

Headline: Movements with meaning: Ethnic dance is part workout, part celebration of the past.

Byline/Title: By Lisa Eisenhauer
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

PublishDate: Monday, 11/28/2005
Sections: Healthy & Fit
Editions: Third Edition
Page: H1

Body Text: On Tuesdays, dancers at the West End Community Center in St. Louis get a workout thanks to the rhythmic moves and music of Mali.

On Thursdays, a small but diverse crowd joins hands in Creve Coeur for two hours of ancient and modern Israeli folk dances.

Every other Saturday, Scottish country dancers gather in St. Peters for some stately and some high-energy footwork.

On any given day or evening somewhere in the region, dancers twirl, skip and leap into other-worldly experiences. They gather at schools, churches and clubs to form into lines, circles and couples. In their separate clusters, they retrace footprints that originated in other parts of the globe, often long, long ago.

At the Center of Creative Arts in University City, instructor Diadie Bathily says some of the West African dances he teaches are actually links to traditional celebrations that go back centuries. But even in these modern times, he says, moves originally meant to herald the harvest in Guinea or praise a full moon in Ivory Coast can have the same relaxing, rejuvenating and liberating effect on a dancer on the other side of the globe.

"It's never, never boring," Bathily says. "I don't know how to explain it."

The Israeli folk dancers who gather each week only skim the surface of a catalog of thousands of dances, each with their own corresponding song, says Gloria Bilchik. "There are some that are historic, but there are also some that are contemporary," she says.

And like those dances, the regulars at the gatherings are quite a mix. Jewish hoofers join hands with Catholics and Unitarians for dances with Russian, Turkish, Moroccan and American influences. "It really reflects the potpourri of Israeli culture," Bilchik says.

Another potpourri, a local one, is drawn to the St. Louis Irish Arts school. There, students from Africa, Bosnia and India join the Midwesterners who come for lessons on the music, songs and dances of Ireland.

Instructor Helen Gannon doesn't find the ethnic mix her school attracts unusual. "You don't have to be Irish to enjoy Irish dancing," she says.

While each gathering and each crowd is unique, the dancers share the desire to get on their feet, to socialize and to savor their own personal favorites from the distinct styles of expressive movement that bring people all over the world to their feet.

It's that world of diversity itself that some of the dancers find irresistible. Take Ellen Dorfman, who joined the International Folk Dance Association of University City six years and 50 pounds ago.

She loves that the group has a repertoire of hundreds of dances and that the mix varies each time the dancers gather. They start out with simpler ones and move on to the complicated.

But each week's mix proves to be quite a workout -- hence her weight loss. "It's very aerobic, very good for coordination," Dorfman says.

Nancy Couture, who shares a passion for Scandinavian dancing with her husband, Rex, points to another benefit from her dance style of choice. Couture says the spirited dances, most of them for couples, require concentration and are as much a mental as physical workout.

Nevertheless, she says, over the decades that she has danced she has found that amid the footwork and teamwork her payoff for keeping in step with dances that go back centuries is "total relaxation."

What to wear or bring

Clothing: Casual wear for social gatherings and workout wear for lessons.

Shoes: Generally, slick-soled shoes that will allow easy movement but aren't slippery (those with leather heels are often recommended).

Partner: No, say most of the groups; if one is needed, they'll pair you up.