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God - and the godless - take it to the
streets



Practice makes perfect ... participants in tonight's Mardi Gras parade rehearsal at Bondi North Surf Club yesterday.

Photo: *Brendan Esposito*

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Josephine Tovey
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GOD will be on Oxford Street tonight, spinning heavenly dance music and spreading a message of love and tolerance atop a two-tonne truck.

The "Surry Hillsong" float, which features DJ Mark Alsop as God and scores of costumed "pilgrims" following on foot, is one of 136 floats promising to bring politics and provocation back to Mardi Gras.

Organisers say tonight's Nations United theme, which focuses on the legal rights of gays and lesbians around the world, is a return to the original spirit of the parade, which began as a protest march for rights in 1978.

"Over a number of years, Mardi Gras had become less political and more about entertainment than making a statement," said the chairman, David Imrie.

"This year will be a demonstration for equal rights and a way of giving hope to gay and lesbian communities around the world."

The gold medal-winning diver Matthew Mitcham will lead more than 9000 parade performers along the route from the corner of Elizabeth and Liverpool streets to the party venue at Moore Park.

Mr Imrie would not reveal the gay Olympian's costume, but said that it would be "quite a spectacular display".

New sponsorship deals with Events NSW and the broadcaster Foxtel gave Mardi Gras funds a boost this year, allowing the organisers to invest in more entertainment along the parade route for the expected 400,000 spectators.

The funding has largely cushioned the festival against the effects of the economic downturn, though ticket sales to some smaller festival events have been down slightly.

It is the 21st Mardi Gras for Ethel Yarwood Enterprises, the artistic collective behind the Surry Hillsong entry, the most ambitious the group has ever attempted.

The group has been behind some of the parade's cheekiest and most politically savvy entries of the past two decades, including the Dick Van Dykes on Bikes in 1998 and the Happy Little Sodomites, in Vegemite-style jars, in 2000.

The artistic director, Sue-Ellen Cox, aka Sydney engineer Kevin "Kabi" Rigby, said the float was less about poking fun about Hillsong specifically and more about promoting a general message of tolerance.

"There are many religions that persecute homosexuals and we're lucky in this country that we've got laws against that," he said.

Police have declared Oxford Street an alcohol-free zone for the night and will be targeting drug use throughout the CBD.

There will be road closures from 6am in the city today.