

The Joy of Joblessness In the Web Wipeout



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

The Butterfly jazz club's owner says former dot-comers fill the tables.

By TODD KRIEGER

KEVIN GEORGE, a freelance Internet producer who has been out of work for three months, just returned from a two-and-a-half-week vacation in North Africa, which included a rave-style trance music festival called "Morocco 2001."

David Bailey, laid off from his job with a technology consulting firm, has been pursuing dreams of training for the Olympic bicycling team.

And Charlene St. John, downsized from a 10-hour-a-day job in e-commerce finance, has taken up short-story writing and the guitar. She is adjusting just fine to the lack of structure in her days, she said. "I have two rules: shower by 5 p.m. daily and take the dogs to the ocean every day."

In this city that was so recently transformed by the dot-com boom, the great e-commerce wipeout (23,100 local Internet workers will get pink slips by the end of next year, according to one study by the University of California at Berkeley) has left a newly minted, newly unemployed leisure class.

Gone are the all-nighters in offices accessorized with sleeping cots. Common now are languid days in coffee shops, unhurried travel to exotic destinations like Tasmania and evenings out at jazz clubs and theme bars — which have never been so numerous or popular, many club owners and patrons say.

Perhaps because the recently downsized are still living off severance packages or savings from the fat times, there does not seem to be a great deal of despair over their unemployed status.

They are turning up at a wave of new clubs like Lord of Balls, a lounge in Japantown with a kitsch hunting-kid theme; Bliss in Nore Valley, a red-draped lounge that is packed on Monday nights — unusual for this city; and G, an unexpectedly hip bar in an otherwise quiet neighborhood of multimillion-dollar homes near Pacific Heights.

That's where Ms. St. John, 35, was relaxing the other night. Since being laid off in December, she has found the time for trips to Hawaii, Las Vegas, Vail and Lake Tahoe, all underwritten by her healthy severance package. "With lots of unemployed friends, I have someone to go to lunch with every day, and plenty of excuses to grab a drink or two in the evening," she said.

John Hurlley, G's owner, who also runs a neighborhood restaurant across the street, Garibaldi's, never expected his new place to draw a faster crowd from all over the city; that is indicative, he said, of the upswing in local night life. "After running Garibaldi's for 11 years, I was anticipating the same crowd — my junior-leaguers and people from the neighborhood," he said. "But having a line out the door? I've had to get a doorman four nights a week."

Another patron was Mr. George, the unemployed Web producer, who was reclining in front of G's gas fireplace, which features white sand instead of bricks for its floor. With shag pillows and long, low divans, G seems to have sprung from the pages of Wallpaper magazine.

In addition to traveling, Mr. George, 41, said he has found the time for some long-pot-off introspec-

tion, and has been doing volunteer work for Art Angels, a group that puts artists in touch with patrons willing to help support them. "I have my electric guitar, my drums, my video camera," he said. "I find ways to noodle with my downtime."

Local news articles have documented how soaring rents in the neighborhoods south of Market Street, driven by the arrival of hundreds of Internet companies in recent years, pushed out artists and working-class families. In the wake of the Internet bust, which has disproportionately affected these small e-commerce start-ups, the first signs of a reversal of the tide have appeared. Real estate agencies are reporting a slight weakening in the price of rental apartments. "I guess if there can be any silver lining to the recent downturn, it would be that the artists forced out by the dot-com invasion are returning," Mr. George said. "Everybody's out of work and they're O.K. with that. People are getting back to what they believe in."

At the same time, he acknowledged that the unstructured time he now has is not all carefree. "The downtime is fun, but it can be stressful at the same time," he said.

Even for new-economy workers who are still employed, the slackening of the frenetic pace in their industry has allowed many, it seems, to pursue more personal, sometimes bohemian interests.

Gil Silberman, a lawyer whose specialty is emerging high-tech companies, realized a long-held dream when he opened Butterfly, a jazz club, with his wife, Norie. He said his clientele includes many dot-comers who suddenly have time to lift their heads from their computers and groove to be-bop riffs.

"People have been waiting for the Internet to stumble. The 'I told you so' crowd doesn't want to see technology succeed," Mr. Silberman, 35, said. "There was a moment when everybody could become instantly wealthy, and that moment has passed. That's not to say you don't still have the guy walking around with \$100 million in his pocket, but with the market less intense, he has some time to spend on more leisurely pursuits."

The Money, Meaning and Choices Institute in Kentfield, Calif., coined the phrase "sudden wealth syndrome" to describe the psychological impact of the high-tech fast lane. One of the institute's directors, Stephen Goldbart, jokes that lately he has become an expert on its opposite, "sudden loss of wealth syndrome."

"We have just come through this amazing growth cycle with very young people coming into oodles of money, and that's fun as long as that show is playing," Dr. Goldbart said. "But now we're seeing a very different picture. It's a time for the diversifying of the psychological portfolio, a time to think about having greater balance between work and other needs."

Still, he acknowledged that being out of work eventually will take a toll in stress, not to mention financial difficulties. "These people may be in a bit of denial if they are not concerned about getting work," he said. "But remember one thing: it was that kind of optimism that has governed the psychology of wealth and the psychology of this economy. That optimism may take them farther than any nose-to-the-grindstone thinking ever would."



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

Money, and the time to spend it, help the bar G exceed expectations.