Why I Felt Loved at Whirl-y-Gig, London's Longest-Running Club Night

Remembering the club that began in 1981 as a collaboration with the Association of Humanistic Psychology to encourage "anyone who enjoys dance as a means of self-expression".

OA By Oobah Arthur Paul Butler

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Can you imagine being stone-cold sober, taking a sharp turn off a road in central London, walking into a full club, tossing your top to the ground and telling a room full of people that you've met a handful of times that you love them? Not in the disingenuous way you might tell your flatmate you love them when they unexpectedly bring home a two-pack of Rolo yoghurts on a Sunday night, but in a manner of genuine warmth and magnetism. If you can, you've probably been to Whirl-y-Gig, the longest-running club night in London.

If you've never heard of the club, that's probably because that's the way they want it. Their website looks as if it's been designed on an Amiga. You can count the amount of interviews they've done in the past twenty years on one hand, and they're not expecting a *Time Out* piece to bring the Thursday night crowd anytime soon. They prefer to shut out the noise from the outside, operating on a culture of: if you stumble upon Whirl-y-Gig, you were supposed to.

Whirl-y-Gig is certainly an anomaly in British clubbing. It began in 1981 as a collaboration with the Association of Humanistic Psychology to encourage "anyone who enjoys dance as a means of self-expression". The organisers have always refused any venue security and instead opted for volunteers. As well as a bar, there's a stall for chai drinks and organic cakes. Until very recently, it was a totally all-ages event, which meant parents often went there with their kids, and pensionable ravers would dance with teenagers who showed up because it was one of the only places they could go. It's normally held at community spaces covered in cloths and lights so you feel like you're in Ravi Shankar's man cave. Unlike any other club in Britain, you really could show up on your own and have a good time. From the second you arrive, everyone welcomes you into the night.

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Here's a parable that best explains it. Look at this guy Jack, in the middle of the photo below, in the Lacoste polo shirt and uncomfortable facepaint looking like he went to Glastonbury with nothing but a condom and a bank card, thinking it would basically be like a bigger Tiger Tiger. His friend recommended Whirl-y-Gig to him, so he went along for the ride.

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Now look at him four years on, now with the red shirt and hippy harem pants on:

Jack suggests that that night alone inspired him to "change myself and become a better person. Whirly changed my life. I first went in 2012 at a stage in my life where I was depressed, lonely and very insecure. I was failing at uni and lived away from my family and friends. The people I have met at Whirly over the last four years have become integral parts of my life to the point where I can't imagine life without them. It has this quality that just brings people together, there's a mutual respect and a genuine sense of togetherness that I haven't felt anywhere else"

I ask a cavalcade of Whirl-y-Gig loyalists to describe their feelings about it and get much the same response. A man in his sixties describes how "Whirly changed [his] life, and continues to do so". One of their assistant lighting engineers was brought there from the age of two by her parents, who met there. Now seventeen, she thanks it for making her a more "open-minded, accepting person". A lady named Emma, who has been going for five years, told me she met her husband at a Whirl-y-Gig and was encouraged to start taking photos – she's now a freelance photographer and a few months pregnant.

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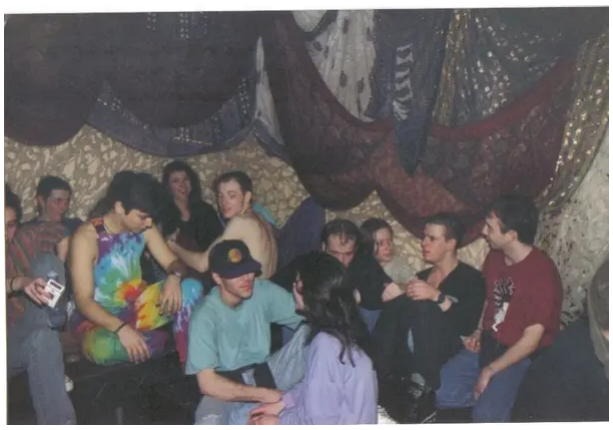
I can keep going, but I won't. Because you're might be wondering how I know all this. So here's the big reveal.

Yep that's me on the left; my uneven peroxide hair and dead eyes dressed in something from Noel's Deal or No Deal wardrobe. I look fucking weird, but I want to make my case: going to one of these nights is weird, from little kids whizzing between your legs to topless grey-haired folks painted fluorescently, tutting. There are lasers shooting off of walls like kaleidoscopes, while people lounge on beanbags having the kind of wince-worthy chats you'd hear in the furthest depths of a CND march. Vibrant globes explode from the ceiling above brigades of marching drums, their players vigorously dancing as part of some sort of psychoactive flurry. The whole thing feels like a fever dream come true but - as we can tell from the looks of Hulk Hogan in an unbuttoned tablecloth (see above) – if you lay in a haze of weed miasma underneath a giant parachute having your hair stroked by a complete stranger at end of the night, you've gone along for the ride. The intense atmosphere, the diverse clientele, that constant intimacy and openness – this is the way that Whirl-y-Gig has been since its inception in the 1980s.

Aloof co-organiser DJ Monkey Pilot (above) is a genuine progressive. He's a man who's probably responsible for Ali Farka Toure or Baaba Maal being heard by the white English middle classes for the first time in clubs. "The music was much more open than the house scene that was going on at the same time in the 1990s. They were bridging musical divides, but still aiming it at the dance floor," Tim Whelan, of experimentalists Transglobal Underground, long-time associates and performers at Whirl-y-Gig, tells me.

Every month, Monkey Pilot will, in his own words, "disappear for five or more long and lovely days every month to prepare for his eight-hour set". What he emerges with is as precarious and eclectic as you'd imagine: Celtic tonality, deep house movements, tribalistic fervour. The night has been through the trance movement, the rave scene, breakbeat, drum'n'bass, balkan beats, an in each case their alternative brand of psychedelia has evolved in conjunction with the alternative dance world, keeping the night bizarrely relevant.



This solid foundation and care has made Whirl-y-Gig a rite of passage for London-based artists and DJs like Dreadzone, Loop Guru and Banco De Gaia and even more mainstream artists like London Grammar used to be regular attendees. It has also become a kind of gateway for young clubbers, who historically were attracted to Whirl-y-Gig because of its liberal door policy and the fact that it was bring-your-own booze. Licensing laws finally killed that dream a few years ago, but Whirl-y-Gig has kept the teenagers and twenty-somethings. What other club are they going to go to that has a light fixture of the slow sun setting or the tribal apoplexy of people lighting incense under a parachute?

It's easy to look at Whirl-y-Gig and think it's a bit quaint, a bunch of hippies meeting in a town hall. But during a period of the city's most accelerated, cutthroat period of development and gentrification, they've sustained themselves. They are the unlikely last men standing of 80s nightlife, swinging a fire poi through a dark cloud of early license threats, noise complaints, and bores going home after the pub.

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