

CULTURE

# Ballroom dancers waltz out of the closet

Out Dancing plays host to its first queer ball

BY PETER ZUCKERMAN

In life, straight people often have more options, and ballroom dance is no exception.

Grab someone of the opposite sex, and you may choose from dozens of classes and clubs. But grab your queer partner, and where can you go?

Brave lesbians sometimes glide around the Crystal Ballroom—a practice that began during the Vietnam War era.

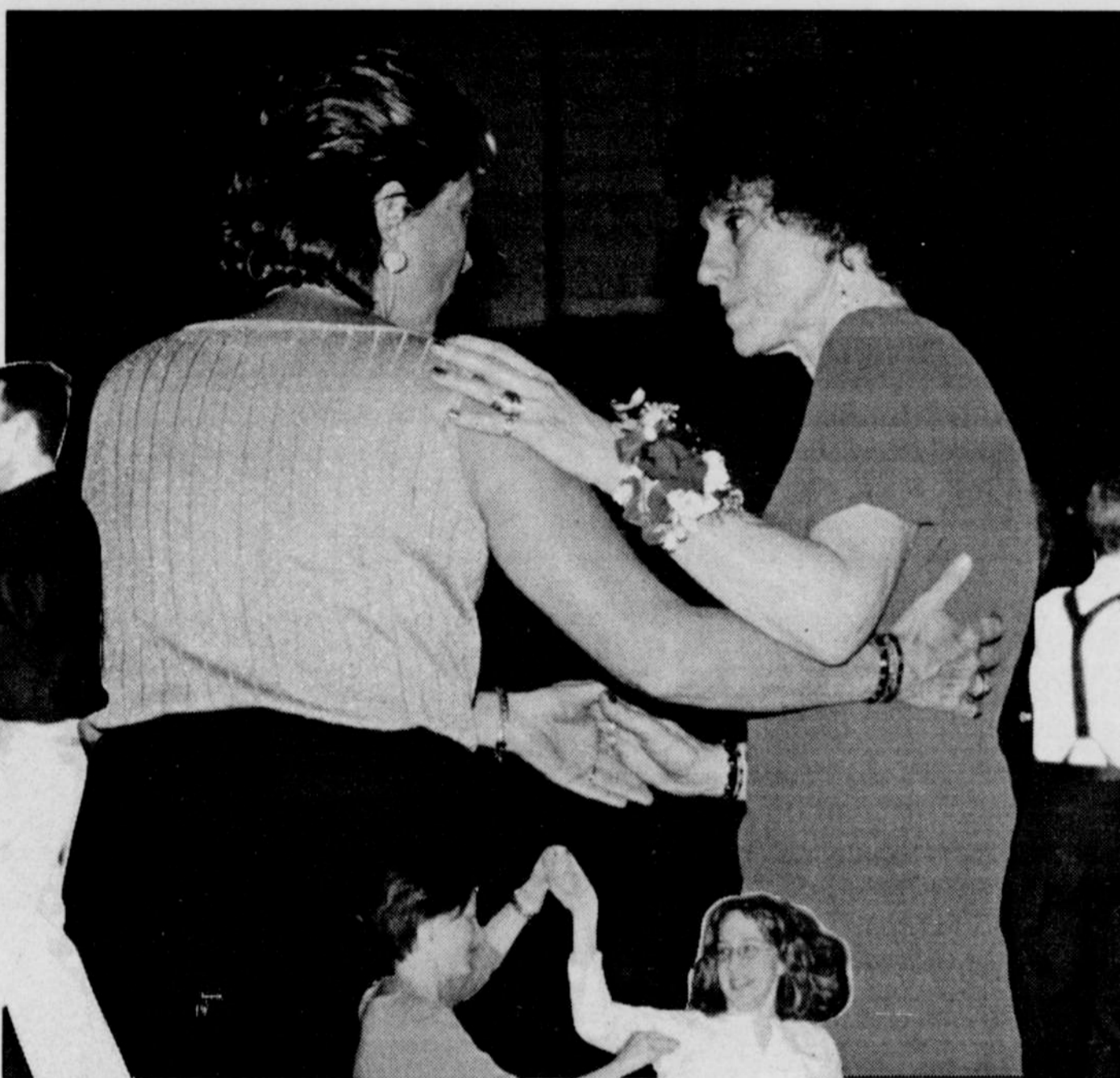
But if you're a gay or trans couple who want to fox-trot, you'd do better in Europe, where such things are more accepted. The queer community in the United States has embraced country and square dancing, but our only taste of salsa is the organic kind eaten with tortilla chips. Ballroom dancers have limited options.

So dance instructor Daniel Hutchinson decided to do something about it. "I got tired of leading a split life," he explains. "I needed an atmosphere where I could be me."

Six years ago, Hutchinson founded Out Dancing, a weekly class that teaches everything from swing to waltz to cha-cha to hustle and most other ballroom dances in a queer-friendly environment. This year he and his partner, David Wilson, also tried something new.

The first-ever Solstice Ball attracted about 80 people to the PPAA ballroom June 23. Some showed up solo, but most were coupled. A group of women even came all the way from British Columbia just for the event.

The evening kicked off with a lesson in the nightclub two-step. Hutchinson teaches in a memorable and amusing way. "Pretend there's a big wad of gum under your shoe, so when you lift your foot up it only comes up a little bit,"



he remarks during part of the lesson.

When showing me how to align myself with my partner he advises, "Nose to nipple." Then he grins. "Not nose on nipple. That's for after the dance."

Hutchinson also serves as the disc jockey, spinning tunes for all the different types of dance. Most people only



know some of the steps, but individuals and couples also let loose freestyle.

"Ballroom dance brings couples back together," Hutchinson remarks. "It's an activity where people have to get personal and comfortable together. It's a place where single people can meet each other.

A dance is intimate, but it's not a meat market."

For Out Dancing, Hutchinson teaches a new dance on the first Friday of the month and builds on the basics the following weeks. To start each lesson, he teaches the parts separately until both partners master the basic steps. Then he couples them together.

Hutchinson has a trick for teaching. "You cast away doubts and ignore that voice that says, 'I can't do this,'" he remarks. "That really changes your confidence. You start to relax and open up, and you start to dance."

He adds that students often fail to realize they actually are doing it correctly. "By the end of the month, the partners have really changed their perspective."

I can attest that Hutchinson knows how to teach. I have two left feet, two left hands and a partner who has at least that many, yet we somehow learned the nightclub two-step. "Dancing is another kind of language," Hutchinson says.

"When you dance with your partner, your communication becomes easier. It softens people—it opens people up to new experiences that positively affect other areas of their life."

Out Dancing plans to play host to queer ballroom dances seasonally, one about every three months. "Now that we know what to expect," Hutchinson says, "it will run even more smoothly." □

OUT DANCING meets 7 to 8 p.m. Fridays at Sally Mack's School of Dance, 532 S.E. Ankeny St., for \$5 at the door. This month Daniel Hutchinson teaches the waltz. Call 503-236-5129 or e-mail out\_dancing@yahoo.com for more information.

PETER ZUCKERMAN is a student at Reed College and an intern at Just Out.

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