

SWINGTIME

DISCO



By Karen Farrar

Back in 1937 — when the Big Apple was the nation's most popular dance, not its largest city — the *Missouri Alumnus* surveyed the dance scene at the University, comparing it to the fraternity and sorority bashes of 1910, “when swing is a one-step, and the hairdress of the moment is the pompadour. . . . There are no jelly joints to while away hours during the week; there are no motion pictures for Wednesday night dates. So the gay young blades and their lassies look forward to the Saturday night assembly, a dusk-to-dawn dance held in Stone’s Hall.”

“A campus queen today [1937],” the *Alumnus* reported, “hurries through the preliminary preparations of getting ready for a dance. Outlining a Joan Crawford mouth, she uses enough lipstick to last a 1910 girl for six months. If she has a corsage — and it’s a rare occasion — she pins the flowers in her hair or at her shoulder. She dashes down the stairs in answer to her date’s frantic bellow for her at the foot of the stairs. It may be 9:30 o’clock. The dances are scheduled for 9, but no dance is officially under way until the hordes of stags arrive.

“After exchanging greetings and leaving her wraps with the house mother (an innovation which made its appearance shortly after the war), her date claims her for his own and they start to force their way through the close-packed couples to see what kind of condition the orchestra is in.

"But they do not get a third of the way across the small floor before the boy feels a hearty slap on the back or else a firm hold on the arm, and he relinquishes his date with a 'See you later.' Unattached, he joins a group of stags standing in a corner and sizes up the girls milling around in the center, until one catches his eye and he taps her partner on the back. And so on and on. . . .

"The girls really have to take it in 1937. They must dance with all types and kinds of dancers under the stag system. They are on their feet constantly from the opening bars to 'Home Sweet Home.' The more successful a girl is, the more she or her escort is 'tagged.' Woe to any girl who dances around the room twice with the same partner. There is something wrong. It's either because her best friends won't tell her or else she just doesn't have that certain vital quality. She must keep up a steady stream of banter and wisecracks, for Missouri dances are noted for their conviviality. When the sorority lights blink for the last time emphatically, she is off for a night of hard-earned sleep.

"Orchestras are rarely imported. Nationally-known bands made famous by the radio and the movies are too rich for college purses. Dancers are content with the strains of orchestras composed of students who are working their way through college. Sometimes orchestras are brought in from surrounding towns as a novelty. But they are generally on a par with campus bands.

"Sometimes a house will splurge heavily on decorations. One house tries each year to create an open air garden scene on the dance floor. Members are assessed considerably to make a lower floor a picture of beauty and liveliness for the few short hours of the dance. An elaborate fountain with a pool of goldfish, soft, colored light, a canopy of stars hanging from the ceiling, real flowers of a wall trellis — all create the atmosphere. The basement is converted into a rock garden where couples stroll during intermission."

Now, almost 40 years later in the nearly-anything goes society of 1978, some will be happy to hear that, although Greek dances

are considerably changed, they still retain a measure of tradition.

Most sororities and fraternities hold three scheduled dance parties a year — in the spring and fall, and a winter formal. But, in between, fraternities (sorority houses do not allow the girls to serve liquor) initiate countless after-football-game parties and mid-week "mixers" or "exchanges," to which sorority coeds are invited. Favorite mid-week bashes are the "themes" parties, often costume affairs. "The Year 2,000," "Hollywood," a '50s party, square dance party, wine and cheese party, and a Red Light party (participants dressed as pimps and hookers) are some notables of recent years. Booze — usually kegs of beer — and local bands or disco or stereo music are the mainstays of these get-togethers.

Though girls on Campus are beginning to wear skirts again and, to their surprise, liking it, Greek dance dress attire is casual — simple blouses and shirts and still lots of bluejeans, though not "grubbies." Winter formal dances — with long dresses and suits — are the exception.

One would have to say that much of the formality characteristic of the '30s' parties has disappeared, as was evident at this fall's Monmouth Duo dance party, hosted by Pi Beta Phi and Kappa Kappa Gamma sororities.

Monmouth Duo festivities begin on Saturday morning with a kidnapping of the girls — still in pajamas — of one sorority by the other sorority, followed by a breakfast (such as champagne and bagels) in one of the local parks. In the afternoon, it's time for the girls' dates to accompany them to a park for games like beerball (everyone must carry a can of something while they play softball), or to explore caves, or just romp. The parties then go in couples or groups to local restaurants for dinner, as food is not served at the evening dance. Party favors, which might be mugs, baseball caps, or gym shorts, are supplied by the girls for their dates.

Drinking, dancing, and mixing are the themes for the rest of the evening at one of the city's party barns, this year at the Road Apple on the edge of town. It's a bring-your-own booze affair for about 500 students, and on the tables surrounding the dance floor are a collection of ice chests filled with ice and beer large enough to insure that no one has to wonder where the next drink will come from.

On the dance floor, the current disco craze is translated by students, with blinking colored lights and booming disco music. Although some students take dance lessons, it's not necessary to know the latest steps to have a good time on the dance floor. The jitterbug of the swing era has made a comeback; other dancers do the low motion or the pretzel, a step accomplished by joining hands and rapidly twisting under the arms until the couple indeed resembles that knotted cracker. Some make up dance steps as they go, so that it's difficult to find two couples dancing alike. Everyone can dance, and does.

Although many couples still dance apart, there is more "touching" than during the "twist" dance fad. A slow dance is thrown in occasionally, and here the girl entwines her arms around her date's neck while he holds her closely around the waist. Some merely stand in this position, swaying to the music.

Wandering through the crowd, a party picture man snaps shots of parties in various clowning and acrobatic positions and, later, students select favorites for their memory books. They should hang on to these pictures. Their children may need some ideas for a '70s party. □

