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The First Dance

By MARK OPPENHEIMER

On the first night of December, an unseasonably cold one in the Ozarks, the boys and girls of John Brown University primed in their zoot suits, suspenders, waistcoats, spats, faux-hawks, pompadours, knee-length pleated skirts, nylons, snoods and inch-high black heels and marched through snow drifts to their gymnasium in the Walton Lifetime Health Complex, one of northwest Arkansas's monuments to the Wal-Mart family's generosity. Inside, the gymnasium was decorated with rows of Christmas lights strung overhead across the width of the basketball court, from one railing of the mezzanine jogging track to the other. The occasion, which would last from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m., was a dance, the first of its kind at this small, nondenominational Christian college.

As if to make up for 90 essentially dance-free years on campus, the 14-piece Jack Mitchell Big Band began playing early, shortly before 8, and from the first note of "In the Mood" the best dancers clustered up front, where they performed aerial lifts, between-the-leg slides and precarious dips, looking like a reasonably good audition for "So You Think You Can Dance" or the great "khakis swing" Gap ad from 1998. These joyful, loose-limbed performances concealed a rather startling truth. The young men and women of this 1,200-person college were dancing alongside, and in some cases bumping smack into, their president, dean and chaplain — the men who only six months ago could have expelled them for doing so. From the school's founding in 1919 by John Brown Sr. — not the abolitionist but a Salvation Army itinerant turned preacher — until last October, dancing had been seen at J.B.U. as a gateway to sin. Students danced, but in private.

The school's "community covenant" had prohibited, in addition to smoking, sex outside of marriage, drinking and gambling, all on-campus dancing except "folk or square dancing and choreography as part of a dramatic production." Distinctions were not made — the Viennese waltz was as forbidden as the electric slide, the achy-breaky as taboo as the lambada. The week before J.B.U.'s first dance, Tracie Faust, a senior, told me about one night her sophomore year when a popular song came on the radio. "And before you knew it," she said, "there were 10 of us dancing, and the R.A. came out of her room and told us to stop." The offending song? "Breakaway," by the adult-lite American Idol Kelly Clarkson.

J.B.U.'s about-face, while abrupt, was not totally unexpected. In the past 10 years, several of America's most established evangelical schools, including Baylor University in Texas, Wheaton College in Illinois and Cornerstone University in Michigan, have lifted restrictions on dancing, even as they have kept various rules against activities like drinking, gambling, smoking and, of course, premarital sex. They are opting to allow formal dances, like swing or ballroom. Of course, it's unlikely there will be hip-hop or bump-and-grind at J.B.U. They will not be krumping. But for millions of evangelical

Protestants, dancing has become increasingly acceptable. There are still conservative Christians, particularly in Baptist, Pentecostal and independent Bible-church traditions, who don't dance, but they are growing scarce. The old joke about why Baptists won't have sex standing up — because people might think they're dancing — has become antiquated.

“I was part of a group of girls who would put on music in our rooms and dance, and were asked to stop,” Jennifer Paulsen told me. Paulsen is the student-government president who helped persuade the trustees to overturn the ban. It was three days before the dance, and we were talking in the Walker Student Center, J.B.U.'s main hub. “We knew there was ‘no social dancing,’ but what did that mean? We knew folk and square dancing was allowed, and people will always move a little if a good song comes on, but how many people makes a dance?”

In my week at J.B.U., I met students who had never had a drink, had never kissed a boy or a girl and had no doubt that dinosaurs and men walked the earth at the same time. But I didn't meet a soul who thought dancing was sinful. And nearly all the students I spoke to danced in high school. So last summer, newly elected to her post, Jennifer and her cabinet decided that it was time for dancing at J.B.U. to come out of the closet. Jennifer is an activist by nature — raised in Seattle, she looks like the outdoorsy girl you see on every campus in the Pacific Northwest, the one on the climbing wall who lobbies for more vegetarian dishes in the dining hall. Her three big passions in life are “infectious diseases, the environment and women's issues.”

When Jennifer raised the issue of dancing with Steven Beers, the dean of students, he was surprisingly receptive to a change. “The subculture had shifted,” Beers, a quiet man who avoids seeming like the campus disciplinarian he is, told me. Beers, who is 47, knows the subculture well: his father was a dean at Taylor University, a Christian college in Indiana that still forbids most dancing on campus. “Christian junior highs or high schools, even churches, were allowing swing dancing on their property,” Beers said. “The evangelical subculture is no longer seeing all forms of social dancing as evil.”

Students had inquired about changing the policy before, to no avail. But this year, Beers, sensing the trustees might be ready, told Jennifer to propose a new policy, and she went to work, finding out about the policies of 18 other evangelical colleges. Nine, she learned, now allowed dancing — but not all dancing. At some Christian schools, you can dance, but only on campus; at others, only off-campus. At one school, no “excessive body contact” is allowed. Jennifer and her cabinet drafted their own version, allowing “thematic dances,” including swing, ballroom and salsa, and showed it to Beers, J.B.U.'s president and the university's vice presidents, who together lightly edited the proposal — deleting, for example, “hip-hop.” In October, the trustees voted. Yes, they said. It was time. John Brown University could dance.

Plans for the first dance were immediately entrusted to Danielle Vogus, a senior whose efficient air seems precocious until you learn that she is actually 29. All week, I saw Danielle putting up posters and selling tickets in the Student Center. For two nights

before the dance, she organized all-school swing lessons in the gym. “We wanted it to be a fun first dance,” she said. It was Tuesday, and Danielle was feeling the stress, and the exhilaration, common to student-activities types everywhere. “I’ll be honest — it’s been hard. ... I’m kind of a perfectionist and kind of a control freak. But it hasn’t been a negative experience. I know it’s going to be great. Everyone will have fun.”

They would have fun, as it turned out. And by dressing up nicely, but not suggestively, and dancing exuberantly, but not too closely, these students and professors would say with their bodies not only that Christians may dance but also that they should. It’s a message that would sound shocking to John Brown. But in today’s evangelical culture, J.B.U. students are not unique. Their appreciation for dancing is part of a turn outward, toward secular society and toward those Christians, including many from ethnic minorities and many from abroad, who never learned they weren’t supposed to dance. As Christian campuses become more diverse and seek to prepare students for a cosmopolitan world, they are aligning with the growing number of faithful who believe that dancing can glorify God, carry the Good News and even give a secular pastime a “redemptive” purpose.

Siloam Springs, Ark., is a town with about 60 churches for fewer than 14,000 people. It is not officially Christian, of course, but the sign at the city limits on Route 412 says, “welcome to siloam springs, where jesus is lord.” It’s a town with Free Baptists, Free Evangelicals, Southern Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Assemblies of God, Reformed Christians, Nazarene Christians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Holiness Methodists and a couple dozen independent Bible churches so committed to Scripture alone that choosing a denomination is close to idolatry. Over the Oklahoma border, there’s an Indian casino filled with one-armed bandits, and 30 miles away in Fayetteville, there are the college bars for University of Arkansas students. But here in Siloam Springs, the restaurants are dry and the church parking lots are full on Sunday mornings.

If you want to know why J.B.U. students didn’t dance until now, it makes more sense to look out your window at Siloam Springs than to look down at the Bible on your desk. The Bible doesn’t say you can’t dance. For that matter, it doesn’t say that you can’t drink or can’t smoke. The rules against these vices are what evangelicals call “prudential” rather than scriptural: they don’t have the force of commandment, but you follow them just to be careful. These rules arose as part of a Protestant subculture so determined to eradicate sin that it began to interdict behaviors that might be baby steps on the road to perdition. This subculture is not mandated by the Bible, but it’s the marrow of towns like Siloam Springs and schools like John Brown University.

Despite their professed commitment to Scripture as the sole basis of the Christian life, radical Protestants have always policed themselves even more strictly than the Bible prescribes. New England Puritans, 19th-century Sabbatarians and 20th-century temperance activists all advocated rules against one biblically permissible activity or another. In the early 20th century, self-described “fundamentalists,” eager to secede from a liberalizing Protestant culture, founded colleges meant to preserve the old-time religion, and the students followed prudential rules. Schools like Biola University outside Los

Angeles (founded 1908), J.B.U. (1919) and Bob Jones University in South Carolina (1927) taught varying theologies — to this day, John Brown students say they hate being confused with the far-right Bob Jones students — but they all banned dancing, drinking, smoking and gambling.

These prudential rules have had a somewhat random quality. For example, conservative Protestants have always been suspicious of art's propensity to deceive and entice, but among the arts, singing has been more permissible than the visual arts, which can tend toward idolatry, and everything has been preferable to dancing, with its obvious evocation of sex. Dancing also raises old fears of physicality — some early Christians, most famously the Gnostic heretics, deemed all flesh and matter inherently corrupt. “We have remnants of that today, that rejection of the body that the early church rejected,” says Colin Harbinson, a choreographer who is dean of the arts at Belhaven College, an evangelical school in Jackson, Miss. “Particularly with dance, the instrument is the body — and the body and material are evil.” It's a prejudice that cuts across religions. Many religious Muslims and Orthodox Jews prohibit mixed-sex dancing except between close relatives. In the 18th century the Hasidic Jews' ecstatic movement during prayer was considered schismatic.

It's hard to say which came first for conservative Christians: the cultural prohibitions or the scriptural justifications. The rules against smoking and drinking have a plausible basis in Paul's metaphor in I Corinthians 6:19 of the body as “a temple,” a sacred site not to be despoiled: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” But other prohibitions seem rooted entirely in prudential culture — where else would we get the notion, enshrined in the rules of some Christian colleges, that boys must keep their hair cut short, lest they confuse gender roles? And how can dancing be prohibited? For Miriam dances after the victory at the Red Sea, and David dances after the ark's return to Jerusalem. Ecclesiastes tells us there is “a time to mourn and a time to dance.”

Traditionally, the answer was that dancing, like long hair on men, might have been appropriate in biblical times but did not fit with contemporary understandings of temperance, modesty or prudence. But within this answer was a tacit concession that as culture changes, some rules change, too. That understanding has allowed for an extraordinary transformation in how evangelicals perceive dance: impossible as it would have seemed 50 years ago, many of them now believe that dancing is particularly desirable. In the first half of the 20th century, various swing dances, like the jitterbug and the lindy hop, were often associated with juvenile delinquency and miscegenation, what many parents feared. Swing still seems like an artifact of the '40s and '50s, but now that era has become, in the evangelical mind, a prelapsarian age before the pill, the Crips or gay marriage. Parents who themselves were forbidden to dance now urge their children toward what has become, standing against the muck of popular culture, a wholesome pastime.

Nathan Cozart is a short, wiry 22-year-old senior, a mechanical engineering major, a Dallas native and a very smooth swing dancer. When we met in the Walker Student

Center, he told me that swinging, far from being discouraged, was popular among his home-schooled friends in high school.

“In North Texas, home-schooling has largely turned toward co-ops, and the one we were part of had about 500 families,” Nathan said. “So, long story short, some friends of mine were involved in the choir at the co-op, and they were doing a tribute to the ’40s and the ’50s, and one of the guys who taught there, a math teacher, knew swing. So he taught 12 of us some preliminary steps, and we did two or three numbers.” Nathan and his friends began dancing regularly at the swing society in Dallas. But when he got to Siloam Springs for college, there was a dearth of swing opportunities. “There aren’t a lot of places to dance here. I’d go with my sisters when I was home. We heard about some swing clubs in Fayetteville, but we couldn’t find them.”

All that changed this school year, when a sophomore, Craig Congdon, brought swing to J.B.U. “I was a really big swing dancer in high school,” Craig told me the morning before the dance. He looks the part, tall and lithe. Craig is a preacher’s kid, and he went to a Christian high school in Topeka that held one formal dance a year, at which a hired instructor would give lessons in waltz, swing and cha-cha. Craig’s mother knew swing and gave him more advanced lessons; in his last two years of high school, he and his girlfriend at the time would occasionally travel to a swing club in Lawrence, Kan. Arriving at J.B.U., Craig heard rumors of a swing club in Tulsa, Okla., but that was at least an hour away, so he had to content himself with salsa. “I was really good friends with a Latina on campus,” he said, “and she took me and some other Latinos and Latinas to a salsa club in Fayetteville.”

By the time Craig returned to J.B.U. for his sophomore year, the club had closed. But good fortune intervened. “At the very beginning of the year, J.B.U. put on a square dance, and after the square dance, the guy left his music on. So I did some line dancing to it” — a brave move, since line dancing was technically prohibited. “And some girls came up and said, ‘Do you do any other dances?’ ” Craig mentioned that he was thinking of starting a swing club, off-campus, and the girls were excited. “And I said, ‘So if I started it, you’d come?’ They were like, ‘Yeah, we’d spread the word.’ ”

So Craig did what any good Christian boy would: he called his church. He attends Community Christian Fellowship, a nondenominational “Bible church” popular with J.B.U. students. Emily Watson, a freshman who, since becoming Craig’s girlfriend, has developed into a gifted swing dancer herself, told me how she found a home at the church: “I was going to try other churches, but I went to C.C.F., and the college/youth pastor invited us all over for a barbecue, and he said he’d leave his house unlocked for us to do laundry, and well, I never left the church.” Unsurprising, then, that the church was receptive to Craig’s dancing plan, which stood to bring students through the doors.

At first, Craig’s Saturday-night swing lessons at the church drew about 40 students. Then, on Oct. 27, J.B.U. staged Mock Rock, an annual on-campus lip-sync show, and Craig and some friends did a swing number. Emily Watson told me that the Mock Rock performance kicked campus interest in swing to a higher level: “That was a Friday, and

the next night was a Saturday, and tons of people came” to the church swing lesson. “The floor was packed.” I heard estimates of 80, 85, even 100 students attended the swing class.

Now, two nights before the dance, Craig was leading swing lessons in the school gym.

For conservative Christians, dancing is also a way to teach the virtues. Students are schooled in chivalry, taught always to walk a lady to and from the floor, applaud the band and ask the girl standing by herself for a dance. A swing, ballroom or square dance usually takes place in a well-lighted space. The swing dancers of yore may have been escaping supervision, but now dancing is a family affair: Nathan and Craig both dance with their siblings. (Craig danced with his mom.) Unlike Christian rock, the music for these dances is palatable to older generations too. Formal dances require instruction in the proper steps, which creates a role for parents or teachers. And of course, the sexuality of dance can be a positive thing, if it provides a sexual release without the sex.

“We’ll allow it,” the evangelicals are saying, “so long as we can make it into something Christian.” It’s in stark contrast to what we might call the ultra-fundamentalist approach, which encourages separatism in the hope of achieving purity. To use the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr’s terms, the fundamentalists’ Christ is against the culture, while J.B.U.’s Christ is a transformer of the culture. Ultra-fundamentalist children are often home-schooled and forbidden secular television or radio; J.B.U. kids listen to Fall Out Boy and have DVD collections (in one dorm room, I noticed “Sweet Home Alabama” and the entire fourth season of “Friends”).

And this engagement with the culture has a religious purpose. Several teachers and students at J.B.U. told me that if you can dance, you can interact socially with people who might need your Christian witness. The students “will meet people through dance they’d never otherwise meet,” says Charles W. Pollard, J.B.U.’s president. “They can go to work for a corporation and meet someone at a dance and meet them in a redemptive way. And we can dance in a redemptive way too.”

Forty years ago, evangelicals did not speak about dancing in a “redemptive” way. But they soon began to take seriously the Christian art apologetics of scholars like Francis A. Schaeffer, whose influential 1973 book, “Art and the Bible,” argued that Christians should be the most passionate of artists, glorifying God with their creativity. Slowly, Christian resistance to dance broke down. Many dancers started identifying as “Christian dancers”; the International Christian Dance Fellowship, founded in 1988, now has chapters in 10 countries, including England, Ireland, Singapore, Ghana, Sweden and the United States. There are now professional Christian dance companies in Houston, New York and Birmingham, Ala. “In the Christian world, dance is the final frontier,” says Colin Harbinson, the Belhaven College dean. “It’s the last area where we’re battling for acceptance.”

Those dance companies are generally not swing or salsa troupes, however. Such social dancing is being imported to the Christian culture by students, including many from

foreign countries. The '80s and '90s were a time of rapid Protestant evangelization in Latin America. Those Latinos and Latinas whom Craig Congdon went salsa dancing with are a growing presence on evangelical campuses. Fourteen percent of J.B.U. students are foreign-born — mostly ethnic Latinos and the children of missionaries. One student-government officer who helped draft J.B.U.'s new dancing proposal is Claudia Alvarez Aguilar, a Guatemalan, and she can't remember a time when she didn't dance.

“In Guatemala, everyone dances for birthdays, weddings, baptisms, even for Christmas, for parties in general,” Alvarez told me. Alvarez is one of J.B.U.'s Walton Scholars, 60 students whose tuition is paid by a fund that the Walton family established in 1985 to expose students from Central America to democracy and capitalism. “I never thought there could be one place where dancing is forbidden. They can learn from Latin culture.”

Mark Noll, a Notre Dame historian, was on the faculty of Wheaton College in Illinois when it liberalized its dancing policy in 2003. Cultural diversity was very much on the trustees' minds, he said. “I think one thing that lay behind this particular issue was the desire to reach out to the African-American community,” Noll explained. “The college had tried for decades, without much success, and dancing was part of the problem. And there was an international component — there were increasing numbers of students from the Philippines and Africa, where dancing can be part of the liturgical practice, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.”

I had heard that Pollard, J.B.U.'s president, wanted to make sure that the language in the new dancing policy, while not sanctioning hip-hop dancing, did not ban it by name either. Pollard was concerned, one professor told me, “that black students would take that as an insult to their culture.” Pollard confirmed this, saying: “I was trying to remind us that a style of dance may have a specific cultural context (at least in the minds of some) and that we should be sensitive to those contexts as we think about the process of hosting a dance.” And Steve Beers, the dean, now says a hip-hop dance could be allowed, “if it was done in a way that upholds the scriptural principles of modesty and respect for others.” Still it's hard to imagine that hip-hop dancing would ever be acceptable at J.B.U. — if too sexual, it wouldn't be Christian, and if too Christian, it would be laughable. But if Wheaton, J.B.U. and other evangelical colleges are serious about welcoming students from all quarters, and of all races, then by allowing dancing they may have invited more questions than they have answered.

The students I met at J.B.U. were, for the most part, the kind of thoughtful undergraduates whom top secular colleges would be proud to have. They're not Stepford students. In 2005, a political-science class at J.B.U. took a poll of 228 students, and while on most issues the students were conservative — very Republican, generally supportive of President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq — 43 percent of the men and 55 percent of the women said they believed there were circumstances in which abortion should be permitted. When presented with the statement that “homosexuals should not be allowed to teach in high schools,” only 33 percent agreed. That diversity of viewpoints was what I expected after hanging out with these undergrads for a week. Most were not having sex, but some were; most did not drink, but many did. Most were disapproving of

homosexuality, but one student sat down next to me, introduced herself and told me the story of her lesbian love affair in high school. The only thing they all agreed on was that there was something special about their campus culture, even the parts they disagreed with.

Some appreciated being at a school that kept their vices in check. Brandon Miquelon, a senior who made the cover of the school paper for smoking a hookah — he used herbs and fruit but no tobacco in the burning mix, hoping to skirt the smoking ban — told me that J.B.U.'s strict rules encouraged moderation: "It's not like I drink my mind out, like so many people I went to high school with, who went to college and turned into alcoholics and potheads." Mark Noll, the former Wheaton professor, said that many students choose Wheaton to avoid the frat-boy party scene.

Most J.B.U. students have decided that more dancing is a welcome shift in the culture, but I met one, Mariah Rose, who was skeptical. She is a 21-year-old part-Mexican, part-Scottish beauty who became engaged over Thanksgiving to Jonathan Hornok, a classmate and at the time her boyfriend of three months. The self-mocking tone with which Mariah joked about her "ring by spring" and her "M.R.S. degree" suggested that she had some critical distance on her small Christian world, in which engagements at 21 are perfectly normal. Nonetheless, she is a defender of J.B.U.'s folkways, and she worries about dancing on campus.

"We're giving in to the hegemony of the secular world, and we'll lose what makes us unique," she said. "It's not that I think that people will dance and go home and have sex, but we'll lose some of what makes us different. Like Matthew 5 says, we're to be a 'light of the world.' It's not that I don't dance — my freshman year I went clubbing at Wild On" (in Fayetteville). "But do we want to bring it on campus? That's not what J.B.U. is here for. It's the same reason we don't emphasize sports here. We have teams, but it's not like guys are here to be jocks. We're going to lose what makes us unique if we follow the trends of the world."

Two nights later, Mariah and Jonathan were at the dance. They arrived early, before 8 o'clock, and even so they had to wait in a line that stretched up the stairs and nearly to the front of the building, threatening to leave some dancers cooling their spats in the snow. The future Mr. and Mrs. Hornok looked as the affianced should — gorgeous and in love, perfectly in sync as a couple and as a swing duo. Craig Congdon and Emily Watson were there, looking practiced and smooth, even if their style was a little more frenetic than that of Nathan Cozart, who led his girlfriend, Valerie Raikes, with a mesmerizing sangfroid. Danielle Vogus prowled the gymnasium efficiently, not relaxing even at the sight of 450 people having a good time, working the circuit familiar to all of us who have danced in gymnasiums: from dance floor to punch bowl to brownie table, kill some time in the bathroom, then back to the dance when a good song comes on — in this case, "All of Me" or "How High the Moon."

At 9:30, Danielle took the microphone and announced the dance contest, with the president and Mrs. Pollard among the judges. At first, 20 couples swung as the band

played, but after the first song the 20 were reduced to 3: Craig and Emily, Nathan and Valerie and T. J. Warren and Sally Dorman, whose aerial lifts were the night's version of the tomahawk dunk in basketball, impressive for their strength but not their finesse. As the couples began the deciding dance, I asked Danielle, who was standing in front of the speakers and had to strain to hear me, which couple she thought would win. Her answer was coy: "I know who is going to win, I know who wants to win the most and I know who deserves to win."

"Let me guess," I said. "Nathan and Valerie deserve to win, Craig and Emily want to win the most and T. J. and Sally will win?"

"Exactly," she said.

And she was right. T. J. and Sally did win, and Craig, through whose efforts so many J.B.U. students had learned to swing, looked a bit dejected.

The students of John Brown University are unusually polite, and three of them asked me to dance that night. I said no, I was working, but thank you for asking. One of the young women, a poised senior whose fashionably short hair seemed to say, "Get me out of this small town now," shrugged and sat down next to me at one of the round tables lining the floor. She was the daughter of an American missionary in Africa, she said. It had been a good four years at J.B.U. She liked the community, and she had honored the school's rules the whole time. But she was ready to leave — medical school was next, she hoped. And maybe a freer time in her life: "I think I need to go out and make some mistakes."

A few minutes later, as the Jack Mitchell Big Band concluded its rendition of "Sing, Sing, Sing," Danielle Vogus took the microphone and said, "Good night, everyone!" As she placed the mike back in its stand, a slow rumble began from the crowd. "One more song. One more song! One More Song!" Jack Mitchell, sitting behind his drum set, nodded, and his band again hit the opening notes of "In the Mood." As the encore ended four minutes later, the students began to applaud. Craig Congdon twirled Emily Watson, and T. J. Warren lifted Sally Dorman above his head in an aerial split — then dropped her into an early dip and held her for a long whole note, until the trumpet's final echo had vanished in the rafters.

As the sweaty boys filed out of the gym with their dates, they grabbed the remaining brownies from the food table. It was 11 o'clock, still early. (A half-hour later, I saw a dozen of these students at the McDonald's on Route 412, girls snuggled up to their boys at a long table, everybody refueling with Big Macs.) As she began to take down the decorations, Danielle Vogus spotted me and beamed a wide smile. "Everyone keeps saying it was the best J.B.U. event ever!" A tall boy standing under the doorway next to her agreed. He was untaping the black and white balloons from the doorjamb and passing them around to a small cluster of friends who were putting the balloons to their lips, inhaling deeply and talking in the high-pitched, Alvin-the-Chipmunk voice of the helium abuser. When the balloon came back to him, the ringleader took a final hit, looked at me and squeaked, "I had a swell time."

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