Community and Space Making through Shuffle Circles at EDM Events

by Aydin Quach

Images by Timothy Nguyen
Photography
This article uses the author’s auto/ethnographic experience while participating in a shuffle circle to interrogate the stakes at play when a shuffle circle and a community are created at an electronic dance music (EDM) event. Shuffle circles develop as a method of understanding the porosity of community building and as a space in which individuals can learn to feel and sense “the vibe” of others and themselves. Methods of interpreting the energy flow between participants or “the vibe” are discussed and instances in which the energy changes and is redirected are highlighted not as points of weakness in community but as opportunities to strengthen and reimagine “the vibe.”

Keywords
Raves, Electronic Dance Music, Music Festivals, Cultural Studies, Dance, Shuffle
Foundation takes place in the PNE Forum, a warehouse-style building in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

FIG 1.
INTRODUCTION

Do you dream alone
Under the moon?
Is it brighter, brighter
When I’m with you
Is the afterglow strong enough?

– “Where You Are” by John Summit & Hayla (2023)²
This reflection piece builds off my auto/ethnographic experiences at Foundation, a local electronic dance music (EDM) event in Vancouver, Canada, that pays homage to a key chapter in EDM’s “foundation,” house music. New sounds featuring the Roland TR-808, a drum machine that became popular and affordable in the late 1980s, were the focal point of house music, and the Warehouse was a Chicago, Illinois, club that pioneered its popularity with Frankie Knuckles as its resident. The Chicago-based music grew to influence and define much of the music heard at raves today.

Shuffle circles are communal spaces forged amid the chaos of a rave. Ultimately, they foster the ability to feel the wavelengths of others, and from an academic viewpoint, their existence could be viewed as a unique method of understanding community building in and beyond the
dance floor. I experienced my first shuffle circle on February 19, 2023. Text below set off as block quotations represents my own journaling and storytelling of the experience. My writing weaves in and out of this personal narrative and my academic musings.

Early into the evening, I slipped through the dense, packed crowd. Nora En Pure, a South African Swiss DJ was beginning her set and the stage lights started to sparkle and dance. Her DJ sets and visuals are known to be inspired by the ocean and her work as a scuba diver. Swimming through and treading around people, I made my way to the center of the venue where I was squished, heated, and compressed by a sea of bodies bobbing up and down.

An hour went by, and my friend Ryan texted me. “Come to the back [of the venue], we are making a shuffle circle.” Both Ryan and I are part of a local Vancouver dance collective called YVR Shufflers, which is an online Facebook group that promotes community meet-ups and allows for more experienced dancers to teach newer members the popular rave dance known as shuffling. Shuffling is a dance style built around the “running man” and the “t-step.” Reading Ryan’s text, I dove through the ocean of people to the back of the dance-hall and was surprised to see that a cluster of people had been able to make a clearing amid the jam-packed floors. Here, you can feel the cool breeze of the evening from the gate. Every person brought their own glowstick and linked them together to form a giant circle.

“Don’t worry, I brought you one,” Ryan told me. He handed me a glowstick and invited me to add mine to the chain. Placing the circle on the floor, finally the shuffle circle was assembled.
FIG 2.
The crowds at Foundation.
Nora En Pure at the helm.
A dancer flowing to the beat of the music.
I had never participated in a shuffle circle before. This was also my first time seeing one. I suspect it is because there are never enough people to make them. This shuffle circle was made possible because of a local online group – a community that wanted to be displayed within a physical space and with the literal construction of a circle. Performance studies scholar Kemi Adeyemi notes, in her work on the specificity of community organizing in nightlife culture, that “this movement could only happen here because of this party.” Intimate moments such as the shuffle circle echo these sentiments.

I unpack and untangle assemblage of community and space through the creation of shuffle circles. In examining the construction of shuffle circles, I highlight lifeworlds on the dance floor – communities that are life giving and life sustaining to those who embrace its energy. Lifeworlds, as defined by the late critical refugee scholar Y-Dang Troeung, capture methods of thinking, sensing, and imagining that cannot necessarily be captured...
through traditional methods of archival research but must be felt.\(^9\) Perhaps in a similar vein to Adeyemi’s discussion of queer Black life, lifeworlds can only become apparent once you take out the noise, attune yourself to the music, and “punch a hole” through the blanket of a crowded rave.\(^{10}\) Thinking within the physical shuffle circle, “the vibe” and invisible flow of energy, the dancers, the observers, and then the larger rave itself, my offering is that the shuffle circle constructs a new vantage point from which to understand the porous nature of the community: “porous” in that it is public and open for invitation for people to join but also “porous” in that it is mutable and changes as people join and leave. In this texture of porosity, individuals negotiate and sustain community. The shuffle circle thus represents a crystallization and a starting point for considering how festive spaces and moments of closeness and community might offer us new insights into what it means to be present.


\(^{10}\) Adeyemi, Feels Right, 50; and Nguyen, “Refugee Anecdotes and Lifeworlds.”
Are you wide awake counting the stars?
Or just lying, lying in the dark?
Uh-oh
— "Where You Are" by John Summit & Hayla (2023)
“The vibe” is a term used within electronic dance music culture (EDMC) scholarship to describe the energy flow at raves. Attempts to constitute the vibe, to name it, and to give it meaning have been perennial challenges for EDMC scholars everywhere. In its broadest terms, the vibe is, as dance music scholar Graham St John notes, “irreplaceable with words.” Performance scholar Alice O’Grady speaks to the importance of how the vibe escapes written words yet is also incredibly difficult to capture when located outside of words. For music journalist Simon Reynolds, it is a “sonic science” where the audience is the star from which energy is created and derived. Reynolds writes: “Each sub-individual part (a limb, a hand cocked like a pistol) was a cog in a collective ‘desiring machine,’ interlocking with the sound system’s bass throbs and sequencer riffs. Unity and self-expression fused
in a forcefield of pulsating, undulating euphoria.”\textsuperscript{13} Likewise, Adeyemi notes that “vibrations” in a space require an acute sense of one’s own body and energy, coupled with the energy of other bodies within the space.\textsuperscript{14} The emphasis is never just on how your body feels but rather also on how it feels in relationship to your personal perception of the environment. In consonance with these scholars, the shuffle circle represents this in a physical, tangible way. As each member adds their glowstick to the circle, they add their own personal stake to the creation of the space and to the vibe.

As I added my glowstick to the circle, I thought about the graciousness of Ryan and his kindness in offering me an extra glowstick—as a fellow body sharing his energy with me and offering a light and invitation to bring my own spark to the circle. In many ways, the glowstick was an embodiment of myself. I felt deeply attuned to the music and the way it was resonating through my body, through my bones. Like the glowstick in my hand, I felt that I too needed to bend and be flexible for the light within me to shine. Connecting my glowstick to the larger chain and circle felt like I was physically adding my energy into the creation of the shuffle circle. Putting my own glowstick into the circle also felt like my petition, or demand, to develop this space into reality. In a crowded space

\textsuperscript{13.} Simon Reynolds, Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture (New York: Routledge, 1998), 16.

\textsuperscript{14.} Adeyemi, Feels Right, 7.
like a rave, where everyone is standing nearly shoulder to shoulder, it takes a village to create a clearing safe enough for us all to shuffle without bumping or harming someone. Once I added my glowstick to the circle, the chain was handed off to someone else for them to add their glowstick. I could see my yellow glowstick sandwiched between Ryan’s blue one and the shuffle circle’s organizer’s green one (the organizer for the night’s event was “Turtle”). I felt the need to dance and move to let myself shine like my glowstick in the circle.
FIG 5.

“Turtle” all lit up with glowsticks.
Mixed emotions
Hearts still open
Though we’re far apart
I get this feeling
I wanna be where you are
I wanna be where you are
I wanna be where you are

— “Where You Are” by John Summit & Hayla (2023)
With the circle on the ground, the shuffling began. Ryan and Turtle entered the circle first and eyed each other down, each showcasing how they interpreted the beat and the vibe of the music. Then slowly, and almost psychically, they started shuffling together, trading steps, and working collaboratively as the music passed through them and into the soles of their shoes. The light of the glowsticks on the ground marked the space they shuffled as sacred. The other shufflers, including myself, stood on the side and brought out our hand fans and started fanning and cheering them on. Eventually, Ryan and Turtle started making eye contact with those of us standing outside of the circle, seeing who would fill the void if they were to step out. Eventually, they both locked eyes with Adriana, a dance and shuffle instructor from Abbotsford and the “mother” of YVR Shufflers, and she nodded and entered the circle. She started introducing her own steps and stylizations, and Ryan and Turtle started to sync up and try her moves. After a bit of joint shuffling, Ryan and Turtle hopped out of the circle and Adriana stole the show. This process of passing the spotlight through acknowledgment as well as a melding of shuffle styles before passing the baton repeated itself over and over again. This was the magic of the glowstick circle we created. In the circle, we spoke using our bodies in “kinesthetic grammar.” The thin fragile fluorescent tubing on the ground was how we made our space to share and create something new.
FIG 6.

Adriana dancing the night
The term “kinesthetic grammar,” as I articulate it, has less to do with how the body is legible to the outsider and more to do with how the body makes itself visible to those within the group. It is further empowered through synchronicity with the vibrations of the community as a whole. It is a wordless, ethereal vitality that skirts just between the photons of light and the sweaty bodies: life giving and life sustaining. It is, in part, a method of answer to performance studies scholar Diana Taylor’s query about “what is at play” beyond the corporeal, the energy, the humor, and dexterity of the performer.\textsuperscript{15} To whom are the performers performing? What is at stake for the spectator? Here I take the sensorial experience of dance as the language to which the performer translates the vibe legibly and invites us to experience the vibe as they see it, before gently passing off and acknowledging a new interpretation of the infinite energy of the rave (or as Taylor notes, the “act of transfer”). Every kick, jump, spin, and flourish the performer does informs us, the spec-

tator, of how the performer interprets the music and our presence. The invitation to model and try shuffling their way before allowing for a new interpretation to enter the shuffle circle demonstrates that within this construction of “fun” there is an ethics of care built into how the vibe must be held by every member of the community. You must hold space for others and the way they vibe before you can invite someone to see the world as you see it.

The interplay of introducing an interpretation, followed by a countersubject, and then cycling back and forth between members in a circle is perhaps akin to a fugue in the realm of music. That is, each introduction of an interpretation must, in some capacity, pay homage to what came before it. Operating in the “minor key” of cultural studies and learning to be attuned to the notes being played as well as to the way dance is making a performer feel are thus integral to the experience of the new, incoming performer and the spectator. The small snapshots of a smile, a wink, or a flamboyant flick of the wrist provide the
necessary transcript to interpreting “joy” and possibly seeing the body as an arena of symphonic euphoria.

The fragility of the glowsticks reflects the careful construction and the embodied nature of creating a shuffle circle. This echoes what musicologist Luis-Manuel Garcia has noted as the brittle and temporal nature of the vibe. The vibe is special, is temporary, and must be constantly tended by those who create it. I reflect back on the moment during the shuffle circle:

I was just returning with a bottle of water for Ryan who was drenched in sweat when I saw that a new person entered the shuffle circle who was not from within our group and was not following the careful protocol of gaining permission to enter the circle. In a way, they brought their own interpretation of the vibe into the space. They stumbled into the circle, nearly tripping on the glowsticks on the ground, and started bumping into people within the circle. They were promptly escorted out of the circle by Turtle, who was kind enough to sit the individual down and ask if they needed water. In the process of leaving the circle, the individual broke the physical shuffle circle. Ryan and Adriana quickly went over to fix the break by reattaching the broken link in the circle and to check if anyone was potentially hurt from the bumping and bashing instigated by the intoxicated individual.

FIG 7. The vibe can be transferred during a brief moment when eyes connect, when bodies touch, or when the concussive beat of the music resonates through your body.
This delicate method of care demonstrates the continual cultivation the vibe requires. It also shows the porous nature of community, as someone can easily enter. What the community does in response to this porosity can determine how the vibe can shift and transform. The stranger’s offering to the shuffle circle and people’s interpretation of the shift in the vibe were further supported by the incorporation of this new offering by the stranger and transformation into something new.

Later, after a short break, I saw Turtle return with the intoxicated individual and invite them formally to try shuffling with us and enter the circle. I observed Turtle teaching them the basic “running man” step and introduce this new person into the group. I also saw Adriana jump in and teach them a few more advanced steps and also guide them into understanding the beat. “Close your eyes. Do you feel the way the music vibrates through you? Let it take you where you need to go. We can do it together.”

In many ways, Turtle and Adriana’s choreography of care and support resonates with Adeyemi’s notion of choreographies of support from those within a communi-
ty who help others join in and teach each other about their bodies.\textsuperscript{17} It perhaps also is harmonious with the idea of “attuning” one’s body with one’s feelings and the vibe and with others in a constructed space, as performance studies scholar Alexandra T. Vazquez notes in The Florida Room.\textsuperscript{18} I also see this as echoing the observations made by Adeyemi in her analysis of the hip-hop cypher where a “bad dancer” finds themselves in a reciprocal position feeding off the energy of being the center of attention. Adeyemi notes: “a cypher is successful when there is equal participation in the (unwritten) rules of the social norms of the gathering and the exchange it fosters.”\textsuperscript{19} In the shuffle circle, this cypher happened between the newcomer and Turtle and Adriana, the group of them working together to inject new energy into the vibe. Eventually, everyone started to shuffle again. In fact, some new individuals were curious by Turtle teaching shuffling, so they also joined in on the lessons. In synthesis, and with leadership, Adriana and Turtle led people into bringing in the stranger’s vibe and helped add something
In this specific case of the shuffle circle, not only is the community porous but it also stands to benefit from this porosity to grow and fortify itself. By bringing this new shuffler into the fold, the community continued to expand the circle and overall enjoyment of the event. It also helped set a precedent on how to respond when a new individual enters the circle. By sharing this space with “newbies,” more and more people become invested in the shuffle circle and see the importance of its protection.
Through the shuffle circle, more and more people are invited to join and create community, strengthening yet also changing what was already there.
FIG 10.
After the rave, there is hugging and lots of chatter about seeing each other at the next shuffle meetup, as well as checking in with each other about life, work, kids, etc. Feeling right feels remarkably ordinary in some ways as well. As I conclude my reflection, I turn to my own gut thoughts about why the shuffle circle even matters at all. In crowded venues of raves, the shuffle circle acts like a clearing to which we can take a breath and recalibrate ourselves not just to the music but also to each other. The shuffle circle reorients how we consider a festive space by taking the focus of energy away from facing a stage toward facing each other in a circle. The headlining artist matters little. The real headliner is us. More important, the shuffle circle makes me feel something. To say it feels “good” might be a bit too centered on my own experiences. It feels right in that everything has lined up perfectly: the
space we have created as a group, the music in our bodies, and the way together we translate the music into footwork as if in perfect harmony. As a developing, junior researcher, I have struggled with the research of “fun,” often deemed unsubstantiated or perhaps too shallow of a form to be considered for academia. In many ways, watching and participating in a shuffle circle has taught me much about how even the concept of “fun” is incredibly labor intensive. Fun is born of intension in tension. In looking at the labor of folks like Ryan, Turtle, and Adriana, a clearer picture can be drawn about the hard work it takes to make space for fun. This momentum is built through studying the shuffle circle and is thus a disruption from how we might classically analyze bodies in movement as well as nightlife spaces on the whole. In punching a circle into a rave space, we can see how negotiations of community are translated and communicated through kinesthetic grammar.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Aydin Quach (he/they) is an MA student in the Department of History at The University of British Columbia. His research deals primarily with sex, gender, race, and sexuality in the transpacific, with a particular focus on the queer Asian diaspora and queer nightlife. His work is guided by pleasurable objects of analysis (music festivals, fetish wear, sexuality) and their illustration of queer Asian or “Gay-sian” lifeworlds in diaspora across the Pacific Rim.

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