

*In
The*
Swing
*of
Things*

AS BALLROOM DANCE
MAKES A COMEBACK
NATIONWIDE, STUDENTS
ARE DISCOVERING THE
JOY AND RELEASE OF
TWO-STEPPING THEIR
TROUBLES AWAY.

BY TRENT
CHAFFEE '09

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY DAVID
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CHAD GOODROAD '09, an English and political science double major, lives with seven female roommates in the French House on St. Olaf Avenue. "Very few people know how to ballroom dance, and I want to be one of those guys who does," says Goodroad, the only man in the house. Living with women has increased his knowledge about the opposite sex. "Girls dig guys who can dance," he says.

They always have.

Ballroom dance classes have been a steady draw at St. Olaf for more than 40 years. Goodroad is among the hundreds of students who have met the college's physical education and applied literary studies requirements through ballroom dance. But, says Assistant Professor of Dance Anne Von Bibra, "nothing has sparked the ballroom revival quite like ABC's No. 1 hit television series *Dancing with the Stars*," now in its third season with more than 20 million viewers.

"Ballroom" is simply two partners dancing a choreographed dance, and anyone can learn.

For baby boomers and their parents, ballroom dancing calls to mind images of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers flowing across the dance floor in musicals like the 1939 classic *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*. More recent films, most notably *Mad Hot Ballroom*, have made ballroom dance seem more accessible. "Ballroom" is simply two partners — one leader, one follower — dancing a choreographed dance, and anyone can learn.

Ballroom dance is a sought-after option in the St. Olaf Dance Department. It can take up to three years to get into Von Bibra's classes, especially if you're female. The women's spots fill almost immediately. More than 40 men signed up for Ballroom I last fall and 10 more are wait-listed for the spring semester of Ballroom II.

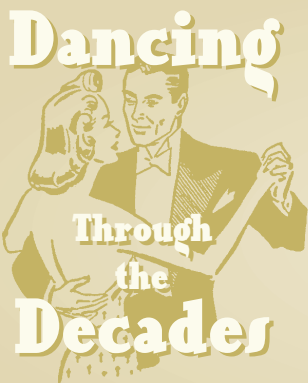
Students take ballroom dance for reasons as diverse as their backgrounds and majors. "If you don't know how to formally dance other than hip-hop, you've lost part of your culture," says religion major Stephanie Neitz '07.

"I just thought it would be a fun art credit," explains Devin Horne, a sophomore English and German double major who has

no previous ballroom experience but danced in his high school show choir in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Von Bibra sees a cross section of the student body in her classes. "There's a nice mix of majors and interests similar to the kind one finds on the social dance floor," she says. Von Bibra focuses on dances that have stood the test of time: the Cha-Cha, East Coast Swing, Slow Waltz, Viennese Waltz and the Foxtrot — the most popular social dance of its time. "I really enjoy watching those who have no dance background discover a new talent or a new love," she says.

Ballroom dance is something that students can use their entire lives. If they're lucky, they'll be like Axel Bundgaard, St. Olaf professor emeritus of physical education and dance who first introduced ballroom classes into the St. Olaf curriculum in 1965. "He's still dancing at age 89," she says.



1900s

The Waltz, Two-Step, Polka and Schottische dominated the scene with the music of Victor Herbert and George Cohen. Ragtime music inspired "animal dances" that included the Grizzly Bear, Bunny Hug, Turkey Trot, Horse Trot, Kangaroo Dip and the Snake.

1910s

Vaudeville actor Harry Fox invented the Foxtrot in 1914 by setting trotting steps to ragtime music. It became the most popular and enduring social dance of its time. Exhibition dancers Vernon and Irene Castle popularized the Tango and Castle Walk.



1920s

"Flappers" danced the Charleston, Shimmy and Rag in the cabarets, nightclubs and speakeasies that replaced the ballrooms of pre-World War I days. Jazz and Latin rhythms became popular on the dance floor. The Savoy Ballroom opened in New York City in 1926, featuring a block-long dance floor and a raised double bandstand.

The classes aim to develop self-confidence and build on students' skills. Those who have mastered the basic steps are encouraged to work on their execution and styling. "And of course the 'leading' and 'following' skills needed for social ballroom dancing are a challenge for everyone," says Von Bibra.

Jake Fitzpatrick '07, a dance and music double major, and Meghan Meier '07, a math education major, help Von Bibra with novice dancers. They stress the finer skills — such as proper foot position — and make sure that the dancers' arms are not creating a "window" in the closed-partner hold. Although students must take non-verbal cues from their partner, they are allowed to speak during ballroom dance. "It's hard to stare into someone else's eyes for extended periods of time without talking," says Annie Becker '07, an elementary music education major.



Cultural Literacy

Von Bibra — known affectionately to many alumni as "AVB" — has taught ballroom skills to hundreds of Oles during the past 19 years. Former student Martha Kunau '90 holds Von Bibra in high esteem and loves watching her work.

"She has presence and great posture," says Kunau, now a principal gifts officer at St. Olaf. Kunau enrolled in ballroom dance to be with her friends, fulfill a physical education requirement and, most importantly, "to be able to dance at the President's Ball held each April. The social aspect of dance and being culturally literate is huge," she says. "It's a skill that we'll have for the rest of our lives."

The proper ballroom dress for Oles hasn't changed over the years: dresses or skirts and blouses for women, dress trousers and shirts for men, well heeled-shoes for both. No jeans, sweatshirts or T-shirts are allowed. "You always knew who was going to ballroom by what they were wearing," says Kunau, who can still spot ballroom students on campus: They're the ones hurrying to class dressed to the nines with dance shoes in hand.

Some of Von Bibra's students have gone on to make dance their life's work. Karena Shackel '98 teaches all types of ballroom dance at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio in Minneapolis. Shackel, who graduated from St. Olaf with a double major in dance and religion, took ballroom classes from Von Bibra and from Professor Emerita of Dance Ann Wagner. She credits the resurgence of Latin dances to the increasing population of Hispanic immigrants in the United States and says that *Dancing with the Stars* is motivating people who were already interested in ballroom to go out and try it.

"Dancing is timeless," says Shackel. "People of all ages look at it for the social aspects while for others it's an outlet for physical activity and a way to meet people."

Von Bibra agrees. "For many students, it provides a skill that is useful in social settings and it's a lot of fun as well," she says. "At the very least they're ready for the next wedding."

Last fall Von Bibra introduced Community Dance Hour, an opportunity for St. Olaf students, faculty and staff to dance for an hour every second and fourth Thursday of the month. Associate Professor and Reference Librarian Kris MacPherson, who has been at St. Olaf for 25 years, relishes Community Dance Hour. "It's an opportunity to be joyful," she says.

Associate Professor of Economics Rick Goedde considers it a

BALLROOM CLASSES, taught by Assistant Professor of Dance Anne Von Bibra (upper right, without partner), are extremely popular at St. Olaf. Some, especially female students, must wait three years to get into one.

1930s

A six-beat variant of the Lindy Hop was named the Jitterbug by band leader Cab Calloway. Everyone danced to jazz and swing music conducted by Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller. Dancers began to incorporate tap and jazz steps into their routines.



1940s

The Jitterbug was the No. 1 dance while Big Band music and Swing swept the nation. The Zoot Suit became the fashionable new dance for men. The Samba and Rumba made their debut as Latin dances grew in popularity. Journalists used the terms Lindy, Jitterbug and Swing interchangeably to describe the style of dancing taking place on the streets and in nightclubs, contests and the movies.

1950s

Rock 'n' roll, a blend of Southern blues and gospel music with a strong back beat, became popular with teens who rocked out to Elvis, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. *American Bandstand*, with its focus on dancing, was the No. 1 television show. Teens across America knew all the popular steps: the Slop, Bop, Stroll, Hand Jive, Creep, Circle and the Calypso. The older generation learned to Cha-Cha, a spin-off from the Mambo.

1960s

Everybody was doing the Twist after Chubby Checker brought it to national attention on *American Bandstand*. Dancing became an individual activity as people of all ages moved away from the old-fashioned ballroom "closed partner" hold and did the Mashed Potato, the Swim, the Watusi, the Monkey and the Jerk. Dances flamed out each time a new craze came along, and "go-go girls" in birdcages wiggled high above the crowds.



The Ballroom Performance Club in 2006.

break from academic work and “another way to express one’s creativity,” and Erica Bisbey ’10 says that Community Dance Hour is important community-building time. St. Olaf dancers have learned contra dances (group social dances from Turkey, Israel, Romania, Macedonia, Portugal, South Africa, Hungary and the United States), the Polka, Kurfanc, Haymaker’s Jig, Mohlão, Zemer Atik and the Portland Fancy.

The student-run Ballroom Club, Swing Club and the more rigorous Ballroom Performance Club likewise are growing in popularity. The groups meet weekly for an hour of instruction and another hour of free dance.

“Last year we had about 10 people in Swing Club,” says club President Lauren Cassat ’07, a religion and mathematics double major. “This year we had 170 people come to the first meeting of the year.” By the end of the semester, the club was averaging 100 students a week, with nearly 400 taking part in the fall swing dance held in The Lion’s Pause, the student-run entertainment venue.

Ballroom dance is improving students’ social skills and teaching them to think on their feet — which will help them craft their own intricate dance in a global and rapidly changing world. 🍷

TRENT CHAFFEE ’09 is an American studies major with concentrations in media studies and management studies. He has taken Ballroom I and is No. 7 on the waiting list for the male section of Ballroom II this spring.

The Twin Cities’ BALLROOM Scene

Hot spots for ballroom, salsa and swing dance abound in the Twin Cities for Oles to showcase their skills. To learn more about ballroom dancing in your area, visit ballroomdancers.com or Google “ballroom dance.”

SWING

Tapestry Folkdance Center, Minneapolis

Classes in Swing and Latin, with a DJ swing dance every third Friday. tapestryfolkdance.org

Wabasha Street Caves, St. Paul

Lessons each Thursday at 6:15 p.m., with dancing from 7–10 p.m. to music by a 16- to 20-piece band. wabashastreetcaves.com

SALSA

Famous Dave’s BBQ & Blues, Minneapolis

Tuesdays 9 p.m.–12:30 a.m. famousdaves.com

La Bodega, Minneapolis

Live band Wednesdays 9–11 p.m.

Loring Pasta Bar, Minneapolis

Fridays & Saturdays 10 p.m.–2 a.m. loringpastabar.com

Naar Grille, Eden Prairie

Fridays 10:30 p.m. naargrille.com

Varsity Theater, Minneapolis (Dinkytown)

Live band every other Sunday, 9:30 p.m.–12:30 a.m. varsitytheater.org

TANGO

Loring Pasta Bar, Minneapolis (Dinkytown)

Live band Sundays 6–9 p.m. loringpastabar.com

BALLROOM / SALSA / SWING

Cinema Ballroom & Latin Dancing, St. Paul

Dances every Friday night:

- 1st Friday: Salsa, Merengue, Bachata, Cha-Cha and Rumba.
 - 2nd Friday: Waltz, Swing, Tango, Foxtrot and Rumba.
 - 3rd Friday: West Coast Swing, Salsa, Two-Step and Hustle
 - 4th Friday: Salsa, Cumbia, Cha-Cha, Merengue and Samba
- cinemaballroom.com

Matty B’s Supper Club, St. Paul

Live band Fridays & Saturdays, 8 p.m.–midnight.

Dance lessons offered once a month. mattybs.com



1970s

Psychedelic rock remained popular while “pop music” splintered into soft rock, hard rock, country rock, folk rock, punk rock, heavy metal and the dance craze of the decade: disco. Latin music and dance influenced the Hustle and Bump, and Salsa dance was also popular. Actor John Travolta and the music of the Bee Gees made *Saturday Night Fever* the quintessential disco movie.



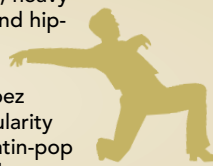
1980s

Music videos on Music Television (MTV) influenced the dance scene. New moves included Slam Dancing, the Lambada and Break Dancing, which came out of hip-hop, an underground urban movement in the South Bronx that spread to mainstream America through movies, music videos, radio play and media coverage. Dance icons included Michael Jackson and Madonna, who made dance the focal point of their music videos.



1990s

Enthusiasm for dance faded as young audiences gravitated to commercialized versions of grunge rock, heavy metal, rap and hip-hop. Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez gained popularity with their Latin-pop crossover albums, and Afro-Cuban singer Lou Bega’s “Mambo No. 5” reached number 11 on the Billboard Hot 100.



2000s

Dancing with the Stars inspires a dance revival, from MTV’s *Dancelife* and WE’s *Dirty Dancing* to films *Take the Lead*; *Shall We Dance*; the documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom*; and in 2007, *Stomp the Yard*, which features Stepping, elaborate synchronized dance routines performed between groups in competitions called “step shows.”

