in the most traditional sense. Instead, I knew that I would be presenting it as religious in a sense that it was a modern movement that was full of ritual and most importantly, profound experiences. As with what is often thought of as the transformative power of religious experiences, the experiences that electronic dance music produces are long lasting and integral to the lives of those that they affect. As I’ve already discussed, there are a great deal of similarities between electronic dance music and religion, and this in turn led me to thinking about it as a

51 Tweed, 54
new religious movement. The respective writings by Bryan Wilson, Elisabeth Arweck, and John Saliba have helped to inform my examination of electronic dance music as a new religious movement.\textsuperscript{52} Also important to this process has been Graham St. John’s edited volume, \textit{Rave Culture and Religion}, which explores rave culture as “public paroxysms” forming “communitas and efference,” which can be conceptualized as a new religious movement “adaptive to apparent meaninglessness of consumer culture,” while admitting that the global rave scene is hardly a “cult” with a central body of teachings or single charismatic leader.\textsuperscript{53} While there are many commonalities between the characteristics of a new religious movement and what is taking place with the electronic dance music movement, there are also points in which it breaks down, similar to the definitions of religion highlighted above. In this section, I will attempt to offer a description of new religious movements, as the category has emerged in modern scholarship of religion and detail why it would be complicated to define electronic dance music as such.

Research on new religious movement often emphasize the importance of enthusiasm, which refers to the passion that members display for their religion.\textsuperscript{54} We can certainly say that electronic dance music fans travel around the country to see their favorite artists perform. There is a strong sense of devotion to the DJs/producers, evidenced by what I have observed in my fieldwork and also in the interviews. This is especially present in the trance genre, in which the trance family travels great distances


\textsuperscript{54} Saliba, 18
to be a part of an event. Additionally, in 2013, Ultra Music Festival hosted fans from approximately eighty countries around the world. Members of the electronic dance music denomination display an intense love for the music, the people who make it, and the their community, illustrating why they could easily be classified as enthusiastic.

Another feature which scholars have stressed in the study of new religious movements is the element of experience. For instance, in John Saliba’s study, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, he asserts, “Members of new religions…talk about the ‘unique’ religious feelings that they have come in touch with since their conversion…The individual claims that he or she has been transformed by the experience.” In all of my interviews, the subjects spoke about experiencing a new feeling that they had never felt before. In one way or another, they acknowledged that their experiences changed, or in new religious movement terms, converted them. Carolyn shared, “I remembered thinking for weeks afterward how I just wanted to go back in time and relive the whole weekend.” After Paul’s Electric Zoo experience, which was the first time that he had been a part of live electronic music, he became consumed by it. “Ever since I felt the music, I have been obsessed with going to electronic dance music shows.” Ken, who said that dance music changed his life, remembered, “I found myself so deeply connected to the music that I started tearing up.” Electronic dance music fed Jane’s hunger for the experience that they create. “I was addicted to these shows, and each time I went, I was feeding my addiction and reminding my brain, body, and soul what true happiness and bliss feels like,” she

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56 Saliba, 19
disclosed. These are all moving examples of how electronic dance music transforms its listeners, altering their viewpoints on life, and what it means to have a truly unique experience.

The final characteristic of a new religious movement that is relevant to electronic dance music is the practice of spiritual disciplines.\(^{57}\) Within the electronic dance music tradition, these behaviors most notably include dancing and the ingestion of MDMA. As discussed earlier, dancing is a central dimension to the electronic music experience. Jane expressed how, “The combination of dance music and dancing is irreplaceable. There is no greater sense of happiness than when one is completely immersed in a crowd, dancing in whichever way suits him or herself.” Dancing is a special part of the culture, in that it serves as a means of connecting with the music and expressing oneself in relationship to a larger community. Many of the interviewees considered it as something akin to a “spiritual” practice, as it bridges the gap between themselves and the music, materializing them into one single entity. As Carolyn put it, “You just want to keep moving and be in the moment. You feel 100% connected to the music.” One of the most extraordinary features of a live dance music experience is the way that the individuals in the crowd mirror one another. Whether someone is all the way in the back, or staring into the eyes of the DJ at the front, everyone is hearing the same sound and reacting in remarkably similar ways. Dancing is something that not only brings the individual closer to the music, but it also unites thousands of people in an electric, emotionally charged atmosphere.

The other important discipline of electronic dance music often thought of in spiritual or transcendent terms is the use of mind-altering drugs. At shows, people

\(^{57}\) Saliba, 20
engage in MDMA use to enhance their experience, as it keeps them moving, makes them happier, and increases the immensity of the music and the visuals. Many of the people I have spoken with have discussed MDMA as a part of a spiritual journey, as it is often taken in a ritualistic manner. That is to say its use is a very present part of electronic dance music culture. Its use is both accepted and in some cases, promoted, as it aids in bringing users closer to the music and creating a staggering experience. It functions in ritual terms since it is an established form of behavior used to generate particular sets of states and conditions. As described earlier, MDMA brings about an altered state of consciousness, which has the possibility of leading to transcendent or unique experiences. As Ken said, “It opened my eyes to what you can experience if you just let go. If you stop caring what others think and just go with the music, you find yourself in a much happier state.” MDMA has the ability to break down the walls between the music and the crowd, and while it is possible to achieve this naturally, the ritualistic nature of the drug amongst electronic dance music crowds makes it similar to a spiritual discipline.

Yet, even as I can apply the characteristics often associated with new religious movements in the areas of enthusiasm, experience, and the practice of spiritual disciplines, there are also important components of these movements that do not appear in electronic dance music. Saliba presents them as “negative features,” which mostly center around the cult-like tendencies of new religious movements. These features can be found in established examples of new religious movements, such Scientology or Millenarian movements, for instance. These movements have proven to have strong organizational dimensions to them, while electronic dance music does not require the
same commitment, in that its members are not bound to the community. Additionally, it is significant to point out that the term, new religious movement, was constructed as a means to stay away from defining religious communities as cults, since the word is commonly associated with a negative stigma. As electronic dance music does not adhere to the negative features, as elaborated throughout my studies, this is where the argument that it is a new religious movement breaks down.

Saliba observes that these movements often include an “all-powerful tyrannical leader,” cults as a proselytizing religious group, and cults as rigid, all-embracing institutions. All of these features concern cults, which I would not characterize the electronic dance music community as. As I have described throughout this paper, the electronic dance community is chiefly associated with the ideas of peace, love, unity, and respect. These are not usually prominent features of cults. Electronic dance music does not ask much of its community, people are free to come and go as they please. Additionally, cults require commitments, whether they be for a certain period of time or lifelong. Additionally, while the electronic dance music community may look to DJ/producers as priest or even messiah-like figures, there is little evidence of following or worshipping them in the oppressive manner often associated with various charismatic leaders of certain religious groups.

While I do see similarities between electronic dance music and new religious movements in regards to the fact that they both contain enthusiastic followers that value their experiences and take part in spiritual disciplines, the defining difference between the two concerns the often rather distinct nature of the commitments required

58 Saliba, 1.
59 Saliba, 12-15.
of practitioners as well as the structural and institutional characteristics often associated with New Religious Movements. The presentation of these often negative features outweighs the presence of the positive features. Therefore, it would be ill informed and overly simplistic to attempt to classify electronic dance music as a new religious movement. Instead, it is more important to note the similarities and the way that the positive features illuminate the religiosity of electronic dance music.

While there has been nominal current work on specifically electronic dance music as a New Religious Movement, Tim Olaveson’s essay, “‘Connectedness’ and the Rave Experience: Rave as a new religious movement” examines its phenomenal community feature with regard to new religious movements. He suggests that due to its strong communal values and ritualistic tendencies, “Rave cultures do in fact exhibit many features of new religious movements and…the dance culture phenomenon of the past 15 years demonstrates sociocultural revitalization on a massive scale.” However, as I highlighted, he also finds limitations with the rave community as a new religious movement due to its lack of formal social structures and binding doctrine. Additionally, I found shortcomings within Olaveson’s argument because of the dated nature of the work, which was written in the early 2000s. As such, it does not account for the evolution of electronic dance music as it has grown over the decade into the worldwide phenomenon that I have described.

61 Olaveson, 100.
CONCLUSION: THE REFLECTION
“That was the best night of my life”

On the first day of my Electric Zoo experience, I ventured into Above & Beyond’s Group Therapy tent to take in the hypnotic and exciting sounds of up and coming British DJ/producer, Mat Zo. The tent was alive with people dancing wholeheartedly along to the music, including myself. Mat Zo seemingly could do no wrong, as his music saturated the air and enchanted my ears. A couple in front of me, who I had never met before, noticing that I had water, asked if they could have a couple of sips. It was the middle of the day and the tent was steaming with heat, so I obliged and handed them my water, so that they would be able to satisfy themselves and keep on enjoying the heavenly sounds of Mat Zo. After they handed me my water back, the man gave me what I thought was the peace sign. I unknowingly gave him the peace sign back, thinking that he was just showing his gratitude for quenching his thirst. He came towards me, and put his peace sign onto mine, commencing the PLUR handshake. I had heard of the handshake before, but had never done it, so he led me though the ritual and proceeded to give me one of his kandi bracelets, which read “Keep calm, rave on.” He gave me a hug, and then the woman that he was with engaged in the handshake with me. They once again thanked me for the water and carried on with their dancing.

Reflecting on my encounter, I came to realize that the spirit of electronic dance music was summed up in that small, yet significant interaction. In that time, dancing to the divine sounds of Mat Zo, as a single community united as one with and by the music, I couldn’t have been more convinced that I was part of a religious experience.
The PLUR handshake was the right hand of fellowship, welcoming me to not only the tent, but also, the community. After I engaged in the handshake, I felt accepted and I began to grasp what the crowd, whether they be dressed wildly or just in normal attire, came for. They didn’t just come for the music, or the dancing, they came for the chance to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and when I thought about it more, I realized that is exactly what I believed religion does. From my coursework, I have come to understand religion as something that can’t be defined, but if I had to, I would define it as a phenomenon that brings people together for a common cause. In electronic dance music, this cause is dancing together with hundreds, maybe thousands of people to the same beat, forgetting the stresses of everyday life and escaping into a world that is unique, and sometimes, transcendent.

As a participant-observer, I realize that I was in a unique position to both be a part of the phenomenon that is electronic dance music, but also to examine it with a critical eye. Furthermore, as there is minimal scholarly research on electronic dance music as it is seen today and religion, I felt a responsibility to accurately represent the community as well as illuminate its exceptional religious feature that I believed deserved attention. With that being said, I do hope that this thesis has brought awareness to electronic dance music as a subject of serious academic inquiry, as it is composed of a number of features that should be regarded as such.

Before I embarked on my thesis journey, I saw the special experiences that electronic dance music had the potential to create. After my interviews and fieldwork, I reached a fuller understanding of why electronic dance music is such a powerful tool in generating extraordinary experiences and uniting people into something that in this
spirit of this study, I will compare to a mash-up. Mash-up is a subgenre of electronic music that consists of many different songs fitted together to form one entity that just makes sense. The electronic dance music community is made up of many different groups of people that come together, and however different they may be, just make sense. As when the music is pulsing, the lights are flashing, and the crowd is dancing, there is a common understanding that in that moment, everyone is believing in the beat. (listen to Track 11)
Kathy, interview by Lauren Gill, Record, February 27, 2013.


Neal, interview by Lauren Gill, Record, February 22, 2013.


Jane, interview by Lauren Gill, E-mail, March 22, 2013.


June, interview by Lauren Gill, E-mail, February 19, 2013.


Paul, interview by Lauren Gill, Record, February 10, 2013.


Reed, Dave (Tritonal) Interview by Lauren Gill, E-mail, February 09, 2013.


