



The Culture Club

Feature Article

New York's gay ethnic minorities want visibility - and a place to party

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By:

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When people speak of the Great American Melting Pot, they're talking about New York City. Walk down a street in Soho and you can hear five different languages being spoken, none of them English. The gay community reflects this diversity but, like the city at large, it's debatable how much the queer majority (read: white men) embrace varies minorities.

Many ethnic gays have formed their own organizations, at first for support—or even survival—but now, in many cases, because they want a judgment-free zone where they can just party while still embracing their heritage. New York's gay African-American and Latino scenes are legendary, but smaller and less established cliques are blossoming as well. Semi-regular parties like Desilicious, geared towards South Asians, and Habibi, aimed at queer Middle Easterners, are places to let your hair down and party—and they're drawing larger and larger followings.

Atif Toor, Rajeesh Parvatkar and DJ Ashu Rai founded Sholay Productions, the company that produces Desilicious, in 2001. "We were at [comedian] Vidur Kapur's apartment talking about how there wasn't really a place for South Asian gays to just have fun," recalls Toor. "SALGA, [the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association] is great, but they're mostly a support group." The first Desilicious was held in early 2002, not long after the September 11 attacks. "There was a sense of anxiety," says Parvatkar, "and we wanted to create a safe space where South Asians could have fun without feeling marginalized or invisible."

As post-9/11 hysteria abated, the Desilicious parties grew. The first, held at the now-defunct Climate 8 in Chelsea, drew about 300 people. This Halloween, Desilicious: Vamp it Up attracted nearly 1,000—but even a regular event pulls in some 500–600 men and women, both South Asian and Caucasian. At any given party, a crowd dressed to follow the night's theme dances to Rai and DJ Bobby's mix of house and Bollywood music, and takes in colorful performances by Desi drag queens, who are more dance-oriented than their Western counterparts. Toor describes the overall vibe as exuberant. "People aren't afraid to let go. There's flirtatiousness but it's not cruisy. Which is very Bollywood."

Desilicious is Sholay's biggest effort, but the group is active in philanthropic efforts, hosting fundraisers for the Queens Museum, disaster relief and Barack Obama's presidential campaign. They even hosted a Bye-Bye Bush Bash when the GOP held its national convention in New York in 2004. "We want Sholay to represent our identities and interests," Toor says. "We like to have a good time, but we also have a social conscience." And though many Americans would lump South Asians together, Toor points out that he is a Pakistani Muslim, while Parwatkar is a Seik and Rai is Hindu. "It's the love of Bollywood pop culture that brings these different communities together."

Though not as big as Desilicious, the Habibi parties—geared toward New York's gay Arabs—are infused with a similar sense of kinship and joy. "There have been parties with as many as 500 people and some where we've had only ten," says Ramses, who's been a part of Habibi (Arabic for "friend" or "darling") since it originated as a social event held by an Arab LGBT group at the Center. "The focus of that group was support and activism," he says. "But there were people who just wanted to have a good time." The Habibi party broke off on its own in the early 2000s and is currently overseen by DJ IZ, who also provides the party's tantalizing beats.

At the November Habibi, more than 100 men—mostly Arab but with some white friends, admirers and even a few women—danced to traditional music and Middle Eastern pop. Despite the Muslim proscription against alcohol, the line to the bar was three-people thick all night. When a buxom female belly dancer took to the floor, the crowd went wild. There was an undeniable sense of freedom, one that doesn't necessarily continue outside the bar. "It's a mix of guys who are out in their regular lives, and those that are closeted," says Ramses. The stigma against being gay in Arab communities, even in the U.S., is still strong. "There are definitely guys sneaking down here, not telling people where they are going." Few Habibi attendees were willing to speak to us.

Among Brooklyn's Caribbean community, a tentative gay nightlife has also emerged. In 2004, a group of St. Lucians participated in a "Gay Diva" night and, this fall, drag queens from Jamaica, Barbados and, Martinique participated in a pageant at the Fellowship of Christ Church on Atlantic Avenue. "The idea was born out of the St Lucian version. We realized that other gay islanders wanted to participate," said coordinator Hemish Gervis of Fabulous Lucians. "This year we had five contestants but we plan to make it even bigger next year." In some cases, though, questions of safety arise. When articles about the pageant were posted online, comments included words of encouragement—"Stand tall, stand strong, stand proud,"—but also threats, including "I hope the Jamaican contestant knows he cannot return [there] for the rest of his life," and "That man from St. Lucia needs a good ass-whopping [sic]!"

Of course, not every queer minority has its own party culture. While a strong presence in New York, the gay Asian community appears more enmeshed in the larger gay scene. The outreach group Gay Asian, Pacific Islander Men of New York, hosts brunches, bar nights and other

gatherings, but not on a grand scale. “If there was an Asian Desilicious, I probably wouldn’t go,” says one gay Chinese-American. Whether it’s because the need for solidarity is less or for some other reason is hard to say.

Gay Jews, at least those that are less observant, are also well-integrated into New York’s mainstream gay scene. But that’s precisely why Jayson Littman founded He’Bro, a queer Jewish group that throws its annual Jewbilee on Christmas Eve. While gay Christians are eagerly awaiting Santa’s arrival, Jewish lads gather for dancing, cocktails and go-gos. “I wanted a place where gay Jews could meet other Jews with no context of religion or spirituality,” says Littman. “A lot of us have mixed feelings about religion, but still proudly identify as Jewish. It’s a culture, not just a religion.”

The first Jewbilee was held at Vlada, but Littman underestimated how many people would attend. In December 2008, the party moved to Splash, with about 1,000 people attending. “It was still more than we expected—it got a little out of control,” Littman admits. He’s shopping venues for this year’s event, which could be bigger than ever.

One reason gay minorities enjoy the company of their own kind is that mainstream clubgoers often either ignore or fetishized them. “We call them ‘curry queens,’ says Toor. “They come around [because] we’re exotic to them. But some South Asians enjoy the attention.” Littman has a similar feeling about so-called “bagel chasers.” “It’s not really harmful,” he says. “I think they’re more attracted to Jewish values and the connection to family. It’s not about a Jewish ‘look,’ per se.”

Born and raised in Manhattan, Littman comes from an Orthodox background. “I went to yeshiva and was in rabbinical seminary,” he says. Like many gay Jews, he he had to redefine what Judaism meant to him after coming out. He’bro parties are just Jewish by virtue of who comes, he says—though during the Purim Tea Dance last spring, go-go boys donned yarmulkes, partygoers dressed in costume (as is tradition on the holiday) and the DJ played Israeli pop songs. Littman says that though he doesn’t actively recruit them, Jewbilee attracts a fair number of Israelis. “I went to Tel Aviv and noticed that parties there had a Jewish infusion without being religious. That’s what I’m going for.”

What these parties share is the desire to wed elements of traditional heritage with queer nightlife. With many cultures’ resistance to homosexuality, it can be a rocky marriage—but one that’s becoming more common as ethnic gay communities continue to emerge in the U.S. and abroad.

Desilicious: Bollwood Jungle Party heats up Rebel (251 W 30th St, 212-695-2747) on November 20 and He’Bro’s annual Jewbilee is planned for December 24. Visit Sholayevents.com, HabibiNYC.com and myHebro.com for more info.