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- Hidden Hills
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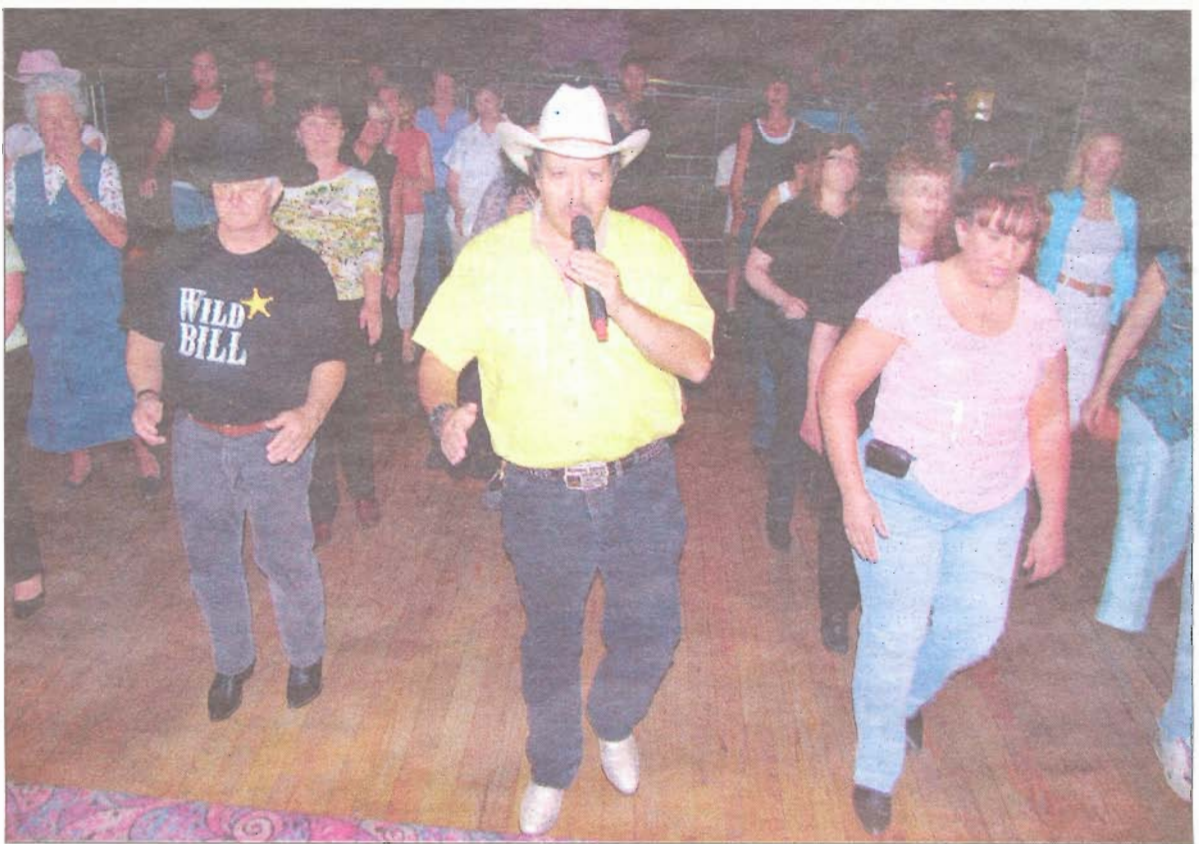
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SCENE:
the Week
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Dancers gets their kicks from country

Cowboy music, movement make a comeback



Mark Kellam/Valley News

Mike Bendavid leads a country-western dance class at Yankee Doodles in Woodland Hills.

Rather than working out to "Sweating to the Oldies" or "Abs of Steel," thousands of Valley residents are doing the "Tush Push" and "Boot Scootin' Boogie" to get their exercise. Plus, they get to share some good times with friends while mastering dance moves such as the grapevine and pivot step.

At Yankee Doodles in Woodland Hills, Mike Bendavid leads the country-western dancing on Wednesday nights. His assistant, Diana Dover, said the recent popularity of TV reality shows about dancing has spilled over to make country-western dancing hot again.

INSIDE:

- Keeping kids in cars safer4
- A splash of color.....10
- The world of Ben Franklin11
- Calendar of events13

Complete story on Page 8

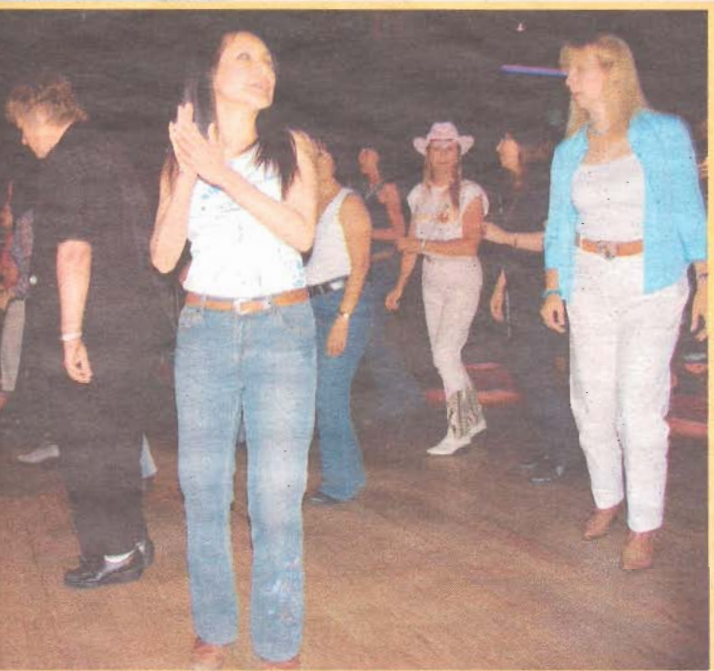


Kickin' up th

Popularity of country-west

BY MARK KELLAM
Valley News Writer

It used to be that country-western dancers all wore cowboy hats and boots. Plaid shirts, jeans and skirts with fringe were almost required to walk on the dance floor in a country nightclub. Today, however, there are more people wearing tennis shoes, T-shirts and shorts — and a cowboy hat is nowhere



Mark Kellam/Valley News
e Corbin, Mary Lih and Adele Levine are among the dancers
ing a new routine at Yankee Doodles.



Mark Kellam/Valley News
Mike Bendavid demonstrates a cross step during a country-western
class at Yankee Doodles.



Mark Kellam/Valley News
e Del Giorgio leads a country-western dance class at the
boy Palace Saloon in Chatsworth. Mark Moravek, left, Brian
don, Luanne Pomerantz and Angela Albistegui are among
e learning some new moves.

in sight.

Country-western dancing never left the hearts of its die-hard fans, but in the past few years, nontraditional country-western dancers have started kicking up their heels because it's a great form of exercise and a nice way to make friends.

Mike Bendavid has been teaching country-western dancing since 1978. Currently, he leads dance classes at Yankee Doodles in Woodland Hills every Wednesday night.

The dancers are all ages, from pre-teen to 80 years old. Country-western dancing's newfound popularity comes after a slump in the dance form several years ago.

Diana Dover, who helps Bendavid with his classes and bookings, said the popularity of recent TV shows such as "Dancing With the Stars" and "So You Think You Can Dance" has spilled over into country dancing.

Also, country songs have become increasingly upbeat. For about a decade, the country music industry was producing an overload of ballads, which might have brought tears to the lovelorn's eyes, but didn't get many people out on the dance floor, Bendavid said.

Almost all country songs today have their own dances. Sometimes the song's title is also the name of the dance,

On their heels

Country-western dancing keeps growing

such as "My Maria," "Runaway" and the classic "Boot Scootin' Boogie."

In other cases, the dances have different names.

Three popular dances with names different from their songs are "Mucara Walk," danced to "Rock This Country" by Shania Twain, "The Cowboy," performed to "I'm a Cowboy" by Red Steagall and "Walk The Line," choreographed to "Dance" by Twister Alley.

Joan Henderson, who just turned 80, was one of the dancers at Yankee Doodles one recent Wednesday night.

She also takes two country line dancing classes at the ONEgeneration Senior Enrichment Center in Reseda, where Bendavid teaches, as well as one class at the West Valley Family YMCA.

Henderson said she enjoys the physical - and mental - exercise that country-western dancing provides. Learning the routines keeps her mind active, which is just as important as keeping her feet moving. "Plus, the music is very uplifting," she said.

Marie Del Giorgio is one of the instructors at the Cowboy Palace Saloon in Chatsworth, where country-western dancing and lessons are offered every night.

Del Giorgio, who has been teaching at the Cowboy Palace for about 16 years, said country-line dancing is popular, particularly with women, because a partner isn't required.

Both Yankee Doodles and the Cowboy Palace offer partner dancing classes, too. There are primarily two types of partner dancing - East Coast Swing and West Coast Swing.

Del Giorgio said the East Coast Swing has one step that is repeated throughout the song.

The West Coast Swing features more complicated steps, she added.

Camaraderie is one of the main reasons folks keep coming back to country-western dancing, Del Giorgio said.

Judy Stolte, 50, moved to Encino from the Midwest about two months ago. When she decided to make the move, friends told Stolte, who is widowed, that she wouldn't be happy moving to a place where she knew no one.

However, Stolte said she found it's easy to socialize at the Cowboy Palace and that learning country-western dancing is a major ice-breaker in meeting new people.

While Yankee Doodles and Cowboy Palace stick to traditional country songs, there are places where country-western dancing is done to a variety of music, including pop, rock, salsa and Celtic.

At Oil Can Harry's, a gay nightclub in Studio City, the floor is filled with country-western dancers learning routines to songs by singers ranging from Madonna to Kenny Loggins.

Rick Dominguez, who hosts the three country nights at Oil Can Harry's, was one of the leaders in crossing country-western dance steps with other music styles.

He recalls the 10-year period when country musicians were cranking out too many ballads. He and other country-western dance enthusiasts decided to keep their favorite style of dancing alive by using upbeat pop tunes. The shift began with the song "Hanky Panky" by Madonna. From there, it spread to a variety of songs, including "Footloose" and the Celtic title song from "Lord of the Dance," which builds in tempo to almost a fever pitch, Dominguez said.

He added that the shift exploded when a country-western

dance was choreographed to the song "Lady Marmalade" from the movie "Moulin Rouge" in 2001.

Dominguez, who has been teaching country-western dancing for 15 years, has choreographed eight dances to noncountry songs. His first one was called "J-Rad" to the Janet Jackson song "All For You." He said his dances are being performed across the country in both gay and straight clubs.

Oil Can Harry's has country nights on Tuesdays,



Mark Keilam/Valley News

Bonnie Marcus gets into the country-western dancing at the Cowboy Palace Saloon in Chatsworth. Marcus also teaches classes at the saloon.

Thursdays and Fridays.

At the Northeast Valley Multipurpose Senior Center in Pacoima, a group of seniors learn dances at 12:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays. Like Oil Can Harry's, the dances feature country-western steps, but are often put to a variety of music, ranging from "Raggae Cowboy" to "New York, New York."

Geri Tanner, who leads the classes and teaches new routines, said the 14-member group often performs at special events at the center. She said all the members enjoy the exercise they get from country-western dancing.

Likewise, at the Joslyn Center in Burbank, country-western dance lessons are popular. On Saturday mornings, dancers enjoy learning country-western routines taught by Virginia Dubickas. "You get to exercise to music, which is better than exercising without anything," Dubickas said. "It's more fun that way."