

A girl's dancing on a cube in the middle of the room; she's tall and pale with legs like long gulps of milk. She's wearing a black leather skirt and a red lace bra—she took her shirt off earlier in the night and stashed it in her purse. She runs her hands over her breasts, moving her hips to Prince.

She isn't a stripper. She works at a failing dot-com by day and says she feels lucky not to have been laid off. She went to a good, artsy school, where she majored in graphic design. She had a boyfriend there who later turned out to be gay.

She watches *Sex and the City*, which she says she likes, although it "isn't about sex." At 25, she says she's had enough lovers for a memoir; she could write "one of those books."

She isn't dating anyone now—she says she's met a lot of guys in New York who "all think they have to date models." She's strikingly pretty, but doesn't seem to know it. "You notice I don't show my ass up here," she says.

She started coming to these parties after getting an E-mail asking about her fantasy life. She had to apply for a membership to this club. She wrote an essay about how beautiful she feels when she masturbates. She got in.

The first time she stripped, she says, she's not sure why, but it made her

GIRLS, UNINTERRUPTED

A couple of years ago, Melinda Gallagher and Emily Kramer realized that few of their girlfriends were having orgasms. With Emily's brother, Matthew, they founded Cake, a club with monthly parties at New York nightspots and a 25,000-subscriber Web site devoted to unleashing women's sexuality. Are these Hugh Hefner's heirs?

BY NANCY JO SALES

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP, BY JUSTINE PARSONS;
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feel good. She felt like nobody was judging her. She hikes up her skirt.

A woman approaches snapping open a Gucci bag and grabs the girl's mound—rubs it, shakes it, laughing. She stuffs a dollar bill inside the girl's thong.

"You go, girl," she says.

The woman's long nails get caught in the red lace.

This party is called Cake.

It's 11 on a Monday night, and most of New York is sitting in front of air conditioners watching reruns, still recovering from the weekend. But there are already hundreds of girls here.

They stream in through the doors to the Whiskey bar of the W Hotel in Times Square, in groups, in pairs, and even alone. Cake is a traveling party—each month at a different venue—billed as by and for "upscale" women.

They're wearing what women wear now whether going to work

"I'm a feminist, an activist," she says, "but a lot of times activism is really tough, grueling, painful work, and here I can dance while I express my feminist views and it revitalizes me and I can be free and women can be free. . . ."

"Does that make sense?" she asks.

Men are ambling through the doors, looking dazed and curious.

Cake—named after a slang word for female genitalia—was founded two years ago by Melinda Gallagher and Emily and Matthew Kramer, three good-looking Manhattanites who describe themselves as "hipsters." Emily and Matthew are sister and brother, and Melinda and Matthew have been dating since high school.

Melinda is 29, Emily, 24,

"Here I can dance while I express my feminist views. Does that make sense?"

or to a sex club—something sexy. Tight jeans, tank tops, bustiers, miniskirts, leather pants, stiletto boots, see-through blouses, fringes, tassels, and, in some cases, almost nothing.

At the entrance they're greeted by Cake's official dancers—wriggling in I LOVE CAKE T-shirts—and handed lollipops and stick-on armbands saying, ASK ME IF I INDULGE IN DIRTY TALK . . . ASK ME IF I INDULGE IN CHAMPAGNE AND ICE CREAM IN BED. Some girls do ask, giggling.

A 30-foot screen is playing a grainy copy of *Emmanuelle*—classic porn for the educated, handpicked for being "female-focused." A woman is seen driving through the hills of Thailand, speeding toward sexual adventure.

Girls are jumping on the stage in front of the screen, peeling their tops off, some bumping and writhing against one another. One girl humps the floor, tossing her hair in an homage to the infamous Madonna performance of "Like a Virgin" on MTV, which first aired when she was in elementary school.

Under a purple spotlight, a gaggle of uptown-looking girls—Botox cheeks, blond straightened hair—exchange business cards,

sucking lollipops and excitedly fishing in their purses.

On an illuminated dance floor a woman large enough to model for Botero quivers sweatily in tight-stretched Pucci.

Nearby, a tiny girl in a gold lamé bikini tap-dances furiously. Her name is Erin Lee Mock and she's a triple major at N.Y.U.—gender studies, literature, and writing; she's 20.

and Matthew, 31. They grew up in Stony Brook, Long Island, together. They eat at a downtown sushi restaurant where they order green-tea flan. Melinda and Emily wear vintage peasant blouses.

"Cake is NOT porn," says their Web site, which has attracted more than 25,000 subscribers worldwide. "Porn is produced by men, with the all too easily achieved goal of getting men off."

At www.cakenyc.com the credo is "an orgasm a day"

for women. The site features sexual fantasies sent in by subscribers, which Melinda, Emily, and Matthew are collecting for an upcoming book, *Let Them Eat Cake*. ("Come on girls, tell Cake your deepest, darkest sexual desires.") There are links to Cake-approved sex toys; Melinda, Emily, and Matthew have their own aerodynamic-looking vibrator in the works, which they will put on the market this fall. Subscribers write in answers to Cake's inquiries: "Cake Girls, tell us how you use a vibrator with your partner." "How did your mom affect your sexuality?"

The Cake concept began in the summer of 2000 when Melinda and Emily started confiding in each other about their

difficulties having orgasms. When Melinda was 13, her mother, "a classic 50s housewife," had given her a vibrator and said, "Now, go and have an orgasm." From that point on, Melinda found it impossible to have an orgasm without the vibrator. As they discussed their predicament, Melinda and Emily noted that none of the women around them seemed to be having much success, either.

"Like, what *is* that?" Melinda says.

and feminist, but not anti-male or lesbian. To become a full-fledged member, an applicant must submit an on-line application explaining why she qualifies as a Cake Girl. No photo is required, just "the right attitude." A recent successful applicant wrote: "Cake is made for women like me! And no Cake event would be complete without my lusty fun-spirited presence! ... As a 30-something sexually free and in-touch woman, I know that a com-

selfes not having anything to do with the male paradigm," says Melinda, who received her master's in human sexuality.

Last summer, Cake wound up on the front page of the *New York Post* when a couple at one of its parties started having intercourse in an elevated booth as their image was displayed on a large screen. **INSIDE THE FREAK BOX**, the headline said.

"There are a lot of gray areas when it comes to public sexuality," says Emily. "We

"It's fun to get your hands on a boy dancer and be sexual with him."

"I felt very frustrated by that," says Emily.

According to their research, they were in the middle of a crisis of John Holmes-ian proportions. Apparently, something happened in the generation that came of age after Plato's Retreat and during AIDS, after *The Joy of Sex* and *Swept Away* and during supermodels, P.C., and Howard Stern. It was something about sex, but not very sexy. Whatever it was, it was making girls very uptight, as Alan Alda might say, and not helping them have orgasms.

The first Cake event was 60 women swapping sex stories in a SoHo loft and watching a demonstration of female ejaculation, the yeti of female sexuality.

"Everything has been an experiment," says Matthew.

"There was this ... explosion," says Melinda.

Meaning of interest. The founders set up a Web site and sent out an E-mail to "500 friends" inviting them to a "Porn Party" at a club called Fun, where everyone viewed a four-hour reel of skin flicks deemed by Melinda and Emily to be titillating to females. "The reaction was so amazing," says Emily, "all these girl-next-door professional women sitting on banquettes staring up at a screen with their eyes lit up."

Word spread; the Cake Web site started getting upwards of 5,000 hits a day, with a ratio of about 65 percent women to 35 percent men. "A lot of men"—young men inundated with the frat-boy ethos of *Maxim* magazine, for which Matthew is, curiously, a consultant—"tell us they're dying for this information," says Melinda. Cake markets itself as heterosexual

community such as Cake is necessary and just adds to the greatness of being a GAL!" A one-year membership is \$100.

Meanwhile, the parties have gone on with increasing participation at popular New York nightclubs—Spa, Chaos, the Park. Each has a theme. There have been "Striptease-a-thons" and parties devoted to lap dancing—women on women or men on women. "The women participating are doing so not to fulfill a male fantasy but to fulfill an empowered vision of them-

have not been approached by law enforcement in any way." Since Rudolph Giuliani's celebrated cleanup of the New York City porn industry, more than 50 new X-rated bookstores, theaters, and dance clubs have actually opened up. For the party—called "Indulge"—at the Whiskey bar in Times Square, Cake's invitation asked nostalgically: "Remember back in the day when Times Square was the sex capital of the world?"

In Cake, which its founders describe as a "revolution," there is indeed a fair amount of nostalgia—for something men used to have. As Hugh Hefner once appealed to swinging guys who were into sex, clothes, cars, fancy gadgets, and themselves, Cake hopes to reach the 21st century's version of such women. "We're marketing Cake to us," Melinda says. "We feel like we embody a new generation of women and Cake appeals to our aesthetic."

The founders believe they've hit on an idea whose time has come: a sex industry, an "empire," for "upscale" girls. They dream of one day seeing the Cake brand on books, films, perhaps a magazine; a flagship club in New York and more around the world; "love hotels" on the Japanese model with "Ian Schrager-like" touches. They've been meeting with "executive producers" about bringing "sexy and informative entertainment geared toward women" to TV and film.

"Isn't that how you change culture?" Emily asks.

On the night of the party at the W Hotel, four women meet in the Blue Fin bar, upstairs from where the festivities are about to begin. Men ogle them. They are Karen Altenbach, 24, an assistant account executive in advertising;

Kim Willis, 32, who works in publishing; Lisa Quinn, 31, a teacher in the New York City school system; and Julia Hines, 25, who works at a nonprofit. They are Cake girls.

They are fashionably, if conservatively, dressed—a print dress, a strapless dress, black tapered pants—except for Lisa, the teacher, who, with her sparkly off-the-shoulder tank top, looks a little more wild. She's a big blonde. Their hair is blow-dried and carefully styled. Kim and Julia have been to Cake before; Karen and Lisa have not.

"I'm a Cake virgin," Lisa says with a New York accent.

"I find their core objectives really thought-provoking," says Kim with an Oklahoma twang. "I love to have conversations with them about what they are trying to accomplish—creating an environment where women feel comfortable to express themselves ... even though I wouldn't neces-

Kim and Julia are single. "But I don't know that it's so much about I'm coming to meet someone here," says Kim. "I'm really interested in the social ramifications of it. I have questions. I have contradictions in myself and I'm constantly crossing the lines."

She says she's been to strip clubs and can't understand why the female strippers look so sad while the male strippers are "having the time of their lives."

Karen says, "I think a woman's sexuality is probably the most important empowerment she has. Women can do whatever they want in certain circumstances because they're the rulers of the sexual relationship—"

Lisa interrupts: "Men are extremely misogynistic because of that. Because we're not physically stronger."

Kim looks impatient. "I want a man to change mah oil. I want a man to open my door. I want to be able to go shopping while he goes and plays golf. ... I don't think men sit around talking about who's in control, and I think women are so annoying for doing that."

Kim goes on, "I worked in the past at a women's magazine and ... we all got drunk and we made the men do a butt dance. Girls get together and we're just as bad as boys."

Julia says in a small voice, "I would really like it if sex was just sex."

"This is like the mall-ified version of Plato's Retreat. It's all so sanitized."

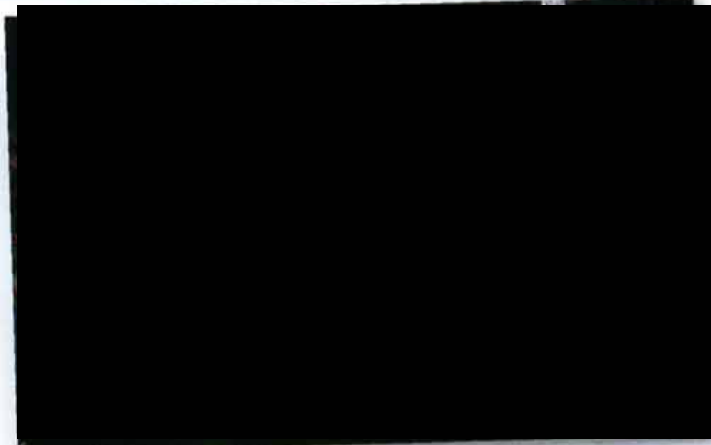
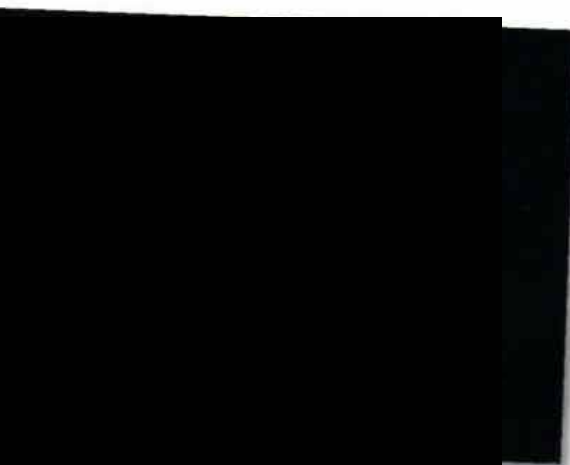
sarily get up onstage and expose myself."

"As Gloria Steinem says," Lisa says, "the reason you're probably scared—because I'm speaking for myself—is insecurity, because when you see magazine covers and someone is extremely beautiful and air-brushed and you don't look exactly like that ... it's kind of a shame."

Whenver I walk by a newsstand, I'm really amazed at how many half-naked women there are on the covers of magazines," Julia says in a whispery voice; she went to Smith. "I think we're living right now in a very sexually charged culture. ... Everyone's naked more and more, and there's nothing wrong with that, but I think we really need to think about that."

"Yet we all say there's nothing wrong with that," says Lisa, "but there's two sides of you. I'm all talk, too. ... Why shouldn't I get breast implants?" Lisa says she's happily married.

Karen says her fiancé knew she was coming to Cake tonight, and he didn't mind. "He's very supportive in whatever I do. He wants me to grow as a person. ... He wanted to come."



They all agree, rather wistfully, that that is nowhere close to being a reality. They disagree—half-and-half—on whether they would hire male prostitutes if they were safe and readily available.

At midnight, the Whiskey bar is packed and loud. The party has drawn around 600 people; the capacity is 400.

There are lots of men here now (they're admitted only if accompanied by an invited girl)—men roaming around slowly like cats in an aviary, dancing, chatting with women. As elsewhere, they aren't trying as hard as the women to look sexy, but they have put gel in their hair.

One man is furtively taking off his socks. He scrambles up on a cube. He's a slim white man in lavender shorts. His name is James; he works on Wall Street and also plays the bass.

"You sexy motherfucker," sings Prince. "I am pro-Cake. I am pro-sex," James says.

There's a girl with James on the cube. James grabs her from behind, pulling her to him by the thighs. She's beautiful—Sally Bowles-ish—one of the official Cake dancers, much like the motivational dancers at Bar Mitzvahs. Her name is

IN THEIR SKIVVIES

Top, a Cake member is encouraged to take off more at the party held at Flow. Above, a young man in black shoes and white briefs drives the crowd crazy at Joe's Pub, a downtown club, in November 2001.

Lisa says the teenage girls she teaches are having sex younger and younger, which bothers her. "It's very scary—the negative side is they're doing it because they know what boys like. Boys like to see two girls together. Boys like to see girls naked. Ninety percent of them are doing it to seek attention, because they wanna be loved and adored. They say, Look at this girl Britney Spears, she's so beautiful, she's being adored by so many people—and that could be me."

Jonatha Bates and she's an aspiring model and actress, 24, from Tacoma.

"It's fun to get your hands on a boy dancer and be sexual with him," she says. "I see him in the audience and go, Come and get it, motherfucker, let's go, I know what you want." She gets paid \$20 for a lap dance.

A couple of guys are watching—everywhere, men are looking up, like New York tourists. "Someone sent me this E-mail about this party and I wanted to see

buzzes Elli's crotch with a Cake-approved vibrator.

She jumps. "Where can I get one of those?" She laughs.

Julia, the Smith graduate, is dancing in the center of four slick-haired, big-jeaned boys, each of whom is trying to ignore the others. Julia sticks her lollipop in one of their drinks.

"It's gettin' hot in here, so take off all your clothes," raps Nelly, on the sound system.

It looks like Paris and Nicky Hilton

At one A.M. the couches are filled with women giving women lap dances. They straddle one another, undulating up and down, playing with one another.

"Women's sexuality is very complicated," says Emily. "What's your No. 1 fantasy for straight women? Other women. But that doesn't make you a lesbian."

Men are watching. One of the men is an older, white-haired guy in a blue blazer; his picture has been in the papers recently. He's the former head of a national cor-

"What's your No. 1 fantasy for straight women? Other women ..."

what it was about," says one of the guys—Dave, 31, in software sales. "It looked a little cheesy to me. It was all about women's liberation."

At the bar, a man is feeling Lisa's—the teacher's—muscles.

Everywhere, guests are drinking Pearls Gone Wild—the official drink of the evening, champagne sprinkled with pearl dust, allegedly an aphrodisiac. Its name is a jovial nod to *Girls Gone Wild*, the video series (millions sold at \$19.95 each) in which unpaid and typically inebriated college girls take their tops off for the camera.

A girl with a pillowish belly hanging over a tight pink mini—she's Anygirl—is shaking backward into a lithe young guy with dreads.

"This is awesome," she says.

"A guy comes up to me in the street and says, 'How much?'" a girl can be heard saying—half outraged, half pleased. "Can you believe that? 'How much?' he says."

Girls are giving each other head. In the flickering light of the movie screen, a bare-breasted girl is on her knees, her face buried in a pair of naked female legs.

"You see that it's not bothering anybody," says Matthew Kramer, our host, cheerily. "It doesn't bother me at all. As long as everyone looks comfortable."

You can hear the raucous laughter of women.

"Whoa," says Elli Frank, a petite actress, 25. "I'm not used to seeing this much vagina elsewhere. I'm a big fan of my own—my gynecologist says I'm normal—and hey, now I know I'm normal—"

A Cake dancer comes up and playfully

have finally arrived—but it's just two tall, identically platinum-haired girls from Long Beach Island, New Jersey. They seem to have planned their faux Hilton attire; they take pictures of each other with a digital camera.

A male magazine writer is studying them. "This is like the mall-ified version of Plato's Retreat," he whines. "It's all so sanitized, so mediocre ..."

His friends are leaving.

"Uh, I think I'll stay," he tells them.

poration under investigation for accounting fraud. He's come here with three bombshells in tow. The girls are fondling one another.

An older woman almost falls climbing up on a cube. She's the type of woman once played by Colleen Dewhurst, lined but proud. She's wearing white bell-bottom jeans and a sequined halter top. She grabs for the girl dancing on the cube—a motorcycle chick in boots—smashing her mouth against the girl's.

The couches along the wall are turning into near orgies. Three, four, and five people together—mostly girls, mostly clothed—squirming in heaps of delight.

The giant screen plays *In-satiable*—Marilyn Chambers is lying on a pool table covering delightedly before a very erect, naked Italian.

The D.J. plays Jay-Z: "Give it to me, give it to me," says the chorus.

A strange guy in leopard pants says, "Man is at a turning point between good and evil—and evil is winning."

The strange guy says his name is Vox Vox. "There's a very dark force, an invisible hand. They're hitting us very hard right now. They have to give us sexual permissiveness in order to distract us from what's really going on. But it's only temporary.

"I'll be fighting them with my film," he goes on. "It's a future *noir* film about the death of reality. But it's also a love story."

Kim, the Oklahoman, is leaving the party with a man.

"Well," says a guy sitting alone, watching everything, "it's better than a regular bar." □