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Lost My Partner, What'll I Do? Keep Dancing!

By KAREN MACLAUGHLIN

Whether you lost your partner, still have your partner, or never had one to begin with, consider joining the *Swinging 21ers* of Fremont or *Farmers and Farmerettes* of Newark, two of the Tri-City's most long-lived and lively modern American square dance clubs. They have been providing good, clean, pulse-hastening fun since 1989 and 1961, respectively, and have rebounded from 2020 to welcome new members.

In traditional American square dance, sets of four couples form a square and perform choreographed figures with names like "Relay the Deucey" and "Load the Boat" which are sung or spoken by a "Caller." In modern American square dance, there can be five (hexagonal) or six (rectangular) sets of couples performing steps. The traditional form evolved from European dances brought over in the 18th century when England and France were fighting for dominance of colonial territories. That's why French words are still found in some calls. *Allemande* means "German" in French, and Germans were considered foreigners, so when you're told "allemande left" you grasp the forearm of the dancer who is not your partner. *Dos à dos* is French for "back-to-back," so the step requires you to circle your partner without turning your body. Male and female parts are traditionally classified as *beau* and *belle*—French for beautiful. In modern dancing, however, anyone can dance either part, so



Jim Osborne calling for *Farmers and Farmerettes* might simply shout, "Swing whatever's coming at you!"

Modern American square dancing is taught all over the world from Sweden to Japan, but calls are made in English. Skirts with petticoats for women and long-sleeved, western shirts for men used to be standard issue and are still welcome on the dance floor, but such attire is now "admitted, but not required" at most dances. Music has changed, too. Not only country, but also pop, jazz, rock, folk, and film scores bring people to their feet (on May the 4th, expect to promenade to John Williams' *Star Wars* theme).

Farmers and Farmerettes dance at Newark Pavilion every Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. The club started with twelve charter members in 1961 and handed out live chickens as door prizes at early hoedowns. Members used to go camping together every year at *A Thousand Trails* in San Benito and performed with other clubs between doubleheaders at Oakland A's games. They danced on the Dumbarton Bridge before opening day, 1982, and at pizza

parlors after closing time when a pitcher of beer only cost 75 cents. In 1973, a change was made to the by-laws that restricted membership only to married couples over 16 years of age. Today, marital status nobody's business, and age, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Jim Hicks is the current president of *Farmers*. He and wife Bev have been dancing since 1961 when they could leave their four-month-old twins at the babysitting co-op during club night. "It's in our blood," says Bev, and to prove it one of those twins now dances in Newark with his wife. Al Minard started dancing with his wife at *Farmers* in 1992. Formerly seen channeling Abraham Lincoln around town, he played Santa Claus at the annual Christmas party for twenty years. The club earned money by selling fireworks every July in the Newark Pavilion parking lot, partially funding trips to Hawaii, Mexico, and Alaska with the proceeds. "If you want to travel, this is the right club," Minard says.

The *Swinging 21ers* got their name from Elks Lodge 2121 in Fremont, where they began in 1989. Square dancing "puts your brain in your feet," explains

Dennis Grohne. Square dancing is much more gratifying than "setting by the TV," he adds. He and partner Sue Kahage have been dancing there since 2002, and Sue is the current *21ers* president. The pair have attended state and national conventions from Yuba City to San Diego for over two decades and testify that the friends they have made in square dancing are just as much an incentive to go as the fun and exercise dancing provides.

"The *Swinging 21ers* LOVE to dance," says their self-described, "hobby" caller, Rich Reel. (A hobby caller has a separate career, but calls and teaches square dancing on the side.) He claims the two most important things about learning to dance are: 1) Feeling comfortable making mistakes, and 2) Knowing that there is more than one way to cut a caper or execute a call. Reel currently packs a "shockingly diverse" 600+ songs on his vintage iPod and is adding 600 more this year. During a discussion on recruitment, he estimated that "Square dancers bubble up out of the ground at a fixed rate."

If you're one of the bubblers, get over to Fremont Elks Lodge

on September 12 for *Swinging 21ers* beginner classes. The first three sessions are free, and there is ample parking. If you want to catch a glimpse of what you'll be doing after nine months of practice, arrive early and watch more experienced dancers Circle, Swing, Promenade, and Load the Boat!

Beginner Square Dance Classes

Tuesday, Sept 12

7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Swinging 21ers Square Dance Club

38991 Farwell Dr, Fremont
(510) 887-5605

<https://www.fremontelks.org/swinging-21ers-square-dance-club/>

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Wednesdays, January 2024

Farmers and Farmerettes Square Dance Club

Newark Pavilion
6430 Thornton Ave, Newark

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