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## **Fun, flirtatious swing**

By Juliana Goodwin

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The first time Tony Powers watched a West Coast Swing demonstration, he didn't think it was for him.

The Springfield man has since changed his mind.

"I more or less fell in love with it and I started competing," Powers says.

Powers is one of a growing number of people who are reviving a dance that is more than 80 years old. West Coast Swing is probably the most popular dance in the country right now, says Kelly Frey, owner of Step by Step dance studio in Springfield.

In the world, adds Skippy Blair, co-founder of the World Swing Dance Council, instructor and author.

It has managed to appeal to so many generations for decades because it can be danced at any occasion to just about any music.

Once called Western Swing, the "Western" was dropped because people assumed it was a cowboy dance, says Blair.

It's a flirtatious dance and lots of fun, says Frey, so it's fun for couples and singles alike.

It's important to follow the lead, but there's room for each dancer to interpret the dance and showcase their individuality, says Frey.

"If you only want to dance one dance, learn West Coast Swing. It has a learning curve, but once you get it, you can do it," Frey says.

Mark McArtor, who holds international dance titles and teaches West Coast Swing in Lebanon, said he's noticed a steady influx of dancers of all ages.

McArtor, who was recently in Springfield to teach a workshop, says, "West Coast swing is one of those things you can go to country bar and dance to it, you can go to a blues club and dance to it.

"You can't go to your average bar, throw a dollar in the jukebox and find the foxtrot, but you can find the West Coast Swing, several of them."

It's a form of ballroom dance, says Darryl Clark, assistant professor of dance at Missouri State University.

"It evolved in 1920s and '30s and was fully evolved in its first phase in 1936. They say it evolved in Harlem," Clark says.

In the late 1930s and early '40s, the music itself was referred to as "swing," not the dances, according to the World Swing Dance Council. Different dances and styles were popping up from coast to coast, but had similarities because they were danced to the same music.

East Coast Swing is the original swing and many dances evolved out of it, including the Carolina Shag and West Coast Swing, says Blair, but it requires more stamina, one reason West Coast is more popular, Frey says.

Unlike East Coast, in which partners move in opposite direction, West Coast calls for partners to rock in the same direction, making it more practical on a crowded dance floor, says Blair.

And as swing became popular in Hollywood, movie directors would ask their dancers to stay in the frame, which is easier with West Coast.

The dance's popularity has ebbed and flowed over the years.

Part of the potential recent appeal is it brings dancers back together as couples, which is very different from nightclub dancing, says Clark.

"It brings back a certain formality," Clark says, and dancers often dress up, which is fun and sexy.

At Sonshine Royal Ballroom, Suite H, 1329, E. Republic Road, many high school and college students have signed on for swing lessons, says Don McCarty, owner.

"Every so often the thrill of dancing comes about for that age. Any time a movie like 'Fame' comes out and has dancing in it, that era seems to want to jump on the bandwagon," says McCarty.

For years, dance companies have reported a spike in enrollment because of shows like "Dancing with the Stars" and "So You Think You Can Dance."

But West Coast Swing is a craze all over the world. Blair is training dance instructors from Europe, the United States and many are coming from Australia.

While it's increasingly popular in Springfield, it's really hopping in larger cities, including Kansas City and Saint Louis, where Powers goes to compete.

"I belong to a club in St. Louis and it's unbelievable. There are a lot of members in the group," the 45-year-old says.

Powers hopes even more people try it locally, because the more that try it, the more that like it.

No matter what age you are, you can learn to dance, says Frey, who took her first lesson at age 30. Now 41, she's an instructor and owns her own studio.

"Life is short, learn to dance," says Frey.

### **Want to learn?**

While other lessons may be available, this is who we featured in this story.

- Step By Step Dance Studio, 1722 S. Glenstone Ave., Suite G, teaches West Coast Swing and offers workshops throughout the year. Call 877-7837 or go to [www.dancestepbystep.com](http://www.dancestepbystep.com)
- Sonshine Performing Arts Academy, 1329 E. Republic Road. Call 883-3102 or go to [www.sonshine.com](http://www.sonshine.com)