

HOME

By GREG MERCER

Presumably by default, my editor asked me if I'd be interested in going to Spiral on Wednesday to see what all the fuss was about. Ever eager to thwart the spread of hip hop at all costs (turns out Spiral charges a whopping \$10 cover charge), I obliged.

However, on the day of my mission, said editor left a message on my voicemail which struck me as peculiar. He suggested I make arrangements to rendezvous with another Pulse staffer ... for safety reasons. (Editor's note: Not so. The other staffer, Scott Galetto, was to join him in order to get ideas for the cover. A benefit might have been safety in numbers if trouble arose.) Now, the last story I did for this paper, I wound up sleeping in a homeless shelter, but no special precautions were taken then. So, what was I getting myself into this time?

I did as instructed albeit I secretly hoped the chap would be a no-show. For you see, while my shaved head and swarthy complexion may not be ethnic enough to land me on the cover of "Jet," I've never been mistaken for the pastry white Pillsbury Dough Boy, either. And if I was about to dive headfirst into a sea of racial turmoil, the last thing I wanted was a bit of alabaster bait by my side.

Photos by Daniel Sturm/City Pulse
Spiral patrons hang at the bar at last Wednesday's

Hip Hop Night.

I arrived at the club around 10:50 p.m. All was quiet. In fact, it was a little too quiet. The night air was so still I could practically hear my own heart beating. So, naturally, when I was unnerved by a slew of security guards dressed like Black Panthers from outer space patting me down for weapons, I was certain they, too, heard my syncopated palpitations. Remember that scene from "Animal House" when Otter and the boys pop into an exclusive club to see Otis Day and the Nights and wind up sticking out like a sore white thumb on an otherwise all black hand? Well, it was fresh in my mind. My tensions were relieved, though, once I got inside and saw a couple of faces paler than mine. However, my assigned bodyguard was not one of them, and for the previously mentioned reason, I did not mind.

For those of you who've never been to Spiral, it bills itself as a video dance bar. The floor plan consists of an indoor bar area which sits adjacent to a glassed-in dance floor, and there's an open-air patio toward the rear. In my opinion, its swanky velvet stools, artsy shaped silver tables and crude painting of young, shirtless men standing arm in arm did not hide the fact this is a full-time gay bar, and to me, it seemed like an odd choice of venues to house a Hip Hop Night (even if on a part-time basis). Let's face it: It's not as if Eminem or any of hip hop's other popular practitioners are encouraging their legions of fans to greet gays with open arms. And the way that night's patrons juvenily snickered after their openly gay server took their drink order told me they had little or no understanding of their surrounding environment.

But then again, maybe it does make perfect sense after all. Why wouldn't one culture (gays), which is still not widely accepted by most Americans, open its arms to another culture (blacks) who have been fighting a similar battle for centuries? Nah, I realize that after paying three bucks for a Coors Light, it's all about a different color ... green.

The night got off to a very slow start. At 11:30, the small number of people there reminded me more of churchgoers than the hardcore, ghetto thugs my editor had me believing I would be seeing. Twilight zonily, it was a lot like the junior high mixers from my own past. Seeds of festivity planted with good intentions wind up

sprouting only wallflowers. Nearly all, including myself, was tapping their feet, but it was geometrically apparent nobody wanted to be the first out on the dance floor. Finally, after some persistent prodding by DJ whatever his name was, a girl dressed like J Lo's less color-coordinated cousin took the plunge, and others, wearing similarly urbane fashions I did not think/hope existed outside video-land, shimmied behind her. Most popular: NBA wannabes draping towels over the shoulders of their game jerseys. Most discouraging: Clothing manufacturer Fubu's wholesale bastardization of Fat Albert and the Cosby kids. Most "Huh?": NFL jerseys worn with only one arm through the sleeve. (Only if we're lucky will this look eventually morph its way into an NFL-style cape.)

At around midnight, the crowd peaked in attendance. Yet by no means could it have been considered raucous. Hardly anyone smoked (which was nice), and when I saw a heavysset guy stuff five lemon wedges into his Corona, this was obviously not the hard drinking set, either. Just speculation here, but I highly doubt trouble or disrespect was on any of their minds. The love of hip hop was what brought them there. Too bad it was so painfully repetitive and uninspired. I tried to get into the mix, but by the end of the night, I had tallied the number of songs I either knew or liked on three fingers. Surely, white people weren't the only ones listening to Whodini and Cool J back in the day. On the flip side, I did have the good fortune to hear possibly the filthiest song of all time. A seemingly never-ending femme sung chorus of "suck and lick my neck, my back, my p*ssy, and my cr*ck." is probably more than you need to know.

The club shut down a little before 2, but as expected, no one was in any hurry to leave. Though, never did I get the sense that an Attica-style situation was going to develop once the masses were herded into the streets. In fact, the lone police officer patrolling the street did not even have to roll down his window let alone get out of his car. Truth be told, the only preventable noise came from car stereos competing for parking lot supremacy. Every other disturbance could be chalked up to science and math. After a long night of bass thumping in your ears, how can 200 people simultaneously be expected to revert to what their mommies referred to as their inside voice. Furthermore, all of this was

escorted off the premises by security in less than 25 minutes.

Don't get me wrong. Residents' complaints are valid, but they're far from original. What young person, after leaving a dance club, does think about anything else but keeping the party going? And what adult living near such a club hasn't complained?

Ever since I've moved here, I've heard a lot of rhetoric regarding the city's efforts to revitalize Old Town, and from what I've seen, Spiral seems to be one of the few places that's actually succeeding at doing so. I know everyone would like to find some sort of middle ground, but just from what I've read in this very paper, I can already tell you what the mayor's going to do about this problem. Nothing. Spiral would be out of it's fiscal mind to change a thing. Residents of Old Town, I don't know what to tell you. Sorry.

By DANIEL STURM

It's 11 at night at the Spiral Video Dance Bar. The crowds haven't arrived yet, so two security guards dressed in slick black outfits take to the floor and begin dancing. Spiral is one of the hippest places in Michigan so it's no surprise even the Ultimate Protection Group feels inspired by its disco lights and the rhythm of hip hop.

In the Old Town neighborhood where Spiral's located, though, people have mixed feelings about the club, because of the loud noise when the bar empties out at 2 a.m. More than half a dozen residents City Pulse spoke with share the feelings of David and Anne Martin, who moved into one of the On The Grand condominium townhouses at 1343 Turner St. in November. "I want to see Old Town flourish, but on some Wednesday nights, Spiral attracts crowds that just raise hell." On numerous occasions he saw people urinate in front of his house, throw beer bottles into the front yard and blast their car stereos at topnotch. "My wife and I just had our first baby. She wakes up very easy anyway. It

certainly doesn't help when you have a 120-decibel stereo outside your window at 2 o'clock in the morning."

Photos by Daniel Sturm/City Pulse
Sculptor Tom Donall renovated an Old Town warehouse in North Lansing and opened as a gay bar in 1998.

The owner of the club, Tom Donall, admits to initial problems after he introduced Hip Hop Night six months ago. But now everything is fine again, he insists. "We have people outside to keep the crowd quieter. If somebody has the music loud, we're asking him or her to turn it down. Naturally we can't put a piece of tape on somebody's face." Donall is angry about some neighbors ("It's basically only three of them") who constantly tried "to override me, go to the (Lansing City) Council and then actually start stirring everything up." He fears a bad image for his nightclub, which opened in 1998 and in which he invested almost \$1 million.

Tom Donall

Originally the neighbors' complaints against Spiral, which is primarily a gay bar, were thought to be the result of homophobia. However, when Jules Vander Galien, a lesbian living near the club, complained, this theory lost weight. Last summer, she combated the noise with earplugs and an industrial-strength fan. This summer, however, she had opted to throw in the towel and no longer stay at her apartment on Hip Hop Nights on Wednesdays or on Friday and Saturday nights, when the club's clientele can party on Spiral's patio till 2 or later. She said the noise was pretty much continuous throughout the night as people came and went, but when the club closes at 2 a.m., it became really, really bad.

"I don't think it has to do with the gay image of the club. People are phobic of everything," says Donall of the neighbor's complaints.

David Martin

On first impression, Mary Morgan — she asked that her real name not be used — doesn't seem like someone with a phobic personality. She lives across from Spiral and has to go to work at 7 a.m. However, almost every Thursday

morning she wakes up when people start pouring out of the nightclub. She hears them screaming, yelling, laughing, honking horns and listening to loud music in their vehicles – “the kind that vibrates your house.” One night she heard a car smashing into her parking lot. “A girl drove right in the back of my landlord’s truck.” Pieces of a clubgoer’s car had flown off. “I ran out to catch her, but she was already half way down the street.” Morgan reported the incident to the police. Another time she went to the police again, because her old car was vandalized. A huge X was carved into the metal, each bar of the cross about one foot long.

Lt. Steve Mitchell of Lansing’s Police Department didn’t want to comment on individual cases, but he said that if these things are reported “We take care of it.” In May, NBA star Jason Richardson’s Cadillac was shot at least three times at Kalamazoo and Larch streets after he and five friends - four of whom are MSU athletes - left Spiral. Not any one was shot. Both Donall and the police believe the shooting was an isolated event and was not related to events at the club.

Brian Werwecki (left) and Ryan Cagor look like Village People but are actually security guards with the Ultimate Protection Group, for which Spiral owner Tom Donall pays \$1,000 weekly for Hip Hop Night.

Ryan Cagor and Brian Werwecki of the Ultimate Protection Group remember that there were some problems with gang members in the beginning. “These problems no longer exist.” Two guards are supposed to cover the parking lot and streets around the club all night, directing traffic with flashlights. Another 10 security guys move people out at closing time and watch the area as people head to their cars. When people start fighting, they escort them out to their cars. Donall spends \$1,000 every Wednesday just to monitor the crowds.

Neighbors complain that although only resident parking is allowed along their sidewalks, dozens of visitors park right in front of their houses, often with their windows wide open and stereos turned high up. Some residents have tried to figure out individual solutions. Residents at 1238 Turner put up a chain barrier at the entrance of the driveway. The rope they used to have before was cut on a Wednesday night.

Beverly Miller

“Customers don’t read signs,” says Beverly Miller, who lives across from Spiral on Center Street. She’s protested against the club since it opened in 1998. Although the street signs clearly said “residents parking only,” visitors often wouldn’t care. Instead, they’d park right in front of her house and quite frequently leave liquor bottles on the streets (“a lot of them seem to like cognac”), she says. Donall doesn’t think such things happen too often. And if so, people should tell him and he would “take care of it.” Old Town resident Miller points out that she doesn’t have anything against people parking in front of her house “if they don’t upset us.” She mentions the gay pride weekend, when hundreds of people going to Spiral and Esquire, another neighborhood gay bar, parked in forbidden places but didn’t leave bottles or cause unbearable noise. That weekend the city put signs “Local traffic only” to keep visitors out of the residential area. “That didn’t work either.”

Even a Spiral fan page on the Internet points out that parking is “a bit of a problem there.” At least the bar supplies visitors with maps of where they should park. The Spiral parking lot provides space for only 30 cars. As a consequence 250 guests try to park in immediate walking distance to the nightclub, causing stress and sleepless nights for the nearby residential areas.

Wes Moniaci

Apparently not many residents share this opinion. David Martin thinks a bigger parking lot could solve some of the problem. He observed that a large parking lot at the corner of Grand River and Turner offers space for about 400 vehicles. “The spot is almost always empty at night times, and it’s just two minutes walking distance,” adds Morgan. She suggests valet parking. But Spiral has tried this before, says manager Ken Pace, “and that didn’t work out.” Obviously nightclub visitors try hard to park right in front of the location they want to visit. And Donall says, “If we have a parking problem, the city needs to help us out and build a parking lot.” He says so far he never asked the city for anything but support letters. “I did it all out of my own pocket.”

Meanwhile, other residents who feel bothered by the

noisy nightclub continue to think of unconventional solutions. Wes Moniaci, of 1419 Center St., suggests the club owner could give some kind of a pedagogical speech at a crowded Hip Hop Night. “Hey people, make sure you’re not trashing the neighborhood.” And Shirley Reed, who lives at 1418 Center, hopes the weather will get cooler soon, because in cold weather there were “fewer people, and they’re less noisy.”

On Hip Hop Night last week (June 19), the neighborhood outside of the club was quiet, and some Turner Street residents were sleeping with windows open. Mary Morgan didn’t wake up at 1.30 in the morning as usual. “If they can keep it like that, I’ll be fine,” she said.