

Our Love Is Loud

A growing number of Christian teens and 20-somethings are attending late-night dance parties—to worship the Lord and introduce their friends to Jesus.

The pulsating techno music builds to a deafening crescendo as space-age-sounding zaps punctuate the heavy bass and drum beat. Red and green laser lights etch twisting torsos against blackened walls as colored glow sticks slice through manufactured fog.

More than 150 teens and young adults crowd onto the spring-loaded wooden dance floor of the Olympian Ballroom in Reading, Pennsylvania, for tonight's event. Most who have come admit they plan to get high—not on alcohol, drugs or sex—but on God.

"Tonight's event is all about worship," says Jeff Stoltzfus, resident DJ and founder of Club Worship. "Dance is one way we can express our worship with a little more energy and passion." Many regulars of the monthly event agree.

"Club Worship has an awesome, free atmosphere where kids can totally praise the Lord and express themselves in a way they are comfortable," explains Lyn Laudenslager, 23, who has been collecting the \$6-a-head tickets since the club opened in April 2000.

"I've discovered a totally whole new way to worship God," says Kristen Herr, 19, a member of the youth group from Zion Mennonite Church. "It's amazing how the music can be so loud and yet I can hear God so clearly."

"Are you ready to dance?" screams Jon Carlson, 18, tonight's

emcee and worship leader. "Get ready to celebrate! Get ready to praise the Lord because He deserves it! Praise God in this place! Testify to His goodness tonight!"

The beat picks up again as the DJ spins a slammin' progressive house tune peppered with Christian lyrics.

"It's hard to explain to an outsider how you can worship to music like this," admits Debra Hoster, 49, the parent of a teen and part of the oversight team for Club Worship. "The lights, the darkened room and the music absorb you, cutting out the distractions of the world so you can open up and focus on God."

Meanwhile, some 700 miles south of Pennsylvania, in a narrow alley banked by a graffiti wall, a DJ mixes dance music under a star-studded sky. Inside the Murray Hill Theater, a Christian venue in Jacksonville, Florida, three other DJs prepare for tonight's four-hour, nonstop rave and dance event. Two hundred teens, ages 14-18, have come to dance to cutting-edge house, trance and jungle music, while light patterns of "gobos" and "moonflowers" wash the room in a bright array of color.

Fusion, which celebrated its third anniversary in December, is now the longest running techno music event—Christian or non-Christian—in the Jacksonville area. "We're known for throwing some of the best parties in the city," says Jamey Wright, the visionary behind Fusion.

Club owner Tony Nasrallah admits that when he was approached seven years ago about holding a Christian dance and rave event at Murray Hill, his initial reaction was negative. But when

Wright convinced him to try a couple events, he changed his mind. "Murray Hill has been a venue for Christian concerts since 1995, but what I discovered was that kids would just come and go at those events," Nasrallah says. "At our dance events, the kids would come and hang out, which gave us an opportunity for one-on-one friendship evangelism."

DJ Bill Sikes, 24, says the majority of kids who attend the monthly Fusion event are not Christians. "We don't preach long sermons from the mike," Sikes says, "but we do share our testimonies when appropriate." Everyone is invited to attend a Tuesday night Bible study in the café next door, and the DJs often pass out free dance music CDs that contain the gospel message.

High on Jesus

Club Worship and Fusion are just two of a growing number of Christian dance and rave events popping up across the country. They combine worship, evangelism and a safe, drug-free atmosphere where young people can hang out and enjoy their passion for dance music.

This growing phenomenon follows on the heels of the underground secular rave culture of the 1990s that has been targeted by the U.S. Congress for its widespread use of club drugs such as ecstasy. Held in warehouses and fields, these all-night dance parties spawned a new generation of teens and college students chanting a mantra of PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect).

In his book *Rave Culture: An Insider's Overview*, secular author Jimi Fritz notes that there are probably more ravers

today than there were hippies in the 1960s. He points out that this “life-changing ritualistic, cultural phenomenon is as powerful as any spiritual practice from the past or present.” In fact, many young people who have had no previous interest in religion start to develop an interest in spirituality after attending a few raves.

DJ Scott Blackwell has participated in enough secular raves to know this is true. “There is something about the repetitiveness and energy of the electronic dance music that causes people to drop barriers and let walls down,” Blackwell stresses. “It’s worship to them—they just don’t know who or what they are worshipping.”

“Music is such a powerful medium,” insists Carlson of Club Worship. “It goes beyond our mental capacity and connects with our spirit. It can be used for good, as in worship, or it can be used for evil.”

Kevin Coffman, who helped establish Shine Productions as a Christian alternative to the Detroit rave scene, knows firsthand the destructive power that music and drugs can have on youth. “A rave is like the devil’s version of church, and ecstasy is the devil’s version of the Holy Spirit,” Coffman explains.

Kevin and his wife, Shyla, were part of the Detroit rave scene in the mid-1990s. Both admit they were heavy drug users at the time. “My wife and I would get high every weekend on ‘E’ [ecstasy] and other drugs. We’d be coming down the morning after, shaking and tweaking, and Shyla would start talking to me about God’s love. She’d been raised in a Spirit-filled church, and she really believed what she was saying, but we were caught up in the devil’s substitute.”

Then in 1999, during a visit to Shyla's home church, the two committed their lives to God. "We totally turned our backs on our former lifestyle," Coffman told Charisma, "but Shyla kept having visions of us ministering to rave kids." When the youth pastor of their church approached her about doing a dance party, Shyla says she knew it was God's confirmation.

Shine Productions has held five rave events since it was founded in 2001. "We draw at least 80 percent to 90 percent straight rave kids to our events," Coffman says. "But we offer a different vibe—one that's pure and clean!"

A Place in God's Family

Insiders will tell you that one of the draws of the rave scene is the sense of belonging it provides. "Kids in the secular rave scene often turn to their fellow ravers to be their family," says Cindy Tucker, 26. "There's such a sense of loyalty and devotion that they would lay down their lives for each other."

Tucker began frequenting clubs in Cincinnati when she was 13. "I understand where a lot of these kids are coming from because I came from a broken home myself," Tucker admits. "These kids need to know someone is standing in their corner, cheering them on. They need to know someone loves them."

A year ago, Tucker, who is a junior high youth director at her church, founded The Palace Cincinnati, which co-hosts a monthly dance night and quarterly rave event at the Underground, an established Christian coffeehouse and concert venue. "We're very much an outreach event," Tucker stresses.

“The opportunity to get to know these kids and to show them Christ’s love in a very real and practical way is huge.”

Tucker says The Palace has had its share of criticism from the Christian community. “There aren’t many pastors who understand the concept of Christian dance music or dance clubs for Christians,” Tucker told Charisma. “I’ve been asked why on earth I would want to associate myself with something that has such a negative connotation. I tell them, ‘Jesus didn’t come for the well; He came for the sick!’”

The teens and young adults who attend Christian dance clubs and raves represent a wide spectrum of beliefs, lifestyles and backgrounds. Former secular raver Kairsie Miller, 18, says a friend invited her to Club Worship a little over a year ago. “I was a practicing Wiccan at the time, so I wasn’t happy with the Christian aspect,” she admits, “but I had nothing better to do, so I came. The people there were so friendly, so happy and joyful, and the music was beautiful and powerful.

“To this day I can’t really comprehend what happened to me—I had a mental and emotional experience all at the same time, and I became a Christian that night.”

Many, like Miller, who have life-changing experiences at these events, end up working as volunteers. Today Miller is part of the team that helps coordinate Club Worship’s dance events.

Bill Sikes is another who came to Murray Hill Theater in 1997 to complete 300 hours of community service. Finding himself in jail for grand theft, Sikes says, “I was hurting, desperate and so lost from all the failed attempts to make myself complete. I knew I needed God.” After his 300 service hours

were up, Sikes decided to stay on at Murray Hill as a volunteer. In addition to DJing, he now leads the Tuesday night Bible study in the café.

Others who come to the events are still looking for the truth. Sarah, 15, wears a white bandanna, several bracelets and a huge metal cross made from horseshoe nails. Although she calls herself a Christian, she readily admits that her religion has no influence on her day-to-day life.

She comes to Fusion every month with her gay, lesbian and bisexual friends because it's a good place to hang out. Her mom is a lesbian, but Sarah says she's just "bi-curious" at this point in her life. "My mom said I couldn't come here if they threw Bibles and preached at us," Sarah told Charisma. "But they don't do that here."

While Christian dance and rave clubs are beginning to flourish in and near larger cities across the United States, some fans have to settle for dance music via the radio or Internet.

Carey Jarvis is the founder and host of "The Dance Chapel," a Christian dance music radio show in the Lansing, Michigan, area. He estimates there are at least 100 radio shows that spin Christian dance music, with more popping up daily. "Techno music has become more mainstream," Jarvis says. "You see it in car commercials, video games and TV shows. It appeals to the youth, so why not use it as a vehicle to spread the gospel?"

is a Web community devoted to Christians who enjoy dance music. Launched in 1995 by Jamey Wright of Fusion, the site offers live music, a chat room and a comprehensive list of

dance and rave events.

In addition to established venues such as Club Worship, Fusion and The Palace, many Christian dance and rave events are scheduled sporadically whenever venues can be found and finances secured. Planet Jesus, a group of DJs in the mid-Atlantic region, has sponsored three events in Pennsylvania and Maryland since January 2002. Erik "Rapture Man" Sellin, 29, says they are getting geared up to provide more events in the area as an alternative to mainstream clubs and raves.

"God is raising up pockets of people all across the country who are not afraid to identify with the rave culture," says Tucker of The Palace. "I believe we do the world a great injustice by being afraid of our culture. We must be willing to do whatever it takes to reach these kids for Christ."

Jumping in the House of God

Christian raves are redefining contemporary worship.

Christian DJs are becoming worship leaders for a generation who say they want to worship God outside the walls of the traditional church.

Jeff Stoltzfus of Club Worship says he was a worship leader in the more traditional sense for years, but began to realize he didn't need to be locked into a particular style of music for it to be worship. "DJ-led worship uses turntables and CDs instead of an organ or acoustic guitar," Stoltzfus points out. "But the worship leader still has to sense where the Holy

Spirit is leading and help the worshipers connect with God.”

When a drug-washed subculture of youth began turning to Christ through New Generation Missions, a church-planting organization in the United Kingdom, DJ and worship artist Andy Hunter says a new paradigm was needed to teach them about worship. “[These kids] had never set foot in a church before, and the old hymns were too great a leap culturally,” Hunter says. “To sing those would have been like asking them to speak another language.”

Because most were solidly into dance music, Hunter began to experiment with turntables to lead worship. The experiment was successful, and now Hunter says his goal is to take Jesus to the furthest reaches of the youth culture.

But for many Christians, electronic, DJ-led worship is pushing the edge. Parents and pastors alike wonder whether dance music can actually be used for God, given the fact it comes from the secular culture.

“I think it’s the same sort of thing the Christian rock scene went through when it first started,” says DJ Carey Jarvis of “The Dance Chapel.” “People were asking if there was really a place for Christian rock because of all the negative connotations surrounding rock music. Now Christian rock bands are commonplace.”

Jarvis says the church should learn from the past and not make the same mistake today. He believes that while Christian dance music and DJ-led worship is the new thing right now, five or 10 years down the road, no one will be upset with it anymore.

“There are plenty of music styles out there,” Jarvis says.
“Techno worship is just another way God is moving.”

Sandra K. Chambers visited raves in Pennsylvania and Florida to compile this report. She lives in northern Virginia.