

# MAKING SQUARE DANCE LESS SQUARE

Do-Sa-Do in Denver shifts direction to attract new members



By Mark Jaffe

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*Couples square dance at Maple Grove Grange in Denver on July 14.*

The strains of Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep” are pulsing, and the dance floor is packed. “There’s a fire starting in my heart reaching a fever pitch and it’s bringing me out the dark.” Allemande left, Do-Sa-Do, Allemande left, weave the ring. “See how I leave with every piece of you, don’t underestimate the things I will do.” Swing and promenade ... . Yes, as the dark bluesy song pumped out of the speakers, the dancers — in a flurry that snapped into patterns — were square dancing. Just another Saturday night at the square dance club. Sixty-four dancers, mostly having forgone traditional crinoline prairie skirts and Western shirts for shorts and polo shirts, packed the floor at the Maple Grove Grange in Wheat Ridge as the caller, Robert “Bear” Miller, sang out the steps. Not your grandmother’s square dancing? Well, actually, it still is, since there was a good chance somebody’s grandmother was out there on the dance floor.



*Bear Miller calls a dance at the Maple Grove Grange in Denver on July 14.*



*While square dancing still attracts an older generation, there are efforts to bring in younger dancers with new music and moves.*



*Larry Cappel, back and Kelly Costello dance with the Rocky Mountain Rainbeaus at the Washington Street Community Center in Denver on July 17.*

This is the Denver square-dancing scene circa 2018. In an effort to keep it fresh, sound systems have replaced fiddlers and banjos, and square-dance callers are using blues, jazz and pop. It is as likely these days to dance to Bruno Mars or Michael Jackson as Garth Brooks.

“For awhile, square dancing got stuck in time, in the 1950s, and now we are trying to get unstuck and evolve again,” said Miller, who calls for Rollin’ Wheels and other clubs in Denver.

Still, the metro area’s square-dancing clubs are getting grayer and grayer, and working hard — with various degrees of success — to recruit new members.

Part of the challenge is that it can take months of lessons to master the basics of the dance, which is sort of “Simon Says” with the complexity and speed of the video game “Cut the Rope.”

“It’s something for people who really like puzzles,” said Bob Riggs, the caller for the Sunflower Squares club in Castle Rock and owner of Square Dance Etc., which provides entertainment, lessons and workshops.

In the 1970s, Denver was a square-dancing hotbed with more than 70 clubs and thousands of dancers, as well as teen and college clubs.

This was in part the legacy of Lloyd “Pappy” Shaw, the principal of Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado Springs, who in the 1930s and 1940s traveled the country collecting square dances and calls and organizing teaching programs. Shaw created a high school square-dance team, which toured more than 50 cities. The square dance is Colorado’s state dance.

The University of Denver’s Carson Brierly Giffin Dance Library currently has an exhibition and documentary on Square Dance in the American West from the Lloyd Shaw Foundation archives.

The number of square-dance clubs in the Denver area, however, has dwindled to 18, with perhaps 900 dancers, including a good number who have danced for decades, according to the Colorado State Square Dance Association.

“Look at any group activity, (like) bowling leagues, bridge groups,” Riggs said. “They’ve all had a significant fall-off. This isn’t about square dancing; it’s about our culture.”

Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, in his book, “Bowling Alone,” called the trend a “decline in social capital.” While you can bowl alone, you cannot square dance alone, so the Denver clubs continue their battle.

One big hurdle is learning the steps. It isn’t easy. The traditional approach has been a lesson a week for 24 weeks, with sessions costing \$5 to \$10 each (often with discounts).

Basic square dancing involves learning 50 moves. The Mainstream program, which is what is primarily danced, uses 70 calls, and Plus takes it up to 100. Advanced adds another 90 calls.

“It seems so complex, but everybody can do it,” Miller said. “If you can walk, you can square dance.”

Riggs and Miller, who both teach as well as call, are each trying to cope with square dancing’s learning curve, such as tailoring shorter sets of classes, all-day sessions or a learn-at-your-own-pace program.

The lessons are often sponsored by clubs, and efforts are made to adjust for costs, so no one is turned away. “If money is tight, you should come and dance,” Miller said.

Dancers work in groups of eight, or four couples, called a square. (Get it?) The caller moves the dancers around, changes their partners, changes their direction.

“You are trying to create patterns, throw an unexpected call, a little surprise and get them back to their partners,” Miller said. “For the caller, it is a Rubik’s Cube.”

Each dance ends with dancers exchanging handshakes and hugs for a job well done.

A few nights after calling for Rollin’ Wheels, Miller was at the Washington Street Community Center calling for the Rocky Mountain Rainbeaus, Denver’s LGTB club. When Miller shifted from Mainstream to Plus, accompanied by Jerrod Niemann’s “Lover, Lover,” the intensity in the room ratcheted up, the dancing punctuated with claps and shouts as Miller called the Acey Deucey, Peel the Top and Explode the Wave.

While Rainbeaus have a reputation as a lively, sometimes raucous group, moving to Plus had the same effect on the Rollin’ Wheels.

Rainbeaus is the biggest club in the area, with 94 members.

“One reason is they accept everybody, straight, a married couple, everybody,” said Paula Kauffman, a straight woman, who owned up only to being north of 70 years old.

Jake McWilliams, 40, a transgender man who has been dancing with Rain-beaus for three years, said, “I think we’re all getting a lesson in being together.”

Rainbeaus may also be successful because of its \$5 lessons, with a special fund to help defray the cost for those who need a little financial help.

Littleton’s Mountaineers has about 70 members.

IF YOU GO Interested in finding a square dance club near you or square dance lessons? The Denver area council of the Colorado State Square Dance Association can connect you. Many clubs begin offering lessons in September. Email middlebrook [mb@gmail.com](mailto:mb@gmail.com) or call 303-332-4212

Club president Ray DeAngelis said financially, the goal is just to break even. The club’s annual dues are \$20. The cover for attending a dance is \$6 a person for members and \$7 for non-members. Most clubs also provide refreshments.

“It is a very affordable night out,” DeAngelis said.

There is a dance someplace in Denver almost every night. Mountaineers dance the first, third and fifth Saturdays of each month. Rainbeaus dance Mondays, Tuesday and Thursdays, though some of the sessions are advanced. Rollin’ Wheels dance the second and fourth Saturdays. Then, there are the 15 others clubs.

It isn’t by chance that Mountaineers is a large club, since it has been aggressive in its recruiting. “Part of our recruitment effort is to bring the age down,” DeAngelis said. “We did pretty well last year.”

In luring more people, age can be an impediment. “Nobody wants to dance with their grandmother,” Miller said. Moving to contemporary music and sound systems is one attempt to shake square dancing’s hayseed image.

The music has to have a strong walking beat of 110 to 130 beats a minute, good phrasing, and 2-2 or 4-4 time, Riggs said. “Country music comes closest,” he said. Still, he has called to jazz and the Hustle.

But not everyone is a fan. Lyle Gillette of Littleton came off the floor at the Rollin’ Wheels dance in his Western shirt and cowboy boots. His badge (each club has its own badge) showed he was a visiting Mountaineer.

“Square dancing was founded on country music,” said Gillette, who has been dancing for 30 years. “Some callers think they can get young people with new music. I’m not so sure.”

Miller, however, said that square dancing is just finding a “new identity” and, it is hoped, new dancers.

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