

# Western Dance Is a Hit in Asheville

by Barry Ward

"Grab your partner, doe-si-doe. Get on the floor for Cotton-eyed Joe!"

This call brings dozens of folks to their feet every Wednesday and Sunday evening at O.Henry's. And if you've ever wondered about terms like "San Antonio Stroll," "Wooden Nickel," "Roll Up The Rug," and "Tush-Push," maybe you should drop by one of these evenings and check out what has emerged as one of community's fastest growing outlets for fun and recreation.

It started as a small group of friends interested in learning the Texas Two-Step and western-style line dances. Now known as Southern Country Asheville, the group has more than 30 official members and as many as 150 more people who have come out on occasion to kick up their heels to country music and to learn new and fascinating ways to dance.

The president of Southern Country is Mark Goldberg, who moved to Asheville from Miami with his friend Steve Harrelson early last spring. Both Mark and Steve have been involved in gay square dancing for more than eight years. One of the first things they did after moving here was to look for country music and western dancing at all the clubs. On their first night out, they were

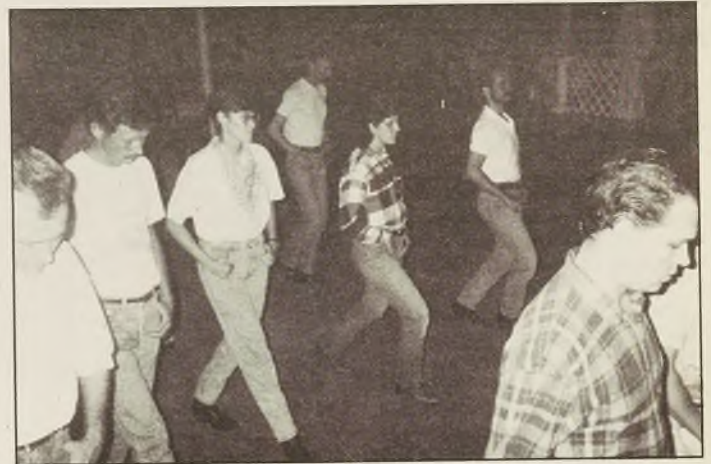
pretty dismayed, because they found none. Then, the next night, they walked into Trax and there were some guys doing two-step. Mark recalls that "they weren't quite doing it right, but they were trying."

Mark and Steve pitched in and the rest is history. Their arrival in Asheville was a bit of good fortune, since Mark has instructed and coached winning teams in Western Dance competition. As word spread, the number of regular dancers grew.

In late May, the group organized as a non-profit "western dance and social club," and as an affiliate with Southern Country, an umbrella organization with chapters in several cities including Atlanta, Chattanooga, Nashville, Columbia and Charlotte.

Many western dance groups restrict their membership to men. But Southern Country Asheville actively encourages womyn dancers. Several womyn are now members, and even more occasionally join the group on dance nights. The policy is very much open door and everyone who is interested in learning western dance is welcome.

One person who has danced with the group on several occasions, had this to say: "I've never come to any group where



A popular line dance is the western version of the Waltz.

I have been made to feel more welcome, where everyone seemed genuinely interested in seeing to it that I had a good time. These people are like a family and they make you feel a part of everything that is happening."

According to Mark, the group is dedicated to the enjoyment of the dance, to continually learn new dances, and to take pleasure in each other's company.

"Since there is already a variety of organizations in the community devoted to political issues, we are purely a social organization," he said. "Of course, we are interested in and supportive of the great work that is being done on behalf of the gay and lesbian community, and one of our goals is to participate in appropriate fundraisers for these organizations."

Southern Country Asheville has had a busy summer. The group's first public exhibition occurred during Asheville's Gay Pride Festival with a performance at the SALGA dance held at The Green Door. Since then, the group has performed at two benefits for the Western North Carolina AIDS Project, both held at O.Henry's. A "coming out" hoe-down was held in June with nearly 200 people attending over the course of the evening. The group travelled to Charlotte to help

get that Southern Country chapter off the ground. And a group trip was made to Atlanta to help celebrate that chapter's anniversary.

Southern Country Asheville is planning another Hoe-Down and an official "Beginners' Night" at O.Henry's, starting at 8 PM on September 14. The free event is open to everyone and will include entertainment, a "graduation" for the more advanced dancers, another spicy buffet, and, as always, free dance lessons. Special attention will be given to folks who want to try western dance for the first time.

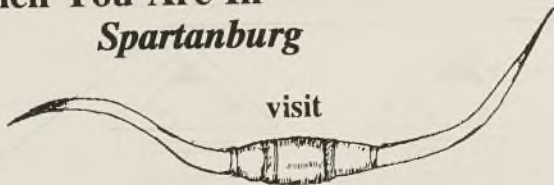
An even larger event, with participation from Southern Country groups from all over the Southeast, will be held in October. It is anticipated that the October event will bring 150 to 200 out-of-town dancers to Asheville.

"Western dance can be done by anyone," says Mark. "We have dancers at all levels, from beginners to advanced, and we dedicate a portion of every Wednesday evening especially for those who are coming for the first time or are fairly new. We don't want anyone to feel

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