

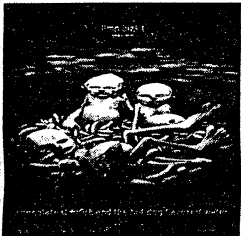
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Music

Family Style

Friends and Family uses
community to keep the
underground rave scene alive

BY VANESSA BEE

Recently, there has been a slew of network television exposés pushing the notion of ravers as glowstick-waving, drug-addled teens gone mad, dancing till dawn, hopped up, and hip as hell. The reality of San Francisco's dance community is far different. Alongside the enthusiastic "candy raver" kids in baggy, baggy pants are many old-time electronic music danceaholics who have been around the scene for years and are intent on returning raves to the days before they became crass, commercial, and overcrowded. Friends and Family (FnF) is one such group of veterans — a diverse crew that grew disenchanted with the increasing commercialism of raves and

started its own scene. Even at a time when the city government is increasingly anti-rave, FnF is more popular and more successful than ever. How does the group do it? One word: community.

In the early 1990s, San Francisco raves moved from underground events to big business. Massive parties with thousands of people — some so big that they offered amusement park rides — proliferated in industrial locations on the fringes of the city. Eschewing secrecy for profits, promoters went public with advertising and fliers. As attendance increased exponentially, so did ticket prices.

Enter Ethan Miller and Bryce Ryan. In 1992, Miller and Ryan were hanging out on SF Raves (an early Internet chat list and bulletin board for the underground rave community), and sharing their growing dissatisfaction with promoter profitmongering and the high cost of party tickets.

In one revelatory e-mail exchange with Ryan, Miller "realized that here was the essential-yet-missing ingredient in much of our culture, indeed, modern society: a caring relationship between producer and consumer." So the duo hatched a plan: They would cobble together their own rave community, made up of artists, musicians, DJs, projectionists, and other interested individuals. By forming a core group of 30 people and having each of them invite five people, they could throw low-cost, high-fun dance parties.

"When it occurred to me to throw parties, it was with the full knowledge that, to do so, I would be engaging in a trusting and caring relationship" continued on page 86



One big happy Family.

Family continued from page 84

with the people I cared about and hoped would come to my party, to our party, to this profound celebration of life," Miller says.

The first FnF rave (or "party," as they are now more commonly referred to within the FnF community) was held at the Blue Cube, a private residence in Noe Valley. The kitchen served as the ambient "chill room," while the garage, which was decorated with black lights and covered in garbage-bag-style black plastic, formed the "blue cube" dance room. DJs spun mostly techno and trance, as the event's organizers wanted to provide an alternative to the homogeneous brand of house music that was so prevalent on dance floors in the early '90s. That first party was now-longtime FnF member Tony

Rotundo's first rave.

"I had never heard such techno music like it before, and had never been enveloped by such wonderful heat and sounds and people," Rotundo recalls. "There was positive energy dripping off the walls. ... I casually put the beer [I'd brought] in the corner and never thought about it again. ... From that point on I knew I would be involved in the rave scene."

Although the first party was a success, the second one got busted, and FnF moved to the Klub Komotion, a now-defunct San Francisco artists' collective. After a half-dozen parties attended by 300 to 500 people each, FnF outgrew Komotion and moved to a variety of locations, including a one-off at the Acme warehouse in San Francisco (also busted) and two parties at an Oakland location known as "the Truckyard."

"FnF has always had an emphasis on finding new and unique spaces to throw parties so that each party is different, each party is a new experience," Rotundo says. "Friends and Family doesn't throw parties in spaces where other parties happen all the time. We would rather wait six months to find a space that will make the party unique and special."

For Halloween 1996, the crew set up in another warehouse in Oakland for what is generally now considered the most renowned of all FnF parties. After a second attempt at that space got busted, Miller says, "Doing undergrounds [of 1,000 people or more] became nearly impossible." Because of a dearth of good spaces and the Bay Area's increasingly anti-rave attitude, the group now restricts itself to two or three parties a year.

Still, membership continues to grow. Eight years after the crew's inception, there are 130 people on the planners' e-mail list and over 350 on the announcement list. In addition to the lure of low-cost parties, attendees enjoy the crew's emphasis on local DJs and non-mainstream, hard electronic dance music. Past raves have featured such notable local DJs as Monty Luke and Forest Green (both featured in *Groove*, a film based on an FnF-style rave), recent Wammie nominee Joe Rice, Plateshifter, Amber, Tektrix, Stonie, and Miller himself. The DJs play a broad spectrum of music, including techno, tech-house, ambient, house, trance, drum 'n' bass, and a host of other electronic subgenres.

While other similarly minded low-cost crews — many with FnF member crossover — have sprung up in the wake of Friends and Family's decreased party pace, the FnF community is unique.

"Friends and Family has been able to build an amazing community — which is the real output, not the parties — which was always my goal," Miller says. "You can pick anything that you care about, that other people care about, and it will turn into something really special if you practice. It turns into a focus for each other, and with practice, people will contribute and add value to the community."

All the members agree that Miller is the glue that binds FnF together. "Ethan is the man," says longtime member Rotundo. In addition to administering the mailing lists, overseeing finances, and securing insurance for events, Miller hosts and moderates all the consensus-based event planning and evaluation meetings (in which the group evaluates past performance and plans future events accordingly), along with balancing a full-time day job and tending to a wife and three children.

Miller first got a taste for musical togetherness in the early 1980s as an employee at New York's infamous punk club, CBGB's. After growing bored with punk's increasingly stagnant and conformist attitude, Miller dabbled in hip hop, reggae, dub, and even the Grateful Dead, before discovering the electronic dance music scene. "It was raving that brought me into myself [and] turned me on creatively," he says.

Miller is a firm believer in the writings of Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa. According to the FnF founder, Trungpa teaches that "mainstream culture has a setting sun attitude — the human race is seen as the end of evolution. A rising sun attitude focuses on something new and fresh, something to make the most of." In March, FnF threw the last permitted rave in San Francisco, a benefit to raise money to oppose the anti-gay Knight Initiative. Miller credits his group's responsible reputation — its "rising sun" approach — as the reason the city authorities allowed the event.

As FnF ambles into its eighth year of existence, the group continues to look forward, building common bonds on a grass-roots level. One might wonder where Miller gets the energy to carry on.

"I continue because the Friends and Family community itself remains totally vibrant with both enthusiastic old and new members," Miller says. "Why would I stop? It just keeps getting better."

Ethan Miller and other resident DJs from Friends and Family and its affiliates spin at the "Mad Hatter," a weekly event Tuesdays at the Bench & Bar, 120 11th St. (at Oak), Oakland. Admission is \$3 before 11 p.m., \$5 after; call (510) 496-6000, ext. 120.

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