



DANCE

like nobody's watching

By Shelley Stewart Photography by Meg McKinney

Here's great news for would-be dancers: Birmingham almost leads the nation in having the most dance clubs, and there's a vibrant dance scene here. So where can you find ballroom or boogie in this town? Hint ... It won't be in the nightclubs.



A young couple, dressed to "cut a rug" in '20s clothing, dances at an AIDS benefit held at Sloss Furnace.



As filmmaker Woody Allen once said, "Ninety percent of life is just showing up." Like birds of a feather, dancers fond of one genre or another get together regularly to pursue their passion, becoming more expert each time. Ballroom, contra, swing, bop, shag, cajun ... whatever... there's a group. "You could dance every night of the week, and never do the same kind twice," says Murray Echols, who is known for spreading the word about Birmingham's many dance opportunities.

With such an enjoyable common interest, there's a lot of overlap. Swing-dancers often flock to ballroom or cajun functions, and the boppers and shaggers share a love of similar music. Some couples, such as Art and Margarita Gracianette, have been dancing together for almost 50 years. Others may have met only that night, drifting together as a new song starts. That's key to the experience—the more dance partners you have, the better you learn—and longtime dancers know it. Many groups offer free lessons, and a partial list of other places to learn is posted on www.b-metro.com. Read on for an overview of some of the more popular clubs.

Elegant Ballroom

"Dancing with the Stars" has introduced millions of new fans to the elegant ballroom dancing that has long been popular in Birmingham. The JBY Ballroom Dance Club and the Birmingham Ballroom Dance Association regularly bring together dancers who enjoy the intricacies of formal dancing. Dressed to suit the festive mood, women in cocktail attire or long dresses and men in suits or tuxes gracefully move to the waltz, foxtrot, tango, chacha, samba, rumba, and a host of other ballroom dances. Live bands and lively feet are *de rigueur* for the evening.

Although known for their intense dedication to technique and correctness in the steps, the ballroom dance groups are far from stodgy. Over time, technical practice becomes such second nature that it allows dancers to relax and give in to the joy of the music. Moving as one, a handsome couple sweeps through the waltz, giving bodily form to glorious sound. Stepping into a foxtrot, their rapidly moving feet are perfectly synchronized. To see a vast ballroom filled with such dancers is a visual feast.

Some learn their art at commercial dance studios, while others sign up for classes at various venues around town. Instructor Chris Busby says, "Within three lessons, you'll know way more than the general public. With 10, you'll feel comfortable dancing anywhere!" Instructor Fabian Sanchez was featured on "Dancing With the Stars" a couple of years ago as the partner of actress Marlee Matlin. Whether or not they participate in competitive dancing, the overall quality of Birmingham's instructors is outstanding. Students go on to become lifelong dancers.

Luci Colee, enjoying an evening at The Club, shares the experience of many in the ballroom. She says, "I've danced on and off for years. Originally a friend brought me, and I've been dancing ever since. It's a true pleasure."





Contra dancers often sport unique attire, such as this kilt made from camouflage fabric. Swinging skirts are a plus for dancing.

Contra Dancing

It's not much of a stretch to imagine these dancers doing the same steps in Colonial or even Medieval garb. There's a peasant exuberance to the moves—quaint, courtly, yet raucously joyous—a community joining to laugh and dance. The name contra is a combination of “country” and the French word “contre” meaning against. In contra dance, long lines of dancers weave in and out as they follow the caller's commands. Moves are similar to those in square dancing.

The crowd gets into the music, and eyes light up as feet start moving. Grandpas dance with their granddaughters, longtime partners mix it up with new converts, and men and women spin around with abandon as the band, Waxwing, plays. Comprised this night of a fiddle, flute, guitar, cello, keyboard, and hand-drum, plus the caller, band members come together from three states just to play their timeless tunes.

The regulars rarely miss a dance. Teri Wright, dressed in a long “earth mother” gown, says “I love the dance. I love the



WHERE AND HOW:

Interested in old-time (as in old-country) music and dancing? Come to the downtown YWCA on the second Saturday of each month or go to <http://sites.google.com/site/bfootmad>. Warm-up sessions at 7:30 p.m. go over the basics, and dancing begins at 8 p.m. All ages welcome. Small admission charge. Tips: Think UAB types, earth shoes, and Mung beans when you decide what to wear; individualism reigns supreme in this free-wheeling gathering of dancers. Here, a fiddle is a fiddle—not a violin.

people. I always feel so comfortable here.”

Another dancer, Bruce McClelland, says, “I've been dancing almost every month for 28 years. Basically, all you have to do is walk and hold out your hands. The caller runs through the steps and then he may stop calling, but the dancers keep on going. It's like something magical! The first time it happened to me, I was like ... Wow!”

A favorite of auto tycoon Henry Ford, who thought it promoted togetherness among his employees, contra dancing went out in the '20s with the advent of jazz. Then the hippies brought it back in the '60s, according to Linda James. “Now,” she says, “you can go to almost any college campus and you'll find a huge group!”

Because the group is so accepting, dancers feel free to dress as the spirit moves them. Tim Holland, for instance, shows up in his green-and-brown-camouflage kilt. “Well, my family is native to Alabama,” he says, with tongue in cheek, “and this is our family tartan.”





No Partner? No Problem!

Lack of a partner should never stop anyone who wants to dance. Most clubs are extremely hospitable to singles who show up alone or with a friend. Because everyone is encouraged to ask everyone else to dance, no one even knows who comes alone.

There are also line dances in which each person, although moving in carefully choreographed steps, is basically dancing alone. These are some of the most popular of all dances, luring both men and women (but especially women) out of their chairs and onto the floor. The Boot-skootin' Boogie, Electric Slide, and Cowboy ChaCha—to name a few—are perennial favorites, but new ones come along all the time.

There are also events specifically targeted to singles. The Singles Mingle, a benefit for Haiti's earthquake victims, attracted more than 300 unmarried people who combined dancing with doing good. For information on line-dancing lessons and opportunities to dance, go to www.b-metro.com or see www.activeculture.info.



Magic City Boppers

Remember boppin' to the sounds of Larry & the Loafers singing Panama City Blues down at the Hangout? Those were the days ... but you can re-live them every Wednesday at the boppers' weekly gathering, where DJs play oldies that make your feet feel young.

Alabamians growing up in the late '50s and '60s were weaned on the music played by Duke Rumore, legendary rock-n-roll DJ at WSGN radio. This music is the soul of the bop crowd, supplemented by slow blues and obscure R&B songs with similar backbeat rhythms.

The boppers congregate down at the VFW, one of the city's most popular dance venues because of its huge wooden floor. Sitting at one of the many tables, dancers chat until they can't resist a favorite song and pull a partner toward open space.

Pegged Liberty jeans, white socks, full skirts, virgin pins, Weejuns ... that's the way it was, and the music brings back that happy innocence. Practiced DJs know exactly when to switch from pounding beats to head-on-my-shoulder tunes as poignant as prom night in the gym.

"Everybody here learned to dance either

by dancing with a doorknob or by putting their hands against the wall," says Larry Harris, President of the Boppers. "The bop is a resistance dance where you push and pull in unison."

To the uninitiated, it often looks like almost random steps. A closer look reveals that those "random" moves are only cool individual styles perfected by lifetimes of dancing. "We had so much fun when we were teenagers," Bob Ausman says, "cruising, dancing at the Hangout in PC, Friday-night parties in Ensley." "That's what it's about," Harris adds. "Whether you can bop or not, just come on down and have fun!"



WHERE AND HOW:

Wanna bop 'til you drop? You can—most Wednesdays at the Kelly Ingram VFW Club, 1801 11th Ave. North. Go to www.magiccityboppers.com for a complete schedule, including monthly Friday dances. There are usually free lessons at 6:30 p.m. with dancing from 7 to 10 p.m. No cover charge. Bring snacks or buy popcorn and beverages there. Tips: Many of the regulars grew up dancing together at local high schools, but they're exceptionally friendly to newbies and singles. Wear loafers and jeans or casual clothes. Ladies, high heels will only get in your way.



Dancing is something you learn, and then you can do it forever. —Sara McJunkin



WHERE AND HOW:

Like beach music, R&B, and oldies? You'll love the Shag! Check out www.beachshaggers.com. There's a dance every Tuesday at the Kelly Ingram VFW Club, 1801 11th Ave. North, with out-of-town parties hosted by other Shag clubs. Free lessons at 6:30 p.m. with dancing from 7 to 10 p.m. No cover charge. Bring snacks; beverages sold at a reasonable cost.

Tips: The Shag originated in South Carolina, where partygoers danced a waist-down shuffle with bare feet on sandy beaches. Wear casual clothes and low-heel, leather-sole shoes—if they glide easily, you can fake the sand.

Beach Shaggers of Birmingham

The first thing you notice are the smiles—the next thing the feet: those gliding, sliding feet attached to legs doing amazing moves. It's the regular Tuesday Shag night, and dancers move to R&B music both old and new. It's a rich mix of Doo-wop and Soul, where the beat is always the thing.

"This dance takes us back to a carefree lifestyle that feels like eternal youth," says John Harper, current President of the Beach Shaggers of Birmingham. "We act like we're teenagers and, in the dark, we almost look like it!" As in high school, a casual atmosphere leads to friendship and romances, including one for Harper and his wife Sally, who met while shagging.

Susan Green echoes his sentiments, "A lot of us are Boomers caught in a time warp. Once we hear that music, we're all 16 years old. When I first came here, I didn't know a soul. Now I know everyone," Green says.

Cliff Capps, a dancer who is also one of the club's regular DJs, says, "I always loved the music here, but after a month of listening, I finally got up and danced. Then I began to love the dance itself. You can add the intricate moves or just stay with the basics."

With mirror-like precision, couples draw close then pull apart in a cadence so smooth that feet barely leave the floor. Young dancers of all ages enjoy the sensuous dance. "It's great exercise, and you don't need the bar

crowd at all. I wouldn't hesitate to come here by myself," adds Sara McJunkin. Only now, *Lil' Brown Eyes*, you can stay for the whole dance without asking *Mama*—and you might even run across that *Sixty-Minute Man*.

Dance first. Think later. It's the natural order. —Samuel Beckett



There are shortcuts to happiness, and dancing is one of them.

—Vicki Baum, *I Know What I'm Worth* (1964)



WHERE AND HOW:

West Coast meets East Coast Jitterbug and the Lindy Hop at energetic Swing Dances all over Birmingham. For a schedule, go to www.birminghamswingdancers.com.

Most dances are held at the Fultondale Friendship Hall, 1024 Old Walker Chapel Rd. in Fultondale. Pay a cover charge, take lessons at 7:30, and dance from 8–11 p.m. Dress is casual. Come prepared to have fun and meet people who love to kick up their heels—wildly.

Cajun and Zydeco

How does someone describe Cajun dancing? Well, imagine dipping one toe into the bayou and then withdrawing it quickly so it won't be eaten by an alligator—over and over—and you'd come pretty close. It's done to exuberant Cajun-French music, heavy on fiddle and accordion. Repetitive footwork frees the body to engage in spins so intricate they leave a dizzy aftermath. In Louisiana, families spanning several generations gather to dance at Fais-do-dos (parties) or on Sunday afternoons, alternating traditional Cajun dance with the waltz.

Zydeco, on the other hand, came to be in black Louisiana roadhouses, where close confines put more emphasis on footwork and less on spins. The rhythm is different too, mixing blues, French, and R&B elements coming mainly from the accordion and rub-board. Observe the crowd of dancers, and it's clear who knows the real thing. They dance closer, their legs are slightly crouched, their feet almost interlock, and they just seem to have that "Laissez les bonne temps roulez" look. Music and movement fill the air and all available space. It's party time and the dancers show their stuff.

The Cajun/Zydeco dance group, collectively called ACME for Association of Cajun Music Enthusiasts, owes much of its existence to David Doggett. Along with Dolores Hydock, he has taught Cajun dancing and Zydeco for over 18 years. Each month hundreds of dancers turn out for the music.

"It's a natural high!" Brent Lambiotte says. "As tired as I might be, I come here and just get rejuvenated." Like many others who come from far-flung cities, Don Baggett drives all the way from Atlanta to be at almost every dance. "I like the joy of the music and dancing with pretty women," he says with a laugh. "Dancing, to me, is like running is to some people. I get a surge from it." Lori Higginbotham thinks of dancing as her passion. "It's also an opportunity to meet people in a safe, friendly environment.

For information on ACME go to www.acmedance.org.



Birmingham Swing Dancers

The young man and woman gyrating to the Lindy Hop are in their early twenties. Across the floor, a gray-haired man is twirling a lady in her late sixties, and they're still pretty good at the Jitterbug. Faces are flushed, and both couples grin—they're having a ball doing dances they love. The band has a diverse repertoire, because as long as the rhythm is right, anything goes at a swing dance. This is the secret of its

appeal.

Swing dancing is a broad term, referring to an energetic mix of styles combining turns with fancy footwork. There's the West Coast version, East Coast version, revivals of the Lindy Hop from the '40s and the Jitterbug from the '50s, with a bow to Shag and Bop. Think Dick Clark's American Bandstand show in 1957, updated with a new generation, for a mental

image of how the dance floor looks. If you want to see dancin' daddies spin their ladies, this is the place.

Pat Abbott and Rinsel McIntosh are among the cadre of swing dance instructors. Looking over the crowd at one of the popular monthly dances, Rinsel says, "This is the best bunch of people you'll ever meet." He should add: They're some of the best dancers too.



For a listing of dance resources go to b-metro.com