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NOT TOO SQUARE TO DANCE

Western American pastime lives on through more than 35 local dance groups

Story by Patrick Condon | Photos by Veronica Weber

As Kurt Gollhardt spins his dance partner across the floor during a recent “Tie-dye Friday” square dance party at St. Andrews United Methodist Church in Palo Alto, he’s not concerned about whether he misses a step or two. Neither are the other 40 or so

dancers who smile and laugh as they move around the dance floor following the caller’s instructions. “Circle right, pass through ... wheel and deal ... swing,” caller Michael Levi sings out to the dancers over a microphone, signaling their next moves.

The dance group is all about

having fun, according to Gollhardt, a longtime member of the Palo Alto-based LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) square dance club, The El Camino Reelers, which members initially formed in 1985 to provide an outlet to socialize and meet friends.

Today, the club holds lessons and events at least twice a week and is open to anyone who wants to dance.

“You don’t need a partner; you don’t need a fancy outfit; you don’t need to know anything about dancing; and you don’t need to be coordinated. What you do need

is a pair of comfortable shoes or boots and the desire to have fun!” the group’s website states.

While the group has a caller and most of the components of a typical modern Western dance club, there are a few differences: The music isn’t limited to country — the Reelers dance to everything from traditional folk music to soul, disco and show tunes; and, people aren’t wearing special square dance attire. The group regularly hosts high-energy, themed dances such as Friday’s hoedown, where members donned tie-dye skirts, shirts, ties and other bright accessories.

The Reelers isn’t a Peninsula anomaly. The group is among more than 35 square dance clubs along the Midpeninsula and greater South Bay, including four in Palo Alto, Stanford, Los Altos and Mountain View, according to the Santa Clara Valley Square Dancers Association. The



Top: Caller Michael Levi leads the El Camino Reelers during a “Tie-dye Friday” dance on Jan. 27 in Palo Alto. Members say the LGBTQ dance group, which formed in 1985, is all about having fun and regularly hold themed dances that include nontraditional music. Left: El Camino Reelers square dancers Andrew Irish, left, and Sam Cantin, right, dance in the Plus and Advanced group that meets weekly in Palo Alto. Irish and Cantin have been square dancing for more than a decade each.



Lynn Ashmall, who has been square dancing with the El Camino Reelers for the past 8 years, laughs as she dances with the group during a club get together in January.

groups, which cater to just about every niche — beginners, singles, couples, straight, gay — are part of a global pastime celebrating Western American square dance and the Old West cowboy era. Groups dance and compete here and abroad at international conventions that include associations from as far as Japan, Australia, Britain and Denmark.

In neighboring Los Altos, Vicky Campagna, a longtime member of Bows and Beaus (one of the oldest singles and couples clubs in the area), said she was looking for a fun way to stay in shape when she joined the club, which formed in 1963. She's never thought about leaving the group.

"I hate exercise, and this is the one kind that keeps my mind active," said Campagna during a recent dance that included some members from the Reelers who wore plaid shirts, western belt buckles, flared prairie-style skirts and lots of denim.

At both clubs, the atmosphere is celebratory and welcoming, with the caller at the center of the activity.

To the untrained eye, the dances can seem complex and difficult, with four sets of partners (eight dancers) arranged in a square, swinging and dancing around

each other, toward the center of the square and back.

"Once you've learned the moves, it becomes more manageable," said Gollhardt before heading back onto the dance floor.

Despite the variety and number of clubs in the area, Gollhardt, who is also a caller and travels the square dance circuit, said in recent years, he's seen the activity "trending down" overall with fewer dancers participating at events. But Gollhardt and the other dancers in his group don't really seem to care much if their activity isn't as trendy at the moment. They describe the square dance scene as a subculture — not a passing trend.

"(This) is my community, my social life," Gollhardt said.

Here, he added, "I discovered the family I never knew." ■

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about the cover: Carol Love, center, who has been square dancing since 1988, dances with the Bows and Beaus club during a recent get together in Los Altos.



Irv Martin, 91, center, waits for the next call while dancing with the El Camino Reelers during a club dance in January. Martin has been square dancing for more than 45 years and dances six nights a week with different clubs in Sunnyvale, Los Altos, San Jose and Santa Clara.



Bows and Beaus square dancers from left, Rodger Bauer, Karin Swanson, Monte Hoskins and Bill LaValle sit out a dance and socialize during a recent weekly club get together at Loyola Elementary School. The group, formed in 1963, is among the oldest singles and couples square-dance clubs along the Midpeninsula, which boasts about 35 clubs.



Indra Ong dances with partner Paul Snyder during a "Tie-dye Friday" dance hosted by the El Camino Reelers at St. Andrews United Methodist Church in Palo Alto at the end of January.



Dressed in traditional attire, square dancers from the Bows and Beaus club in Los Altos wait for the dance calls to begin.