

MUSIC



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House DJ, producer and label owner Juan Zapata (top left) currently helps to throw a Friday night house event at Casablanca in Old Town, while Joe Liehr (above) helps put on house nights at Casablanca (bottom left), Mr. Smith's and Gateway Park in Arlington.

Northern Virginia Underground

BY ARANYA TOMSETH
GAZETTE PACKET

Local house DJs throw parties for a devoted following at venues in Old Town, Arlington.

Saturday, June 3 was a beautiful day. It was the kind of perfect, 75-degree, sunny Saturday that has the power to draw even the most dedicated of couch potatoes out of their homes for outdoor activity. Some people spent the day hiking, some played sports, and others — such as Alexandria residents Erin Brown and Judith Rana — spent the afternoon at Gateway Park in Arlington, dancing to house music in broad daylight as the baffled motorists and pedestrians of Rosslyn rubber-necked and passed by.

“It was a great day with a chill vibe,” said Rana, 29. “There were a lot of people there with their pets and children, relaxing on beach blankets and enjoying the beautiful weather.”

Brown, also 29, shared Rana’s enthusiasm for the outdoor event.

“The park party at Key Bridge rocked because of the great music, friendly people and relaxed vibe,” she said. “Nothing beats a fun party outside on a beautiful day with your friends.”

The park party “Summer Sessions” have been going on for the past two years, and attendees say that they continue to get better

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— Erin Brown

with each one.

The June 3 party was the first of Summer Sessions 3. Two more park parties will take

place before the summer finishes — one on July 15 and one on September 2.

Summer Session parties are free and run from 11 a.m. – 8 p.m. in Gateway Park, a tiny island of grass and concrete located in Rosslyn, just near the entrance to Key Bridge.

SUMMER SESSIONS is just one of several

lar “house heads,” but in addition, often turn out to be a pleasant surprise for venue regulars who show up regardless of what music is playing.

One such venue is Gua-Rapo, a trendy two-level tapas lounge and restaurant located on Wilson Boulevard in Arlington. On different nights, local DJs like Aaron Sparks, 31, play house music on the upper floor.

“It’s always a fun night at Gua-Rapo,” said Sparks, who lives in Falls Church. “It’s a good space and my friends come out and play as well, so we have a good time.”

Sparks’ fiancée Annie Kulig has been a bartender at Gua-Rapo for five years, and has seen it go through many transformations — from various paint jobs to furniture adjustments, to menu changes.

“I think it’s the best that it’s ever been right now,” said Kulig. “At the end of the month the upstairs is being redone in a yellow and white theme with new furniture. The bar is being moved and extended, the DJ booth is being moved, and we are finally getting more bathrooms put in... it should be super cool and a nice change.”

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To find out more about Body Rock's Summer Sessions parties and parties at Casablanca, e-mail Joe Liehr at dj_joe_1@hotmail.com. For more information on Ken Christensen of ECB, visit his Web site at www.kenudigit.com, or e-mail him at keneceb@gmail.com.

Body Rocking Locally

FROM PAGE 14

Joe Liehr, whose promotion company "Body Rock" is responsible for putting on this year's and last year's Summer Sessions parties, is a fan of Gua-Rapo for its "bar-like atmosphere." Liehr, who lives in Seven Corners, plays at Gua-Rapo on the third Wednesday of every month, but also goes there as a customer when his friends play.

"I think they have great lighting, a comfortable DJ booth, and they usually get a great crowd on the weekends," said Liehr, who is 28.

Liehr said that he does not mind that most of the clientele at Gua-Rapo are not there specifically for the music.

"It doesn't bother me because right now, dance music needs to be heard by fresh ears, and people need to be educated," he said.

Prior to starting Body Rock, Liehr was part of "Dirty Sugar," another promotion company that he ran with several friends.

"We threw a regular party at Mr. Smith's in Tysons," said Liehr. "The managers there at the time supported what we were doing and allowed us free reign of promotion and booking DJs."

Ken Christensen, 32, also goes to Gua-Rapo from time to time to see friends play, and occasionally plays there on Friday nights as well. He also used to play at Liehr's Dirty Sugar parties.

"The crowd at Gua-Rapo is mostly local Rosslyn and Arlington people," said Christensen. "They are definitely there more so for cocktails and small talk, but it's a nice place."

CHRISTENSEN, who is from Springfield, has been spinning records for more than 10 years and is one half of the famous house duo the East Coast Boogiemens. He and his long time friend Juan Zapata, 30, of Annandale, first met in 1996 in Richmond. The two began tagging during a Halloween party and realized that they had musical chemistry on the decks, and subsequently, the East Coast Boogiemens were born.

For the last decade they have worked their way up from playing local parties for free, to traveling the world for highly compensated gigs at massive clubs. Along the way, they have started their own labels, thrown parties of all sizes and produced countless house tracks. Nowadays, they only play together as the East Coast Boogiemens a few times a year, but they both continue to run labels, make music, run house nights at local venues, and spin individually at clubs in the U.S. and around the world.

"I have thrown events in D.C. and Miami, but have never had the pleasure of working as a promoter in the Northern Virginia area," said Christensen. "Juan has a successful night

at Casablanca in Alexandria on the first Friday of each month, and I do love to play at these events when my schedule allows it."

Christensen ranks Casablanca as his favorite house venue in Northern Virginia.

"Casablanca is the place to be in terms of music," said Christensen. "People there are ready to dance and are into DJ culture."

CASABLANCA, located on King Street in Old Town Alexandria, has been friendly to local house DJs for quite some time. Formerly home to the well loved "Lemur Lounge" Friday house night, it has now become the home of Body Rock's "Everybody Loves Music" night, which takes place on the first Friday of every month.

"Casablanca is another venue that has supported dance music," said Liehr. "The former party throwers, the Lemur Lounge, had a very long and successful run of about six years."

Christensen and Zapata played at several Lemur Lounge parties, and were also regulars, even when they were not spinning records.

"I really like Casablanca," said Christensen. "The atmosphere is very laid back, and they have had great DJs in the past on the Lemur night. I met some of my very closest friends there."

In fact, watching the crowd on house nights at Casablanca is somewhat akin to watching a family reunion of sorts — only everyone is in their late 20s and early 30s, and everyone loves electronic music.

"Casablanca? Somehow I keep ending up in that place, gabbing with the same old people and spending ridiculous amounts of money on my massive bar tab," said Erin Brown, who has been going there since Le-

"The house scene needs help. It needs to be nurtured and continually pushed for it to survive. I think bars need to start thinking about how they present music to their customers."

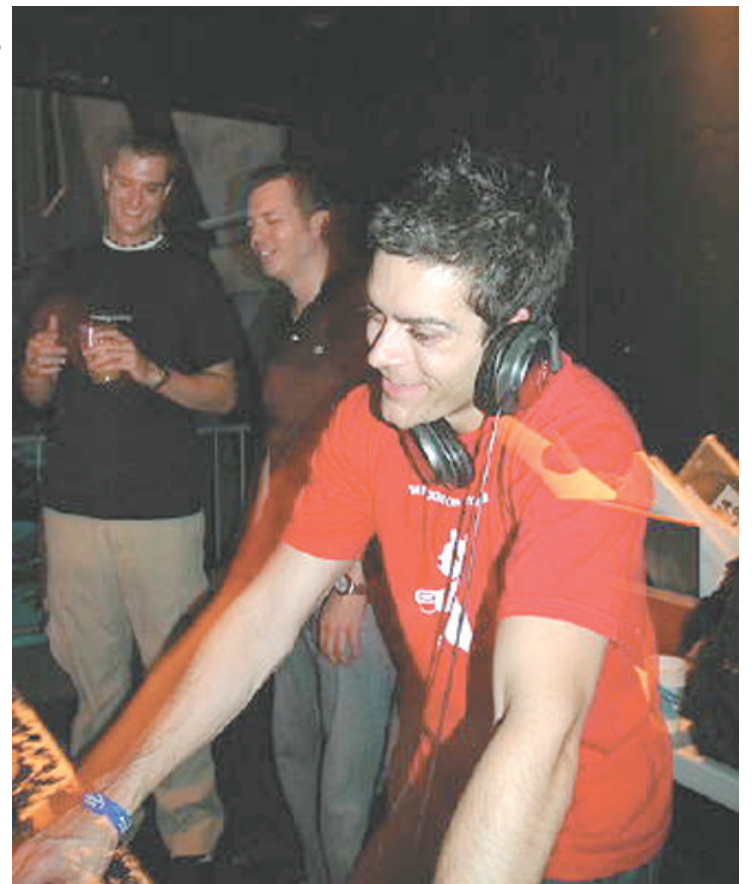
— Joe Liehr

mur Lounge first started, and is now a regular at the Everyone Loves Music night. "But I can't complain about it, I have fun — I must if I keep going back for more."

Brown, who has been a devoted house head for more the last decade, said she enjoys going out in Virginia because it is a "little less pretentious and a little more casual" than D.C. venues. "I don't necessarily feel like I have to put on my 'game face' to go out," said Brown. "Plus it's more convenient for a Virginia resident like myself."

Judith Rana likes Virginia venues for similar reasons.

"The scene in Virginia is much more laid back and less of a hassle," said Rana. "I go out to Virginia bars sometimes because they are close, they have parking, and there is usu-



PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

Aaron Sparks, 31, is a regular DJ at Gua-Rapo in Arlington.

ally no door charge and a smaller, friendlier atmosphere."

Michelle Volberg, 23, lives in Old Town and is within walking distance of Casablanca. She hits it up for Friday house nights because it is an easy trek to familiar faces.

"It's got a good underground vibe and great music," said Volberg. "It's under the radar."

ALTHOUGH LIEHR, CHRISTENSEN and Zapata all work regular day jobs, they continue to DJ and throw parties because of their love for house music — and while money is not the main motivation, the monetary benefits are often nothing to be sneezed at.

"In Northern Virginia I make anywhere from a free bar tab to several hundred dollars," said Liehr. "Not bad for playing music I love."

As a well established DJ, producer and label owner, Christensen earns anywhere from \$500 - \$1500 per out-of-town gig. He plays almost every weekend, and travels to cities as close as San Francisco, to cities as far as Sydney, Australia. Next month, he will take a week's "vacation" from work for a short European tour that will see him headline at clubs in Belgium, Amsterdam and Spain. Playing in Northern Virginia is not quite as lucrative, but it still offers compensation with the added bonus of getting to hang out with friends.

"In Northern Virginia payment varies depending on your crowd drawing potential," said Christensen. "Some DJs make \$75, some make \$300 - \$1000. It just depends on your draw, your locality and how often you play."

PROMOTION IS a key issue when it comes to booking DJs at local bars and restaurants. Liehr and Christensen think that the house

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scene could benefit from better planned promotion.

"The house scene needs help," said Liehr. "It needs to be nurtured and continually pushed for it to survive. I think bars need to start thinking about how they present music to their customers — too many places rely on promoters and DJs for all their needs. The venue should provide sound and a place for the DJ to operate."

Christensen said that he would also like to see the local house scene become more unified in terms of parties.

"I think that it is split into a million small venues across the Metro area — now if only we had one place to house it all," he said.