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Grab a partner for a bit of a fling...

By Chris Elwell-Sutton 01.06.07

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In some ways it's a typical post-clubbing scene: high-spirited revellers pouring out of the venue, groups of twenty-somethings hugging each other as they say their goodbyes, each partygoer sporting an ear-to-ear grin.

But wait. Something's wrong with this picture. No one's really off their face, there are no bouncers and no minicab drivers hassling us. In fact, it's only 11.15pm. What manner of nightlife-based weirdness is this? This, my friends, is the Ceilidh Club.

When I arrived at the dance hall of Cecil Sharpe House, the roomy Primrose Hill headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, I was sceptical that an evening of Scottish country dancing was going to make for a good night out. As a Scottish Londoner, I'm the first to say a ceilidh (pronounced kay-lee) is the best thing for dancing at wedding receptions. But for a Saturday night out?



Highland fling: clubbers pair up to dance the night away

The founder of the Ceilidh Club is Ed McCabe, who started it back in 1998 when he was a postgraduate marketing student at Glasgow's Strathclyde University. "Everyone loves a ceilidh," says McCabe. "But the only time you could go to one was when someone got married. So I decided to recreate the best part of a good Scottish wedding, except without anyone having to buy a present."

I turn up with my girlfriend and a couple of pals at 8pm, and things are already underway in the rather grand, wood-panelled hall, with the caller cajoling the dancers jovially through their moves as the competent fourpiece Scottish band belts out the music that's been spicing up gatherings north of the border for hundreds of years.

The crowd are mostly in their twenties: young London professionals, students into their folk music and a smattering of curious visitors from other countries. Most, however, are not Scottish. Even the caller, who was wearing a kilt, has a decidedly English accent.

The rest of the building is like a combination of a church hall and a student union, not that this is a problem as we psyche ourselves up for the dancing by downing a couple of pints in the basement bar, served by a friendly gent sporting the kind of majestic beard that only the folk music scene can produce.

The night becomes a happy, sweaty blur as pairs, fours and other combinations are hastily formed among friends and strangers for dances like Strip The Willow, The Gay Gordons and the Eightsome Reel. Some are more complex than others, and very occasionally, when several beginners end up together, moments of chaos ensue. Generally though, the caller and the more experienced dancers conspire to keep things on track, and everyone's laughing as they whirl and gallop.

There's no obligation to dance with the partner you came with and by the time the night is out my clammy palms have been in happy contact with dozens of others. As the room heats up, faces redden and the pace sometimes becomes a little scary.

There's no doubt about it, Scottish country dancing is very physical. For some, this is part of the attraction. "There's something unnatural about mainstream clubbing, which makes it different from other kinds of dancing in most countries, in that it's not tactile," says McCabe. "At a ceilidh, you're allowed to touch people. You can flirt easily and it's not hard to judge whether someone's interested in you."

Obviously, I'm not here to pull, but I can see what he means. There's something about throwing giggling girls around the dance floor in what seems to me like a manly fashion which could, under certain circumstances, put a man in a lusty mood.

Ending shortly after 11pm, the night goes remarkably fast. For your average clubber, this is a disgustingly early time to contemplate going home and yet, like everyone else here, I feel that my kicks have already been got.

It has been a refreshingly different way to dance the night away, and best of all, I know I'm going to feel great in the morning.

- *The Ceilidh Club, Cecil Sharp House, 2 Regent's Park Road, London, NW1, 7pm-11pm, admission £10. Next parties: 8 June, 29 June, 13 July, 27 July, 31 August ceilidhclub.com*