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# How Mustache Mondays Built an Inclusive Queer Nightlife Scene and Influenced the Arts in L.A.

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LGBTQ+ Pride



Participants of Musache Mondays. The weekly event's performances and general revelry spanned from 2007 to around 2018 and came to define edgy queer nightlife in Los Angeles during its decade-long run. | Courtesy of Dorian Wood

"It was the best party in L.A. hands down."

For nearly ten years, Mustache Mondays reigned as the queer place to be in Los Angeles. The popular weekly downtown club night, replete with signature fiers, graphics, DJs, performances and general revelry spanned from 2007 to around 2018.

But, it was not just any party.

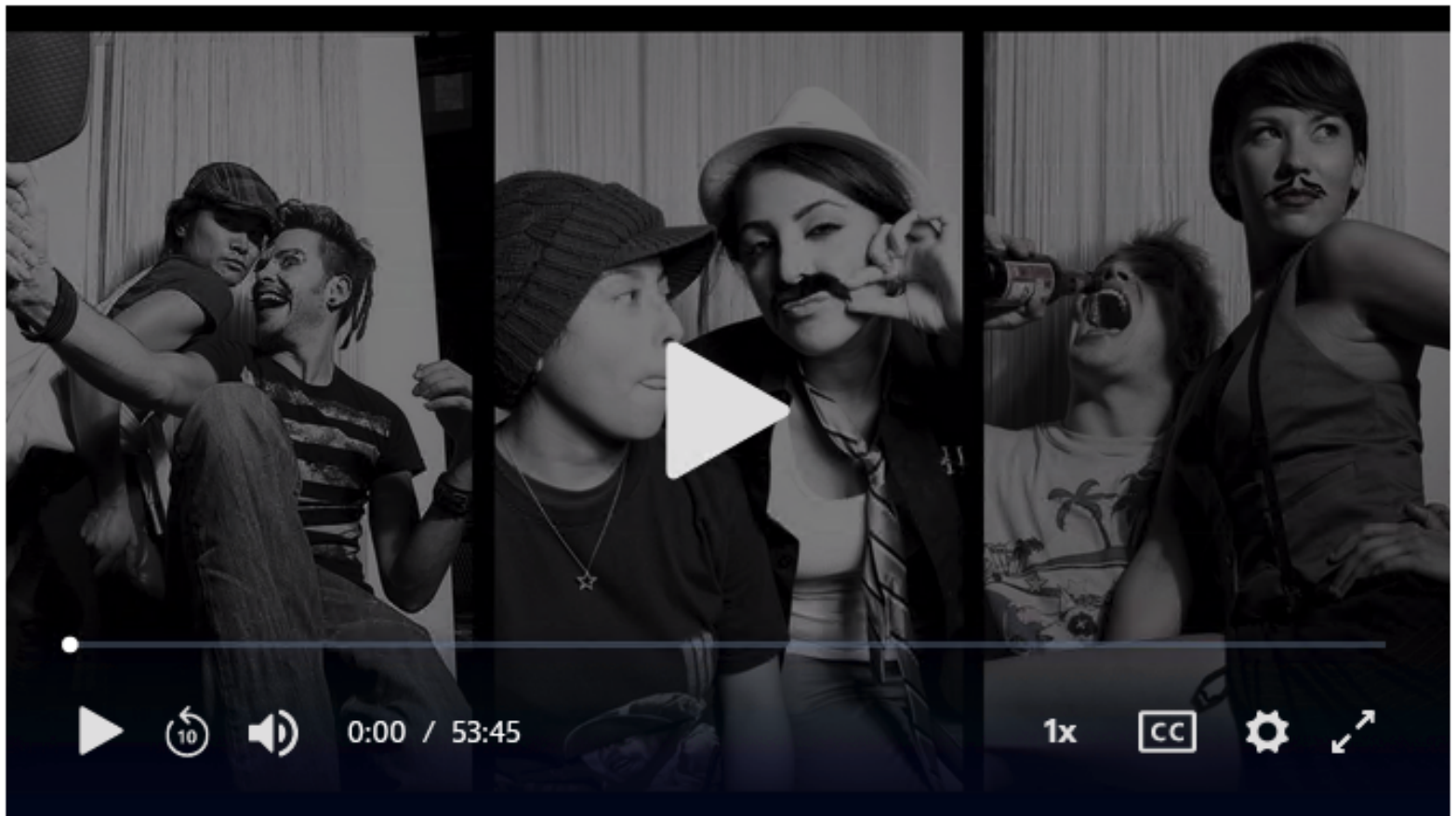
A new KCET documentary explores the L.A. queer cultural phenomenon, Mustache Mondays, and its artistic reach beyond the pulsing lights, music, dancing and creative expressions of queer joy.

Mustache Mondays was started by four friends and roommates — artists, DJs, promoters, curators, creatives — who wanted a queer nightlife experience that reflected their eclectic tastes and DIY ethic. The late Ignacio "Nacho" Nava, Jr., Mustache Mondays' main promoter, along with DJ Josh Peace, Danny Gonzales and Dino Dinco put their collective energies together to launch the party that came to define edgy queer nightlife in Los Angeles during its decade-long run.



Three of the four founders of Mustache Mondays: Danny Gonzales, Ignacio "Nacho" Nava and DJ Josh Peace. | Josh Peace

Mustache Mondays traveled from bar to club to venue around downtown. Anywhere it went, Mustache attracted a steady stream of partygoers from around L.A. and mainly from the working-class communities of color closest to downtown. The party opened the door to performance and exhibition outside of the stratified 'art world' spaces for such high-profile Los Angeles artists as Gabriela Ruiz, rafa esparza, Sebastian Hernandez, San Cha and Maluca, Franc Fernandez, Ryan Heffington and so many other cultural producers. The cultural impact of Mustache Mondays, and the work of artists who cut their teeth at the weekly party, continues to reverberate through the worlds of fashion, photography, performance art, visual art, music and choreography in Los Angeles and beyond. In doing so, Mustache Mondays mapped an alternative circuit of queer nightlife and counter-WeHo culture that was firmly rooted in community, collectivity and care long after the last dance.



An LGBTQ nightclub event in L.A. called "Mustache Mondays" was an incubator for today's exciting artists. Watch the episode on "Artbound."

## Making Mustache Mondays

By most accounts, Mustache Mondays represented the co-founders' collective vision of what they wanted a queer space to look, feel and sound like in Los Angeles.

Music, specifically the kind they liked, was first on DJ Josh Peace's mind. "We wanted something of our own, to play the music we wanted to play," says the co-founder in the documentary.

In a [Red Bull Music Academy](#) article about the "iconoclastic party," DJ Peace explained, "We were tapping into the newer indie underground and hip-hop stuff." He kept people dancing all night with "genre-blending" music that featured "electro, bassier world vibe elements" compared to the usual 'gay bar' fare of top 40 mixes, rock and roll, alternative or "Latin night" offerings.





DJ Josh Peace at the turntables. | La Madre is Watching

Mustache regular Marcus Anthony Brock remembers dancing on the checkered dance floor at Charlie O's when the Monday night party met at the bar inside downtown's Alexandria Hotel. "There was no other queer club dropping such eclectic sounds, all in one night in such a way — house, hip hop, soul, cumbia, original remixes," Brock writes in a recent essay remembering Nacho. "The whole scene was a vision."

"Mustache was the group's take on queer nightlife done right, operating in opposition to the stuffy and predominately white, gay and male venues of Hollywood and Wes Hollywood," writes Joseph Daniel Valencia in "Queer Nightlife Networks and the Art of Rafa Esparza, Sebastian Hernandez, and Gabriela Ruiz," his master's thesis on the subject, which was fueled by his work with co-curator Paulina Lara on the exhibition, **"Liberate the Bar! Queer Nightlife, Activism and Spacemaking."** The 2019 exhibit was held at the ONE Gallery in West Hollywood. It shed the light on the integral connection of nightlife, activism and artistic expression historically (as in the Stonewall Riots and The Black Cat in Silver Lake), as well as in a Los Angeles and contemporary art setting (which wove in Lara's expertise and lived experience of the queer nightlife scene through her close connection with Nava and Mustache Mondays). As Raquel Gutiérrez writes in **Places Journal**, "[The exhibition] was in part an homage to Nava. But the exhibition was also an important site of knowledge production concerning queer Latina/o/x imprints on the L.A. built environment over recent decades."



The late "Nacho" Nava, Jr., Musache Mondays' main promoter, founded Musache Mondays alongside friends DJ Josh Peace, Danny Gonzalez and Dino Dinco. | Courtesy of La Madre is Watching

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**“Mustache Mondays drew such a kaleidoscopic network of people. It was a place for experimentation and DIY world-making that continues.”**

Joseph Daniel Valencia

"Mustache Mondays drew such a kaleidoscopic network of people," Valencia told KCET. "It was a place for experimentation and DIY world-making that continues."

Dino Dinco, a Mustache co-founder, affirmed their commitment to new and emerging artists. "We were not interested in commercial work, in what has been seen before."

As Valencia notes in his thesis, Mustache Mondays became an incubator space for contemporary art practices beyond the white walls of a gallery.

rafa esparza, an award-winning multidisciplinary artist, appreciated Mustache as a space that invited and sustained such a wide range of creativity and artistic exploration. "Mustache incorporated all of these different talents into the making of a queer nightclub," he said.



A promotional poster for a Dec. 24, 2012 birthday bash celebrating Nacho. Rye Rye and DJ Total Freedom were among the several live performers that evening. | Courtesy of Brian Skiff



The collaborative atmosphere of Mustache Mondays is something that continues to be seen in the work of esparza. Rather than reproduce the idea of a lone genius artist working in frenzied confinement only to 'show' their work in a stifling white-cube gallery environment, esparza's 2018 exhibition at the Insitute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, instead turned the gallery into a showroom, workroom and studio space.

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At "rafa esparza: de la Calle," local artists and queer nightlife personalities like Mexican fashion designer Victor Barragán, noé olivas (future co-founder of Crenshaw Dairy Mart) and Gabriela Ruiz were invited to work on site. Their fashion garments were then worn by the artists and proudly sashayed through the streets of Santee Alley to the enjoyment, not of an art audience, but of the vendors and shoppers in the downtown Los Angeles area. This past year, esparza also helped organize 80 artists to lend their voice in support of immigrant rights, not through in-gallery exhibitions, but in very public aerial interventions.

As Dinco, DJ Peace, Danny Gonzales and other denizens in the documentary tesify, Mustache Mondays was their weekly "church," and promoter Nacho Nava, their revered "patron saint," was "the draw."

When Nava passed away in January 2019, the queer art and nightlife scene in Los Angeles lost one of its most visionary architects. In many ways, the story of Mustache Mondays is the story of Nava and his drive to create what esparza described as a "space of joy that was so carefully curated for a queer community that maybe doesn't feel that they can have fun in West Hollywood."



Mustache Mondays gave participants a space of release but also an open ground for creative expression. | Dorian Wood

## Mapping New Queer Nightlife Circuits

West Hollywood continues to be experienced by many working-class queer people of color as an exclusionary scene that caters to what the late Salvadoran historian, Horacio N. Roque-Ramírez, **called** "the hegemonic gay subject: seemingly wealthy, white and male." People who lived closer to downtown or who did not necessarily want to go out to "WeHo," as the gay enclave is colloquially known, could go to Mustache as a welcoming, diverse alternative.

Mustache Mondays was a part of what Valencia called a "topology of queer nightlife" that radiated from downtown and touched other bars and scenes in neighborhoods around L.A. "People who went to Mustache also went to these other places, and they were all different from each other," said Valencia.

Such bars constitute "subterranean social sites and cultural outlets" that "emerge in the conditions created by differences in geography, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class and gender," writes women's, gender and sexuality studies professor Stacy I. Macias.

In her essay about the Sugar Shack, a gay bar that operated for over twenty years in El Monte, Macias points out that bars like the Shack appealed to those "working class people of color whose queer — or outsider — satus" compel them to "search [for] affinities beyond... 'Gay L.A.,'" imagined by most as "WeHo."

Mustache Mondays created another kind of "Gay L.A.," centered in downtown and closer to these communities.



Participants of Mustache Mondays pose for a photo. | Courtesy of KIKI



Danny Gonzales, a photographer and one of the co-founders of Mustache Mondays, had a feeling since the beginning that their party would be special. As he explains in the documentary, Nacho and company sarded engaging artists and choreographer friends when they held Mustache at Charlie O's.

"We were excited and knew we had something after the first night," said Gonzales. "[We got] Miss Barbie Q on board as host, and that's when the night really sarded to take off."

Charlie O's was the launching pad for the Monday night party that would make its way around venues in downtown Los Angeles, eventually reaching Hollywood before returning to its downtown stomping grounds.

"What Nacho built, it could happen wherever he went," said Gonzales.

And wherever he and Mustache Mondays went, Nacho and company blazed a queer party circuit that included stops at Crash Mansion, the Lash, Civic Center Studios, and most memorably, La Cita.

## After the Party

**La Cita** figures prominently in the history of Mustache Mondays, which enjoyed a peak run at the popular bar next to Grand Central Market. Through it travels from venue to venue, Mustache Mondays secured a legacy that went beyond the club's walls and continues to reverberate throughout mainstream and subcultural art and performance worlds.

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"What Nacho had built couldn't be pinned to a building," said esparza, whose art was a fixture on Monday nights. "Mustache [was] a multidisciplinary queer platform that created a fun, safe space for people to gather once a week for nearly ten years. That in and of itself is bonkers."

"We could really make the case that the legacy of Mustache Mondays lives on through so many people, artist," Valencia told KCET. "It traversed all kinds of terrain — art, fashion, photography. Nacho collaborated with all kinds of performers and cultural practitioners that Mustache felt like an alternative space of the art world."



The nightlife scene cultivated by Musache Mondays is what gave artis Gabriela Ruiz a crucial entry into performance art and opportunities to work within a like-minded community. | Courtesy of Gabriela Ruiz

It was the nightlife scene, for example, that gave Gabriela Ruiz a crucial entry into performance art and opportunities to work within a like-minded community. Ruiz described Mustache Mondays to [KCET](https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/mustache-mondays-inclusive-nightlife-and-contemporary-art) this way, "You pay your ten or fifteen-dollar ticket to go hear music and dance all night. But then in the middle of it you have a great fucking performance artist who will just perform in the middle of the night. You don't have to go to a museum to experience this."

Ruiz staged many of her own performances with collaborators at these queer spaces. The "Escandalos Angeles" event held at Chico, a Montebello gay bar, for example, paid homage to performance artis Robert Legorretta, his "Cyclona" persona and the East L.A. barrios that inspired it, while critiquing the growing antipathy to Mexican and Central American immigrants. At Club Scum, another monthly queer event, Ruiz painted her body blue, applied red lace to her body and danced to the Mexican pop song, "Chica Embarazada (Pregnant Girl)."

Before his death, Nava also promoted shows for up-and-coming artists like Guadalupe Rosales, whose **"Veteranas and Rucas"** collection of Chicano party photographs from the 1990s, has been exhibited at the **Vincent Price Museum of Art** and the **UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center**.

## An Ethos of Care and Community

His ongoing support of artists like Rosales and the broader context of Mustache Mondays that made this network accessible to cultural makers (instead of "artists and performers") across and beyond genres remains one of Nava's, and the party's, greatest legacies.

As Valencia observed, "the ethos of care and support, of community, that's Nacho's main legacy. It extended well beyond the party. He opened the door for people's creativity, artistry, and in a way that supported artists, and they support each other in ways we don't see. That doesn't stop because the party's over."

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Joseph Daniel Valencia

The history of the gay/lesbian/queer bar as launching pad for social liberation movements also took center stage in **"Liberate the Bar! Queer Nightlife, Activism and Spacemaking,"** co-curated by Lara and Valencia.





Raquel Gutiérrez holds the mic while at a Mustache Mondays event. | Courtesy of Bradford Nordeen

"We find these histories now and stories about why we should save these places on their GoFundMe pages when clubs are on the brink of closure," he said. "There's a recognition of these spaces as part of our subcultural communities and an awareness of wanting to preserve them."

For these reasons, the post-pandemic urgency to save beloved gay establishments is especially acute. The outpouring of

community support to **save the New Jalisco Bar**, an effort both artist Gabriela Ruiz and curator Paulina Lara were also heavily involved in, demonstrates the importance of these sites of queer nightlife as gathering places for marginalized groups and significant holders of their cultural memory — also part of Mustache's lasting impact beyond the party, and a testimony to the power of Mustache Mondays and other queer nightlife events beyond 'the club.'

*Editor's note: The article was updated to reflect the correct name of Mustache Mondays co-founder, Danny Gonzales, and to further clarify Mustache Mondays' relationship to other queer spaces.*