Party Out of Bounds: 
Queer Activism and Temporary Utopias

Chances Dances 
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_Chances Dances_ is a collective of DJs, artists, activists, and educators that organizes queer dance parties in Chicago. Since 2005, _Chances_ has created environments where queers can seek refuge from mainstream judgments and assumptions. Part of our mission is to create safe spaces for all gender expressions; countering the hostility many queer people face in their daily lives and even in many gay bars. _Chances_ emerged as an alternative to gender binary-based nights and bars and continues to host a diverse mix of genders and sexualities. Over the last six years, _Chances_ has evolved from a scrappy, month-to-month event to three parties a month. Today, _Chances_’ platform and profits are used to support other DJs, artists, activists, and educators within our community. Our aim is to stage and support regularly-occurring events where queers feel at home and less restrained by labels, identities, and categories; a place where it’s possible to connect with other queer people who aren’t exactly the same.

As queers in the U.S. know, the pervasive anti-queer attitude of our culture comes not only from institutions like government and organized religion, but from the society that supports these institutions. While many of our comrades, as well as our own organizers, work to combat top-down, institutional oppression, _Chances_ embraces the stickier task of countering homophobia within Chicago’s social fabric, and even within our own community. Our methodology differs from contemporary activist strategies such as direct action, campaigning and lobbying. Instead, we offer a reprieve from the slow-kill negativity of a heterosexist socio-cultural landscape through the vehicles of socializing, personal contact, and dance—believing that any truly effective, radical, revolutionary and progressive agenda must incorporate bodily, spiritual and social forms of pleasure. The reason is clear: perhaps more pervasive than systemic homophobia is a profound disbelief in progressive change. This apathy is widely accepted as the inevitable malaise of post-modernism, the price of living in a global society that prioritizes superficial claims to individuality and success, even as institutional power becomes more centralized. The tension between the desire for identity and our increasing alienation is central to our personal lives and political struggles. However, difference and commonality can be embraced equally, and largely without trepidation, if a time
and place outside traditional paradigms and capitalist value systems is created. If you build it, they will come.

**Chances** is an activist organization committed to the project of crafting temporary utopias. At least three times each month, volunteer organizers create a productive diversion from the status quo, a time when respectful, open-minded participants harmoniously share space with others like and unlike themselves.

These temporary utopias share several key characteristics:

- Safety is mutually agreed upon, consensually formed and communally maintained. It is not ensured through policing, though crisis management must always be available from those who have organized the utopia’s parameters and proceedings. Safety in this sense is antithetical to political correctness; rather, it is a profound respect that enables and incites risk-taking. It is comfort in mystery and intense conversation. It is the freeing of the voice in the chromatic choir.

- Temporary utopias are time machines. They evoke, unearth and reassess the past, contend for a better future, and manifest a bodily present full of radical pleasure.

- If there are desired products of each convergence, they are (good) memories, sensory pleasure, conversation, self-love and new relationships. Temporary utopias are production sites that convert intense human energy and slight material resources into radical potential: a moment that ends with beginnings. Concrete objects may be produced, but are not a measure of success. This focus on leisure, temporality, and non-physical production stands in opposition to the dominant structures of time, work, and capital.

- Radical politics will be arrived at by conversation, not mandate.

- Respect for and recognition of human complexity is the basis for the full realization of human rights. Temporary utopias must be invested in respect for and recognition of gender variance, disabilities, myriad sexualities, age difference, ethnic, and racial difference, and family in all its forms.

**Chances** takes its name from a shortlist of rural and smaller city gay bars (think “Expressions” and “Rendezvous”). The co-founders of **Chances** sought to recreate their experiences of small town gay bars, where folks of all stripes gathered simply to be queer—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, whatever.
Because less populated areas often claim only one gay bar (if that), it becomes the space where people express their sexualities and gender presentations without hostility. Cities, with their density and diverse demographics, tend to offer narrowly defined bars and nights for GAY MEN or LESBIANS, but never for BOTH or ALL. A coming together in and in spite of difference is what temporary utopias and Chances Dances are about. Coming together is not unprecedented in Chicago: the city where a racist and homophobic riot against the multicultural and feminized disco movement took place—1979’s “Disco Demolition” at Comiskey Park—is also the birthplace of House music which emerged from the ashes of disco, was popularized by queer DJs (like disco), and was heavily influenced by queer culture.

In the spirit of inclusiveness, Chances employs a tag-team DJ method and invites several guest DJs to expose dancers and DJs to a wide spectrum of taste and skill. On any given Chances night, two to four DJs play sets ranging from five songs to half-hour blocks, switching off or rotating in round robin-style. This promotes musical diversity, without requiring attendees to sit through hours of someone else’s idea of “great music” before hearing something they can relate to. In turn, greater risks and less traditional music can be played. DJs with different predilections and skill levels provide partygoers more access points than a consistent, narrowly defined musical scene. And while we have preferences—leaning toward music that is queer-friendly, sometimes classic and often trendy—we also sustain a deep interest in highlighting or creating new musical relationships. Through the curatorial moves of individual DJs and the DJs-as-collective, connections and relationships emerge across genres and time periods. A selection of obscure House or Disco may be followed by beat-oriented rock made by women in the 90s, which may be followed by a European remix of West African pop, which may be followed by a Madonna track, older or newer. Historical, geographical, personal, and political identifications are revealed over time. This movement across genres through different DJs creates a fluid, quick-changing space where curators remain anonymous and dancers always find old and new friends to dance with and to.

The earliest incarnations of Chances, in the back room of a now-defunct Wicker Park taqueria, incorporated decor and dress themes, as well as a hostess and drag performance, adding aesthetic cohesion to each evening while further encouraging a multitude of expressions. This more performative version of Chances lost steam with the departure of our beloved MC, Teena Angst. Around the same time, the original party moved down the street to Subterranean, a more stable venue, and we scored a second party, Off Chances,
at nearby Danny's. With these changes, a re-evaluation of our mission was needed. With fewer costume and prop expenses, our venture suddenly became profitable, if only marginally. Pocketing the profits seemed antithetical to the community-oriented space fostered on these small dance floors.

First attempts at redirecting our newfound capital took the form of creatively political projects and simple acts of generosity. Smaller endeavors ranged from the design and distribution of educational materials on queer issues to giving away mix CDs and homemade food at events—all of which we continue to do. Our most ambitious project was a spectacle staged as part of the 2007 Pride Parade, featuring a gaggle of self-proclaimed queer witches riding a truck decked with multicolored limp cones, demanding that parade-goers “summon a new queer reality”. To this end, masks of the faces of 27 of our queer heroes were passed around, asking the audience to enact the legacies of the figures depicted. The masks continue to be used in art exhibits and educational programs. Although these larger projects were successful, we still sought a more direct and sustainable practice of giving.

Eventually, a long-term project was established with the Critical Fierce-ness Grant: a biannual micro-grant administered by Chances Dances, providing financial support for queer art and artists in Chicago. The logic of using our profits to fund the creative endeavors of queer Chicagoans is a nuanced notion of giving back. The Critical Fierceness Grant reproduces, on a different scale, the dynamic that emerges at Chances events—the reciprocal exchange of admiration and energy between DJ and dancers. One wouldn’t exist without the other. The grant assists the chronically underfunded artists, activists and creatively queer groups who form Chances’ main constituency, regardless of gender or orientation. At the time of writing, more than four thousand dollars has been distributed over five grant cycles; by publication, we will give out at least a thousand more.

Through the granting process, Chances organizers have realized that a crucial aspect of sustainability is our ability to adapt in response to our ever-changing community. Our mission must evolve and our goals and methods shift so we can be what Chicago’s queer community needs us to be.

The grant and our overall mission evolved again when we were offered a monthly residency at the Hideout, a mainstay of the local rock community that had hosted Saturday night dance parties for years. Again we moved to create a safe space for queer people at an established, mostly straight venue. An often-unrecognized aspect of our work as organizers and activists involves working with venues that, although not intentionally discriminatory, might not otherwise create a welcoming space for large numbers of diverse and fluid
identities. Positively, each of the three venues we have consistently worked with has embraced our mission and our queerness. Working with the Hideout allowed us to establish a visibly queer night on the weekend, as opposed to off-nights during the workweek. In addition, the modest five-dollar cover allowed us to increase our allotted grant monies to a minimum of a thousand dollars per cycle.

While *Chances*, *Off Chances*, and *Chances at the Hideout* all take place in Chicago’s Near-Northwest side, each retains its own identity. Each *Chances* night brings a different audience, each venue lends itself to a different vibe, different styles of music, different dance floor energies. To that end, in addition to the aforementioned guest DJs, we seek partnerships with social justice groups to raise funds and awareness, as well as with an array of emerging performers to share their work. This outreach connects us with communities throughout the city and exposes our established audiences to the causes we value. This, for us, is activism.

The *Chances* mission is to bring people together in real time around music, pleasure, love, creativity, and fabulous queer energy. To put our bodies into contact with each other and find solace, rejuvenation and, yes, temporary utopia in our coming together is to create a less goal-oriented but still effective and important kind of activism. Empowered by our queer ancestors and an optimism that believes the world can be energized by radical politics, we seek to bring Chicagoans together in the spirit of queer inclusivity, one dance at a time.