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They chant, they dance, they do downward dog. No drugs or drink allowed. These kids are high on life

By Suzanne Smalley
NEWSWEEK



Katie Murray for Newsweek

July 7 issue — Kim Schmidt glistens with sweat as she dances, trancelike, to the repetitive beat coming from industrial-size speakers in the corner. It's two hours past midnight in a loft in New York City's Chelsea district, and more than a hundred blissed-out twenty somethings spin with her in the half light. Down a dark hall, in the "chill out" room, others sit—eyes closed, hands clasped—looking blank. What are these people on?

NOTHING, IT TURNS out. Or rather, Schmidt and her friends are high on "New Age raves," an underground movement that blends the healthiest elements of raves—electronic music and dance marathons—with yoga, meditation and other spiritual rites. Drugs and alcohol are strictly forbidden. All the people at this event, sponsored by a group called [Body Temple](#), are looking for a Saturday-night party where they can lose themselves without taking anything more potent than a shot of blue-algae juice. Some are urban yoga addicts looking for new ways to get a fix. Others, like Schmidt, are refugees from the rave scene who have hit bottom and climbed back up. More than a decade after raves started in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, club goers have had enough of overdoses and hangovers. "I was a club kid who used to try to get the high with ecstasy," says Schmidt, 27, her ponytail bouncing. "Now, I get it naturally. I like being around people who are celebrating in a healthy way. And I love to dance."

Promoters are launching holistic raves all over the country, from Oregon to Chicago to Los Angeles. In San Francisco, there's a New Age rave almost every weekend. Parties are held anywhere from yoga centers to nightclubs, and people drive hundreds of miles to attend them. Once there, they dance as if their lives depended on it, and that's just the point, says Lynn Schofield Clark. After years of grim news, from Columbine to September 11 to the Iraq war, young people need new ways to celebrate. "The idea of experiencing life and a sense of community in a way that is not risking their lives is pretty appealing," says Schofield Clark, author of "From Angels to Aliens," a book about spirituality and youth. Dr. Dean Ornish, an expert on the health benefits of yoga and meditation, would put it another way. "It's a more healthful way [than drugs] to open up into the altered states of awareness which dance and music can bring you to."



Clockwise from left: Bill McLaughlin, Parashakti, Mark Sklawer, Alok, Aaron Pichinson

In Los Angeles, a group called Ambient Groove Temple throws all-night parties once a month: deejays spin the hard-driving electronic music you would expect to find in a nightclub. Evenings

begin with yoga and meditation sessions that last up to three hours. Then, participants listen to lectures on Eastern philosophy and how to save the environment before roaming through three rooms where they can sample a smorgasbord of raw food and herbal drinks. Massage therapists offering Thai-and shiatsu-style rubs are on call to loosen dancers' muscles before they hit the floor.

The first party was in San Francisco about three years ago, but elsewhere the trend has taken off only within the past year, and already it has moved beyond the coasts. In Chicago a crew called TranceZenDance Tribe throws similar events, also drug-and alcohol-free. After a guided meditation focused on what organizer Travis Robb calls "linking consciousness with everyone on the planet," and a sound-healing session (in which a musician on an Aboriginal instrument called a didgeridoo circles the room, playing at everyone's feet), TranceZenDance deejays crank up the music. Images of the Taj Mahal and the Pyramids, and geometric shapes flash on a wall-size screen.

Organizers range from small-time yoga-shop owners to established nightclub impresarios. Later this year, Robert Wootton, who managed the popular Irish band Hothouse Flowers for six years, will launch a club called Spirit in New York City. Spirit will occupy the same building that used to house Twilo, perhaps the world's most famous electronica and ecstasy warehouse until it was shuttered two years ago after repeated drug busts. The new club will serve alcohol, but the drug policy will be so tough that Wootton has already spent time with New York police planning security modeled after the club he now runs in Dublin. "If we catch you consuming or selling drugs, we don't just eject you, we call the police and arrest you on the spot."

Like its Irish cousin, Spirit will feature three floors—Mind, Body and Soul—and every week deejays and performers will stage a floor show based on the creation myth. "We're taking over darkness with light," says Wootton, alluding to a time when Twilo was so plagued by overdoses that management rented ambulances to sit outside, waiting for casualties. "I've watched where the rave culture went wrong," he says. "We're trying to bring it back to its pure state."

Wootton's focus on ancient rituals would make Body Temple's acolytes feel right at home. Marketed as a "tantric circus" that "creates an environment where the tribal and the mythic coexist on the cutting edge," the New York event regularly features what may be the ultimate collision of worlds: the shamanistic trance-dance ceremony. A 28-year-old "trance-dance facilitator" named Parashakti (whose bio notes that she is "descended from a long line of Jerusalem healers") leads a rite during which she encourages everyone to find his inner "power animals." The crowd listens raptly, eyes closed and inhaling billowing clouds of incense, while repeating her chants. After the ceremony, partygoers don blindfolds to heighten their sensory perceptions while they bust a move. Parashakti surveys her domain proudly, the diamond-encrusted bindi between her eyes flashing. Beatific kids are kicking it and the organizers are counting their profits. Just saying no to drugs never looked so cool.

Newsweek July 7 issue 2003