

HULA

Hoop Culture

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THE HOOPERS



NESSIA STARR

When Nessia Starr signed up for her first hooping class at the Quinlan Community Center, she simply saw hula hooping as a fun way to spend time with her mom. But by the end of her first session, she was a convert. “From the moment I picked up that oversized hula hoop, I was in love,” she recalls. Seven years later, Nessia is the one teaching the classes—and she holds them in the very same community center. “It’s that aha moment where you see a person’s face light up that excites me,” Nessia says. “It’s fun for me to see how people learn and connect with the hoop. It’s personal and different for everyone.”

In collaboration with her husband, Ron, Nessia also hosts local hoop jams at Campbell Park and designs hula hoops for their online store, TrinityStarr. While Ron favors the technical aspects of making hoops (like sanding and drilling holes for push buttons and rivets), Nessia delights in crafting the appearance. “I have always loved colors and the emotional, psychological influence colors have on mood and well-being,” she explains. In their Inspired Designs series alone, there are 48 different patterns—accompanied with expressive names like Muse, Wonderland, Instinct, and Illuminate.



RON STARR

When Ron Starr joined Nessia for a hooping documentary screening and saw a hundred people hooping across the street, his wife’s new interest started to become his own. “I was blown away,” Ron recalls. “I saw that there was a community of really cool people to be a part of.” LED hoops were another initial draw. “My first thought was, I have to make one,” he writes on the TrinityStarr website about his first encounter with the hoops. “I am a bit of a technology geek, so naturally I had to apply that to hooping.”

Ron’s YouTube videos and his presence at hooping jams motivate other men to participate in this female-dominated activity. “There are cool ways for a guy to do hooping that aren’t necessarily so graceful and beautiful,” he says. One of his favorite moves is a combination of *paddles* and *breaks*, bringing his arms within the hoop and swinging them in chopping motions while nimbly switching the hoop’s direction back and forth, a form of expression with traces of hip-hop and martial arts. And when Ron spins rings lit up with LEDs, or even set on fire, no one would dare call what he does feminine.



CRISSY GUGLER

Crissy Gugler embraced hooping because she loves Latin and ballroom dancing—and her husband doesn’t. “It turns out, a hula hoop makes a great dance partner. It never says no,” she laughs. Today she is never without a hoop—even tucking a collapsible one into her suitcase for vacations.

When Crissy became more involved in the hooping scene, she found that most events were held in San Francisco or Santa Cruz. Instead of wasting gasoline, she decided to establish a community here. For a while, Crissy taught hooping to anyone who expressed an interest (at one point even coaching someone with one leg). Currently, her main focus is organizing weekly spin jams. But she doesn’t consider herself a leader. “I just like to have fun. If other people want to have fun at the same time, that’s even better.”

Crissy identifies chest hooping as one of the trickier moves. She compares the movement to swirling a wine glass—the stem receiving more rotation than the goblet. “The top moves at a different rhythm than the hips do.” To demonstrate, Crissy leads the way to her car, and from a tangle of eight or so hoops, she works one free and performs the move in an empty parking space in the Whole Foods parking lot.

THE HOOP

The hula hoop has evolved into so much more than the children's toy sold by Wham-O in the '50s. Far from a fleeting fad, these plastic hoops have inspired an entire cult following. Our local chapter, the South Bay Hoopers, is six hundred members strong on Facebook. They regularly assemble for classes and hoop making, but the main draw is the hoop jams. Every week hoopers gather at parks (or at gyms when the weather grows chillier) to practice their moves.

Hoop culture is as colorful as the hoops its participants twirl. To experience it, visit a hoop jam hangout—but don't expect to observe from the sidelines. As jam organizer Crissy says, "It's not a spectator sport." They are an inclusive bunch. A heap of hoops in different sizes, weights, and designs are strewn across the grass, specifically so that onlookers can join in. And if someone expresses an interest in learning a new trick, it's likely that person will be mobbed by at least three eager instructors. Because hoopers fall under the larger umbrella of flow arts—creative expression through movement—other flow artists make regular appearances at these laid-back practice sessions. This includes jugglers, acroyoga couples, poi artists, levitation wand twirlers, and staff spinners. Portable speakers are readily available for anyone who wants to plug in their iPod and DJ.

Perhaps it's not so strange that hooping has continued to impact us today. Hoops extend centuries back to the development of the Native American hoop dance and are used as a form of storytelling. A single dancer performs with one to forty wooden hoops, wielding them in different ways to represent animals, humans, nature, or seasons. The circle itself represents the never-ending cycle of life and its interconnectedness. Hoop play is found in Europe as well as the Americas. During the Middle Ages, children and adults rolled barrel hoops and sometimes even jumped through rotating ones, much like we jump rope. In 14th-century England, wooden and metal hoops were commonly twirled around waists. In fact, due to the weightiness of these objects, medical records note doctors diagnosing excessive hooping as a source of dislocated backs.

But what does this recreation mean to modern participants? What sets it apart from other activities? Hoopers respond to these questions in many different ways. It's a social pastime, coming with an entire community of new friends. Tapping into mind, body, and spirit, hooping strengthens the core and builds reflexes and patience. It spiritually grounds practitioners, assisting them in finding their center. "Repetition of circular movement around the body creates a connection for people that is very meditative, peaceful, and calming," explains Nessia.

Additionally, it can provide a nonjudgmental atmosphere. "Hooping helps people come out of their shells." Ron says. "Dancing used to be something that I would do after a drink or two. Now I'm ready to dance anywhere." Most importantly, it draws out that inner kid. A transformation takes place when a hooper steps inside that ring—her eyes light up, her back straightens, and the years fall away. "People can do it in a very serious manner," Crissy says. "I've seen some very sexy hula hooping. I've seen some crazy physical, I-can't-believe-they-can-do-that hula hooping. But it's still inherently silly. It's like hopscotching or playing jump rope. No matter how good you are, there's always a playfulness to it."

Featuring Hooper Caroline Kim.

