

VIVIAN JOHNSON for The Columbian

When he's not teaching or swing dancing, Russell Bruner performs with the Wanderlust Circus and does burlesque shows in Portland.

Perfecting his SWING

Vancouver Ballroom's new owner brings new events,
live music to dance community

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT
Columbian staff writer

From a swing dance-karaoke hybrid to a new stage to a tighter rental policy, the Vancouver Ballroom has evolved since its grand opening in April.

Some of the changes stemmed from a November shooting outside the downtown venue, but others have been in motion since the ballroom came under new management.

Former owner Larry Peacock opened the ballroom to provide more opportunities for social dance in Clark County. He relocated to New Mexico to be with his fiancée this fall, and Russell Bruner took over the reins.

Bruner, a 28-year-old Vancouver native, assumed the lease on the 4,500-square-foot space in October. He and Peacock have known each other for years through the Portland swing scene.

Bruner has run dances at venues on both sides of the river, but the Vancouver Ballroom is his first experience owning a business with a designated space. And he is learning the hard way, that ownership requires both flexibility and responsibility.

The ballroom is currently breaking even by offering weekly dances and lessons, as well as renting to outside groups.

Bruner had to rethink his rental policy after a gang-related fight broke out during a hip-hop event hosted by a local

high school student at the ballroom in the early hours of Nov. 28. The melee spilled outside, where one person was shot in the hip. Police have made no arrests but say the investigation is ongoing.

Bruner, who wasn't there at the time, responded by canceling all hip-hop events. He's now more selective about whom he rents to and more involved with events put on by outside groups. Attendance at Saturday swing dances hasn't decreased since the shooting, Bruner said he doesn't think people feel unsafe coming to the ballroom.

"We're lying low for awhile. After the shooting, I didn't want anything like that to happen again," he said.

Bruner said he likes hip-hop but is being "overly safe" to avoid attracting the wrong crowd.

"I have a lot of respect for that dance style. It's really unfortunate that the troublemakers are also into hip-hop," he said.

Fortunately, the swing crowd is a friendly bunch, Bruner said. It's a tight-knit community, one he's been a part of since he started swing dancing about 10 years ago. It's just one avenue in which the professional entertainer expresses himself.

Bruner owns the performance, dance instruction and production business Swing Time, and also performs regularly with the Wanderlust Circus. There he does everything from acrobatics to character acting. The 2000 Evergreen

INFORMATION

The Vancouver Ballroom offers beginning swing lessons from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. Saturdays, followed by a dance that goes until about 11:30 p.m. It's \$8 general admission, \$6 for students and free for first-timers. The second Saturday of every month is "swingaroke" night.

The ballroom also offers more advanced swing lessons from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays, followed by a practice session from 8:30 to 10 p.m. The cost is \$5.

The Vancouver Ballroom is at 808 Main St., Vancouver. To learn more, go to <http://www.vancouver-ballroom.com>. Vancouver Ballroom is scheduled to host Vancouver's Got Talent beginning Feb. 3 and continuing for the next eight Wednesdays. Winners from each week will compete in the finale, set for April 7. Acts will vie for \$500 and a free class from Immortelle Modeling and Acting Agency in Vancouver.

Admission to Vancouver's Got Talent is \$5. The entry fee is \$20 per act. Acts must register in advance by calling 503-706-

High School graduate does burlesque shows and plays drums for several swing bands, as well.

Music was his first entrée into swing. Songs from the '20s to the early '40s have captivated him ever since he started playing trombone in jazz band in

Ballroom:

From Page D1

the eighth grade.

"The style of music that made the most sense to me was always swing music. There's a certain feel to it that shows up in everything I do," he said.

That includes his style of dress. At a recent interview in the ballroom, Bruner was fresh off a performance in the *Sinferno Cabaret* at Dante's in Portland. He was still wearing his *Sinferno* attire: a gray, vintage-inspired Oxford baggie-style suit, wingtips and a bowler hat. A circus ringmaster's costume hung in the ballroom's concessions area.

The circus is a 180-degree turn from his previous career track. Bruner studied engineering at Clark College and worked as an electrical engineer before devoting himself full-time to entertaining.

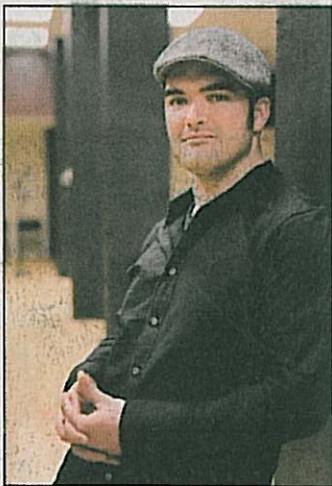
That devotion led him to take over the Vancouver Ballroom after Peacock left. While he's taken hip-hop out of the mix, Bruner has made several additions to the ballroom. Some are aesthetic, and some go deeper.

Among them is a stage, part of his commitment to bringing more live music to the ballroom.

Live bands, everything from swing to rockabilly, elevate the ballroom to a new level, said Amber Dannals, Bruner's assistant.

"I just think that people love the live music," said Dannals, a 21-year-old Vancouver resident who teaches preschool and kindergarten at Clark College's child care center.

Other cosmetic changes include painting the columns and chairs black for a sleeker look. Bruner plans to replace the florescent lights with something less harsh.



VIVIAN JOHNSON for *The Columbian*
Russell Bruner has taken over ownership of the Vancouver Ballroom from Larry Peacock. Bruner added new programming and made some cosmetic changes.

"We want something that isn't cafeteria-style lighting, more ambient lighting," he said.

There have been programming changes, as well, including discontinuing ballroom dancing lessons. Instructor availability and competition from the nearby Arthur Murray Dance Studio led Bruner to focus solely on swing. He gives an advanced swing class Tuesday evenings "to boost the level of dancing" at the ballroom.

To help bring new dancers into the fold, he's instituted monthly "swingaroke." At swingaroke, people sing Sinatra covers and other swing songs during the Saturday dance. It falls on the second Saturday of every month and helps attract new patrons, Bruner said.

"We're always looking for little gateways to get people in and interested," he said.

Another gateway, he hopes, will be Vancouver's *Got Talent*. James Madison, a booking agent for Vancouver's *Immortelle Modeling and Acting Agency* and owner of the talent

agency *Madison Management*, is putting on a competition next month similar to the reality television show "*America's Got Talent*." Acts ranging from singers to dance troupes to poets will compete each week, and the audience and a panel of judges will choose their favorites. After eight weeks, the finalists will compete for \$500 and a free class from *Immortelle*.

"It will help us to discover talented acts and help kids in Vancouver get involved. And also make for a good show," Bruner said.

Bruner plans to be among the judges for Vancouver's *Got Talent*, part of his resolution to be present for outside events. Juggling his performance schedule with the ballroom's demands is challenging, but he does have help.

Peacock, who did not respond to interview requests for this story, gathered a group of committed volunteers when he first opened the ballroom. Called the *Vancouver Six*, these young Clark County swing fans helped him run the space and publicize events. Though the formal group no longer exists, many of the same people still consistently volunteer to help at Saturday dances, Dannals said.

Those Saturday night dances give Vancouver youths something to do without having to go to Portland, a challenge Bruner remembers.

"I grew up in Vancouver. I certainly didn't have much to do when I was under 21. It's nice to be able to provide an all-ages venue," he said. "We're making changes to make it safer and to continue to provide these fun, positive events."

MARY ANN ALBRIGHT: *maryann.albright@columbian.com*, 360-735-4507.