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SMC Gets in the Swing

By Lou Fancher



Saint Mary's students in the JanTerm course, 'If You Ain't Got That Swing,' learn Lindy Hop and Swing basics with guest dance instructor Pat Doyle (center) Photo Andy Scheck

When Saint Mary's College told Professor Rebecca Carroll to go out on a limb with her Jan Term class, she swung out as far as her dancing bones could travel.

Carroll, Chair of the college's Department of Business Administration and a long-ago ballroom dancer, took SMC's intense pack-an-entire-term-into-one-month assignment to heart. She devised a course that begins with slavery and ends with a dance craze that swept the United States in the 1920's, 30's and, in resurgence, the 1980's.

If the five minutes-yes, that's just five little minutes-that it took for the course registry to fill after it was posted is any indication, swing dance is on the rise again in 2012.

The only person who wasn't surprised is Carroll.

"I'm not surprised; I'm delighted," she said, in an interview just three days into the class. "Most of the students told me they loved the history of the period, the music, the dress. Some of them said they liked the idea of moving through January term. They spend the rest of the year sitting in class."

The class meets four times each week, with a 90 minute lecture session followed by a one hour dance class. Patrick Doyle, a popular teacher from Mendocino County, provides instruction. Carroll said he jumped at her invitation to come down to "her" college and teach 20-year olds.

"He calls himself a drill sergeant: the students who are athletes say he's like their coach, only louder," Carroll laughed.

Doyle is careful and respectful of the students' proper form. He begins with simple tension and compression exercises to gain comfort with the leader/follower roles social dances require.

"They were just absorbing this culture and are so willing to put themselves out there and try this," Carroll exclaimed. "By day three, they were already smoothing out their movements."

Swing Dance allows for a more grounded, relaxed movement vocabulary than ballroom's upright posture, and its definition has grown to include the Lindy Hop, Charleston and East Coast/West Coast Swing patterns.

"It came on slave ships. They put the Africans on the deck and had them dance. It wasn't because they were kind: it was to keep them in better physical condition to get more money for them," Carroll explained.

The one thing she has learned, unexpectedly, is how unaware the students are about how much African culture

has contributed to American music and dance. "The same steps those Africans were doing are the steps we are doing today. We talk about jazz being an American art form and that's true, but that's only because we don't think of all the imports."

Carroll teaches courses in rhetoric, when not indulging in her passion for dance and its historical origins.

"I have a PhD in arguing," she joked, describing how one student, when asked to offer his definition of rhetoric, raised his hand and announced, "Lies!"

Instead, rhetoric emerges from classic, Aristotle-drenched discourse, in which opinions are not mistaken for arguments. She is proud that SMC recognizes the importance of the distinction.

"I mostly teach argument to business students. How do we write well, how do we speak well: most colleges don't teach this. You need to be able to make your point, to state your business," she said.

Due to the popular appeal of the If You Ain't Got That Swing class, a free, open dance party has been scheduled for Thursday, January 19th. Starting at 6:00 p.m., a one-hour instructional session will heat up Saint Mary's Soda Center. Immediately following the class, at 7:00 p.m., the 17-piece Big Band orchestra Class Act will accompany a two-hour swing, sway, tuck turn, and rock-step extravaganza.

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