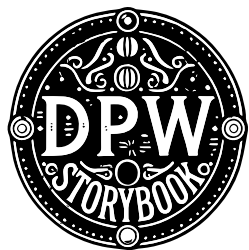


DA

DA is the Playa Restoration /Environment Manager. His first Burning Man was in 1997. After working on an art project during the event in 2000, he joined the Department of Public Works in 2000 doing the “cleanup crew”. By 2003, he had become the full manager. As his budget increased, he was able to go from 1 to 4-line sweeps, gathering roughly 175 people in 2021. He was a founding member of “Special Forces”, DA was a founding member of the “Special Forces,” a group dedicated to addressing the most challenging cleanup areas: the “hot spots”. In 2006, he invented the Playa Restoration MOOP Map with the concept of the red, yellow, green colors marking the speed progression of the line sweep and therefore the amount of MOOP in each zone. Also in 2006, he created the Talent show as a great finale of Playa Restoration. He studied graphic design and illustration, and he’s done the theme art for Burning Man which has been exhibited at the Smithsonian.

This interview was conducted online by “Flo”, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2021. Most of Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve reading flow.



“I was invited to be part of what was then known as the cleanup crew. At the time there was only about thirty of us.”



DA on Playa during Resto. Photo credit: Michael Garlington, 2008.

I’m the Playa Restoration manager for Burning Man. Now, Environment Restoration. I first joined the Department of Public Works in the year 2000, that would have been my fourth year at Burning Man at that time. I had been going since 1997. I was invited to be part of what was then known as the cleanup crew. At the time there was only about thirty of us. Very small!

The event was still something like in the 26-30,000 population range at that time. It was still big, but it wasn’t where we are now, which is 80,000 people. I was invited by members of DPW. They said, “Hey, you should stay with us and join the cleanup crew!” I was like, oh, I don’t know. You know? At that point I was part of another art project. So, I was already there since July, which had been my earliest. So, 2000 was my earliest

time out there and I’m thinking, oh, I’ll be done by the time the event ended, which is September.

So now I’m invited for what is essentially the bonus round! I had to really check myself. I was like, oh man, can I do this? Can I handle this? Emotionally? Am I prepared? I almost felt like I was there for such a long time this could break me. [laughs] But I didn’t know!

So, I accepted the invitation and I stayed. I had to leave for a week and then I came back: that’s nothing. The very first day of cleanup, proper, they lined us all up, roughly an arms width apart. We were much further apart because there weren’t much of us. At the time it was co-directed by two people. DPW at that time, was still under Will Roger, but managing the cleanup was two people. It was Christ Schard and then Burning Dan Miller. Christ Schard is an artist who

does Burning Man artwork, and Dan Miller used to build the man. They were in charge of cleanup.

The methods were still pretty raw, but the basics were there. It was essentially that you lined up an arm’s width apart along each block. Like, at 2 o’clock, Esplanade A: then you’d go to 2:30 to 3 o’clock Esplanade A. So on and so forth. At the time, we barely knew where we were in the city because sometimes, we had pulled up all the t-stakes or had rough markers. We had an advantage from just knowing the city from being out there a long time, and understanding where we are from the sun, but yeah, that was essentially it.

The thing is, when I set foot on the Playa when nothing was there—just us and some trucks—there was a beautiful, overwhelming feeling of “Wow!” The expanse! And Burning Man was just here! But now it’s

gone! You know? You look around you really couldn’t see anything: just Playa. It wasn’t until you were walking step by step that you would see “MOOP:” Matter Out Of Place. That’s our word for it.

It would come into focus, and you would pick up that MOOP. That MOOP might be a woodchip, or metal debris, or plastic. Something broken. Usually, it falls in the form of things that were broken. It’s not like a garbage bag full of stuff. It’s things that people would miss. We could tell that people really cared.

I remember that, moving with that team of people, it’s so quiet. You can hear your footsteps. Then you hear people all the way on the other side of the line cracking jokes. I was like, “this is the best!” I don’t know, it was almost like a secret. It was like a secret awesome. I felt like I couldn’t believe that this was the part of



DA on 2023’s Fence Day. Photo credit: Woody Jim, 2023.

“People were coming to me for the answers, because I guess it sounded like I knew what I was talking about, even if I didn’t.”

Burning Man, and I love Burning Man! It was almost like a joke. There was something very funny about it. Like, if I had to convince people like, “Hey, you guys got to clean up Burning Man, it’s so fun!” people would be like, “Yeah right”. [laughs] It was a beautiful experience.

Once you get into the work of it, there’s something very finite about [mooping]. Like, this is going to end for real, and you’re going to have to leave. You know? There’s something really beautiful and frightening about that for some people. Because sometimes it can be an escape, like Burning Man. Anything can be an escape. Then, all of a sudden, it’s like, “Oh my gosh, here’s thirty of my friends and, if I go home, I don’t have any friends.” Or, I don’t have a home, or a job. None of the situations are the same for everyone. But that comradeship and sense of purpose? All of those things come together.



Larry Harvey (left) and DA (right). Photo credit: unknown, 2018.

Those are very positive things. But I also think that, you know, anything too much can be considered negative. You can find its negative aspects. I think there are definitely things to work in: it can be an escape.

We had a joke. I think it was the co-leader of DPW at the time, Flynn. One day he showed up before us to give a speech. He was helping to run all DPW, but he had his eye on different things. So, he came and addressed the actual cleanup crew, and I was kind of a big deal. Like, “Oh my god! Flynn’s here!” Flynn is like, “Hey, gather round, everyone, I want to talk to you.”

He’s giving his speech, and he goes, “Alright, now if you happen to have a wallet on you, I want you to pull it out. Pull out your wallet.”

People pull out their wallet. “I want you to pull out your ID.”

People pull out their ID. “I want you to pull it out and read the address.”

And people are like, well, alright, ok...

“I really was discovering a part of myself through that process. It actually brought out my responsible leadership side. I used to hide.”



DA doing Survey. Photo credit: unknown. 2018.



Photo credit: unknown, 2023.

“Now, after today, I want you to go there!!!”

And everyone just started laughing! It was a nice, funny reminder that we have to go home. Some people are like kicking and screaming that they don't want to go home. You know? But it's like, you can't stay. So, there is that sense of, you know, you gotta go! You gotta deal with life.

We've done Playa Restoration for all these years, and I can get to how we've grown and things like that. But I think we've done a really good job when it comes to framing the fact that there's a time to go home. You're gonna have to leave. There might be some other, smaller opportunities to stay, but you really have to hold your shit together. Because, out there, in that time period, sometimes [people]

just psychologically find they're at their end. It's like they spend too much here and they're still from life or something like that. Sometimes there's just so many people, and they're just processing things, and they cry that it's over.

It's really important to remind people that can happen in life, in general. It's not just this thing that happens

“I was picked by a gentleman by the name of Fix, who said, “I’m putting together a team of specialized cleanup workers and you’re on it.” I go, “Oh, wow, it’s like Special Forces.”

to us here. It can happen in life! It's important that people take care of themselves: not only physically, but mentally.

This is pretty funny: I remember when I realized that they were looking at me for leadership guidance. I didn't know what was happening. I was like, I'm not in charge, what are you talking about! People were coming to me for the answers, because I guess it sounded like I knew what I was talking about, even if I didn't. It was something that happened for me in cleanup and 'Leave No Trace.'

I want to be clear about this. I really was discovering a part of myself through that process. It actually brought out my responsible leadership side. I used to hide. I liked

to be hiding. I liked to be a badass, but in secret, you know? I liked to be able to do things and be part of the team. I was always a team player, and I was always trying to make the team look good and things like that. But, yeah, it was something that wasn't really brought to the surface until it was called out.

One of the leaders back then was Johnny Babylon. He was coming to me carrying a radio, and he also has his own radio. He goes, “DA, management wants you to have this.” This is maybe in 2002, 2003? Something like that. So, I'd only been in DPW for like two years. I said, “Oh, no, no, I don't want one of those!” Like, no. I know what happens when you get those. You think you're important and you tell everybody what to do, and you're not actually doing any real work. [laughs] I was that kind of kid. I like digging in the dirt. I like the work work.

He says to me, “DA, listen. It has become obvious to us that you know what's going on. You know what's up. The crews listen to you, they're looking to you for guidance. We need to know what you know, and you need to share it with us. You need to accept that as a responsibility.”

I was like, “Ugh!” I felt seen and frightened, and heard, and foiled. Like, oh, my game is up now. [laughs] So, I'm like, “Fine.” I took the radio, but I just had that attitude of: “fine, but I'm not gonna like it, and I'm not going to use it”. A little defiant. So, I still had that part of me. Then I remember walking back to my camp, my tent, and I remember my friends looking at me, staring at this radio shell-shocked. They're like, “Oh my god! DA took a radio!” I was like, “Shut up.”

But that was just part of my growth. That was part of my evolution.

“[In 2006] I put together a concept of the red, yellow, green. That's how Playa Restoration releases the MOOP map now”

So, yes, I took to that radio and responsibility, and things changed. How the crew sees you changes. Sometimes they're looking, and it's not to take it personally: there's a responsibility, a power, a thing there. I was very conscious about that. I've watched it evolve over the next twenty-something years.

At that point I was managing a smaller crew in Playa Restoration—well, it was still called cleanup crew—called Special Forces. I started Special Forces. Well, I was picked. I was on the first team picked to be on Special Forces: I was a founding member. I was picked by a gentleman by the name of Fix, who



Photo credit: unknown, 2020.

“Playa Restoration’s ultimate goal is to make sure that we pass the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) site inspection, post event, that is conducted by the BLM, who’s land the Black Rock Desert falls on.”

So that was in 2006. But since I joined, we were all trying to figure out how to map and track. So, we all had different maps, and we’d just write “woodchips” or we’d right a “cigarette.” We’d write what we thought it was, but we didn’t have the system that is presented which became known as the MOOP Map. We’re all trying to figure it out.

We also used to write messages on cones. Like, on the orange traffic cones. So, I’d leave it there and then write “woodchips” or “glass” and leave it out. So, people would come across it and be like, “oh, glass.” So, there were ways to communicate with each other, but we really wanted to figure out a way to communicate with the community—and not for them to take it personally. I had to be very careful about this. This is a responsibility.

So, the MOOP Map itself is also responsibility for information. I am sharing our progress. Playa Restoration’s progress was green on this block, but yellow for this block, and red on this block. It means that in green they were moving faster, in yellow they were stop and go, and in red they were just stopped. That’s all I’m saying, however, there is data that can go with that. It’s there so that we can say because we were slow, we were mooping. So now I can look at the MOOP Map and see exactly the kind of day we had.

There are levels of degrees with which we are measuring our perspective, and that’s all that is. Then I remember when we were unveiling it: you know, red, you’re not bad people. This isn’t about shame. None of this is about shame, and I don’t think shame is sustainable. I don’t think it’s a very positive thing. I think we can teach, and we can nurture, and we can enculturate, and we can cheerlead. That’s all you need, and every year we’ve been doing better. We always do better, including in 2019,



“I studied graphic design and illustration. So, I’ve actually done the theme art for Burning Man. [...] They’re all hidden in my studio right now. I’ve done [Coyote’s book] too.”

when the BLM made the test harder. We had our greenest MOOP Map ever, and we had our best score on the Bureau of Land Management post-site inspection. So, we met that challenge.

All of a sudden, after my second year of managing Playa Restoration, Burning Man doubled my budget. This is when we really were able to start saying, “ok, here we go!” We had a system where you started as a volunteer, and then there were paid positions after that. But it was training, essentially. So [our ranks] became somewhere from 30-60 [people]. Then it went from 60 to 75. Then it went from there.

That’s when I was able to have two-line sweeps. We used to just have one, if you can imagine one going all the way around. Sometimes we didn’t really cover everything. I mean, we could cover what we could,



Photo credit: unknown, 2017.

but it wasn’t expected that we cover every single square foot. We had to prioritize. Then when we started growing, I was like, oh, I’m going to have two-line sweeps running at the same time. That happened. So, all of a sudden, we’ve learned how to break Playa Restoration into a modular format.

Ok, each line has 30 people, and they have a bus, and there are fluffers. You know? Now x2. Like, this line has 30 people, and there’s a bus, and there’s fluffers, and there’s rangers and medics. Then my budget increased again, and I was able to do three lines! So, now we’re up to four. We run four lines at the same time. That’s roughly about 150 [people] and there’s 25 on Special Forces now. So, 175, roughly. We’re able to cover so much more at the same time. It’s been pretty amazing to watch it grow so quickly.

Playa Restoration’s ultimate goal is to make sure that we pass the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) site inspection, post event, that is conducted by the BLM, who’s land the Black Rock Desert falls on. So, they manage the land. They’re essentially the landlords. [laughs] We are given a test by them in which we have to leave no more than one square foot of debris per acre on average. We’re given this test of about 120 GPS points throughout Black Rock City.

Those points are given a test where we put a spike in the ground and tie off a rope that’s about 40 feet long. Then we pick up all the MOOP within that rope that we can find. Sometimes it’s all really tiny and that’s it. You put all that MOOP into a bag, you mark that bag, and then you give it to the BLM. So that’s how that test is. Essentially, it’s the amount of MOOP that’s allowed: it’s a smaller version of the one square foot per acre, each test area. If there’s more MOOP bigger than the size of



“I don’t have a partner. I don’t have children. This became my life and will be the thing I am judged on. nurturing this culture so it can keep going without me needing to be there.”

my hand, that means that test could fail in that one area. That’s how little, that’s how tiny! So, even if it was like a wad of tissue paper. [...] That means we would fail that spot.

I studied graphic design and illustration. So, I’ve actually done the theme art for Burning Man. [...] They’re all hidden in my studio right now. I’ve done [Coyote’s book] too. I’ve done the theme for several years with Larry Harvey. I worked with him on the theme, and he liked the way I represented the theme. This year too! The Great Unknown? I also did that. I’ve never done a ticket: they’ve always been bigger stuff like a poster, but I’ve done a lot. Actually, my work was in the Smithsonian exhibit.

My posters were there, and that’s actually the last time I saw Larry Harvey. We were standing in front of my poster because it was kind of a collaboration. We took a picture and

that was the last time I saw him. He passed away like a week later—well, he had a stroke a week or so later. But I was honored to have those moments.

My first illustration teacher—when she was drawing, and we were watching her draw—would call every line she made “information.” Information. I am giving you information! When you are looking at an image, you are being given information of what is there, what might be there, and what isn’t there. Each line expresses that and translates that. You can put every thread and every leaf, or you can imply that and give it feeling. I think that word, “information,” still resonates with me.

I created the Talent Show! I have a crafty mastermind-ness of things where I’m like, “You know what needs to happen? A Talent show.” That was probably ’06. I became the full manager and then I was really trying to meet the goal of passing the BLM site inspection but, also, I’m working with the culture. Working with the culture, I’m a burner! I’m a burner, right? So, it’s not like I’m going, “Oh, I got hired to make sure we pass inspection.”

It’s like, “I feel like I have responsibility to nurture this culture and grow.” I want this to live beyond me. So, this becomes my legacy. This became my life. I don’t have a partner. I don’t have children. This became my life and will be the thing I am judged on. So, ultimately, I want to keep nurturing this culture so it can keep going without me needing to be there.

I think it was Sleep Dep who was the first host. But I told Sleep Dep, and was like, “Hey, we’re putting on a Talent show, and I want you to host it.” He goes, “ok,” because he was DJing. It was small, it was in the front

“I created the Talent Show! I have a crafty mastermind-ness of things where I’m like, ‘You know what needs to happen? A Talent show.’ That was probably ’06.”

room. It took on a life of its own and gave expression. I wanted a show where it could be like, “we’re not just this”. Same with DPW. So, usually you’re doing this one thing: you’re hammering and you’re wearing black. People think that you’re just this one way. But we’re like, no, we’re so many things. You [just need to] give people an opportunity. Like, I didn’t know she could sing. I didn’t know he could dance. I didn’t know!

We only have the two weekends. There’s two weeks of tear-down when we’re still on the Playa. Then there’s two weeks of Playa Restoration. That’s when we’re back in Gerlach. It seems long. The expression is one week after the event, but we break it up into two weeks. We move off the

Playa in one week, and then that next week we’re tearing down the fence. Then we have three days off. Then we come back for Playa Restoration. So, it’s fast! It feels long because it’s so dense.

But essentially, I wanted [the Talent Show] to be towards the end because I it was kind of a form of a finale. Like this is our year-end bash. Even though the stretch ends on Tuesday, we’re not going to have it on Tuesday, we’re going to have it on Saturday night! But then it also evolved into this being the night that the bar stays open all night. Again, this is like working with the culture. I’m working with the bar staff, and that’s technically another department, but we’re working together.

There’ d be a night where they’d want to keep it open and stuff. I was just like, well, let’s just make it a thing! Let’s keep it open! So, it kinda just evolved into ‘Talent-Show-goes-into-Shit-Show-Sunday.’

“It kinda just evolved into ‘Talent-Show-goes-into-Shit-Show-Sunday.’ The bar never closes that night and everybody is just like: Oh my god!”

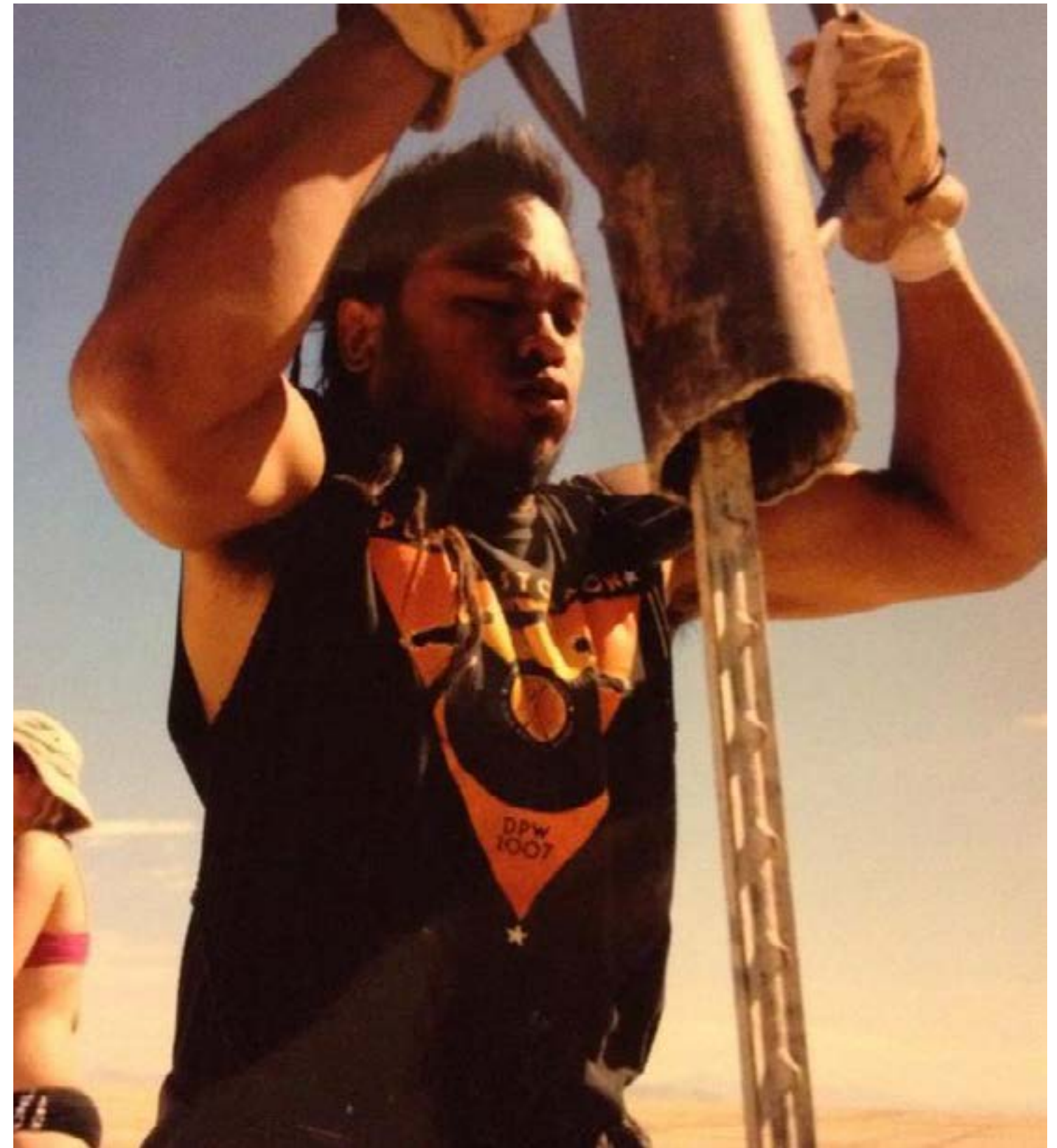


Photo credit: unknown, 2007.

The bar never closes that night, and everybody is just like, “Oh my god!” But you gotta get that out. You gotta get that out. Then you’re just like, “Ok, here we go, I have two more days at work and then I go back out into the world.” I go back to my address, and my ID [laughs] and I’ll

go there. Or I’ll keep going.

Some kids will meet at Playa Restoration, and then they’ll go travelling together. They’ll go do other things. Whatever the hell it is. You see them on Facebook and it’s like, “Oh, they’re in this part of the

world now, or this part of the world now.” You get the sense that the world is also still big, even though I could also just come back home.