

LORD OF THE SQUARE DANCE Howard Richman gets Dancers Swinging

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Adding Flair to Tradition, Richman's Dancers Promenade to Madonna

By Sally Deering



Howard Richman

Slip the Clutch, Shoot the Star and *Roll Away with a Half Sashay*; these may be non-sequiturs to most of us but to square-dance fans these terms get them twirling on the dance floor and if Howard Richman's calling the dance, there might be some Madonna in the mix.

Square Dance calling may not be a typical job found on a resume, but Richman does it to add to his income as a theater artist and he travels throughout the Tri-State area to gyms, schools and church halls to put people through their paces on the dance floor.

"When square dancing was in its hey-day there were no computers, internet, or texting, and on Friday or Saturday night this was the chance to meet people," Richman says. "It has since evolved."

For those of us who barely remember dancing the Virginia Reel in grammar school, traditional square dancing has three levels. The entry-level called "Mainstream" comprised of 64 movements; "Plus" with another 30 movements and "Advanced" with another 30. Mainstream and Plus have their own clubs where people take classes and hire callers like Richman to swing them through a labyrinth of patterns in time to the music.

"It's like when you first learn the alphabet," Richman says, "first you learn letters, then words, then sentences and then it gets more literary. In the Mainstream level 68 different steps or movements can be strung along in many different combinations which get you back to your

partner and back to your home position. Once you learn those, you can go to any mainstream level club.”

One of the exciting things about square dancing, Richman says, is that the dancers never know what’s coming next.

“That’s modern American square dancing,” Richman says. “They get up and I start speaking the calls and they’re doing what I’m telling them to do and I’m putting them through a good combination of movements in a smooth and flowing way. You have to know left from right but it’s okay to have two left feet.”

GREENWICH VILLAGE SQUARE DANCES

Richman learned he had a thing for square dancing back in the mid-1980s when he saw a newsletter advertising a square dance in Greenwich Village.

“There were a lot of nice people there,” Richman says. “I was an aspiring dancer at the time, so I picked up the steps pretty quickly. I was singing along with the music, and someone said to me, you should be a caller. I looked at it as a performance; I never dreamed it would go this far.”

THE MUSIC ISN’T JUST COWBOY SONGS ANYMORE

When Richman calls a square dance he uses a range of music from traditional square dance songs to contemporary pop tunes. Square dancing is 128 beats per minute, that’s the speed the music should be for calling, Richman says. He’s called square dances to pop songs like Meghan Trainor’s “All About That Bass”.

“I’ve called Madonna songs, Destiny’s Child, Paul Simon,” Richman says, “and traditional country songs like ‘Back in the Saddle Again’.”

PRACTICE WITH FRIENDS

Stating out as a square dance caller, Richman says he practiced his calls with a little help from his friends.

“You get people over to your house and tell them I’m going to call for an hour and then I’ll feed you,” Richman says. “You memorize things and things start to click. It’s my job to remember who’s partnered with whom.”

Although, sometimes partners can get jumbled on the dance floor.

“It used to be easier, the guy’s shirt would match the gal’s dress,” Richman says. “There would be the couple in blue, the couple in yellow, now it’s much more casual, you have to look and pay attention at the beginning of the set. And people will switch partners now whereas in the past it used to be a woman would only dance with her husband.”

Richman will go in and teach a class before he starts calling the dance, and in June, he will have come full circle and will be back in Greenwich Village, this time teaching square dance. A Jersey City resident who grew up in South Orange, Richman admits square dance calling isn’t a typical profession in New Jersey.

“It’s a pretty rare job,” Richman says.

He credits square dance caller Joe Landi for inspiring his style.

“I make people think more than most callers,” Richman says. “I can be challenging, but I’ve been told my music selection is fantastic, and I’m not boring.”

If you go:

To find out Howard Richman’s square dance schedule, go to:

www.callerhoward.com