

UW Student Creates the Anti-Rave

Opal Gamble

Whatever you do, don't mention the word "rave" around Albert O'Connor.

O'Connor, a second year math student at the University of Waterloo, is the driving force behind a grass-roots event aimed at educating the public about electronic music.

Together with a small group of volunteers and a growing gang of DJs and performers, O'Connor, tackle the problems of making electronica a success. The event, dubbed Electronica in the MC, takes place in the unlikely location of UW's Math and Computers (MC) building's comfy lounge.

O'Connor made sure the point of the Electronica in the MC event was crystal clear: "this is *not* a rave. This is only about the music."

There's a good reason for O'Connor's caution in labelling his event a rave: Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver, and other cities across North America have banned raves on city property and cracked down on the events with legislation. University administration would cancel the event immediately if O'Connor advertised Electronica in the MC as a rave.

The electronica, or rave, scene began as groups of enthusiasts gathered to share their common interest in the music. As the genre gained attention, the crowds grew and so did the problems associated with electronica events. The noisy disruptions caused by the events and the deaths due to overdoses of rave drugs like ecstasy became a media focus. The term rave took on a new, negative meaning.

O'Connor says, "there used to be a time when raves were only about music, but that time has passed. I'm not trying to recapture any kind of old school vibe, but simply let people play electronic music and let others enjoy it. That is it."

The DJs and performers of Electronica in the MC echo O'Connor's sentiment, saying that they want to educate the public about their music. Mike Edwards (DJ noah) explains that his love for the music got him started as a DJ and says that, "just listening to [electronica] wasn't enough; I wanted to start spinning it too."

Brian DePratto (DJ motive) agrees with Edwards. He says, "I have always had a love for both the music and the skill of blending together two different sounds."

Electronica has its roots in genres stretching back to the late 1970's. Industrial, metal, and pop groups all experimented with incorporating computer-generated sounds into music. David Evans, half of Expert Knob Frobbers, became interested in electronic music because of the sounds his Commodore 64 could make in the early 1980's. Eventually, he "realised that the 'real' music...must be using something similar to the C64's built-in synth chip."

Evans' partner Billy Biggs couples computers with the rave scene, saying, "my first exposure to electronic music was in the computer demo scene. Raving and the computer underground have always been closely linked."

The computer connection plays a major part in the success of Electronica in the MC. Although UW boasts the largest student bar in Canada, Federation Hall, and a smaller pub called the Bomber, O'Connor chose the comfy lounge in the Math and Computer building to house the electronica event. Usually full of math or computer science students studying, chatting, eating, and sleeping, the lounge is not known for its beauty or its fresh air. O'Connor looked past the crowds of students and the lack of ambiance to the huge windows and the open space, and he saw an electronica event.

O'Connor says that he received nothing but support from the administration, which encouraged the transformation of the lounge.

Nadia Ursacki, Vice President, Activities and Services of the Math Society in 2001, was one of the administrators encouraging unusual location. She says that after having problems with the Bomber double booking Math Society events, she "seriously considered having the pub night in the comfy lounge. Then we all started talking about the space and ideas for it. The Electronica idea came from that."

The first Electronica event, in the fall of 2001, received so much glowing support that O'Connor gathered his team and expanded the space, adding the cafeteria next to the comfy lounge to double the event size in 2002. O'Connor estimates that the first event drew between 80 and 100 enthusiasts to the comfy lounge, although it appears that everyone was having too much fun to count.

A night at Electronica in the MC reveals a diverse group of students enjoying the sounds: One computer student sits in a chair reading a PERL Cookbook and absentmindedly tapping a foot to the music; a couple of volunteers at a makeshift booth sell cotton candy, glow sticks, and bottled water; a group of students in jeans and t-shirts dance in a circle; another group gathers in front of the DJ gawking at the assortment of wires and equipment strewn across the tables.

None of the DJs, performers, or students seem interested in the supposed rave lifestyle the media has portrayed over the last few years. There are no substance highs beyond the inflated sugar levels created by too much cotton candy. Electronica in the MC is truly about the music and the technology. Albert O'Connor is right: Electronica in the MC isn't a rave.