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Midlife women are clubbing more than ever – so please stop calling us tragic

As Nineties culture continues to be all the rave, please spare a thought for the women who are being mocked for wanting to dance like they used to. And isn't it funny, says **Helen Down**, that the 'dad dancers' of this generation are getting a free pass

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Rhyth-mum of the night: Society is too quick to judge older women as 'reckless' for their desire to let loose (Beth Marsh)

S

o **Madonna**, queen of reinvention, is back. Yes, again. And this time she's not just coming out fighting, but also raving: "To rave is an art," she said in her announcement about the July release of her new album *Confessions II*. "It's about pushing your limits and connecting to a community of like-minded people."

At 67, Madge is more age-defying than a tube of Future Renew serum. But you won't hear me trot out the usual gripes about her refusal to grow old gracefully or her desperation to stay young and culturally relevant. Why? Because I know *exactly* how she feels. At 53, I too am no spring chicken, and yet I too still enjoy **cutting shapes on the dancefloor**.



I'm not alone. According to researchers at the University of Leeds, midlife women persist in going clubbing because it's good for their mental health. After quizzing 136 women aged 40 to 65 who are still out dancing, they found 87.5 per cent of participants said raving was a way of connecting with themselves and others.

This research has become inescapable on socials and is causing a rush of excitement among my cohort of Gen X women. So much so that one delighted partygoer had the study printed out as a giant vinyl and stuck it on her wall. It's struck a chord with my peers and me because it gives us permission to come out of the shadows and dance into the UV light. We finally feel seen.

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The popular imagination has us safely tucked up in bed by 10pm, lamenting our hot flushes, or guzzling “lady petrol” and moaning about our blokes. What it doesn't have us doing is throwing our hands in the air on the dancefloor. Because that would simply be far too embarrassing, wouldn't it? Or immature. Or desperate. Or cringe. Or plain old tragic. If these are your knee-jerk reactions, please go check yourself for a toxic combination of ageism *and* sexism.

“Hostility is directed at women who are seen as too visible, sexual or independent as they get older,” says Dr Julie Hannan, psychologist and author of *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*. “That reaction is both ageist and sexist. It comes from both men and women, since these are cultural expectations, not just male ones.





Madonna, 67, is set to release a new album later this year (*Rafael Pavarotti*)

“If society has internalised the idea that women should age ‘gracefully’, meaning acceptably, discreetly, without taking up too much space, a woman who resists that is likely to provoke judgment from both sexes.”

For every snide comment around the Queen of Pop’s impending return, there’s adulation for the comeback kings, with Jagger and Springsteen praised for their enduring energy and relevance. Similarly, for every eyebrow raised at a fiftysomething woman on the dancefloor, there’s a balding man in a shacket, thick-rimmed specs and trainers recommended by his teen who barely merits a batted eyelid. That’s not to say older male clubbers are never on the receiving end of ageist comments. They are (see the “sad dad” John Lewis Christmas advert). Just not as much. And it’s certainly not as brutal as what women have to put up with.





Sweet harmony: The University of Leeds study confirms what many older women knew – raving is unbeatable (Getty)

One of the authors of the University of Leeds study, Professor Alice O’Grady, points out that where the older male promoters and DJs often get respect, midlife women often on the end of insults such as “Whose mum are you?”, insinuating they’ve only come to the club to collect their kid. Or worse, they’re just seen as someone who is going to do some p*ssed-up “mum dancing”.

I’ve spent the past two years writing a novel in which the protagonist, a 47-year-old **mother**, buries her post-divorce pain in raving. A handful of literary agents couldn’t fathom the idea of a mother who chooses to go to raves, clubs or festivals. She was irresponsible, perhaps even slightly taboo. An unrelatable character who couldn’t possibly exist beyond pages of fiction.

Yet we do exist. In large numbers, actually. Don’t believe me? Go to a festival over the summer and watch slack-jawed as women rave away the shackles of motherhood. Some will even be doing it with their older offspring. Trust me, it happens. To many, though, it’s still a shocking sight. Or even worse, embarrassing.

“Motherhood is still bound up with the idea that women should be self-sacrificing, sensible and endlessly in control,” says Dr Hannan. “So when a mother goes clubbing or lets loose, she’s often judged as reckless rather than recognised as a normal human being with needs, wants and desires. She gets punished for stepping outside the cultural script of the ‘good’ mother.”

Despite these challenges, women like me who came of age during rave’s original golden era are drawn back in time and time again. I’m lucky. As a divorcee who shares childcare down the middle with her ex, I can afford to sacrifice the occasional weekend to the rave gods. Plus, as my child gets older, he needs me less. But even when he was a little’un, I would sometimes sneak onto the dance floor and brave the excruciatingly painful combination of hangover and childcare that followed.





Down in the dance: 'Once I'm dancing, I don't care what people think anyway' (*Helen Down*)

There's something utterly irresistible about meeting up with old mates, dancing and surrendering your body (and mind) to the simple pleasure of 140bpm. House? Drum'n'bass? We were there the first time round, thanks. Dancing is a much-needed distraction from the world's ugliness. And a much-needed reminder that there's more to our identity than what society outwardly sees; motherhood, menopause and moaning. We're not reliving our youth; we're standing in our power. And the benefits are more than enough to compensate for any sexist or ageist snipes.

And luckily, once we're dancing, we don't care what people think anyway. That's literally the point. Once we're inside the club, we marinate in the loved-up vibes. One time, my old rave pal and I got: "There's old, then there's *old*." Well, screw you. At least we can afford a taxi home.

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When younger clubbers do comment, it's generally well-meaning. I frequently get, "Good on you! I hope I'm like you when I'm older". It's a

little patronising, but at least there's zero malice. Also, although I don't go to clubs to "pull", I've twice ended up dating younger guys whom I met on the dancefloor. And the more underground the club, the more open-minded its people are. Phonox, a small independent club in Brixton, is one of the most inclusive spaces I know. People of all ages, genders, sexualities, races and religions are welcomed with open arms.

But the final word must go to Madonna herself. In the teaser for her soon-to-be-released single, she breathily delivers the lines: "Sometimes I like to just hide in the shadows, create a new persona, a different identity... Out here, on the dancefloor, I feel so free." Oh Madge, I'm right there beside you.



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