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## Click & meet

### Want to make friends? Grab that mouse and get on an e-mail-list club

By RODNEY HO/Staff

Barely an hour into the Wednesday Night Drinking Club's latest party at the Chamber nightclub, Andrew Graves had nabbed a date.

Graves, 31, a single customer service vice president for a small software company, met Katie, a communications worker for a major airline. Vodka tonic in hand, he talked about his frequent traveling, segueing into his love for adventure.

"I'm an adrenalin addict," he said. She suggested they go sky-diving together sometime. Intrigued, he agreed.

Graves, one of the club's 10 hosts, was pulled away, but he'd already gotten Katie's phone number. "I've learned," he says, "always get numbers upfront."

There are at least a half-dozen clubs like this in metro Atlanta, clubs that thrive off e-mail lists. Friends forward party invites to other friends and, like bread mold, the lists multiply into thousands of names. Voila! Instant megaparties that draw hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people.

"It would be impossible to do this, costwise, by sending out paper invites or even faxes," says Patroski Lawson, 34, who organizes the Square Hat Supper & Social Club, which started in March with 58 names and now has more than 1,700.

With names like Hair of the Dog, Under the Radar and 1st Fridays, these groups serve a middle ground between club hopping and dating service. Professionals in their late 20s and 30s, who feel they've outgrown clubbing into the wee hours, see the parties as a less pressurized way to meet like-minded people and less expensive than a formal matchmaking service.

"We're not the crazy drinking crowd anymore," says Peter Ingram, 35, a divorced Atlantan who created Under the Radar nine months ago and attracts about 200 people per event. "We don't do anything to make it a cheesy meat market." His group, for instance, screens out anyone under the age of 27.

These clubs purposely downplay the fact that they cater mostly to the unmarried. Pro-Atlanta's original name --- Sunday Night Singles --- was quickly canned. "Singles don't like to be reminded they're single," says co-organizer Larry Peck, 40, whose happy hours draw 300 to 500. But, he adds, "it's a numbers game. The more you put yourself out there, the better your chances."

Barton Brown, a 40-year-old vice president for a logistics company, ended a relationship seven months ago and has already snagged a few dates from these functions. "This takes the edge off," he says at a Pro-Atlanta happy hour. "Nobody's sloppy drunk. People just want to meet, no stress."

Brown says that, rather than meeting aimless party gals at nightclubs on weekends, he's "drawn to women who've made a mark on life," including a recent match he made with a stylish 36-year-old marketing rep. "She's doing better than I am," he says with a chuckle.

This concept of a social club is hardly new, but e-mail makes it much easier to sustain. Philippa Courtney, a Portland, Ore., author of several relationship books, recalls attending "chain" parties in the late 1970s in which people were required to bring along friends and a host would keep a master list of phone numbers. Those were cumbersome compared with today's versions.

"For people who are feeling extroverted, these social clubs sound like a fine way to expand one's horizons, but they

clearly aren't for everyone," Courtney says.

In fact, it's easier to make friends than find dates, says Rebecca Barnett, a 27-year-old corporate account manager for OfficeMax. She's attended Square Hat and Wednesday Night Drinking Club parties since the summer and has made a raft of new buds and reacquainted herself with some old ones. "It's very laid-back," she says. "It's not a pickup scene or heavy into business networking, either."

None of the clubs require membership fees, but most charge to get into a party. Pro-Atlanta's midweek happy hours and the Wednesday Night Drinking Club, for instance, cost \$5 to enter. They also change venues --- popular spots include the Rock Bottom Brewery, Loca Luna and Leopard Lounge --- to keep things fresh.

The granddaddy of local social clubs is 1st Fridays, which began e-mail marketing in 1999 after relying on fliers for three years. Its focus: young black professionals. The monthly parties, held at places like Phipps Plaza and the 755 Club at Turner Field, draw as many as 3,000 each month despite entry fees of \$20 or \$30.

1st Fridays, which also has clubs in cities like Chicago and Houston, tries to keep its "class" level high by strictly enforcing a dress code that prohibits jeans, caps and see-through attire.

"You're paying for the crowd," says Candace Atlas, a therapist in her late 20s, during a 1st Fridays party at the Sheraton Atlanta. "I don't have to look over my shoulder."

Nathan Abbott, 29, Wednesday Night Drinking Club's organizer, says his functions have gotten so large, he struggles to find venues. He recently decided to try something offbeat by holding the monthly get-together at the Chamber, a club known for its S&M theme.

As a huge disco ball reflected rays of red light, Chamber employees in leather lingerie undulated on platforms to '80s tunes (e.g., Depeche Mode's "Master and Servant," Sisters of Mercy's "This Corrosion"). Below were plenty of gawking men in khakis and bemused women in conservative dresses. On the main stage, semi-nude women dropped hot wax on each other.

Kelli Cook, a 34-year-old restaurant hostess and part-time first-grade teacher, wore a friend's leather top as a lark and boogied with an attractive 32-year-old computer salesman. "These are the types of people I'd go to church with," Cook says.

These clubs are so easy to create, some organizers worry that competitors will start cannibalizing each other.

"I don't think any one of these groups will last forever," says Umberto Catignani, a 31-year-old plastics consultant, at a recent Square Hat happy hour, "but someone will always pick up the slack, because the idea works. There are always new single people in this town."

Most clubs work the same way: An organizer sends out e-mail party invitations to a few friends using evite.com. They forward the invites to others. Those interested ask the organizer to add them to the list, and it grows.

### **PRO-ATLANTA**

- Frequency: Twice-a-month Wednesday happy hours.
- Crowd: 300-500, late 20s to early 40s. Professional crowd, not big drinkers.
- Cost: \$5, with free appetizers.
- Contact: Pro-atlanta@att.net.

### **WEDNESDAY NIGHT DRINKING CLUB**

- Frequency: Monthly.
- Crowd: 600-800, mid-20s to mid-30s. A party-hearty group.
- Cost: \$5; first drink sometimes free.
- Contact: wednesdaynightdrinkingclub@yahoo.com.

### **1ST FRIDAYS**

- Frequency: First Friday of each month.
- Crowd: 1,500-3,000, mid-20s to 40s. Sharply dressed black professionals.
- Cost: \$30 (\$20 with Web site invite).
- Contact: www.1stfridays.com.

### **UNDER THE RADAR**

- Frequency: Monthly.
- Crowd: 200 (minimum age is 27), with most in their 30s, many with high-tech connections.
- Cost: Free, but you buy your own drinks.
- Contact: u\_t\_r@hotmail.com, but you need to be referred to get on the list.

### **SQUARE HAT SUPPER & SOCIAL CLUB**

- Frequency: Monthly dinner and monthly happy hour.
- Crowd: 15-25 for dinner; 150-300 for happy hour. More intimate and laid-back than other groups. Most participants in their late 20s to late 30s.
- Cost: Dinner varies; happy hour is \$5.
- Contact: squarehatsupperclub@yahoo.com.

### **THE SCHMOOZE**

- Frequency: Monthly on Thursdays or Fridays.
- Crowd: 200-300, late 20s to mid-40s. A business networking group, with plenty of people in sales, media production and meeting planner types.
- Cost: Free.
- Contact: kenneth.jones@aspenproductions.com.

### **HAIR OF THE DOG**

- Frequency: Monthly.
- Crowd: First party in November drew 400 sensitive, pet-friendly people, with proceeds going to the Atlanta Humane Society.
- Cost: \$5-\$10 suggested donation.
- Contact: hairofthedogatlanta@hotmail.com.