Dancers take a spin, break a few rules

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LAFAYETTE — Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. This sing-song saying is no longer just for brides.

These days, it more accurately sums up the philosophy of square dance clubs. Old traditions, new and nontraditional square dance callers, borrowed musical styles and lyrics, and blue jeans.

Yes, blue jeans. A number of square dancers are no longer enthusiastic about wearing the special attire required at square-dance functions, according to Rosalind Landry, president of the See Saw Square Dance Club in Lafayette.

Landry says some men would like to ditch the neckwear and long-sleeved shirts (worn so that their female partners don’t have to clutch a sweaty arm), and some women are tired of the flouncy petticoats. The growing clamor seems to be for blue jeans.

"Should we relax the dress code? I would be disappointed to see that happen. I remember when I graduated from lessons, I couldn’t wait to go out and buy real square-dancing clothes,” Landry said.

Although square dancing is an American dance, it’s gaining popularity in Japan and Germany, where it was carried over in the 1980s via military bases. Even in foreign countries, square dancing is known by its English name and is understood by those who don’t speak the language.

There is a movement to entice “younger” dance—people in their 40s and 50s — back to the fold.

“Square dancing was really big at one time,” Landry said. "Many of our dancers have been dancing for 25 or 30 years."

For example, George Eldridge of Abbeville has been dancing since 1940 and was recognized at a New Iberia dance a month ago.

Despite the absence of younger people interested in the custom, square-dance callers are more often using music that appeals to youth, such as Caribbean, rock, and even rap music, said Houma square-dance caller Gwendolyn Vance.

"For young people, it makes a big difference to use music with a heartbeat." The lack of interest among younger Americans may be that they are raising families and working more than one job, unlike their counterparts in Sweden, where the aver-
The square dancer is 20-something, said Ohio caller Mark Clausey. Perhaps square dancing is more popular with older Americans because it offers them a different kind of heartbeat: Exercise. Clausey said a dancer will walk some 5 miles during a three-hour square dance.

In New Iberia last month, Bruce Carter of Shreveport, a heart-attack survivor, had a convincing tale for potential recruits: “My doctor told me I could thank my square-dance caller, because I’d have had muscle damage if I didn’t square dance. At the time, I was just working and square dancing.” Although men are the most difficult to recruit, they end up enjoying it most, Clausey said.

“Most men come to think of it as a strategy game, like chess, that gives them a feeling of accomplishment, as with any sport.” Strategy? Sport? Square dancing? Are we talking about the same thing?

Another trend in square dancing is the desire of some square dancers to compete, although most dancers would rather just have fun. “I really don’t have any desire to know anything about ‘challenge’ dancing, to be honest. It’s not fun, it’s more like work,” Landry said.

Vance is a caller interested in making square dancing even easier. “New people coming in are already expected to learn 53 to 72 calls, and that’s a lot.” For a dance that originated with “a lot of hootin’ and hollerin’ in a barn,” the kindness of its participants is surprising and legendary. No alcohol, smoking, cursing or gambling is permitted at most square-dance function across the nation. That seems to suit the square dancers just fine.

Vance, a former opera singer and classical pianist, said she gave up the “intellect” of classical music because she couldn’t resist the “emotion” of square dancing and its folk music, which “makes my feet want to move.” She has since learned to play the dulcimer, fiddle, violin, and accordion.

“In line dancing, you don’t touch anybody. In ballroom dancing, it’s you and your partner, and the rest of the room can just jump in a lake. But with square dancing, people contact other people, touching hands and arms. You swing with everybody in your square.”