

Walk a Mile in My Shoes (and My Shirt)



Elizabeth Lippman for The New York Times

Swap shoppers at ThriftOn at the Botanica bar in New York.

By MELENA RYZIK
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THE bargain hunters started filtering in at 9:05 p.m., toting garbage bags, carts and wheeled backpacks full of clothes. They descended into Botanica, a divey subterranean bar on Houston Street that, on this Monday night at least, looked more like a boutique dressing room. Except that none of these style-savvy men or women were there to shop. They were there to swap.

"This is cute," one woman said, as she pulled a tiny green ruffled miniskirt on over her jeans. Wearing it, she dived back into the piles of clothing almost as quickly as her fellow swappers laid them out: the coffee table held dainty sweaters, designer jeans, T-shirts and pants. Vintage dresses and coats were hung on a portable metal rack. Shoes covered the couch — hiking boots, zebra-striped loafers, black flip-flops, patent-leather sneakers, and clear plastic jellies, which quickly found a new owner in Jill Pakulski, a tall, willowy musician.

"I just found a size 10 in jellies!" Ms. Pakulski said, grinning and waving them around like a prize. "Do you know how freakish that is? And I didn't pay for them — I traded for them!"

Ms. Pakulski, 24, is one of a growing number of people whose wardrobe comes free of charge, courtesy of perfect strangers. The clothing swap gained traction in the last decade as a kinky girl's night in; one woman would invite a dozen friends over to trade cast-offs, kvetch and drink. But now it has become a night out, moving to public spaces like bars and community centers, where anyone is welcome.

With more visibility came more popularity: the relatively new Web site clotheswap.meetup.com has members in more than 50 cities; in Portland, Ore., there are multiple swaps, arranged according to clothing size. And Swap-O-Rama-Rama, which started as a one-time event last October in New York, has expanded to include franchises all over the world.

"It's a real phenomenon," said Suzanne Agasi, whose at-home swaps outgrew her apartment in San Francisco just a few years after she started them in 1996. Back then, she said, "no one knew what a clothing swap was." On Thursday, Ms. Agasi will be host to her 100th swap. The people attending these fashion free-for-alls are not just the young starving artists, hipster students and fashionistas-on-a-budget who first made them popular, but women — and men — of all ages and income levels. And they have embraced bartering as much to protest consumer culture as to look good without emptying their wallets.

"It's a karma thing," said Amy Israel, 32, who sells energy commodities and is a frequent swapper. "Instead of dropping stuff off for money, you come here." (Ms. Israel's karma must be very good. At the Botanica bar event, which is known as ThriftOn, she scored a pair of Prada pants.)

Gabriel Willow, who runs nature education courses for children in Brooklyn, had his own way of

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explaining the appeal of swapping. For him, it is "equal parts philosophy, stinginess, and the excitement of finding something."

Mr. Willow, 28, is easily excitable. At ThriftOn, which draws about 100 people at each of its seasonal events, he pawed through a mess of T-shirts until he came up with one that read "Married June 3, 2003" (he wasn't). On it went, over a purple ruffled polyester shirt and above a pair of tight black striped trousers. He topped off his new outfit with a perfectly distressed leather bomber jacket.

"I'd never buy a new leather jacket, because I don't want to support the leather industry," he said. "But I like recycling. Some days I find that everything I'm wearing, I got here."

Like most clothing swaps, Swap-O-Rama-Rama and ThriftOn encourage visitors to take as much as they want from piles of variously organized (and unorganized) garments. There are usually no changing rooms, so swappers just try things on over their clothes, relying on others for the thumbs up or thumbs down.

Rules about what to bring and what condition the clothing should be in vary from swap to swap, and not all require donations. Some require that items be cleaned or pressed, and forbid unmentionables. Most swaps cost nothing to attend, though it is becoming more common for organizers to charge a nominal entry fee to cover costs like space rental. And, inevitably, a few people have even begun to view swaps as business opportunities. (So much for karma.)





Last month, Ms. Agasi quit her job in sales to pursue swap-hosting full time. At her next event on Thursday, she'll charge swappers \$30 each, bringing a boutique attitude to a barter culture.

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