



# SQUARE TO THE DANCE

LGBTQ AND STRAIGHT DANCERS  
AT SPIN CYCLE SQUARES

PHOTO BY JESLYN LEMKE

## Do-si-do in the gay community BY JESLYN LEMKE

**A**m I allowed to fall in love with a 60-plus gay man on the dance floor? Can I do that?

I, a person who identifies as a girl, went to a gay square dancing club on July 16 in Springfield with my own partner, who identifies as a boy. I have the dance skills of a large hyena. This soon became apparent as the caller paired us off with separate partners.

Patrick Finn, my aging square dance partner with a grey walrus mustache, had the kindest, gentlest blue eyes I ever done seen. His trembling hands took mine and slowly led me through the steps. I was a gay square dance virgin. Old Finn got me through that first 10 minutes of do-si-do, encouraging me at every blunder. I sighed a little when we had to stop holding hands.

My partner I came with, meanwhile, was fending for himself between two aggressively sweet old ladies, one who had a big red pin on her shirt that read: "BOY."

Spin Cycle Squares is a gay square dancing group that meets every Sunday evening in Springfield at Emerald Square and Round Dance Center, a worn-down structure off Yolanda Street. A tiny plaque above one of the best parking spots read, "caller," the traditional leader in square dance who calls out dance moves. This dedicated group of 50- and 60-somethings meets to chit chat, eat some snacks and dance for 10 minutes at a time, once a week.

Gay square dancing came about in the 1980s as an emergent space for the LGBTQ community to feel at ease while square dancing.

"Two men dancing together is still uncomfortable for a lot of straight clubs, but that's been slowly changing," says Tim Matteson, the dance caller for Spin Cycle. "If someone wants to come with their boyfriend or their girlfriend as a couple, they can do that with the gay square dance club.

"Our club is about half straight and half gay," Matteson continues. "Right now we are low on women. We've had more lesbians in the past. We've had transgender people. So it's a place where people can do a fun social activity with other people as themselves and not feel threatened."

Somehow I was expecting more flirting, skin and alcohol. However, the group feels more like a laid back church social than the Wayward Lamb at 1 am. Someone brought two cartons of

strawberries from the farmer's market and set it next to the muffin squares and open jar of Twizzlers.

"I'm gay and I like dancing with gay people," Finn says with a laugh when we sit down for an interview. "It's a lot more fun."

Finn, single, drives down from his tiny farm in Lebanon every Sunday to dance and socialize with some of his good buddies. He sits across from his friend Kurt Jensen, a greying older man with an earring in his left ear. "He's the biggest troublemaker you'll ever find," he says loudly of Jensen.

Jensen doesn't look up. "He's also a little hard of hearing," Finn finishes with a giggle.

Matteson attended dancing that evening in a yellow Hawaiian button-up and a tidy mustache. Matteson, a gay man, has been a square dance caller in Oregon for the past 10 years.

"Gay clubs have their own particular language as part of the stuff we do," he says. "In most gay clubs, do-si-do is done as a highland fling," a gesture where one curves the arm above one's head, much like in highland dancing.

He calmly calls out each dance move from the stage, crooning a little Dean Martin to his dancers.

"I don't know why I like you like I do. I don't know why, I just do," he sings low into the microphone.

Later, I ask Matteson if he has met anyone through square dancing in Eugene.

"I have not," he says. "I actually know people who met their partners through square dancing. In a smaller community like this, it's just like anything else. It's hard to meet people that you haven't already met before."

Each weekend the group president decides if the dance group has enough attendees (you need eight) to pull off a square dance session for Sunday night. It's free to attend, and one can simply walk in without signing up.

When we go to leave, someone asks, "You aren't going to stay for the whole thing?" Several people warmly invite us to "come back anytime." I'm touched and make promises to return. Everyone is so goddamn nice here, you'd think I was at church. Old Finn gives me a warm hug goodbye.

Finn, if you are reading this, I will come back so we can dance together again. ■



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