

## **"The Cops Are Jammin' The Frequency"**

### Critical Moments For The Sydney Free Party Scene

By Sebastian Chan/Yellow Peril 1997



[Sydney Park By Night]

Every subculture has a defining moment after which it is irrevocably changed. For Sydney's Vibe Tribe, that moment arrived on the night of April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1995. *Freequency* - the next in a long lineage of free parties held by the Vibe Tribe in Sydney Park was in progress. Over five hundred people were dancing to the chaotic lo-fi acid sounds pumping from a dodgy sound system. Unbeknownst to most, a group of 40 police with batons and riot shields were gathering on the outskirts of the park, planning to shut the party down. They had received "noise complaints" despite the fact that the majority of the noise flowing out of the party sailed over the barren industrial wasteland of Alexandria. At 2am the police moved in. Finding that they couldn't deal with the concept of "everyone being in charge", and not being able to find the generator that powered the party, the police formed a wedge-shaped riot dispersal position and charged the dancefloor with batons and police dogs. Nine people were arrested, driven up the road and away from the party but not charged, two people were hospitalised, and countless others said that they were or witnessed others being beaten and generally harassed by the cops.

In an inner city area where public space is almost non-existent and young people excluded from notions of "the community", the free parties in Sydney Park were a vibrant, peaceful and joyous reclamation of space. More open-ended than the concurrent rave scene, they drew a more diverse crowd many of whom would otherwise never had the inclination or opportunity to hear and dance to such strange music. Sydney Park was the ideal location being close to transport, open-air, and most importantly it was uniquely acoustically shaped so as to direct all the sound of the party over the industrial areas of Alexandria and away from residential properties. With a few hundred dollars a party could be quickly and communally organised, word circulated through the local community by word-of-mouth and a few photocopied flyers, and then a bucket passed around on the night to recoup some costs.

In the aftermath of the forced closure of *Freequency*, many people who were initially inspired by the free

party actions of the Vibe Tribe became unsure. The stakes had suddenly been raised – no longer did you risk going out to a party and having it shut down early, or, as an organiser, being fined a few hundred dollars for exceeding noise restrictions, but now you might get your head beaten in too. A lot of people stopped going out and for a while the parties dried up. Also key members of the Vibe Tribe moved to the more fertile soils of the North Coast, and the organisational reins were handed over to a new generation of people.



[Hey, That's Not A Raver, He's A Clubber!]

Over two years later and after a number of formal complaints and an internal police investigation, the NSW Ombudsman has just released a report on the actions of the police at the *Frequency*. Citing a 'lack of evidence' the Ombudsman makes a number of recommendations but fails to order a further investigation. The Ombudsman and the internal police investigator, however make some damning statements against the police. These include findings that amongst the police "a systemic course of lying must have been in operation", "a number of police deliberately removed their badges and have failed to come forward" and that the police failed "to follow basic recording procedures relating to prisoners whom they had arrested". As the Ombudsman writes, "in hindsight, it may have been desirable for police to withdraw and address the crowd via a public address system". It is clear that the police acted confrontationally. Commanding officer of the raid, Sergeant McKenzie, unnecessarily feared that "if the party went on any longer [they] would lose control of the situation and complaints would be made about police failing to stop the noise". As has been repeatedly demonstrated, the Vibe Tribe had always, at other free parties in Sydney Park, been able to negotiate a lower volume level with police to the mutual satisfaction of all people.

Before this becomes "just another example of how fucked the cops are", it might be wise to consider that whilst the Ombudsman's report fails to recommend further investigations or actions against the police, several key criticisms of the police have been formally made as a result of people actually making formal complaints. Furthermore, rather than see *Frequency* as the death knell for the Vibe Tribe, it might be better to see it as a catalyst for subsequent subcultural developments and an integral part of the history of the 'scene'. Even the attitudes of South Sydney Council have shifted with the yearly *Mascon Festival* being allowed to take place in Sydney Park in the daytime now. The demographics of Newtown and St Peters have changed to since *Frequency* and the clusters of people, places and events that themselves gave birth to the Vibe Tribe in the first place have since dispersed or changed. New battlegrounds in the struggle to reclaim community spaces have sprung up and new subcultures are continually forming. The police force, too, has been shaken up by the recent Royal Commission, and rather than confront young people directly a number of 'policy initiatives' have been devised to 'deal with the problems'. One of example is the new dance party code, which attempts to place constraints on dance parties so that they better suit 'police operational requirements', cleverly hidden under the smokescreen of 'health and safety'. Harder to confront, and still harder to rally against collectively, information and education are the now the

key to future resistance. A pamphlet is currently circulating the cafes, bookshops and record stores which contains the key findings of the Ombudsman as well as a response from two of the people who were there at the time so keep an eye out for it.

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