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Stimulus Programs That Roll At Night

By SARAH WILDMAN

ON a recent Thursday night in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, two D.J.s—Shea Van Horn and Tommy Cornellis—were filling the basement lounge of Napoleon, a bistro, with French electro and house music. The occasion was a monthly party called *Maison*, and the room was packed: gay men in their 20s, a clutch of American University law students, a preening reality TV star (Paul Wharton) and Omar Popal, the 31-year-old owner of the upstairs restaurant.

“At one point I thought of asking everyone to come wearing black-and-white striped shirts, in a nod to our French theme,” Mr. Van Horn said, as he emerged from the D.J. booth.

No doubt the guests would have followed his instructions. That week alone, Mr. Van Horn, 39, who has a Pied Piper-like effect on Washington clubgoers, had already spun at four parties, with themes including sleazy cool and indie pop.

At the dance hall *Town*, on U Street, Mr. Van Horn D.J.’d for an event where the crowd was packed with costumed characters: a dancing bear, a gaggle of drag queens, a go-go dancer in a low-cut flintstone-strudded Speedo. Mr. Van Horn, bejeweled, appeared as his drag alter ego, *Summer Camp*. But at *Maison*, Mr. Van Horn was wearing a tidy button-down shirt that set off his blue eyes and boyish face. It wasn’t a stretch to imagine this former Seattle resident in his day job: a marketing and communications specialist in health care at AED, the nonprofit development organization.

“I don’t associate these things with D.C.,” Mr. Van Horn said of the themed parties, which, over the last year or so have become an increasingly common evening activity in Washington. “I say it’s so L.A. or it’s so New York but it’s also, now, so D.C.”

Washington night life, it seems, has some of age, and Mr. Van Horn, along with a cohort of other D.J.s, restaurateurs and night life entrepreneurs, is emblematic of the changes. Indeed, the city, once called, even by its own citizens, “Hollywood for ugly people” is in the midst of a night life renaissance. To wit: 53 restaurants, bars and boutiques have opened in the last two years in the area known as Mid-City (roughly from Thomas Circle up 14th Street through U Street, and along U down to Ninth). That doesn’t include the new celebrity chef haunts in Penn Quarter, nor the sleek new hotel bars at the Jefferson and the W, nor the monthly or weekly alternative parties like *Maison* that are held in warehouses, bars and nightclubs.

The nexus of the new energy is at 14th and U Streets, but the geography of D.C.’s burgeoning night life stretches up to Columbia Heights, down 14th through Logan Circle, past the Convention Cen-



EXUBERANCE
D.J. Shea Van Horn at Napoleon. Below, from Greg Fuller, and his room Brad Ball at Napoleon; the entrance at Churchkey; the entrance Churchkey a Birch and Barley sister rest

ter into Chinatown and out to the revived H Street corridor. At the upstairs/downstairs duo of new restaurants on 14th Street called Churchkey (a gastro pub with an extensive bar menu) and Birch and Barley (the upscale sister restaurant downstairs), the wait for beer begins at 6 p.m. By midnight the line stretches down the block, and the crowd upstairs is shoulder to shoulder until closing. Up the street at *Patty Boom Boom*, a new Jamaican reggae dance hall, the ballroom is packed, sweat-filled and writhing by 11 p.m.

“I think people are more willing to try new things in D.C.,” said Mr. Van Horn, noting that the mind-set is changing just as the national focus on the city has shifted on both a political and pop cultural level. “Even television developers think D.C. is a cool place to be,” he said.

Washington is in the midst of a night life renaissance.

pointing to “Real World” and “Top Chef.” “It’s always been important, but now it’s also interesting,” he said.

There have, over the years, been several bright moments in Washington’s night life, particularly in music. In the 1980s, Washington bands like *Minor Threat*, heavily influenced hard-core punk rock, and the 1970s go-go genre originated here.

Things grew much quieter at the end of the last century and the beginning of the current one. But more recently, local, national and political events—not the least of which was the election of Barack Obama—have met and married, helping to rejuvenate a night life culture that’s uniquely D.C.

“The election kind of hit the gas pedal on a change that was already occurring,” said Eric Hilton, a founder of the popular D.J. collective *Thievery Corporation* and an owner of several hotspots, including *Marvin*, a favorite restaurant of White House staffers; the *Gibson*, a speakeasy; *Patty Boom Boom*; and the

Eighteenth Street Lounge. Mr. Hilton is also a quiet backer in the U Street Music Hall, a new venue for D.J.s opening this month.

Mr. Van Horn argues that the appetite for new options in Washington was just waiting to be unleashed. He and his colleagues now promote highly successful events aimed at the gay community that run the gamut from a monthly “dirty disco” men’s party called *RAW*—to *Mixtape*, a mixed audience, indie-pop event that he runs with Matt Baier, another D.J.

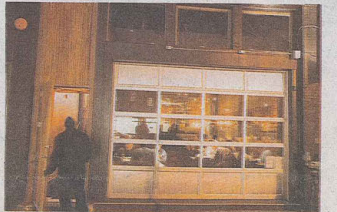
“He knows how to play to his audience but at the same time pushes them to try something new, and that’s a huge part of his success,” said John Marble, a night life impresario who spends his days buttoned up in the federal government in communications and has free time scoping new event ideas from Bucharest to Berkeley. Mr. Van Horn, he said, is one source of inspiration.

Some of that inspiration is derived from Mr. Van Horn’s Seattle days, when he studied theater and performed in what he called “subversive, edgy and dark” cabaret with performers like Ryan Laundry and Dan Savage. Mr. Van Horn eventually abandoned the stage and moved to Washington for graduate school at American University. After living in Europe for a few years, he returned to Washington where, in 2005, he helped launch *Crack*, a drag variety show that includes everything from mash-up versions of diary tales to dark political comedy. More recently, Mr. Van Horn, who had also been a D.J. in Seattle, has been concentrating on events that push at the edges of where Washington audiences have been comfortable.

“The number of different events that Shea has a hand in would be a full-time job and then some, and the fact he has a full-time job in addition to all of that is jaw dropping,” said Ari Shapiro, a *White House* correspondent for *National Public Radio*. Mr. Van Horn, he said, “approaches night life with an attitude of inclusiveness rather than exclusivity.”

“It’s tapping into something that’s not happening and providing it,” is how Mr. Van Horn describes his efforts.

And in today’s Washington, it seems, he has found a receptive audience.



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