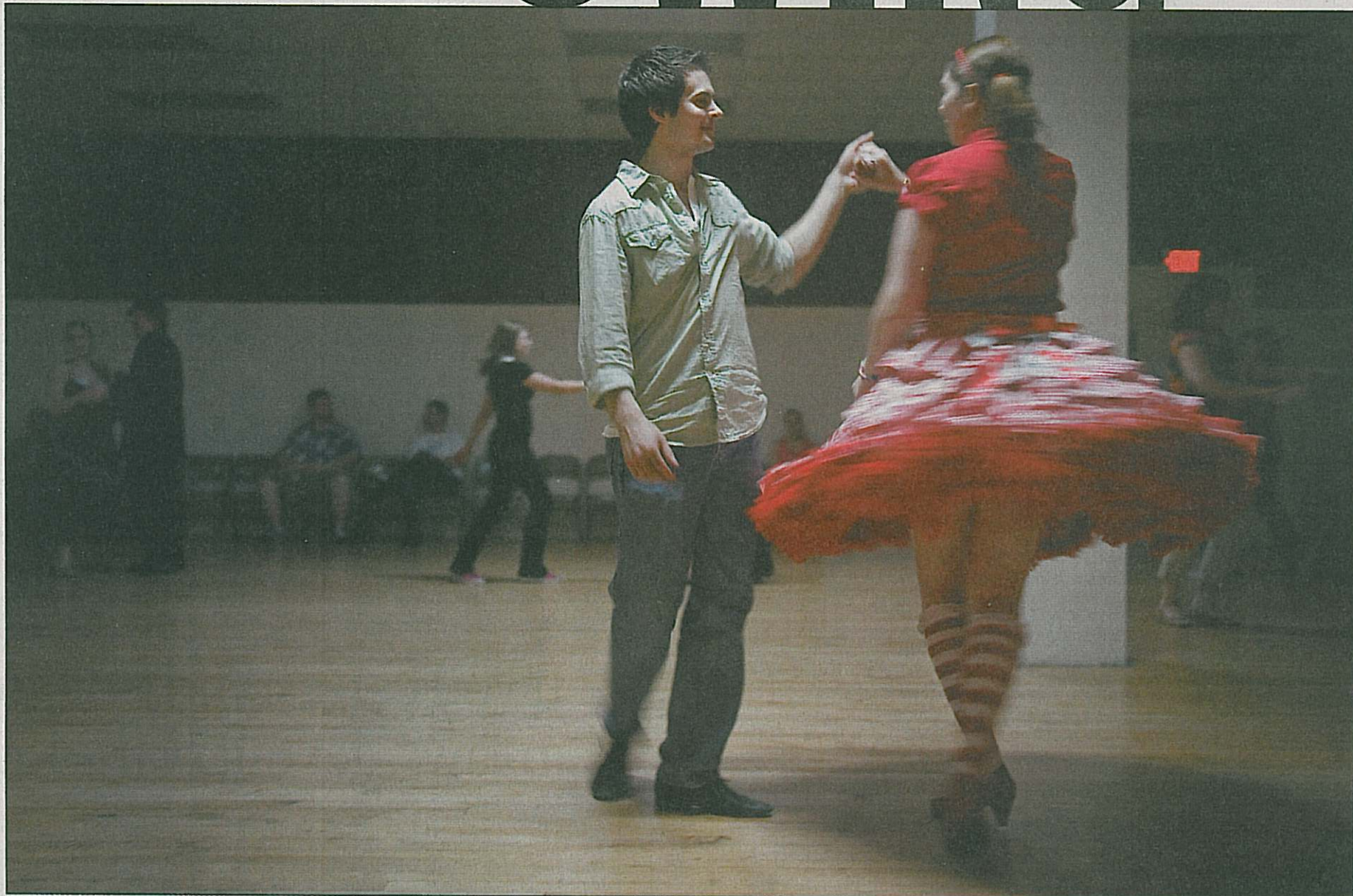


# In full SWING



Photos by ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Brandon Daniel, a 25-year-old Portland State University student from Vancouver, dances with 17-year-old Bronte McKinney at the Vancouver Ballroom. Daniel is one of six young adults from Clark County helping Stumptown Dance owner Larry Peacock grow the swing dance scene in Clark County.

## A new downtown Vancouver venue nurtures a thriving swing dance scene in Clark County

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT  
Columbian staff writer

It's a warm Saturday night in downtown Vancouver, and big-band music filters out the doors of the new Vancouver Ballroom like a siren song. As "Tuxedo Junction" begins to play, seasoned dancers dressed in everything from jeans and T-shirts to vintage dresses and newsboy caps run to the front of the ballroom to do the Shim Sham, a choreographed routine. It's like a scene from "Grease" or any high school prom flick where everyone magically knows the same dance.

Brianna Whithorn leaps up from behind the table where she's been deejaying and begins calling out moves to help those less familiar with the dance. "Tacky Annie!" "Boogie Back!" "Shorty George!"

From a folding chair along the wall, first-timer Sebastien Porter takes it all in. Not yet ready to tackle the Shim Sham, he's processing the basic steps he's learned so far.

"It's confusing because you'll get the first couple steps down, and then they move on," said the 17-year-old Camas high-schooler.

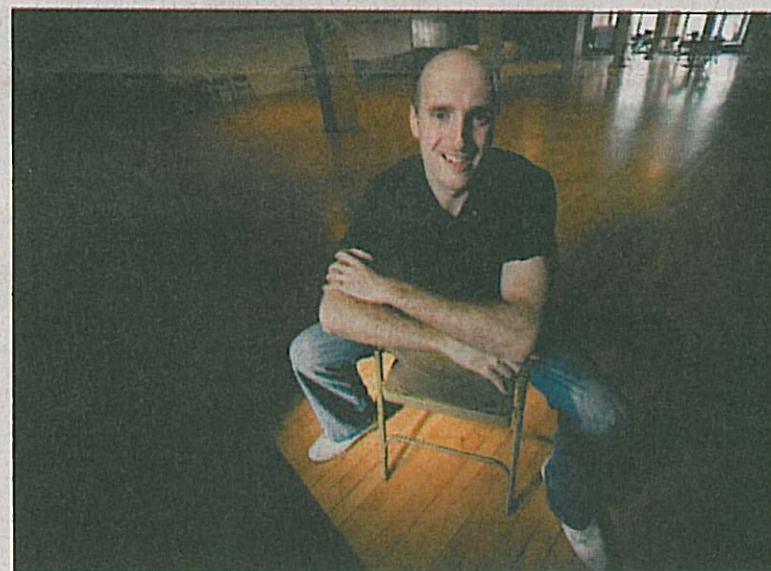
Then Amber Dannals, who helped lead a beginning lesson earlier in the evening, asks him to dance.

"They'll come up and work with you one-on-one and practice the steps," Porter said. "I'll definitely be back."

That type of accepting, nurturing environment is exactly what Stumptown Dance owner Larry Peacock had in mind when he opened the Vancouver Ballroom last month and tapped Whithorn and five other young adults to be its ambassadors, volunteers motivated by their love of the dance to create a thriving swing scene in Clark County.

### A passionate sixsome

Dubbed the Vancouver Six, Whithorn, Dannals, Taylor Stender, Paul van der Salm, Brandon Daniel and Joshua Wagner are a mix of high school and college students and recent graduates from Vancouver, Battle Ground and Hazel Dell. Peacock knows them from dances he's run across the river.



Larry Peacock, 31, opened the Vancouver Ballroom last month. He rents space at the Scottish Rite Center, Lenora's Room and other Portland halls each week to host dances and give lessons, but this is his first designated venue. It's situated between the Old Town Antique Market and the former Spanky's on Main Street in downtown Vancouver.



Brianna Whithorn, 18, leads dancers in the Shim Sham at the Vancouver Ballroom on a recent Saturday night. The choreographed group routine combines swing, Lindy Hop and tap moves.

### If you go

- **What:** Swing dancing.
- **Where:** Vancouver Ballroom, 808 Main St., Vancouver.
- **When:** Saturdays. Beginning lesson from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m., social dancing from 8:30 to 11:30 p.m.
- **Cost:** \$8 for adults, \$6 for students.
- **Information:** 503-957-3369 or stumptowndance.com.



# Swing:

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They're not necessarily his best or most experienced dancers, but they have a contagious enthusiasm.

"I chose people who have 'the bug,'" said Peacock, a 31-year-old Beaverton, Ore., resident who caught swing-itis himself about six years ago. "They're addicted to dancing, and they have a passion for swing."

They're also eager to bring others into the fold, happy to take time out from practicing advanced steps and aeriels to work with beginners on basic moves.

"They're very compassionate. They're full of good energy. They care about people, and they're accepting of everybody," Peacock said.

## 'Come as you are'

If it weren't for that dynamic, Wagner wouldn't be part of the Vancouver Six. Not a naturally gifted dancer, he struggled at first to get the hang of swing and almost gave up several times.

"I got a lot of encouragement to stick with it even though I wasn't very good at first," he said.

Now, almost 2½ years later, Wagner is president of the Clark College Swing Club and deeply entrenched in the swing community. For 29-year-old Wagner, finally pursuing his interest in dance marked a shift from shouldering family responsibilities to focusing on his own dreams.

Wagner had always assumed he'd go straight to college after high school, but life intervened.

His father had cerebral palsy, and his health deteriorated as Wagner was finishing up home-schooling. His mother struggled with health problems as well. His father died eight years ago, and Wagner stayed home in Ridgefield to help his mother.

Three years ago, he found himself at 26 years old working odd jobs and not doing what he really wanted, which was to write. He got his mom into a senior community with a caretaker to help with household chores, and he enrolled at Clark College, where he's studying English.



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

**The Vancouver Ballroom's free grand opening April 25 drew more than 350 people of all ages. Subsequent Saturday evening dances have drawn average crowds of 75. A group of young adults from Clark County, including Amber Dannals (foreground, second from the left), Taylor Stender (background, far left) and Joshua Wagner (far right), helps publicize and run the dances.**

"There were a few years when I didn't get out much," he said. "It's a lot different now. There's a part of me that's kind of making up for lost time, doing things I'd always been interested in, like trying swing dance."

Wagner is relatively new to dancing, but others in the Vancouver Six draw from backgrounds in jazz, hip-hop and ballet.

Whithorn, an 18-year-old senior at Prairie High School in Battle Ground, sometimes dances swing in tap shoes, combining her old and new loves.

Whithorn has tap-danced since age 5 or 6, but only discovered swing last May when her older sister and a friend took her to one of Peacock's social dances at the Scottish Rite Center in Portland.

"After the first time, I was pretty much hooked," Whithorn said.

The swing scene has provided Whithorn and Wagner a chance to get out and make new friends, the same

opportunities people were looking for when the dance first developed.

Swing dance emerged between world wars I and II, riding the highs of the Roaring Twenties and the lows of the Great Depression. When times darkened in the '30s and '40s, the social dance form provided a much-needed reprieve from daily life.

"The object was to relieve stress, have fun and make each other laugh," said Karla Steggall, Clark College swing dance instructor.

## A spike in interest

For the past decade, swing classes at Clark College have filled up, and social dances in the area have been well-attended. But in recent years, interest has piqued.

"Swing is on an upsurge," Steggall said, noting that social dance in general has seen a spike in popularity, thanks to television shows such as "Dancing

With the Stars" and "So You Think You Can Dance."

But Steggall also gives credit to Peacock for creating a thriving swing scene in the Vancouver-Portland area.

"He is our Lindy Hop king," she said. "Larry is a guy's guy. He's tall, athletic and young. He makes dancing cool, and he's making it an open door."

And that's what Peacock believes the Vancouver Six will do.

They've committed to attending at least three Saturday night dances a month and helping publicize the ballroom with everything from fliers to word-of-mouth advertising to "Lindy bombing" — spontaneous performances to attract attention and celebrate the dance.

When necessary, they handle everything.

They agreed to run two weekend dances at the new ballroom while Peacock was in Texas for his fiancée's graduation from medical school. Dur-

ing the first dance, Peacock checked in with texts but had confidence they could handle making the playlists, setting up the sound system, offering a beginning lesson and taking admission.

"I knew it would go well," he said.

With the exception of Dannals, who is an instructor at the ballroom, the group doesn't get paid for their work. Peacock said he's putting aside a portion of the proceeds to help send them to dance camps, and they get free admission at the ballroom, but the rewards are more than monetary. For them, swing is a way of life, and they're excited to have a designated venue closer to home to do what they love.

## Opportunities on the home front

Until now, Clark County swing devotees have had to travel to Portland for most dances. Peacock used to run dances at the Hazel Dell Grange, but the Thursday night time slot wasn't ideal. Leasing the space for the Vancouver Ballroom gives him flexibility. By June he hopes to offer lessons daily, ranging from East Coast swing to Lindy Hop to salsa, hip-hop and ballet, as well as three or four social dances per week. Ballroom and West Coast swing classes have already begun, and summer workshops are in the works.

Peacock believes there's enough demand for all-ages entertainment in Clark County to sustain the ballroom, and others agree.

"I know a lot of our kids are always looking for a good, wholesome place to go. They love dancing, and they're good at it," says Bethany Larson, Christian Youth Theater's Vancouver area coordinator. Peacock has taught swing dance for Christian Youth Theater, and many of those youths attended the Vancouver Ballroom's grand opening on April 25, which drew more than 350 people.

"They're happy to have something in downtown Vancouver," Larson said.

So are the Vancouver Six.

"It's a lot easier than driving to Portland all the time," said Wagner. "We're all excited about what (the Vancouver Ballroom) could become."

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