In Full Swing

The mambo, fox trot and cha-cha are back, thanks to a renewed enthusiasm for ballroom dancing.

By JAMES E. FOWLER TIMES STAFF WRITER

fter some female friends confided to Michael Pierce that women find men who can dance well just about irresistible, he enrolled in ballroom dancing classes at Pierce College in Woodland Hills. Also taking the class was Izumi Kaneko, then a recent immigrant from Tokyo.

"Once I started, I really liked it," Pierce said. "I learned mambo, cha-cha, swing and fox trot. I began to like it a lot, and then I met Izumi, we became dance partners, and the rest is history. We love it."

Two years after their first fox trot, Pierce, 34, an engineer at Hughes Aircraft in Malibu, and Kaneko, a 27-year-old Pierce College student from Encino, are engaged to be married.

Earlier this month Pierce and Kaneko were two of about 600 people at a Pierce College Athletic Department benefit dance in the grand ballroom of the Warner Center Marriott Hotel. These fund-raising galas, which occur about once every three months, draw ballroom dancing enthusiasts from throughout the Los Angeles area.

Although the media has drawn a bead on the recent surge in popularity of country-Western dancing, enthusiasm for ballroom dancing has quietly been growing as well, especially among aging baby boomers who don't relate to the popular music of today and don't feel comfortable wearing



Instructor Kris Hagerty, center, leads women in a Tuesday night Valley Swing Dance Club class at Reseda's Crest Lounge.



SCUIT HATHBURN / For The Times

Arto Vanwest and Barbro Rentmeister are among well-dressed dancers at a Pierce College Athletic Department benefit.

cowboy hats. Add to that a large contingent of older people who have a nostalgic appreciation of the music and dancing dating to their youth.

And, with the prominence of dancing in several successful films such as "Dirty Dancing," "Mambo Kings" and, more recently, "Scent of a Woman," "Swing Kids" and "Strictly Ballroom," some people are predicting that couple dancing's time has come.

Again.

Paulette Shafranski, a professor of dance in the Cal State Northridge kinesiology department, said the increased interest in partner dancing is a result of people's desire to communicate on a nonverbal level.

"People want to be close to each other," Shafranski said. "It's OK to touch each other while you're dancing. It's a socially acceptable way to touch."

The Moonlight Tango Cafe, the Sportsmen's Lodge, the Crest Lounge and Barbata's Steak House are a few of the places in the San Fernando Valley that regularly offer various forms of ballroom dancing. And dancing teachers are doing a brisk business acquainting—and reacquainting—people with this older style.

Ken Sloan and his wife, Sheila Webber-Sloan, are former ballroom dancing champions who have competed on the national and international level. They run Sloan and Sloan's School of Dance in Glendale.

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Rose Nichols and Bill Martz show their dance-floor moves at the fund-raiser held in the Warner Center Marriott's ballroom.

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"Your basic social dances are still the backbone of the major dance studios," said Sloan. "Fad dances come and go, but the fox trot is the basic popular dance. Swing is popular. Rumba, waltz, samba. Mambo is getting popular again."

Bill Tole, whose 16-piece orchestra played at the Pierce fundraiser, said the band doesn't have to travel as much as it once did because of increased demand for their music in the Los Angeles area.

"The [dancing] students not only follow my band around," Tole said, "but, they go out to Disneyland and all over town."

Mac McDonald, the Pierce College sports information director who organizes the school's bigband fund-raising dances, said he has seen an increase in ballroom dancing's popularity since he started the events about four years ago.

"We get requests for tickets we can't even fill," McDonald said.
"They say, 'Let us know next time.'
We're building a mailing list but we always miss a lot of people."

"It seems to be a growing trend of young people," said Chuck Cecil, the master of ceremonies at the Pierce dance. "They dance a little bit differently, because they probably originally learned their dancing doing rock 'n' roll, so now when they go into the swing dancing, there's a little bit of a change."

Cecil, 70, has been the host of "Swingin' Years," a syndicated radio program heard locally on KPCC-FM, for 36 years.

"I didn't do any counting, but I would guess 20% of those people here, maybe 30%, did not know the Big Band Era. They're too young to

'Dancing is a physical release, it's like safe sex. For that one song, you're with that one person. You're theirs, and they're yours.'

Dr. Beverly Ball dentist and dancer

have experienced the big bands the first time around, and that's kind of nice for us old folks."

Joyce Mason and her date, Dean Campbell, are the kind of people Cecil is talking about: baby boomers and ex-rockers in their 40s.

"I'm definitely into the jitterbug and the swing," said Mason, a Tarzana resident. "I want to learn how to fox trot. It's a very neat way to move around the dance floor."

Campbell likes the older-style music. "I enjoy this a lot more than I would anything modern we could go to because [there] it's always too loud and too crowded," Campbell said. "This is easier to dance to, you can listen to the music without hurting your eardrums."

Campbell especially likes the more elegant atmosphere at dances held in hotel ballrooms such as the Marriott's.

"I like that there's no smoking."

he said. "You go to any dance place and you can hardly see, you're choking to death, your ears hurt it's not pleasant."

But large ballrooms like Marriott's aren't the only places to couple dance in the Valley.

The Valley Swing Dance Club meets every Tuesday at the Crest Lounge in Reseda. Sonny Watson and Kris Hagerty give beginning and intermediate-level swing dance lessons, with social dancing afterward.

"Don't forget to introduce yourself," Watson said as he led the class through the finer points of something called an eight-count sugar push. "You could be dancing with your future ex-husband."

Watson, 33, started the club in 1985, but has seen a big increase in interest in swing dancing in the last two years. He now draws about 150 people each Tuesday who pay \$6 to be put through their paces.

"Everybody used to do it," Watson said. "And then the twist came and all couple dancing took a dive. It lost popularity."

Watson and Hagerty, 26, give swing dance lessons in the Valley about four nights a week. "It's a dance you can do to any type of music." Hagerty said. "It's romantic, it's sensual and dressing up is part of the attitude."

Dressing up for some of the women includes not only fancy dresses with flowing skirts but also garter belts and seamed stockings—evoking the sensuality of an earlier, more innocent time.

Dr. Beverly Ball, 45, a dentist who lives in West Los Angeles, travels regularly to the Crest on Tuesdays. She has been swing dancing for about four years. She started after she was injured in a car accident. "I got involved in dancing for my health, and it's socially interactive," Ball said. "In the '90s, a lot of singles think it is a safe place to go."

Rose Nichols, who moved to Sherman Oaks in February from the Upland area, said she quickly tired of the Valley club scene and was looking for an alternative. She enrolled at an Arthur Murray studio, and then took private ballroom dancing lessons.

"It's nostalgic, more classical and more fun," said Nichols, 41, who grew up with Top 40 music. "It's a completely different scene. There's no gangs and you can get out to your car safely.

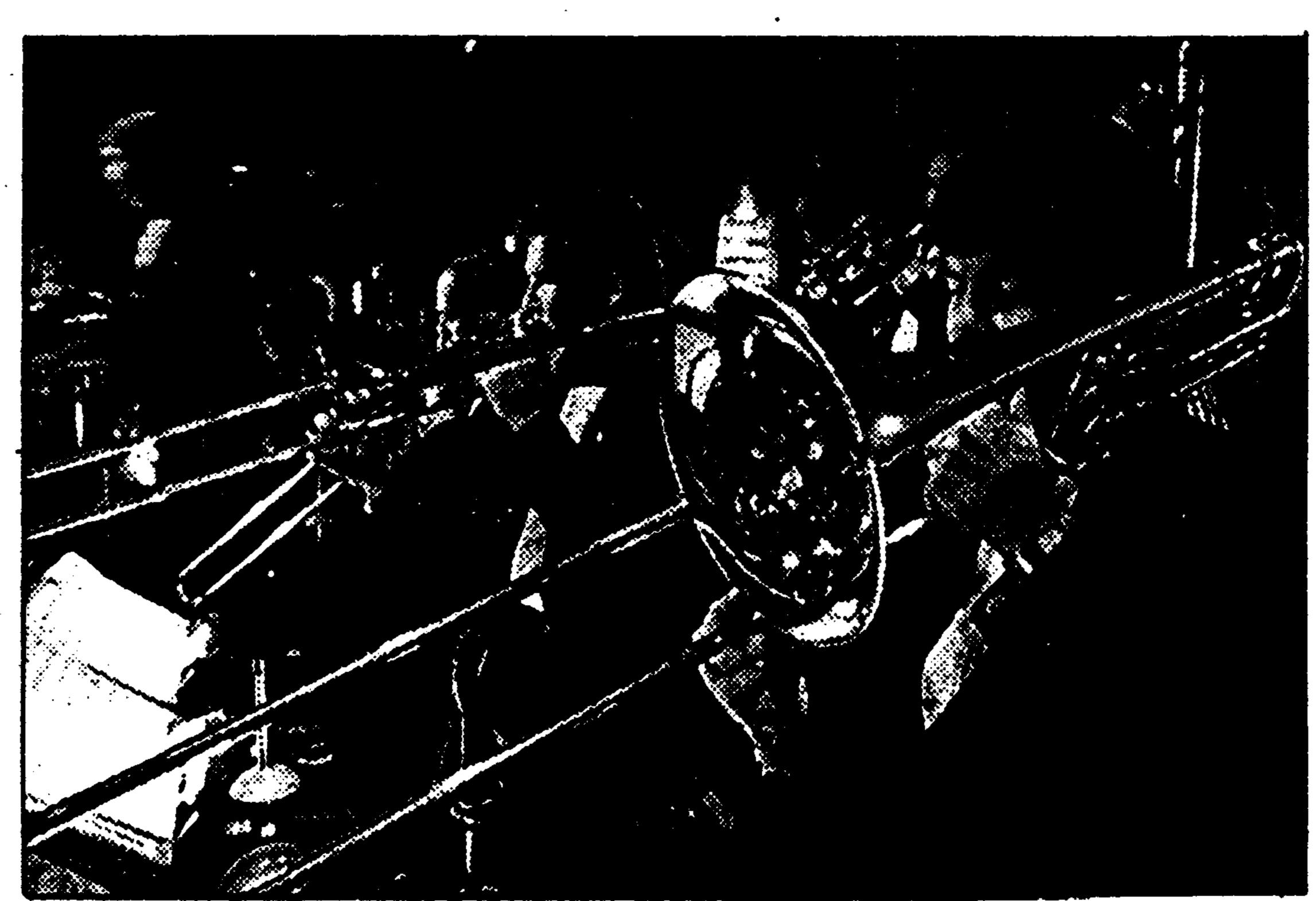
"The people are different, a lot more polite, you can get dressed up and feel like you're out on the town," she added. "And you can kind of show off, and it only takes two months to learn it."

Nichols goes out dancing three nights a week, but she wants no part of country-Western dancing.

"Comparing country-Western to ballroom dancing is like comparing beer to champagne."

For some, the dancing provides a temporary intimacy.

"Dancing is a physical release, it's like safe sex," Ball said. "For that one song, you're with that one person. You're theirs, and they're yours."



SCOTT RATHBURN / For The Times

The Bill Tole Orchestra provided big-band sounds for the Pierce College dance at Warner Center Marriott.

Where to Learn

Here are some contacts for learning ballroom dancing:

Jamle and Gall Arias teach swing dancing and promote dances with live music and disc jockeys. They specialize in "aerial" swing dancing. Call (310) 474-7350.

Felix Chavez specializes in Argentine tango, but also teaches Latin, American and international ballroom dance styles. Call (818) 719-6521.

Valley College Community Services, 5800 Fulton Ave., Van Nuys, offers classes in ballroom, Latin ballroom, West Coast swing and salsa. Registration begins at the end of March, and classes will start in April. Call (818) 988-3911.

Pierce College Community Services, 6201 Winnetka Ave., Woodland Hills, offers classes in ballroom and cha-cha/tango ballroom. Registration begins at the end of March, and classes will start in late April. Call (818) 719-6425.

Learning Tree University, 20920 Knapp St., Chatsworth, offers classes in ballroom, East Coast swing and West Coast swing. Registration is open and classes run almost continually. Call (818) 882-5599.

Sloan and Sloan School of Dance, 343 Arden Ave., Glendale, offers instruction in all American and international styles of ballroom from beginning to higher competition levels. Call (818) 241-4424.

Sonny Watson and Kris Hagerty specialize in West Coast swing dancing. Watson runs the Valley Swing Dance Club that meets at the Crest Lounge on Tuesdays, and he and Hagerty give private lessons. Call (818) 504-0941.

Where to Dance

Here is a sampling of places in the San Fernando Valley area that offer ballroom dancing:

Barbata's Steak House, 20001 Ventura Blvd., Woodland Hills. 9 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Call (818) 340-5914.

Crest Lounge, 6101 Reseda Blvd., Reseda. 9 p.m. to midnight Tuesdays. Call (818) 342-1563.

Glendale Moose Lodge, 357 W. Arden Ave. 8 p.m. to midnight Wednesdays. Call (818) 240-1505.

Guys and Dolls Dance Club, American Legion Hall, 7338 Canby Ave., Reseda. 8:30 p.m. to midnight Fridays. Call (818) 705-9843.

Moonlight Tango Cafe, 13730 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks. Big bands, 8 and 9:30 p.m. Tuesdays; music of the 1940s and '50s, 7 to 11:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 7 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Fridays, 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. Saturdays, 6 to 11 p.m. Sundays. Call (818) 788-2000.

Sportsmen's Lodge, 12833 Ventura Blvd., Studio City. 6 to 11 p.m. the first and fourth Sundays of the month. Call (818) 984-0202.

Ventura Club, 13920 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks. 8:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Tuesdays and 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Fridays. Call (818) 788-5550.

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