

TEN... AND YOU'RE OUT!

Ever more restrictive club regulations has seen a return of unlicensed raves..
By Peggy Whitfield



“Young revellers pictured passing balloons of ‘hippy crack’.”

The above are recent headlines from national daily papers in the UK: illegal raves are back in the headlines again, and once again, for all the wrong reasons. Stories of violent disorder, anti-social behaviour, and sadly, several drug-related deaths of teenagers have been well-publicised in the press, but the truth behind the headlines is more nuanced.

Illegal raves and free parties have been a ubiquitous part of British life since the late '80s. Free parties were born out of the acid house musical movement and the so-called second “summer of love” in 1988, coupled with the explosion of MDMA as a recreational drug, free parties could be found in all corners of the British Isles, as Tom Jones,* a rave veteran of these heady days, explains:

“Free parties came to prominence in

the late 80s/early 90s. They were free, not necessarily always free of cost but certainly free from commercial influence. The crowd that frequented them was not all “crusties” with dogs on strings, but a very diverse bunch of people ... These parties were not necessarily politically engaged, but they did take place at a time when young people (those born from the late 1960s onwards) felt completely alienated not only from society as a whole, but also from a Government that was almost ludicrously positioned to the right and also seemed not to give a flying fuck about ordinary people.”

The parties got bigger and attracted largely negative media reporting which invariably concentrated on the attendant drug culture. Eventually the government reacted by introducing the Criminal

Justice Bill, ostensibly banning free parties. The raves mostly moved out of the fields and into the newly established clubs of the '90s, and thus club culture as we know it was born.

Today's rave scene looks very different. The introduction of the Temporary Events Notice license (TEN) has allowed promoters to take their parties out of more traditional club venues and into a wide variety of spaces, such as warehouses, disused factories and even churches, provided they can meet fire regulations, health and safety inspections, police checks and local authority guidelines. This is to ensure that electronic music parties can go ahead, but in a safe manner and without causing upset in the local community. Of course, if parties are put on without the consent of the authorities, the safety of

attendees cannot be guaranteed, as Mike Smith (not his real name), an electronic music promoter explains:

"I do believe that illegal parties are more dangerous than legal ones. In going through the process of licensing, the council and the police check your background in events and make sure that you are adhering to health and safety policy. These events are obviously more regulated so it is pretty much unfeasible for a licensed event to go ahead that is unsafe. When a party is illegal it is purely down to the individual who organises it to take care of the people attending ... Events of this nature would of course be more dangerous than an event that has been approved by the council and the police."

So if the introduction of the TEN license has made putting on parties easier, why are people still throwing illegal raves? There are a variety of reasons. Mike, who has put on licensed and unlicensed parties in the UK, gives one perspective:

"Certain venues fall outside of what the council believe are safe. I do believe

licensing for their parties. Sometimes they don't have the money to pay for the increasingly expensive rental of spaces or jump through all the hoops that the authorities demand. For others, such as promoters within the free party scene that more closely reflects the counter-cultural, alternative philosophy of the parties of the '80s and '90s, it's integral to the nature of the event that it occurs outside of the law, free from restrictions, without the knowledge of the authorities.

Much of the media tends portray illegal raves as hotbeds of drug use, but there is generally little difference between drug use at licensed and unlicensed events. Big licensed clubs in the UK will give you a pretty intensive body search on your way in and will confiscate drugs from you if they find them and may refuse entry. Unlicensed raves are a little different. Most will have some form of security, and many will search you, but this to check for weapons, rather than drugs. Although the rave scene is not known for violence it is deemed better to err on the side of caution.

Raves are not for children, they are for adults, who are more cognisant of the risks they are taking. People who regularly go to raves tend to buy their drugs in advance, from a dealer that they trust. They are far more cautious about buying drugs from random people they meet at a party, and often realise fairly quickly if what they are taking is not what is said to be, or cut with other substances. Teenagers simply don't have the knowledge, judgment or experience to be in a rave environment, and this greatly increases the risk of something going wrong.

But what about the police response to illegal parties? It's actually fairly common for the police to allow an unlicensed party to continue, as long as the party is not too large or too loud and they are satisfied the party is safe as shutting down a party can often cause more problems than it solves. A Metropolitan police officer told me:

"Illegal raves and drugs go hand in hand, but we are more concerned about health and safety than drugs, particularly if the structure of the building hasn't been checked. If the premises are insecure and unstable, and something was to happen, like the roof caving in, it would be a massive incident, and the first thing that people would ask is where were the police? The police are also concerned with everything that can result from illegal raves; residents being disturbed, the negative effect it has on community relations if the police don't shut it down or are seen not to do anything, ravers driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, putting themselves and others in danger, and dodgy cabs with the risk of sexual assaults."

Illegal raves go on every weekend, in fields and cities all across the UK. The majority pass by unnoticed, as they are problem free. The few that do hit the news stands are there because something has gone wrong. Promoters need to do their best to ensure that their parties are as safe as possible, and the people who attend these parties need to be aware of the potential risks, as illegal raves are not going to go away any time soon. A growing number of people are attracted to unlicensed parties, as they want to dance without having their ID scanned or intrusive body searches, in places with minimal commercial influence. And of course, for some, taking drugs with a reduced risk of arrest holds its own attractions.

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"Police hunt for eight people over Croydon death rave."

things are over-regulated here but I guess from their point of view, too much safety can never be a bad thing. I have gone outside of their regulations at times to create something different. I have used certain venues that would not pass their criteria. In my eyes, simple awareness of the problems at hand can quite easily turn an 'unsafe' space into a safe event space for people."

Other promoters are sometimes forced to go down the route of unlicensed raving due to TEN licenses being revoked at the last minute by the authorities, days before the event is to take place. Promoters spend a lot of time, effort and money in creating a party; hiring sound systems, elaborately decorating venues and flying in DJs from all over the world to play there. To be told on extremely short notice that the venue cannot be used, sometimes for the smallest of health and safety reasons, or because too many people 'may' turn up, is galling. Many promoters, if they have the resources and contacts, will find an alternative venue and carry on regardless.

Then, of course, there are promoters who have no interest in obtaining

There is not generally more drug use at an illegal rave than a legal rave, although the one exception to this is probably cannabis, as it's very hard to get away with smoking a joint in the smoking area of a licensed rave. For many people, one of the benefits of an illegal rave is that you can smoke inside the venue, whether that's a cigarette or a spliff. Drug use is, however, far more open at an illegal rave than at a legal party, as the security at such events are there purely to ensure there is no trouble, rather than to police an individual's consumption of drugs. That said, security and promoters will step in, as they do at licensed parties, if someone appears to have taken too many drugs, or are too drunk. Responsible security and promoters generally always ensure that if someone is too wasted, on whatever substance, that they get put into a cab, or given medical assistance, if necessary. Unfortunately, tragedies do occur, and people do die from drug related reasons. But drug deaths do not occur because the raves were illegal; licensing would not have made any difference. However, both of the recent deaths in Croydon at illegal parties were teenage boys.