

# RADICAL SELF-AUDIO

## *The Art of Music at Burning Man*

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**Photos by: Darrin Harris Frisby**, See more original photos specific for this article at <http://www.pbase.com/jacktors/burningmanreviewselect>

Seventy DJs from 14 countries decamped in 21 teepees with a nearly 24-hour open bar and food. They played in two massive domes with large elevated DJ booths, dancing cages and lasers. Between the two domes sits a three-story tall by six-story wide triple-layer lumen screen with the DJ booth in the middle called the Tower of Babel. This is Root Society, just one music camp at Burning Man, and it just might rock your world.

A record breaking crowd in excess of 50,000 people recently converged in makeshift Black Rock City for the 25<sup>th</sup> annual Burning Man festival from August 29 to Labor Day. The celebration of art and radical self-expression occurs in the Nevada desert on an ancient dried seabed known as the playa. It culminates in the burning of a five-story custom sculpted effigy referred to as “The Man.”

Burning Man is a visual arts festival at heart and organizers stay true to that vision by putting revenues back into large-scale art projects. However, even with the intense focus on visual arts, Burning Man has spontaneously evolved into a substantial music showcase and has now become a large part of why people go to Burning Man. “Music is definitely the reason I came,” said Niki Mattioli who drove 22 hours from Boulder, Colorado.



Andie Grace, (aka ActionGrl), the communications director for Burning Man, unequivocally states, “This is not a music event.” She points out that they are unique among festivals because they don’t book any acts.



Like it or not, the music, just like the ubiquitous dust, is as much a part of the burn as the visual art. There is music everywhere, all day and all night; drumming, Reggae, didgeridoo, Russian gypsy, vaudeville, funk, Celtic, pianos bars, massive afternoon rave parties and a heavy gulp of electronica in all of its forms and manifestations. At one point I counted six different sounds and types of music all

happening simultaneously.

I heard time and again that it wasn't just one kind of music that turned people on, it was all of the music at once. Instead of a cacophony, the varied music coagulates into an auditory symphony. The sounds reverberate into one large, if unsteady, back beat, and more than any one type of music, it is this amalgamation that defines the unique sound of Burning Man.

Nevertheless, the grand sound camps that deliver high-energy dance experiences are unparalleled and are the most powerful of the Burning Man music scene.

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[Opulent Temple](#) is the best known and most established of the large-scale music camps. It was founded nearly ten years ago by Rich Martin, a fabricator and Syd Gris, a San Francisco-based child psychologist by day and DJ at night.

The setting is a large sphere roughly 50 meters in diameter encircled by platforms of varying height. Atop the platforms are tall columns of flames adjusted via the DJ booth. At the nadir of Opulent Temple is a large steel DJ pod that is assembled by a forklift and made by the camp members themselves. On top of the pod is a large flame thrower that can be shot out over the crowd.



Opulent Temple takes over 80 people to put together at a cost of about \$60,000, which is raised at several fundraisers throughout the year. On any given night, they may get 10,000 people at their “[sanctuary for sacred dance](#).”

Syd's music is a range of house, break and techno with large gaping beats punctuated by staccato bursts and zigzags. He mixes in random samples from Pink Floyd, Green Day, and quotes from Hunter S. Thompson among others, making his music accessible even to the non-raver. His tunes tether to the familiar—a lifeline to the mother ship of sorts—unlike the heavy dub-step or trance, which can feel out-of-orbit (and that's okay sometimes, too).

Syd told me that his week on the playa “fulfills an inner need to be a part of something bigger.” After his first burn in 2001 he was blown away. “How could they produce this in the desert?” he

wondered. Burning Man forced him to ask, as it does for many, “What is your passion and how do you make it happen?”

The experience inspired him to be a more creative DJ and take his playing to another level. He put his formidable organizing skills to use and raised money for an art car the next year and the Opulent Temple (of Kaos) was born. The camp profile grew as they expanded the production—adding fire and a DJ temple. But the tipping point came when internationally acclaimed DJs [Paul Oakenfold](#) and [Tiesto](#) “blew it up.” Now soft-spoken Syd Gris is something of an underground superhero in the Bay Area music scene and a major player on the playa.



On the other side of the vast Burning Man grid, a distance of several miles, is [Root Society](#), driven by Jeffery Taylor (aka Jefr Tale), the founder of Monster.com. The Root compound consists of the two domes. Between the two domes sits the [Tower of Babel](#): a triptych of synapse-bending silver screen with dancers at various levels within. A complete mind-twist really, and not possible anywhere else.

Jefr organizes Root Society with the same entrepreneurial and organizational skills he used to build Monster.com. He methodically brings to life a very specific vision and music experience.

Jefr hales from Boston, where the burner scene isn’t as vibrant as the Bay Area, so he has primarily used his own resources to finance Root Society. He has spent over an hour a day on the phone for the last six months to organize this little fete. Total cost: one hundred thousand dollars and worth every penny. He considers it the greatest gift he could ever give and it is *very* well-received by the citizens of Black Rock City. They come night after night like “moths to a flame,” Jefr says.

[Bassnectar](#) most personifies the Burning Man sound and is one of the first artists to crossover from Burning Man to bring heavy dub-step to mainstream audiences. Bassnectar was set to play on Thursday night at the BoomBox, but because of technical problems, had to come out and tell the crowd of approximately 15,000 people, that for





the first time in 13 years, he couldn't play.

The challenges of playing on the playa are many. In the spirit of radical self-reliance, Burning Man provides zero support for music—a rub for some. Unlike granted visual art projects, music camps must provide their own generators for power, fuel, sound infrastructure, performance lights, cables and even haul out the waste accidentally left on their dance floor.

Any number of problems can occur. The alkaline playa dust conducts electricity and generators can clog with fine sand and sputter out. Intense heat can mangle equipment not properly stored. Spinning tunes is a lot easier in the harsh environment than a full band and this is why the sound of the playa is overwhelmingly techno. Even still, you don't just plug in and play here.



The highlight of the Tower of Babel was Friday night with [Crystal Method](#) who made their first appearance at Burning Man. They were clearly ecstatic and used thunderbolt beats and visuals utilizing the Tower of Babel to its fullest possibility.

Opulent Temple and Root Society are but one of many other music camps. [Nexus](#), just next door to Root, provided a large adult-scale jungle gym and a massive globe called the Fire Pryosphere

feathering flames. There is the [Hookahdome](#) where sultry [DJ DolCe Vita](#) commanded her audience like a high priestess. Disorient, who come all the way from New York ten years running now, as well as [Distrikt](#), who throw the biggest day party on the playa. And there is much, much more.

### Alchemy of Moments

There is no commerce at Burning Man and nothing is allowed to be bought and sold. It is a gifting economy. Participants organize into camps that provide parties, food, sushi and sake

tastings, frozen daiquiris, and just about anything else you can think of. Transportation is based on the bicycle. It is also economy that works on a philosophy of complete self-reliance. Everyone has to take care of their own scene—as Syd and Jeffer are well aware.

Musicians play for free at Burning Man, it is a gift. Like legendary DJ Carl Cox who spent \$30,000 of his own money to fly from Ibiza to play Opulent Temple last year. He said later in [DJ Magazine](#) that it was the most significant musical experience of his life and reminded him of why he played music. He soon issued a Burning Man-inspired mixed CD on the well-known [Global Underground](#) series.

Even though some people were unduly disappointed at Bassnectar not playing, in the ethos of the playa, it is his burn as well. He doesn't owe anyone anything. As a spectator or performer, you can't really expect *anything*—especially when you aren't paying or being paid. It really is a gift.



Burning Man without dust is like Woodstock without rain. Dust is a great equalizer on the playa. Larry and Sergei from Google are just a couple of dust bunnies looking through goggles, taking in their own inspiration. You can just as easily hang in Todd Rundgren's camp, Hill and Dog, eat weanies with Perry Ferrell or drink Veuve Cliquot with the Wizard Posse under the Cool Bus. There is no backstage at Burning Man.

One of the highlights of my experience was when Syd invited me into the DJ pod at Opulent Temple and allowed me to control the fire. I've never in my life controlled a fire show for thousands and I may never again, but it was a thrill I shall not soon forget—and nobody got burned.

Make no mistake, this is not a Rainbow Gathering or a kids club rave. Andie Grace of Burning Man is careful to point out that they don't want people thinking it is a music festival and come unprepared, like they were going to Bonaroo where the essentials are taken care of. Rather, Burning Man attracts some of the most creative and smartest people on earth. Engineers, builders and explosives experts. Burners have ingenuity, resources, and they ask the big-bang question: *What if?*

*What if* we transport a large school bus from New Orleans and refashion it into a paddlewheel boat with a fiesta deck on top, light it up like a Christmas tree and add fire spewing from tall steam columns. Fill it with 25 of our closest friends, an open bar with loud funk music pulsating from the stern—and then make legendary Hoodoo doctor and bluesman, [Coco Robicheaux](#), the greeter and spiritual masthead. *Voila*, an old school bus is now the elegant [Lady Sassafras](#). “Burning Man is like walking around in your dreams,” Robicheaux said.

In the end, I found it is less about the specific kind of music one might listen to and more about the experience and relationship to it. Music is always better with fire. In that context, it is neither about just the art or music. That debate is irrelevant—because it is about so much more.

There is a time on the playa when everyone confronts themselves and asks who they really are and how they want to live their life. At that moment they become a burner—not just a spectator. Like Adam Lambert deciding to go on American Idol while at Burning Man, the playa empowers people to take control of their destiny.



The magic at Burning Man happens when all the elements combine to form something greater than the sum of its parts. An elixir brewed in the alchemy of moments—auditory, visual, *personal*—that allows participants to reinvent themselves. It is a process of engagement because it is entirely participant driven. The playa is a level playing field in which everyone has a gift to offer. Everyone can be an artist or a rock

star—even a child psychologist like Syd Gris.

“Burning Man changed my life,” he said. “And we helped change Burning Man.”

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