

Ballroom Dancing A Culture on its Own

Many find the hobby of ballroom dancing to be very interesting. A ballroom dance class contains an instructor and students. There are many types of dance genres that are being practiced. Many of the practices then lead to enrolling in dance competitions in Hawaii and the other States. There were three methods that were used in observing the subculture of Ballroom Dancing. They were: participant observation, formal interviews of dance instructors and students, and life history of the elderly ones that had many years of experience.

Ballroom dancing consists of two types of dances called the “Modern” and “Latin” dances. It was said that modern dancing began between the periods of 1920 to the 1930s. According to Walter Laird, “Modern dances derived from a group of British professionals.” The types of modern dances are the English Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep and Tango. As time passed and many countries welcome other countries to migrate, many cultures diffused with one another. Walter Laird stated, “Ballroom was then influenced with the “Latin” dances, which consisted the first Afro-Cuban rhythm to influence the British learned Modern dancing after the 1930s.” Rumba was the type of dance that became popular in American ballroom dancing. Through diffusion of British and Latin dances, the “Samba, Jive, Paso Doble, Mambo, Cha-Cha dance genres were created, using the steps of modern dance with the Latin movements of the body (Laird).”

There are many reasons to why many enjoy participating in the culture of ballroom dancing. First of all, ballroom dancing enables a person to dance with the opposite sex. Not only making a bond stronger of a marriage couple, but also introducing a new relationship to the single people. Ballroom dancing is an easy way to exercise the body. Not only does it help burn

calories, it also helps develop coordination of the mind and muscle, enabling accurate counting in accordance to hip, hand and foot movements. Continual practice enables a person to incorporate good poise, enabling healthy walking in their growing years. Doing intricate dancing can tone the body muscles and also teach a person to adapt to the graces of a dance; whether it being a happy feeling swing dance to a sexual feeling of the salsa dance.

Being a Ballroom dancer can also boost a person's confidence. Many were once ashamed of dancing, but continually practicing and appreciating their hobby, many find confidence in presenting their dance. Confidence is also maintained when a person gets to know their dance partner. With this, they know they can be self-assured that they will help take the lead and help one another in dancing.

Ballroom dancing is considered a hobby for couples and friends. "You can practice learning a dance step in the classroom and display it at a local club with your fellow dance mates" said Angela a student of Swing dance. Ballroom dancing also can be the cheapest and most rewarding way to spend leisure time. Many class on O'ahu range from thirty dollars to fifty a month; which there are about two or more class sessions a week. Most interestingly, ballroom dancing can be started at the age of five and still can be enjoyed when a person becomes ninety-five. Anyone who can count and has the ability to have fun with dance can join ballroom dancing.

There are many ballroom dance competitions operated in Hawaii. Many enroll into dance competitions to entertain the audiences and show their hard work to the judges. According to Laird, there are two important factors when dancing in a competition. "Quality is one; it is expressed through the dancers' choreography, presentation and personalities." There are sometimes monetary and trophy recognition. In many competitions, they are divided into either

being a Modern or a Latin dance genre. Many observers can distinguish what type of dance competition they are in, whether it being a Modern or a Latin competition. In a Modern dance competition, “Women’s dresses are long and flowing to enhance movements created during dances. The men wear formal full dress with white ties and tails. In a Latin Dance Competition, the dresses are usually shorter to show the movements in the individuals body parts like the legs and hips for the ladies and well tailored, shirt styled tops for men” (Laird). Much of the Latin dances have a sense of sensuality or abundance of hip movements. Many of the Latin music are bongo and maraca based instruments. The Latin dances are much faster than the Modern genre. As for the Modern dances, its tempo is much slower and less sensual.

Ballroom dance classes vary, especially with the teaching skills of the instructor. Some may take their time, and some may rush through the lesson. There is also no specific body type that is desired for this type of dance. Carmelo, a dance instructor for 7 ½ years said, “The only way to achieve as a ballroom dancer is faith in you, rhythm to the beat, perseverance, and most importantly have fun.” Three classes observed: swing, salsa and waltz. All were led by the same instructor. The swing class had 4 couples, two of whom were married couples and the other two who were just great friends who wanted to try something new. In the beginning of the class, the instructor asked his students if any of them had any CDs that they would like to use in that day’s lesson. Words such as sweep and tap, run around, and free spin, were said by the instructor as steps that would fit perfectly with the music. A 2 minute partner dance was taught and although some had difficulties, they were not ashamed to ask for help, or just try. One couple, in particular, had said that they haven’t had any dance experience whatsoever before taking the class and after 3 months of swing feel as if they are professionals.

“At first, we were uncomfortable about what was ahead of us, we had no idea dancing could be so much fun. And there’s a plus, since me and my husband have started, both of our cholesterol levels have lowered, and we both had lost weight. We thought this would be a challenge for us, we were proven wrong.” -- Carolyn

With a 20 minute break in between classes, there were already students waiting outside of the studio. The next class was salsa. Carmelo opened the door to let them in and greeted each one of them. Some students began reviewing with each other what they had learned last week; one student had put on her dancing shoes, which seemed different from the rest. Most of the female students had practiced in high heels, while she practiced in flat jazz shoes. These classes are more comfortable for her, and she started not too long ago. As class began the sound of Latin music slowly became louder and the students had rushed to stand in rows in front of the mirror. Following Carmelo, all the students participated in stretching exercises that would help their muscles relax before the real dancing had began. Counts as “5, 6, 7, 8...” were repeated over and over again as each exercise was done. The students in this class seemed more outgoing and loud, and seemed to be enjoying it. There were younger students as well, four of which were college students. In most dance competitions the younger generation would select salsa over swing due to the music and modern steps used. After the exercises, all were paired up and songs of the dance played again. As the music played on, all the couples had just followed the swaying of the hips and the tight turns of Carmelo. Another difference between the salsa and the swing class was the dress attire. In the salsa class, skirts were shorter, shirts were tighter, and the men’s outfits seemed tight as well. The salsa dance is more seductive and sexy as opposed to others. Having it derived from the Latin culture, it is seen as an exotic type of dance. The hips were closer, the stance was tighter, and the turns and flicks of the feet were faster. There was a 5 minute break and during that break a cell phone rang, and it was a student’s, surprisingly well enough his ring tone was salsa music. Such a strong and passionate dance like this can truly

affect someone's life, as if it brings joy and energy to a busy, hectic, and stressful life. As it came to a close, everyone said their goodbyes to each other with kisses on the cheek.

One student in particular, Janet, had an interesting story on why she started to ballroom dance. She had said that for nearly 19 years she had been a mother, a wife, and a career woman, and needed something to herself to get her away from the chaotic real world. This is her 3rd year of dancing, and Carmelo said she had truly progressed:

“When I started working with Janet, all she was worried about was her age, I told her you know what look at me, I am 53 years old, and I don't even look it, don't worry about it. She was flimsy at first, but who wouldn't be, being that it was their first time? I promised her from day one I will make her a ballroom dancing star, especially within the Filipino community.” (Carmelo)

Janet had started ballroom dancing with her husband, but he gave up and just let her have all the fun. “My husband just realized he was too fat, and couldn't keep the counts in his head as he'd hoped, he shows his support but coming to my performances.” After 6 months, her first performance was underway, and it was with her and the instructor at a showcase in Waikiki.

“Yeah I was nervous, who wouldn't be, and it was my first time out there with my name being called out. I admit, I messed up more than I had hoped, but that's how we learn. That's the good thing about this lifestyle; you learn and learn new things everyday, knowing that you will get better. As of today, I have performances every weekend, and if not, I go to the ballroom dancing clubs and begin to learn more of the culture of salsa dancing.”

Another break came along, and the waltz class came in. Carmelo had said this was a different waltz class, it wasn't for students wanting to learn outside of their everyday lives, but it was for a girl's debutante ball. This class had consisted of 18 couples, all of which were high school teenagers and were uneasy about learning the waltz. It was hard for Carmelo to gather everyone's attention all at once, but once it was brought, he had selected the pairs, which girl goes to which guy. He then taught them basics, of the box step, how to hold each other, the “prominent” stance, and to always look to the left, not to the ground or to each other. When

music played, the teens started to get the hang of it, it was the music that had bored them. Gerald, one of the dancers, had said, "I don't even want to do this, it is so old school, nobody does this anymore." All the girls glared at him, and the class went on. At the end of the class, Carmelo had sat everyone down and had them listen to what they were going to dance to on the night of the debutante's ball, all were shocked. A more "present" version of waltz had played and all of the students' emotions had changed from not caring to becoming excited and eager.

Teenagers today, have a hard time taking in the concept of ballroom dancing, but with the help of the media and family traditions, this art of dance is slowly entering into the younger generation's daily life. A new film called, "Take the Lead," with Antonio Banderas, is coming out this weekend and is about a group of teenagers trying to grasp the notion of ballroom dancing and not always think of it as a dull, "old school," type of dance. With this film coming out, hopefully a lot of people, teens especially, can change their judgments on the style of ballroom dancing.

In conclusion, the culture of Ballroom dancing has its many benefits. Whether it being a monetary reward, learning a new dance or maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Ballroom dancing also builds a person's confidence, whether dancing in a small group or at a large group like competitions. This experience of Ballroom Dancing is unforgettable. The classes were filled with eager instructors and students. There is no sense of status; everyone is treated well and respected. Having the chance to partake in a dance lesson was also astonishing! Many once sought that dancing didn't come naturally. Though, with continual practice many can find that Ballroom dancing can be fun, as of what many of the informants have said.

References:

Laird, Walter. The Ballroom Dance Pack. United States: DK Publishing, Inc. 1994.