

# EQUAL BUT SEPARATE

DESPITE ITS CATCHY SLOGANS AND REPUTATION AS AN INTERNATIONAL CITY, ATLANTA HAS A SOCIAL SCENE THAT'S AS SEGREGATED AS EVER.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

**W**E WERE RUNNING late and the chill in the air had us hurrying toward the building in

search of much needed warmth. I did a double-take and, despite my haste, nearly stopped dead in my tracks as I approached the venue that was hosting a poetry event emceed by a popular urban radio personality.

What? No. Can't be, I thought as I stared at the long line snaking around the building. Are those . . . white people? Coming to hear urban poetry? Wow, I had no idea that Def Poetry Jam on Broadway had generated such "crossover" interest.

The burly black guy standing in the doorway motioned for my friend and me to go around the long line and through another door. Was this the VIP line? A special media entrance, maybe?

I abruptly snapped back into reality as, glancing over my shoulder, I noticed the marquee out front, indicating that an alternative band was playing on the same night in a smaller room adjacent

to the auditorium where the poetry show was underway. The man was essentially telling us to get into the other line—the black line. Ah. Now it all made sense.

So, true to the form that—thanks

is typical of the city, we filed into our separate lines, one all white and the other all black, into our respective events. A few hours later, we left the building as disconnected as we were when we arrived.

On one hand, this is the South, the place where demeaning Jim Crow laws were once common and where, not too long ago, there was an all-out state capitol showdown about whether or not to continue flying the Confederate flag. But on the other hand, this is Atlanta, the international city that hosted the Olympics a decade ago. You know, where "every day is an opening day" and city leaders of all races like to brag about our progressive diversity.

No matter where you stand on the issue, the fact remains that behind the flashy catch phrases, ad campaigns

and rhetoric, in terms of race, there exist two very separate Atlantas.

Atlanta is far from living up to its own hype. Look no further than the housing demographics to validate my point ("I-20 is the city's Mason-Dixon line," one of my friends always pur-



to a few years as *Atlanta* Magazine's resident "party girl"—I have learned

## PARTY PEOPLE

Sadly, it's rare to encounter people of different races mixing socially in Atlanta; most parties tend to have a dominant hue.

ports in lively debates), but the city's social scene is no exception.

Are we so divided by race that we can't even enjoy a party together? It kind of makes me think about when, years back, the state of Arizona refused to observe the Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday. "You gotta be awfully racist not to support taking a day off from work," joked one comedian.

Between my jam-packed social calendar and my obligation to cover events for the magazine, I have concluded that the crowd at parties and social events in this city can mostly be likened to two variations of an ice cream sundae—some are mostly vanilla with chocolate sprinkles; others are mostly chocolate with a dollop of whipped cream. Of course, there's the occasional banana split, a gathering that includes a mix of cultures all globbed into one, but such occasions are few and far between.

If blacks and whites won't get together on any substantial level, you can only imagine where Indians, Latinos and Asians fit into Atlanta's lopsided equation. Don't get me wrong, I know that cities beyond the South face similar challenges, but those cities don't brag about being diverse like Atlanta does.

Of course there are exceptions to every rule. A few places, like the Midtown cafe *Apres Diem*, have consistent diversity, and you can always catch a sea of patrons of all colors gyrating the night away on the dance floor at *Loca Luna*. But the city's dirty little secret, the proverbial elephant in the room if you will, is that the crowds at most clubs, lounges and social affairs have a dominant hue by design.

At most places in Atlanta there are unspoken "white night" and "black night" rules. On Thursday night at the *Leopard Lounge*, for instance, the crowd is all black. On Saturdays it's all white. Although *Compound* has made strides toward attracting a diverse crowd, it's widely known that Friday nights at this über-chic club cater to a black demographic whereas, again, Saturday is "white night."

Sometimes these evenings are referred to in code terms. Any club's "hip-hop nights" will be geared toward a black crowd, and its "techno nights" or "eighties nights" will be aimed at whites.

Before it closed for good in August, along with its very obvious, but not openly advertised, white (Saturday) and black (Friday) night distinctions, Vision even had two Web sites, [vision-atlanta.com](http://vision-atlanta.com) and [visionsaturday-night.com](http://visionsaturday-night.com). There's no way to prove that the digital divide was rooted in racial separation, but you do have to wonder why all the festivities for one club could not co-exist on one Web site.

There's rampant belief among many African Americans that "black night" is treated quite differently by owners of local nightspots—\$30 parking, inflated cover charges (or having a cover charge at all). Who could forget the additional fee to walk upstairs on Friday nights at the restaurant Shout? The jury is still out as to whether the differences are race-based because of bias or because of calculated business decisions to milk more money out of black crowds caught up in the hip-hop hype of flossin' (translation: excessive showing off) because they're simply willing to pay. It's one of those topics that is discussed in hushed tones behind closed doors, but in the end, it's just one of those things that make you go "hmmm."

Unlike the legal precedent that spawned the phrase "separate but equal," it must be noted that, as separate as Atlanta affairs tend to be, they truly are equal when it comes to flash and cash. It seems that every racial group in Atlanta—from the Georgia Indo-American Chamber of Commerce to the 100 Black Men of Atlanta—has its share of posh, extravagant affairs.

This is especially true at high-end \$250-a-ticket galas and private invitation-only events. There's not much difference between the pomp and circumstance at the mostly white Fashion Cares fundraiser and, say, the album release party for an R&B singer

(although the camels and giraffe at Usher's party at Compound blew everyone else away).

Interestingly enough, my observations come nearly 10 years after veteran Buckhead caterer Windsor Jordan, brother of former Clinton aide Vernon Jordan, told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that when metro Atlantans entertain privately, the guest list is invariably just one color. Of the hundreds of private parties he's catered over the years, only a select few have more than nominal integration.

In the same article, Jordan's assistant, Sheila Mount, eloquently noted how the racial divide actually begins in the workplace. "It's okay to be friends Monday through Friday, 9-to-5, but then you punch out on your Friendship Time Card and go home to your own," she contended. Well said, Sheila.

I'm not necessarily suggesting that we should all get together, hold hands

SOCIAL EVENTS IN THIS CITY CAN MOSTLY BE LIKENED TO TWO VARIATIONS OF AN ICE CREAM SUNDAE—SOME ARE MOSTLY VANILLA WITH CHOCOLATE SPRINKLES; OTHERS ARE MOSTLY CHOCOLATE WITH A DOLLOP OF WHIPPED CREAM.

and sing "We Are the World" (or is that "Kumbaya"?) as we sip Cosmos at a ritzy Buckhead lounge. At the end of the day, I believe that people should feel free to party and socialize with

whomever they want. It's your free time, and no mandates should be in place. But I do wish that Atlantans—civic leaders and regular residents alike—would spend less time touting how progressive the city is and more time actually being progressive. That means stepping out of that comfort zone every once in a while. Even if you're not white, drop into East Andrews Cafe on Friday night to listen to a live band. If you're not Latin, stop by a club on Buford Highway for a taste of some authentic salsa dancing. If you're not black, try nursing a "Harlem Shake" cocktail at Harlem Bar downtown. Perhaps you'll be pleasantly surprised by the experience.

All in all, it's time for Atlantans to move beyond talking the talk about this international city thing and begin walking the walk. Or dancing the dance as the case may be. ✪

[crthomas@atlantamag.emmis.com](mailto:crthomas@atlantamag.emmis.com)