

Square dancing club keeps twirling in San Rafael

Modern music, less traditional dress, younger crowd loosen traditions

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Just as they do every Wednesday night at the Marin Rod and Gun Club in San Rafael, the Tam Twirlers square dancers gathered on the dance floor, in groups of eight, and waited for the music to start.

Caller Eric Henerlau pressed play on his MacBook Pro laptop's iTunes, and began making his calls — "star through, veer to the left, to the left all veer left for the Ferris wheel, sweep a quarter to the middle and back away. Are you home?" — to Robin Thicke's libidinous "Blurred Lines."

"This was not what I imagined," said Ann Johnson, who joined the Twirlers with her husband, Drake, in January. "You think of the fiddles and the country music and all that. But that's not what this is. When (Henerlau) plays the modern music, it's a lot of fun."

As Henerlau puts it, this isn't your grandpa's square dancing.

A few of the Twirler women wear traditional square dancing dresses, but for the most part, tennis shoes and T-shirts substitute for cowboy boots and bolo ties. The playlists still include oldies, but Henerlau's song selection ranges from the 1920s to the Rolling Stones to the latest pop hits. He's even been known make his calls to rap songs.

"We're modernizing," Henerlau said.

It's part of a movement to keep square dancing fresh and inviting in a younger crowd. The effort has paid off, as 11 of the Twirlers' 45 members are new this year, joining a mix of folks ranging in age from their 40s to 70s, including some who have been square dancing for 40 years.

"The energy in the room, dressing up, it's like date night," said Janet Sayles, who met her husband, Brad Sayles, when they were among the first-ever Twirlers in 1978. "And you don't really realize you're exercising, because you're having so much fun."

Ann Johnson said she didn't expect so many of the Twirlers to be from the tech industry. One of them, Brad Christie, created a smartphone app, called "Taminations," that provides information on the various calls, including simulations of each call's movements.

The way square dancing works, four pairs of dancers get together, each pair making the side of a square. Before the song begins, each dancer is "at home," next to her or his partner. Then the action happens.

The music goes on, and the dancers make their moves based on a series of impromptu instructions from the caller, who plays a roll resembling a combination of a workout-class instructor and an orchestra conductor, with the spontaneity of a freestyle rapper.

Partners get separated, circle left and right with others from the square, doing half sashays and dosados. Then, by the end of a sequence, they should all arrive home, back with their partners.

"It's like solving puzzles," Ann Johnson said.

The mainstream, or intermediate, level has 68 calls, or moves. The advanced level adds another 30 calls. But like the number of words in a language or plays for a football team's offense, there is no limit to the number of moves that can be incorporated into square dancing.

"It's a language, like anything else," Henerlau said. "They have to do what I say, but they don't know what I'm going to say next. That's the whole thrill of this thing."

Square dancing, he said, is a team sport: if one person falls down, the rest of the group falls apart.

Henerlau, 54, a resident of Corte Madera, has been calling square dancing since 1980. He said he first learned to square dance while at Novato High School in a physical education class, taught by "Mr. Cutler." Soon after, he and his girlfriend — now wife, Jennifer — were handed a flier advertising a square dancing class. They checked it out, and have been hooked ever since.

Henerlau, who began calling for the Twirlers in 1994, is a bit of a star in the square dancing world. He calls hoedowns and other events around the world, including one he will be doing in Japan this September.

Calling a square dance requires the verbal agility of an auctioneer and the lyrical harmony of a singer

"Eric is an entertainer," said Twirler Ralph Parker, who has been square dancing with his wife, Carol, since the 1970s. "Of all the callers I've danced to, which is a couple hundred, he pays the most attention to how he sounds."

As much of an effort as there is to modernize the dance, Henerlau said the most fundamental part of square dancing hasn't changed.

"The calls themselves, and how they're executed, really hasn't changed in the last 40 years," Henerlau said. "The way we're packaging it, the music, the attitude, that's where the changes are."

He said there are several gay square dancing clubs in San Francisco, and on occasion, the Twirlers combine forces with them. It's another part of the modernizing of square dancing, as well as de-emphasizing the traditional perception that people need a partner to join.

"We make sure to make the singles feel welcome, and if they don't have a partner, we find them one." Henerlau said. "It gives everybody a chance to dance."