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**'90S SWINGERS GIVE MONOGAMY THE KISS-OFF;
TRENDS: THE '70S SWAPPING FAD HAS GROWN
ORGANIZED AND COMMERCIAL. SEX IS A HOBBY
FOR THESE PARTNERS IN PROMISCUITY.**

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Talk about taking your recreation seriously. Last summer, during a heated session on the dance floor at one of her group's bimonthly socials, Joan, an enthusiastic "swinger" in her mid-50s, collapsed with a heart attack. Four months later, in the lobby of an Orange County hotel, she was back in full regalia: a short, tightly cleaved, silver sequined dress, black stockings and pumps. She also had a new pacemaker.

Soon, Joan (not her real name) and her "significant other" were enmeshed in the arms of two other couples, bodies writhing and tongues flailing, gyrating to the music of Michael Jackson. Already, plans were being laid for a group trip later that night to a reserved room on one of the hotel's upper floors.

"It's nice to bond with people that think the same way I do," Joan said, taking a breather. "There's freedom and lots of trust. You can let your hair down and do what comes naturally. My doctors also say to keep on doing it--it's good for you."

Such a gonzo attitude is not uncommon among today's swingers. In the '70s, swinging was a laid-back, quirky fad--partner-swapping, generally at poolside parties and potluck dinners, involving about 1 million enthusiasts. Now, it has burgeoned into a tightly organized--and some say highly commercial--recreation for an estimated 3 million pleasure-seeking participants in America alone.

Whatever mainstream America may think of adultery (see accompanying story), a hotbed of house parties, swing clubs, travel agencies, conventions, even bed-and-breakfast inns are catering to those interested in sexual freedom, whose activities in many instances are being driven by the Internet.

"There's a much greater awareness," says **Bob McGinley**, who in 1980 founded the North American Swing Club Assn., based in Anaheim. "Before there was always a problem with communication. How do you let the public know--you can't just run

an ad in the **Los Angeles Times**. Now the Internet can spread the word, cheaply, all over the world."

Indeed, a 100-couple party recently spent a weekend at the Eden Loreto Resorts in Baja. Hedonism II is a popular vacation playground in Jamaica that survives on a steady stream of swingers, more than 700 in January alone. Many swing clubs often connect with their brethren in Russia, Japan, Germany and France.

Some analysts point to several factors that may account for the growing prominence of swinging. Besides the communications revolution, they say a series of 1st Amendment legal victories over the last two decades regarding sexual matters has afforded individuals more freedom to pursue unorthodox lifestyles. Commercial activity has also streamlined the recreation, making it more organized and further spreading the gospel.

A backlash against the angst-ridden sexual hibernation of the AIDS-ridden '80s also may be occurring. And an empowerment of women--social, political and sexual--may be emboldening some to follow their own interests and instincts.

"Women are taking a more prominent role in these swing clubs. They call the shots," says Ted McIlvenna, director of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, a graduate school in San Francisco. "More women are working, and with that comes more power, affluence and associations. In the old days, men screwed around and the women stayed home. Now women are out there"

("At first the men drag the women to these events, then the women love it and go wild and drag the men back," says one swinger, a bank loan officer by day.)

Other experts are not convinced that swinging is on the increase. They believe that the phenomenon is just more publicized now and that the number of participants has remained stable over the last three decades.

"It's always been a minuscule part of the population that's involved in what is really a transitory recreation," says John Gagnon, co-author of "Sex in America," a wide-ranging tome on sexual habits published in 1994. "There's just many more advertisements about it."

But to some, the growth is self-evident. In 1973, about 125 swingers, members of the Lifestyles Organization, a seminal affiliate group of the North American Swing Club Assn., showed up at a ranch in Riverside for its first convention. In August, more than 4,000 packed a sold-out gathering of the association in Palm Springs that included seminars on "Growing Up With Kinky Parents," "Recipes for a Successful Orgy" and "Female Ejaculation and the G-Crest."

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McGinley says that "excluding the White House and Congress," there were no more than 80 identifiable swing clubs in the U.S. in the early '70s. His association's directory and Web site now list more than 300 swing clubs and dozens of publications and annual events across the nation. They range from a 14-acre "adult theme park" north of Seattle to a private gathering of professionals in Seal Beach to the modestly named Couples Social Club in Levittown, N.Y.

Members of the swing set say the new wave consists of a wider variety of denizens. In addition to the middle-aged mainstays, a younger, more physically fit crowd is jumping into the fray and starting its own clubs.

To swingers, sex is a hobby, a recreation devoid of petty jealousies and painful entanglements.

According to the most recent comprehensive studies outlined in "Sex in America," about 28% of men and about 20% of women commit adultery in their lifetimes. Many swingers believe that polygamy, with all its freedom, is mankind's natural state, rather than white-knuckled monogamy with all its insecurity, sexual boredom and distrust. They say swinging is as much social as sexual and allows for greater degrees of intimacy, loyalty and friendship.

"Regular clubs are often filled with lonely, single, unhappy people," says Careena Collins, an L.A. resident in her 30s who is an enthusiastic attendee of swinger events. "But at swinger gatherings, people are so happy and free. They already have a mate and can be more honest, open and sexual. It's the best of both worlds."

Jennifer and John (their nocturnal pseudonyms) would agree. The young married couple from Moreno Valley recently hired a baby sitter for their 1-year-old son so they could attend a Friday night swinger dinner-dance at the Days Inn in Fullerton.

The participants at the affair were of varying shapes and sizes, professions, ages and races. A 50ish man in a floral shirt had his arm around his partner while making kissy small talk with a new acquaintance. Nearby, a well-dressed couple talked animatedly over dessert with another attractive duo. Those in attendance included a psychologist, a car dealer, a chiropractor, a medical doctor, a schoolteacher and a member of the Orange County Sheriff's Department.

Once the music started up, Jennifer unsheathed herself from a long overcoat to reveal nothing but a full-body fishnet stocking, bikini underwear and high-heels.

"I'm here to find a skinny, long-haired Mexican girl, a Jennifer Lopez type," she said. Jennifer typified many women at the event who consider themselves bisexual or, at the very least, bicurious. (Their male partners seemed to be interested exclusively in women.)

By midnight, the party had become conspicuously physical. Music by the Gap Band, Donna Summer and Madonna, along with blinking red lights and a fog machine, heightened the pandemonium. Clumps of couples grinded and grappled with others while trying to keep time to the music.

Despite the free-flowing nature of the affair, many participants refused to give their real names, concerned about the social stigma and criticism from friends and relatives.

"Don't mention my name," one woman said. "If my mom knew this, she'd kick my ass. I went to Catholic school for nine years."

Actually, despite the variety of social activities, many swingers say a firm etiquette prevails, even across international boundaries. Single people are discouraged (in some clubs, a partner is referred to as a "ticket," because you need one to gain

entry). Rude, officious, pushy people are an absolute no-no. Drugs are eschewed. Good grooming, health and cleanliness are encouraged.

The tone, more often than not, is playful. Most groups like to call themselves EOLO--Equal Opportunities Lifestyles Organizations--they welcome all ages, creeds, colors and income levels. But to the initiate intent on quick serial liaisons, watch out, say many swingers. You could find yourself out on the sidewalk.

"Some first-timers think it's a candy store, and they find out it's not like that right away," says Ken, founder of the Four Palms, a swinging club in Temecula. To score, one has to adhere to protocol and play the game: Be civil, considerate, and defer to women, who often direct the traffic.

Some clubs are considered "on premise," places where sexual activity takes place, while others are "off premise," sites for couples to socialize and arrange to meet later.

In an age of AIDS, many swingers insist they are far more knowledgeable about safety than the average civilian. They say a host of STD-killing jellies, rubber dams and condoms are the norm at many parties.

"Swingers are more concerned with their health and sexual issues than non-swingers because they want to continue having fun and not hurt themselves," says Ken.

However, in a 1992 study involving 88 swingers, Richard J. Jenks, a professor of sociology at the University of Indiana Southeast, said he found a remarkable lack of concern about AIDS.

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"The impression I got," he said, is that "they see it as a gay disease. Only a minority, about 31%, indicated that they practiced safe sex."

Other analysts warn that a host of emotions can be aroused during freewheeling sexual activity and that they can complicate matters in a relationship.

"What swingers are trying to do is use sex as a sport and redefine it as pleasure, but a pleasure that's easily confined," says Pepper Schwartz, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington and author of the book "American Couples." "At first it's very exciting. You're crossing a taboo with all this access to other bodies and personalities. But after awhile, what happens when your partner becomes more attracted to someone else?"

"Or when one partner is not as popular, or when he or she gets a venereal disease or, God forbid, something worse than that? Sooner or later it can take a toll. . . . The human heart and groin do not follow rules when they are inflamed."

But Ken thinks "a trust forms between husband and wife that allows passion to keep growing. It really keeps the fires burning." And at the Days Inn social, a few took a more global view of the proceedings.

"We've often thought that the best way to solve all the world's problems is to turn the United Nations into a swingers organization," said NASCA public relations

director Steve Mason, surveying the packed dance floor. "How do you drop a bomb onto people that you've just had an orgasm with?"

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