



✦ a hooping revolution  
churns up ever more joy  
& self-awareness in  
the yoga community. ✦

*you spin me round*

by Anna Dubrovsky ✦ photos by Claudia Goetzelmann ✦



STYLIST: JASMINE HAMED; HAIR/MAKEUP: TAMARA BROWN/ARTIST UNTIED; CLOTHING FROM FAR LEFT: CATSUIT: DERVISH GIRL; CROP TOP: MELODIA; CAPRI: DERVISH GIRL; MEN'S TANK: AMERICAN APPAREL; SHORTS: ZOBHA; CAMI: DERVISH GIRL; LEGGINGS: AMERICAN APPAREL



**If you saw** Anusara yogini Shakti Sunfire take the main stage at last year's Wanderlust Festival, in Squaw Valley, California, you felt the yoga community's enthusiasm for hooping firsthand. As the DJ spun a downtempo tune, Sunfire danced in the embrace of her partner—a plastic hoop trimmed with flames. It rolled like a wave up and down her body, orbiting her thighs and waist, and whirling around her rib cage. She spun it overhead as she sank into Hanumanasana (Monkey God Pose) and then blossomed into a backbend. When she picked up a second hoop, the crowd whooped in wonderment. Sunfire—part whirling dervish, part pinup girl, and 100 percent yogini—beamed as she shimmied inside her rings of fire.

Today, Shakti Sunfire (whose given name is Laura Blakeman) and other hoop-yoginis with exotic stage names are teaching workshops in yoga studios across the country, from San Francisco to Cincinnati to Manhattan—and the trend is going global, picking up fans in cities such as Sydney and Barcelona. Devotees of the hybrid art form say it not only helps them tone and tune in to their bodies but also encourages better

alignment while bringing a fresh infusion of fun and joy into yoga practice. For those reasons and more, regular folks (men and women, young and old) and skilled performers alike are hooping it up at yoga retreats, summer festivals, MC Yogi concerts, and *Yoga Journal* conferences. They spin and dance on the National Mall during DC Yoga Week.

"Hooping rocks," says Anusara Yoga founder John Friend, who does it in his backyard when he's home in Texas, and on the road at yoga festivals, teacher trainings—wherever yogis gather.

A handful of trendsetting teachers have created hoop-yoga hybrids with names like HoopAsana, HoopYogi, and even Hoop Vinyasa. Some teach yoga for part of the class and hooping for the rest; others teach you how to hoop while you're holding yoga poses, and advanced classes teach you how to hoop through a yoga flow. Some weave in Tantric teachings; some blast techno music. No matter where you live, a groovy hoop-yoga class is probably coming to a studio near you—if it hasn't already.

"It's definitely growing, and it's come a long way since I started hooping six years ago," says Jivamukti and Hoop

*continued on page 106*

**FUN in the sun**

Nayeli Michelle Bouvier and Shakti Sunfire (pictured left) and Daniel Claussen and Sianna Sherman (right) play on a hot summer day.





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eira, who has  
ael Franti and  
to Sharon Gan-  
ne. Many yogis are drawn  
to hooping for the same reason kids are,  
she says: It's fun.

"It's about connecting to that child-  
like energy, that playful spirit inside you,"  
says Liana Cameris, a Philadelphia yoga  
teacher and hoop dancer who developed  
Hoop Vinyasa with two hoop-yogi friends  
in New York City. "A lot of times when  
you're practicing yoga, you're so serene.  
It's a solemn type of practice." Hooping  
is a way to let loose. "You laugh and you  
smile," she says. "It's like that feeling of  
being little and getting lost in something  
and time just slipping away."

Sianna Sherman, a senior Anusara Yoga  
teacher and avid hooper who has teamed  
up with Sunfire to teach yoga and hooping  
at yoga festivals in the United States and  
abroad, agrees. "I feel like the appeal has  
something to do with people's longing to  
play, to feel beautiful, to dance, to not be

so burdened by the pressures of everyday  
life. You get a hoop on and some music,  
and suddenly you get a little lighter, freer,  
happier. It energizes you and draws more  
light into your life."

Plus, the fun is contagious. To see for  
yourself, just take a handful of hoops to a  
local park, and you'll attract curious on-  
lookers in no time. Last year, when Sher-  
man and her hoop-yogi friends descended  
on San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts to  
shoot a promotional video, they attracted  
a bevy of Japanese tourists who snapped  
pictures and then, upon invitation, stepped  
into the hoops themselves, giggling. A mul-  
ticulti hoopfest ensued, and a connection  
was made.

### free your HIPS

Yogis who are hooked on hooping insist  
there's more to it than good times and  
good people. It can actually take your  
yoga practice to a new level. As Cameris,  
who switches from mat to hoop and  
back in the course of her home practice,  
explains: "As I'm hooping, I'll find certain

areas that feel constricted. So I'll take off  
the hoop, get on the mat, and move into  
postures that target those areas."

Hooping can also release long-held ten-  
sion and emotions in the hips. "That area  
gets so emotionally locked for people. It's  
where fears set in," Sherman says. Hoop-  
ing gets people moving in a way that "frees  
their emotions and melts resistance. They  
feel more free to express themselves."

In class, some teachers use the hoop as  
a prop to refine alignment. For example,  
in Utkatasana (Chair Pose), Hoop Vinyasa  
teacher Julie "Jewels" Ziff Sint, of New  
York City, asks her students to hold the  
hoop in front of and above themselves,  
making sure that it's in line with their  
torso. The variation makes it easier to  
"talk about the way the rhomboids, lateral  
muscles, and trapezius muscles should  
behave in Utkatasana," she says.

Once yogis have acquired some spin-  
ning skills, the hoop can be used to make  
familiar poses more challenging. Picture  
Vrksasana (Tree Pose) with a halo-like hoop  
orbiting overhead around your *namaste*

hands. Or three-legged Dog Pose with a  
hoop spinning around your raised foot.  
To pump up the volume, try a Hoop Vin-  
yasa class, where you might flow through  
Triangle, Warrior, and Tree Pose with a  
hoop spinning around your wrists, then  
hips, then legs. The possibilities are prac-  
tically endless.

### turn up the JOY

On a subtler level, hooping can help you  
find that balance between *stbira* (effort,  
steadiness) and *sukha* (ease, grace), which  
is the very definition of asana in Patanjali's  
Yoga Sutra. "In asana we can be pushing  
our bodies to the point where it's unsafe,  
and we may not know that until we injure  
ourselves," Sunfire says. "But the hoop  
has its own physics associated with it. If  
you make too much effort, it will fall. You  
can't just push through and seek the out-  
come, which is what so many of us do in  
asana and in life. The goal is to tune in and  
become sensitive. To listen."

There's a deeper contemplative aspect  
to hooping, too. Like vinyasa flow yoga,

Shiva Rea's popular Yoga  
Trance Dance, or the ancient  
tradition of Sufi whirling,  
hooping can be a form of mov-  
ing meditation. As Sherman  
observes, "My yoga practice  
is always in a state of evolu-  
tion. So bringing the hoop  
into it is even more fun. It just enhances  
the pure, radiant joy of being in my body.  
It's another portal into *ananda*, or bliss,  
just like meditation."

Ultimately, hooping can help you tap  
into what aficionados call the flow, "a  
state of movement without thoughts,"  
says hoop dancer extraordinaire Vivian  
"Spiral" Hancock, who lives in the San  
Francisco Bay Area and performs around  
the world. "That's what you want to hit.  
That's the addictive power of hooping."

Hoop-loving yogis view their prop  
as not just a toy but a tool for transfor-  
mation. Consider Sunfire's story: For  
years, she was a self-described "people  
pleaser"—a hooper who dazzled the  
crowd with her technical prowess, praying



that they would like her. But  
as she delved deeper into  
her yoga practice, she says,  
she developed a more inti-  
mate relationship with her  
body—and herself. In time,  
that new relationship allowed  
her to bring her fully present

embodied self to the stage and become a  
knockout performer. "What really moves  
people," she realized, "is when someone  
dances with the uninhibited joy that  
comes from the center of their being."

"Yoga brought my heart to center stage,"  
she says. As her yoga practice deepened,  
so did her hooping. "Yoga is a kind of turn-  
ing in. It's about connecting to the Source,  
to your divine essence. In that process,  
you see the strength of your own heart  
and your particular authenticity. Hoop-  
ing is a turning out, an ecstatic, visceral  
celebration of that connection." Clearly,  
it's a potent combination. ❖

*Anna Dubrovsky learned to hoop around her  
waist, knees, and hands for this story.*

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