

National Post
Toronto section
My Comfort Zone
By Jay Somerset

It's a warm, sunny Sunday morning in Toronto. People are out walking dogs, shopping for groceries, and relaxing after Saturday night. If you were to walk by the northwest corner of Spadina Avenue and College Street, you'd have no idea that downstairs a raging after-after-hours party was underway, just as it is every Sunday—for almost a decade. Welcome to the Church of CZ, welcome to the Comfort Zone.

The Comfort Zone—also known as CZ, or “the venue”—is a gritty, windowless club beside the equally decrepit Waverly Hotel and Silver Dollar blues bar. Outside, a small sign says CZ, but most people just see a door with a piece of wood in place of a window, the door that leads down to a Toronto institution for the party set, people that stay out after the bars close and the after-hours clubs finally shut down. From 6 o'clock Sunday morning until 4 a.m. Monday, about 1,000 people pay \$20 to dance and listen to DJs spinning house music.

“I went to church every Sunday for four months straight,” says Sarah, a former CZ regular who now parties at more conventional times due to her Monday-to-Friday office job. “It's dirty, loud, and the energy is relentless—these are people that have been partying and dancing since Saturday night. There's really nowhere else like it. That's why I came back week after week.”

Entering the club is like walking into a surreal pillow. After a light frisk, I leave my sunny day behind and enter a party straight out of New Year's Eve. Sober, I bump into a crew of shirtless guys dancing near the entrance, their shirts jammed into back pockets. It's so dark I can barely see five feet in front of me. The heavy fog of sweat and marijuana wafts through the air, contained by the black three-metre-high ceiling. My eyes begin to adjust and I see hundreds of people dancing manically, shaking glow sticks and drinking bottled water. The odd cigarette or joint punctures the blackness while the DJ revs the audio engine with beat after beat. It's relentless and, from the toothy smiles dazzling under the black light, so much fun.

Two small bars flank each side of the windowless club, but neither serve booze; bottled water—the biggest seller at \$5 each—Red Bull energy drinks, and Kool-Aid slurpees are the only drinks on tap. “We're an unlicensed venue but we try to keep the crowd to the above-19 age,” says Ian, the fortysomething “person without portfolio” who runs the club. Ian has short, cropped hair and wears glasses. Like most people at CZ, he looks like your neighbour, casual in jeans and a T-shirt. And like everyone else in this story, Ian prefers to keep his last name and past jobs to himself. “I've always worked in the logistics business. I still do.”

To an outsider, the crowd seems to be one big mass, but there's order to the randomness. "People tend to congregate in certain areas, sort of like high school," says Miss Raquel, host of Sunday's I Love CZ event. "I manage Boys Town, where the gay, usually shirtless guys congregate, and my boyfriend, Glenn, takes care of Chinatown. The pool table area used to be known as Regent Park or Parkdale."

With the low ceilings and shady corners, the club looks like a church basement painted black. It can hold about 350 people comfortably with little nooks everywhere. The DJ booth stands right in the middle of the dance floor and acts as the centrepiece of the club. Then there's the couch area in the back of the club. Even after my eyes adjusted, I still could not make out what was going on in that shadow world among the couches. Outside the bar, under the blazing sun, the back patio looks like a Mexican prison yard. People sit, sweating and smoking, their eyes glazed over from too many party favours, too little sleep, *too much* in general. Empty water bottles litter the floor, swept up by "broom guy," who provides endless fodder for the bugged out minds.

Part of the appeal of CZ is the diverse crowd. "It has nothing to do with what you're wearing, how old you are or what you do for a living," says Raquel, 31. Besides hosting the Sunday party, Raquel also organizes the long-weekend events, posts DJ set times online, and edits *Scenester* magazine, a publication that focuses on club culture in Toronto. "We get all types of people of all ages: club kids, doctors, lawyers, business owners. They all come to unleash and escape. There's no posing, just people dancing and sharing in a dirty little secret world outside of everyday life. In the white-collar professional world, you can't loosen your tie, but at CZ, no tie is required. It's the opposite of pretension."

This may have something to do with the longevity of the club. Where most places catering to the late-late night crowd last a year or two and feed off of trends and fashions, CZ has been going strong for almost a decade. "Every DJ in the city wants to play here," says J-Prez, 32, a resident spinner who's played the club for about five years. "Walking into the club in the middle of a sunny day is surreal, which adds to the appeal. You walk in and there are hundreds of people dancing manically under the black light, every single weekend. You know you've made it when you play CZ."

Raquel puts it more bluntly, "There is a line-up of DJs just dying to play here. We've got people who drive down from Sudbury or up from the U.S., pay the cover, and want deep, grinding, danceable music. The hard, deep, funky tribal beats make CZ unique. There's nowhere else like it—not even Montreal has the same vibe—and that's why people will spend hours here—you can't hear this music anywhere else."

Besides the Sunday event, the club is also open Thursdays from midnight to 7 a.m. and Saturday from 3 a.m. till 1 p.m. "It's a similar crowd," says Ian. A company called Double J Entertainment promotes the non-Sunday CZ events, and music booker Dan Burke—a former editor at *Maclean's*—handles the odd band that comes to play.

When the bar opened, New Year's Eve, 1996, it was more of a live music venue. The original booker, a tall, straggly haired hippy named Cosmic Steve (or Groovy Steve, depending on his mood) used the venue to showcase live bands of the psychedelic ilk. At that time, rave culture was reaching its apex and, since Deadheads and ravers tend to share common interests—endless music, drugs, scenes not featured in *Toronto Life*—the shift from band to DJ was seamless.

While the club has a zero-tolerance policy for drugs, this does not mean the dancers are fuelled by Maxwell House coffee. “Ecstasy and G [GHB, or gamma hydroxybutyrate] were always the most popular party favours,” says Sarah. “My crowd usually stuck with ecstasy, whereas the gay crowd and the strippers took G. The people in Chinatown were always the most wacked out. Half of them would be waving glow sticks frantically while the others watched with sunglasses on.”

That was then and this is now. With almost zero advertising—Raquel sends out digital flyers for her long-weekend shindigs called “Come Get Your Fcuk'in Beats”—weekend after weekend, crowds descend the stairs and records keep spinning.

“Sometimes I'll drive by College and Spadina on Sunday with my husband and we'll see people milling about outside the club,” says Sarah. “We look at each other, wondering what they're getting into.”

So is the Comfort Zone slated to become the oldest club in Toronto? Ian laughs, pauses, and says with an odd mix of conviction and surprise, “Who knew it would go on this long?”

—Jay Somerset (jay@doyouconcur.com)