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Going Clubbing by Staying at Home

By [BEN SISARIO](#)

The crowd was about 50 strong, dressed somewhere between postwork casual and preclub glam, when Nicole Atkins plugged in her guitar on Friday evening and began to play. She hawked her CDs between songs, and the sound system was run by a Knitting Factory employee — all pretty typical for Ms. Atkins, a New Jersey-bred songwriter who has reams of critical acclaim but is still struggling for her big break.

Yet this was far from a typical gig for her, or for the Knitting Factory. For one thing, she was not performing at that club, but rather in the cavernous, softly lighted atrium of Ohm, a gleaming new residential tower on 11th Avenue in Manhattan, the latest luxury outpost in the real-estate frontier between Chelsea and Clinton. Facing west as she played, she could watch the sunset through the glass walls of the building's exercise room.

"You know what would be really cool," she remarked between songs, "is if somebody could get up on the Cybex up there and entertain me while I'm entertaining all of you."

The concert represents a new connection between two forces that have often been at odds in New York: live music and high-end real estate. Last year the Knitting Factory moved to Brooklyn after being priced out of its longtime home in TriBeCa, but its cool factor is still a valuable draw in Manhattan: the club has been hired by Douglaston Development, the developer of the complex, to book twice-monthly private shows there to help attract affluent young tenants. Ms. Atkins's show was the first.

The 34-story, 288-unit building, at the corner of 30th Street, opened in February and is about 25 percent rented, said Nancy Packes, a marketing consultant to the developer. Monthly rents start at about \$1,900 for a studio and \$3,600 for a two-bedroom. The architect was Stephen B. Jacobs, who designed the Gansevoort hotels in New York and Miami Beach; the building has the look of a boutique hotel, with multicolored fluorescent lights set into the walls and giant television monitors in the lobby playing abstract, screen-saver-like shapes.

Speaking before the show, Ms. Packes said that the building's proximity to the clubs and bars of Chelsea helped define a target clientele: people in their late 20s to mid-30s, probably unmarried, "on their first or second job" in high-paying or creative fields.

"This is not for people in their 50s, people with kids," she said. "It's for young people whose true religion is music."

Much of the crowd on Friday was right within that demographic. Amy Kapnick, 29, had moved from a similar building in Midtown, lured to Ohm by its youthful identity.

“You’re not going to have elderly people, people with six kids living in the building,” she said. “You’re going to have other young professionals looking to have a cool environment to live in.”

Her friend Liz Stiles, 28, lives on the Upper East Side and was unabashedly jealous of Ms. Kapnick’s new digs. “I live in baby-carriage city,” she complained. “I went out last weekend. I tried having a phone conversation, and babies were screaming. I couldn’t even talk on the phone.”

Buildings like Ohm could be seen as one reason that many live music spaces — the Knitting Factory, [CBGB](#), Tonic, Luna Lounge and Fez — have shut down or left Manhattan.

But the idea to use live music as an attraction to sell property was hatched by Seth Rosner, who besides working with Ms. Packes (he is also her son), is the owner of Pi Recordings, a highbrow jazz record label whose roster includes Vijay Iyer, Anthony Braxton and Marc Ribot. Mr. Rosner said that having the shows gave the building an important competitive advantage in a down economy.

“It’s a different city now,” he said. “Less people renting and less people buying means you have to do more to make your product more distinguished.”

Jeffrey E. Levine, the chairman of Douglaston Development, put it even more succinctly: “Being the better mousetrap saves the day.” He had his family in tow for the show. For refreshments he served beer and brought in hot dogs and knishes from his favorite deli in Queens.

The hot dogs, and the music, were a hit on Friday, although a sweep of the room revealed that not every new Ohm resident was likely to step out for a 1 a.m. D.J. set. Will and Nicola Brown, who moved from the English countryside, said the main attractions for them were their apartment’s amenities and floor-to-ceiling windows, not the distance to any bar.

“We’re not clubbers,” said Mr. Brown, 32, who works in human resources at Goldman Sachs. His only concern about the music, he said, was that it would be “too heavy” and go too late. Like a real club, in other words.

For the first night there was no such danger. Ms. Atkins, who lives in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in an apartment that she described as “the polar opposite of this place,” played a 35-minute acoustic set in which she relished the atrium’s natural reverb, and she was done by 8:20 p.m. The shows are free for residents, but Mr. Rosner said the musicians were well paid. He declined to give specific figures, but said that the budget for the year, with 24 planned shows, was more than \$60,000, counting production expenses and artist fees. The next event is planned for mid-April, but the Knitting Factory says it does not have an act confirmed yet.

Ms. Atkins said she was grateful for the job. But she raised another point that residents may have to contend with: the willingness of musicians to take part in the series, and to take part in the building’s marketing plans.

“At gigs like this I kind of feel like hired help,” she said. “The music is a decoration, part of trying to sell something.”

“But,” she added, “there are worse ways to make money.”

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