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If They Want to Make It Hip, They Shouldn't Call It Square-Dancing

Fighting 'Hay Bale' Stigma to Lure the Young; Do-Si-Do to U2, Michael Jackson, Tag Team

By MARY PILON

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Every other week, Paul Silveria gathers his friends, many of them tattooed habitués of the punk scene here, in warehouses or large houses and cranks up loud protest music.

Then, the 28-year-old steps forward, do-si-dos his partner, and begins to square-dance.



Petticoat

"Square-dancing here isn't really what people imagine it to be," Mr. Silveria says of the hybrid rock and square-dance moves he does. "It turns into a hoedown mosh pit."

In the 1950s and 1960s, square-dancing was big with young and old folks alike. Today, youthful dancers and "callers" like Mr. Silveria are increasingly rare. If this quintessentially American art form can't lure new blood, many aficionados fear, it could be heading toward its last dance.

To attract young people, square-dancing organizations are making efforts to modernize. To the standard repertoire of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash, some callers have added Michael Jackson, U2 and hip-hop. To keep younger pupils hooked, instructors use collectible plastic badges that denote dancing milestones. Moves include flourishes such as dancing with a beanbag on your head.

The push has some purists grumbling that the true square-dancing tradition -- which arrived from France during colonial times and thrived as a social activity in rural areas -- is being ruined. In particular, older dancers complain that young people are too loud and don't respect traditional clothing or music.

Despite the complaints, leaders stress that they must update or die. "It's scary," says Doug Schafer, 60, an active member of the Bonnie Lads and Lassies square-dancing club in Tacoma, Wash. His group has 69 active members, only 13 under the age of 35. In a survey conducted by the United Square Dancers of America, only 36% of dancers were under the age of 60 in 2005. Fewer than 1% were between 19 and 29.

Nationally, the number of square-dancers has declined to 300,000 from more than one million estimated square-dancers in the late 1970s, says Len Houle, president of the USDA. Responding to the grim numbers, a related group voted in June to spend \$22,000 revamping its Web site to feature video and younger dancers.

Attracting the young isn't easy, even in the Pacific Northwest, a bastion of square-dancing all the way back to the covered-wagon days. Organizers must battle a perception among young people that square-dancing is uncool.

For decades, children endured square-dancing taught by indifferent teachers in gym class. Many adults still grimace at the thought of another do-si-do, resurrecting memories of stepping on toes and listening to outdated music.

"We're trying to prove we're not square," says Ray Gallagher, chairman of the Pacific Northwest Teen Square Dance Festival. Fighting "the hay-bale and hillbilly stigma" can be tough.

Mr. Gallagher's annual festival is the largest of its kind left in the country and is credited with anchoring a robust young dancer community in the Northwest. In its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, the springtime event drew 1,500 dancers from the Northwest. Now, Mr. Gallagher says he'll be lucky to attract 500 competitors. They come from all over the country, because so many other youth square-dance festivals have died.

Baleigh Marquardt, 15, describes herself as a "closet square-dancer." Concerned her high-school friends will make fun of her, she says that only a handful know about her weekly trips to the Maplewood Grange in Aurora, Ore., to practice dancing with the Canby Cloverleaves. In lieu of full prairie skirts worn over lace-trimmed petticoats, Ms. Marquardt opts for "toned-down prom dresses," without open backs.

A few miles north, at Kinton Grange in Beaverton, Ore., dancers sweat and spin, their footsteps thundering on the wood floor. Older dancers welcome half a dozen young dancers on the floor. One girl sports pink-tipped hair, black leather bracelets and a blue prairie skirt. Another boy uses a class ring to cinch his neck scarf.

During one dance, a white-bearded man wearing a pink neck kerchief twirls a 10th-grader so fast that she pleads, "I'm dizzy!" During breaks, younger dancers remove cellphones from belt holsters and begin text-messaging.

Among those twirling and texting is 20-year-old Amanda Roberts. Ms. Roberts recently was elected to the board of the Tualatin Valley Council of Square Dance Clubs. She is the youngest member by a few decades.

Since joining, she has begun a recruitment drive to find young dancers. She made a Facebook page for the Toe Draggers, the club she belongs to in Beaverton. She posts square-dancing fliers on high-school and college campuses, and joins online discussion groups to tell youths where they can find dance lessons. For all that, she's only recruited two people for lessons. Young people "think it's all Western. They have the wrong impression," Ms. Roberts says.

Sometimes it just takes the right incentives to convince people under a certain age to attend square dances. Charmaine Slaven, 29, helped launch a "Dare to Be Square" event in the Northwest two years ago to train new callers and musicians. This year's event sold out all 160 spots. Ms. Slaven's formula for success: cheap cover charges, no lessons required, and kegs of beer.

Teens used to have their own clubs, but because of the dwindling sizes of many organizations, many teen groups have combined with traditional clubs in recent years.

This creates some tensions. Christy Knierim, a 19-year-old dancer in Corvallis, Ore., says she and other youth were relegated by elders to the back corner of the dance floor. Elders worried about confusion when younger dancers switched male and female dancing roles. There were also concerns of "goofing off," she says. In time, the two groups have unified.

Other older dancers embrace the new culture. Down the road at the Oak Grove Community Club, George Hermann, a 62-year-old caller for the Oaky Doaks of Oak Grove, Ore., put on a backwards cap and shades and began rapping to "Whoop! (Square it is)," a square-dance version of Tag Team's 1993 hip-hop hit "Whoomp! (There it is)."

To a thumping backbeat, Mr. Hermann delivers his lines at a rapper's pace into a microphone: "Swing that lady round and round" and "do an allemande left."

Michael Kious, Mr. Hermann's grandson, was mortified as a young boy when he first heard his grandfather rap in front of an audience. But now, the 21-year-old Mr. Kious, a dancer himself, says his grandpa's rap is a favorite.

Mr. Kiouss met his wife, Lisa, square-dancing. Although they have encountered a handful of other young dancing couples online, the newlyweds realize they're a rare breed.

They say they enjoy dancing with older folks but acknowledge a generational divide. Younger dancers' faster pace, additional hip bumps and extra claps can cause some collisions with elders, many coping with knee replacements or arthritis.

"Sometimes we have to warn older dancers that they're in a younger square," Mrs. Kiouss says. "It can get crazy."

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