

Rat Parties

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RAT Parties were a series of large dance parties held in Sydney, Australia during the 1980s and early 1990s. The Powerhouse Museum said that they "formed a key element of an emerging subculture"^[1] that was fashion-aware, gay-friendly, appreciated dance music and open, outrageous celebration. Along with the rise of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, the success of **RAT Parties** marked a groundswell of acceptance of Sydney's gay & lesbian community. RAT parties are credited with introducing the visual performance art of VJing to Australia.^[2]

RAT Parties

Genre	Electronic music, fashion, art, lifestyle
Location(s)	Sydney, Australia
Years active	1983-1992
Founded by	Recreational Arts Team

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RAT Team

Forty **Rat Parties** were organised by the Recreational Arts Team between 1983 and 1992. The core of the team was Jac Vidgen, Billy Yip and Reno Dal. Jac Vidgen was a gregarious organiser who became the promoter and business leader. Billy Yip was a creative artist who created the themes and design concepts which characterized the parties, and his cleverly co-ordinated posters, fliers and ads became noticed around Sydney. Reno Dal was the team's original technical designer and producer involved from 1983 until 1986. Mark Taylor was the technical producer for the peak period 1986-1990, Wayne Gait-Smith was a technical designer. Tim and Mic Gruchy were the video designers from 1987-1992. As a young fashion student and a close friend of Vidgen, Akira Isogawa contributed to many of the lavish costumes that now survive in a well catalogued retrospective of the RAT era kept at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum.^[1]

Vidgen was working as a waiter, holding extravagant parties for his friends in houses he shared until Dal, who had supplied the lighting for one of those parties, suggested they cover the costs by charging people. Vidgen and his boyfriend Yip agreed, and they set about organizing the first RAT party.^[3]

Growth of the concept

Vidgen threw his first public party (entitled "RAT Rock Wreck") for 200-250 guests in inner-city Surry Hills on 2 October 1983.^[4] Subsequent parties each had a special name, usually conceived by Billy Yip, incorporating the word 'rat' in its title. The next official RAT party, titled 'RATsurrect' and advertised through word-of-mouth, was held at the Bondi Pavilion on 22 April 1984. The early parties, particularly 'RATizm' at the Paddington Town Hall April 1985 attracted an inner-city party crowd of heterosexual bohemians as well as gay men and drag queens. RAT parties typically had audio-visual presentations, bizarre props, party drugs, innovative lighting, underground cabaret groups, the best DJs in town and unusual live performances. The later large Sydney Showground events would feature amusements and rides, break out/chill out areas and a selection of food and beverage alternatives.^[3]

In 1987 Vidgen registered Recreational Arts Team Pty Ltd as a company.^[5] The events became larger, and were no longer exclusive eastern suburbs affairs where it was necessary to know the right people to obtain a ticket. The parties became famous for their spectacular entertainment and celebrity guests. Massive New Year's Eve parties were held for four consecutive years filing the Hordern Pavilion and Royal Hall of Industries at Sydney's Showground where up to 15,000 partygoers could be accommodated. 'A Ratty New Year', was the first held on New Year's Eve 1988 the event was broadcast live on JJJ and featured a 4am live performance by Grace Jones. Jones was due on stage much closer to midnight but refused to perform until Vidgen could provide a paper-trail of evidence that the performance fee had been transferred into her US account.^{[4](2:00)} New Year's Eve 1989 headlined Adeva at the same venue.

Magazines and newspapers regularly featured RAT Parties in their social pages - fashions worn by partygoers and performers were captured by a number of high-profile photographers, among them Robert Rosen, Tom Stack, John Webber, Sonny Vandavelde and most notably William Yang.^[1] The Australian Broadcasting Corporation summed up the events by saying "Parties became an art form in Sydney's Oxford street. Jack Vidgen's private house parties grew into the notorious RAT parties. Events that set the tone and style of Australian dance music culture."^[6] Media responses to the novelty of these events was mixed. At one time the Herald said that "RAT parties are a concept that has obviously worked",^[7] while another article in the same newspaper described them as "resolutely and profoundly superficial" with "unapologetic selfishness ... and shabby glitter."^[8]

The RAT events gradually became a part of mainstream Sydney culture; the parties were praised for their record of non-violence^[7] and the RAT team was sponsored by the New South Wales Government to produce the "young people's event" for their 1987 Carnivale.^[9] Starting with the party on New Year's Eve 1986, some RAT parties were brought under the organization umbrella of the Festival of Sydney, produced in partnership with ABC Radio's JJJ, which broadcast the events live featuring well-known radio personalities including Andy Glitire and Maynard F# Crabbes.^[1]

Although the budgets had grown from \$5,000 to \$400,000, costs and expectations also skyrocketed. Business was risky, profits were slim, and money made on one party was frequently lost on the next one.

DJs and copycats

The RAT parties and Sydney Gay Mardi Gras Party and Sleazeball were forerunners of the dance parties and raves of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the early 1980s pub rock in Sydney was still the mainstream, and dance music was a relatively underground phenomenon, with venues such as Stranded and later Patches in Sydney pioneering dance parties in established venues. Dance party enthusiasts left the pub scene behind, preferring recorded electronic music provided by pioneering DJs like Tim Ritchie, Robert Racic, Stephen Allkins, Bill Morley, Pee Wee Ferris, Scott Pullen, Andy Glitire and Mark Alsop.

Spearheaded by these DJs, dance music took off in Sydney during the 1980s. Promoters behind events by FUN, Sweatbox, Bacchanalia and the standard setting twice yearly public parties produced by the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, booked inner city warehouses and tired old venues and transformed them into vibrant, packed palaces. By the end of the 1980s parties flourished all around the country, with promoters booking a constant flow of influential overseas DJs such as Paul Oakenfold. While established rock venues suffered from lack of attendance, dance parties were frequently sold out.

By the end of the 1980s it seemed that a massive dance party was being held every weekend at an accessible Sydney venue and competition was fierce.^[3] The RAT team pulled back to focus their efforts on a single New Year's event each year that would be likely to generate a return. But their profound impact on Sydney's bacchanalian awakening had already been made.^[5]

Cultural impact and legacy

The RAT parties altered Sydney's night life, starting a craze for giant dance parties that lasted into the 1990s. They provided a diverse range of entertainment based on visual and aural stimulation, provided a creative outlet for talented people and set the tone and style of Australian dance music culture. RAT parties are credited with introducing the visual performance art of VJing to Australia.^[2]

In 2009, the Sydney Powerhouse Museum hosted an exhibition to "revive memories of Sydney's notorious RAT parties".^[3] Vidgen donated many of the articles on display there,^[4] and he described in an interview how the creative freedom and interactions from the RAT days built the careers of a number of people in various creative fields.^[10]

List of RAT parties and events

1. RAT rock wreck, an old house, Redfern, October 1983
2. RATsurrect, Bondi Pavilion, Easter Sunday, April 1984
3. A Midsummer's RAT dream, Balmain Bijou Theatre, January 1985
4. RATizm, Paddington Town Hall, Easter Sunday, April 1985
5. RAT-around-and-square, Roundhouse and Squarehouse, University of NSW, June 1985
6. Chez RAT, Rummours Nightclub, East Sydney, Surry Hills, October 1985
7. LunRATic, Luna Park, December 1985
8. OceanRATting, Bondi Pavilion, January 1986 (part of the South Pacific Festival)
9. RATparade, Paddington Town Hall and Chauvel Cinema and foyers, Easter Sunday April 1986 (featured fashion parade)
10. RATarama (The movie party), Enmore Theatre, June 1986
11. PRATy – Carnivale Time, Paddington Town Hall and Chauvel Cinema and foyers, September 1986 (for NSW Government's Carnivale '86)
12. RAT-above-Syd's, A studio, Darlinghurst, October 1986
13. MoombaRATarama, The Powerhouse Ballroom, Melbourne, November 1986
14. 19RATty7, Luna Park New Year's Eve 1986 (live on air on 2JJJ-FM, part of the Festival of Sydney)
15. HypeRATive, Hip Hop Club, Paddington, January 1987
16. SuperRATural, Paddington Town Hall, Easter Sunday, April 1987
17. RAT-time-follies, The Cuckoo's Nest Nightclub, Sydney, June 1987
18. ERATicipation, The Banquet Hall, RAS Showground, July 1987
19. RATfricarnivale, Paddington Town Hall and Chauvel Cinema and foyers (multicultural party for Carnivale '87)
20. Murder by perfume, The Museum Caffeteria, November 1987 (for YU Cosmetics)
21. CelebRAT '88, Hordern Pavilion and Forecourt, New Year's Eve 1987 (live on 2JJJ-FM, part of the

- Bicentennial Festival of Sydney)
22. CongRATs (the 21st RAT party), Bondi Pavilion, Easter Sunday, April 1988
 23. RAT rapping, Hordern Pavilion, July 1988 (featured New York rappers and graffiti artists)
 24. ExpRAT '88, The Roxy and Patches Nightclubs, Brisbane, August 1988
 25. Eat RAT (a RAT party in aid of Ethiopia), Hordern Pavilion, September 1988 (raised \$34,000 for the EAT project)
 26. LaseRATrnce, Hordern Pavilion, November 1988
 27. Dispensation, SLATS Warehouse, Christmas Eve 1988
 28. A RATty New Year, Royal Hall of Industries and Hordern Pavilion, New Year's Eve 1988 (live on 2JJJ-FM, part of the Festival of Sydney, featured an exclusive guest performance by Grace Jones)
 29. RAT on the road, a tour of the Eastern seaboard, March–April 1989
 30. Expratic, World Expo Fun Park, Brisbane, April 1989
 31. Back to Rat, Hordern Pavilion, May 1989
 32. Unite Fashion Parade and Dance Party, Hordern Pavilion, July 1989 (co-produced with Dance Delerium)
 33. Mega U-18s Dance Party, Hordern Pavilion, July 1989
 34. Colours, Hordern Pavilion, September 1989 (a perfume launch for Colors de Benetton with MTV and featuring Boy George)
 35. GlittteRATi, Hordern Pavilion, November 1989 (featuring cabaret/fringe acts on the hour)
 36. Accelerat, New Year's Eve, Luna Park, December 1989
 37. Opening Night Party, Sydney Biennale, April 1990
 38. Ratmania, Hordern Pavilion, April 1990
 39. Rat On, Hordern Pavilion, New Year's Eve, December 1990
 40. NYE 1992 (with FUN Party organisers), Hordern Pavilion, New Year's Eve 1992

See also

- List of electronic music festivals
- Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras
- Rave



Wikimedia Commons has media related to ***Rat Parties***.

References

1. Powerhouse Museum. "Recreational Arts Team (RAT) parties archive, 1984 - 1989". Powerhouse Museum, Australia. Archived from the original on 9 August 2014. Retrieved 9 August 2014.
2. Tomas, Juan-Carlo (2002-11-23). "Mix masters". *Sydney Morning Herald*. Computers: Fairfax Media. p. 8.
3. Olding, Rachel (2009-11-28). "Where the wild things were". *Sydney Morning Herald*. ISSN 0312-6315. Retrieved 8 August 2014.
4. Maynard (20 February 2010). "80s Exhibition Powerhouse". *Planet Maynard* (Podcast). Event occurs at 3:00. Retrieved 9 August 2014.
5. Portus, Martin (1987-09-17). "Rat-rapping". *Sydney Morning Herald*. Metro. p. 3.
6. "Long Way to the Top, episode 6: Gathering of the Tribes 1984-2000". Australian Broadcasting Corporation. 2001. Archived from the original on 9 August 2014. Retrieved 9 August 2014.
7. Stapleton, John (1988-03-31). "When rats come out to play". *Sydney Morning Herald*. Metro: Fairfax Media. p. 2.
8. Malouf, David (1989-12-27). "A 'learning' experience". *Sydney Morning Herald*. News and Features: Fairfax Media. p. 19. Retrieved 9 August 2014.
9. Stevenson, Lesley (1987-09-16). "RAT parties trap fun-lovers - and even shy mice". *Sydney Morning Herald*. Eastern Herald: Fairfax Media. p. 13.
10. "Short interview with Jac Vidgen by The Powerhouse Museum 2009".

Further reading

- Photo gallery at Brooks, Hannah (1 March 2009). "When rat ruled the world: well, Sydney anyway". *vice.com*. Retrieved 11 August 2014.

External links

- Interview with Jac Vidgen on the origins of the RAT parties (<http://www.sydneyravehistory.com/#!jac-vidgen-rat/cp6x/>)

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