

Bay Area couples waltz the night away

DIVERSE CROWD GLIDES, SPINS AT 'FRIDAY NIGHT WALTZ' TO OLD STANDARDS, METALLICA

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Mercury News
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched: 04/13/2007 01:34:23 AM PDT

The smiles are the tip-off.

All around the second-floor ballroom, couples are grinning as they swirl in three-quarter time. One, two, three - one, two, three. Young with old, fat with thin, pretty with plain - and variations of all of those. It doesn't seem to matter.

What draws them is the fun of Friday Night Waltz.

"Our motto is: 'a social event for people who enjoy waltzing,'" said Scott Gamble of Palo Alto, one of the founders of Friday Night Waltz, who is a computer consultant when he isn't on a ballroom floor. "Many of the young people who come are tired of rock and roll and hip hop."

Every Friday night for the past five years, 130 to 190 people have gathered in Palo Alto, Alameda or San Francisco to waltz and polka, tango and cha-cha, swing and salsa, with some other steps mixed in. The average age is 30.

"Many dancers are Stanford alumni, students, faculty and staff," Gamble said. "There are a lot of Google employees who attend."

Indeed, for many, going to Friday Night Waltz is like attending a reunion. Many got hooked when they took the social dance classes of Richard Powers at Stanford University or danced at the Renaissance and Dickens fairs. Some are members of PEERS, the Period Events & Entertainments Re-Creation Society.

All love the romance of the waltz.

"The act of spinning incessantly in the arms of another is somewhat trancelike," said Powers, one of the world's foremost experts on social dance. "You aren't showing off with dozens of steps, and you're not performing for an audience, but simply moving in unison with another person to wonderful music."

From Metallica to more traditional waltz numbers, the music played at the Friday Night waltzes is as varied as the people who come. Yet no matter what the song is, the same step is still at the heart of the dancing: one, two, three - one, two, three.

Powers, for instance, sometimes serves as DJ - making it a sure bet "The Chipmunk Song" will be among the play for the polkas. And when he can, he helps teach the two-hour classes held before the waltz. The classes make it possible for beginners to step right up on their first night, and the regulars make it comfortable enough for them to try. The cost is \$8 for the dance, and \$11 for the dance and the class.

"It's what people are watching on television but we're doing in real life," said Daniel Galpin, 35, a software engineer from Santa Cruz. "I love bringing new people here."

On the first and third Fridays of the month, Friday Night Waltz is held in Palo Alto. The East Bay group has grown and now waltzes on second Saturdays of the month at the Oakland Veterans Hall. The group's formal New Year's Eve Waltz Ball at the International House in Berkeley sells out at 300 every year.

Unlike competitive ballroom dancing, where the focus is on technique and new steps, "you focus on your partner more in waltzing," Gamble said. "If you get good at it, it's like driving - you're completely aware of the music and can talk to your partner without the fear of crashing into someone."

On a recent Friday night in Palo Alto, in the second-floor ballroom of the First United Methodist Church on Hamilton Avenue, the crowd was typical: a mix of young and old, clothing and style, from the short red dress of a white-haired regular to the long velvet coat and green hair of a first-timer from San Francisco.

"My friends told me about it," said Kevin Kessler, 21, a philosophy major from San Francisco, resplendent in a black derby hat, burgundy velvet coat and green hair.

Whitton Frank, 23, of Atherton, had been a standout at Friday Night Waltz for four years, with her freckles and long red hair. She gravitated to waltz after Irish and vintage dancing and then moved to Los Angeles last fall to pursue a career in acting. She has returned to Palo Alto to dance several times since.

"Unfortunately, there is less dancing there," she said.

And more focus on image. At Friday Night Waltz, "a lot of us have a policy," she said. "If someone asks you to dance, you say yes."

Barbara Burley, 72, of Pacifica, comes every Friday night with her 17-year-old granddaughter, Jackie Juricich of San Mateo.

"When the music starts, I can't sit still," Burley said. "I don't just hear it, I feel it."

Like many of the others, who started out in a different form of dancing before discovering Friday Night Waltz, Burley keeps hoping she'll run into some people she used to folk-dance with, "but a bunch of them have died off."

Kim Tran, 21, a human biology major at Stanford, often comes with friends and likes the "quaintness" of the setting and the dances.

"I had a gentleman escort me off the dance floor," she said, beaming. "It's great to see all the different ages."

Tran can always count on running into friends at the Friday night dances.

Between his daytime and evening classes at Stanford, Powers has 700 to 1,000 dance students each quarter, "who then pour into the Bay Area dance scene once they've discovered dancing." All 140 slots in each of his six dance classes are filled within days each quarter, with long waiting lists.

And when he asks them which dance they enjoyed most, "waltz always ends up being the overall favorite," he said.

"One comment I often hear is, 'I took the course mostly to learn swing, then I was surprised to discover that I liked waltzing even more.'"

Part of it is the connection with a partner. But mainly, "it's the romance of the waltz."

On the web: [www.fridaynightwaltz .com](http://www.fridaynightwaltz.com)

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