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Despite concerns, party buses rock on

On these bus lines, the party starts and ends on board

By **David Filipov and Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 29, 2011

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MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Bride-to-be Dawn Macdonald danced with friend Keith Nicholson during her Jack and Jill party aboard Boston Super tour's Bustonian last month.

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Thumping with nonstop 1980s techno pop, the garish former school bus rolled through Chinatown, a riot of New Wave pink, Pac-Man yellow, and blue disco lights that pulsated to the incessant beat. Two men the size of linebackers swung from a gleaming stripper pole, surrounded by 30 or so fellow carousers gyrating to the music and cheering them on. Beer flowed. Jell-O shots quivered.

It was not yet 9 p.m. The bachelor/bachelorette party of Brian Lordan and Dawn Macdonald was just getting started.

Keeping an eye on this rolling revelry from his rear view mirror was Chad White, 39, Air Force veteran, firefighter, and on this recent Saturday night, driver of the '80s-themed bus belonging to The Bustonian, one of several Boston companies that rent out vehicles for on-board bacchanalia.

Such buses have become a popular means of pub crawling without walking and partying without driving. But these

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moveable feasts have also drawn concern from law enforcement and neighborhood leaders, who see the buses as public nuisances that cannot be policed the way bars or cars are.

Party buses are regulated under the same laws as stretch limos or Greyhound buses, meaning that the state's open container law does not apply to passengers carousing on board the vehicles.

The problem was highlighted by the recent arrest of an Allston man on charges of urinating out the window of a party bus on busy Newbury Street at 9 a.m. on a Tuesday.

Two Boston police detectives happened to see the act and boarded the vehicle, where they found "about 15 young males very intoxicated with beer cans all over the bus," according to a police report.

The detectives did not detain the driver of the bus nor fine the company, which was not named in the report. The other morning merrymakers were allowed to ride on.

Superintendent William B. Evans, chief of the Patrol Division of the Boston Police Department, said he has been worried for some time about the buses, which have proliferated in the city over the past decade.

"We want to encourage designated drivers," Evans said, but "it bothers me that we have this floating barroom going down the street."

Evans said that police stop buses when they see obvious infractions. This happened last October, when a vehicle was cited for blocking traffic and blaring loud music in Allston. Police found that the bus was carrying 90 passengers, three times capacity; that some riders were underage; and that the bus did not have a permit for its flashing emergency vehicle lights.

But there is no way for police to regulate what happens on a bus, unless, as in the Allston case, they have reason to pull it over.

The state Department of Public Utilities oversees party buses as it does other "for hire" passenger carriers

that transport at least eight passengers, Catherine Williams, a department spokeswoman, wrote in e-mail.

“There are no regulations specific to passenger behavior” on the party buses, she wrote.

Nor is there a precise count of how many party buses tool around the Bay State, because the department does not distinguish them from other carriers.

Derek Fredrickson is owner of Andover Coach LLC, which rents out four buses for proms, birthdays, bachelor and bachelorette parties, graduations, sporting events, casino trips, and nights out on the town. He estimates that there are around 20 companies in the Boston area offering similar services.

The lack of oversight aimed at these carriers of mobile merriment presents a dilemma to neighborhood leaders.

Meg Mainzer-Cohen, who heads the Back Bay Association, said bar and restaurant owners welcome the business the buses bring when they stop and their patrons pile into local bars. But they do not always appreciate the bulky buses idling and blocking traffic in the neighborhood’s narrow streets, particularly in the wee hours and especially because the neighborhood has no control over the vehicles.

“We license every restaurant, every pub, every hotel,” she said. “I’d be shocked if we let people just party up a storm without someone in charge.”

On the *Bostonian* the night of the Lordan-Macdonald prenuptial festivities, the person in charge was White, the driver.

His job was to make sure his passengers had fun, legally, as he ferried the celebrants from the couple’s Revere home to Boston and back, visiting watering holes along the way, a challenging combination of roles, as chauffeur, emcee, chaperone, and security guard.

In two years working for *The Bostonian*, White has overseen proms and 13-year-old birthday parties, as well as pell-mell blowouts where entire busloads did *The Worm* down the aisle and tried to climb out the escape hatch while the bus was moving.

These prewedding parties were older, mostly in their 30s and 40s, and White established authority quickly, moments after he navigated the bus into the narrow street where the passengers waited.

“Don’t do anything that would get you thrown out of a bar,” White shouted once the merrymakers had boarded the bus and shown IDs. He added, “Don’t stick anything out the window.”

He also cautioned the men in the party - some of whom weighed well over 200 pounds - not to swing on the pole (They did anyway.)

The pole is the centerpiece of a floor where the front-facing rows of seats have been replaced by a wraparound bench.

Not that the partiers sat: From the moment White finished his talk and “Thriller” blared through the loudspeakers, the bus rocked and rolled as the booze flowed.

The rental cost \$200 an hour for the six-hour party, White said, and the crowd got its money’s worth.

“As soon as I saw this bus, I was sold on it,” said Macdonald, a letter carrier like her husband-to-be (they married Oct. 1; she is now Dawn Lordan) “This was the only way for all of us to get together and no one had to drive. That’s my main thing, safety.”

The party stopped at a couple of bars where bands performed. The passengers entered the bars without paying a cover charge, part of a mutually beneficial deal the Bostonian has with clubs and pubs.

White’s duties turned to ensuring that his patrons got off the bus, into the bar, and back. He intercepted a passenger who had carried a Jell-O shot off the bus. He fended off curious passersby who thought the glowing bus was an open party. He pulled his bus away from a curb when a state trooper gestured from his cruiser for him to move the vehicle off a main road.

“For the most part, the police like us,” White said. “We’ve got 32 people who won’t be on the road. It’s a safe way to party.”

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