

Bellydancing in B-town

A vibrant community exists here, unmatched in mid-america.

When folklore graduate student Jeana Jorgensen moved to Bloomington from Berkeley, California, she thought she'd be the only belly dancer in town.

"I was terrified that I would come here and have to build the scene from scratch," she recalls.

Little did Jorgensen know that Bloomington has one of the most vibrant belly dance communities in the Midwest. There are more than a dozen teachers and hundreds of students who regularly drape themselves in scarves and veils and access their inner goddess through the marriage of music and movement.

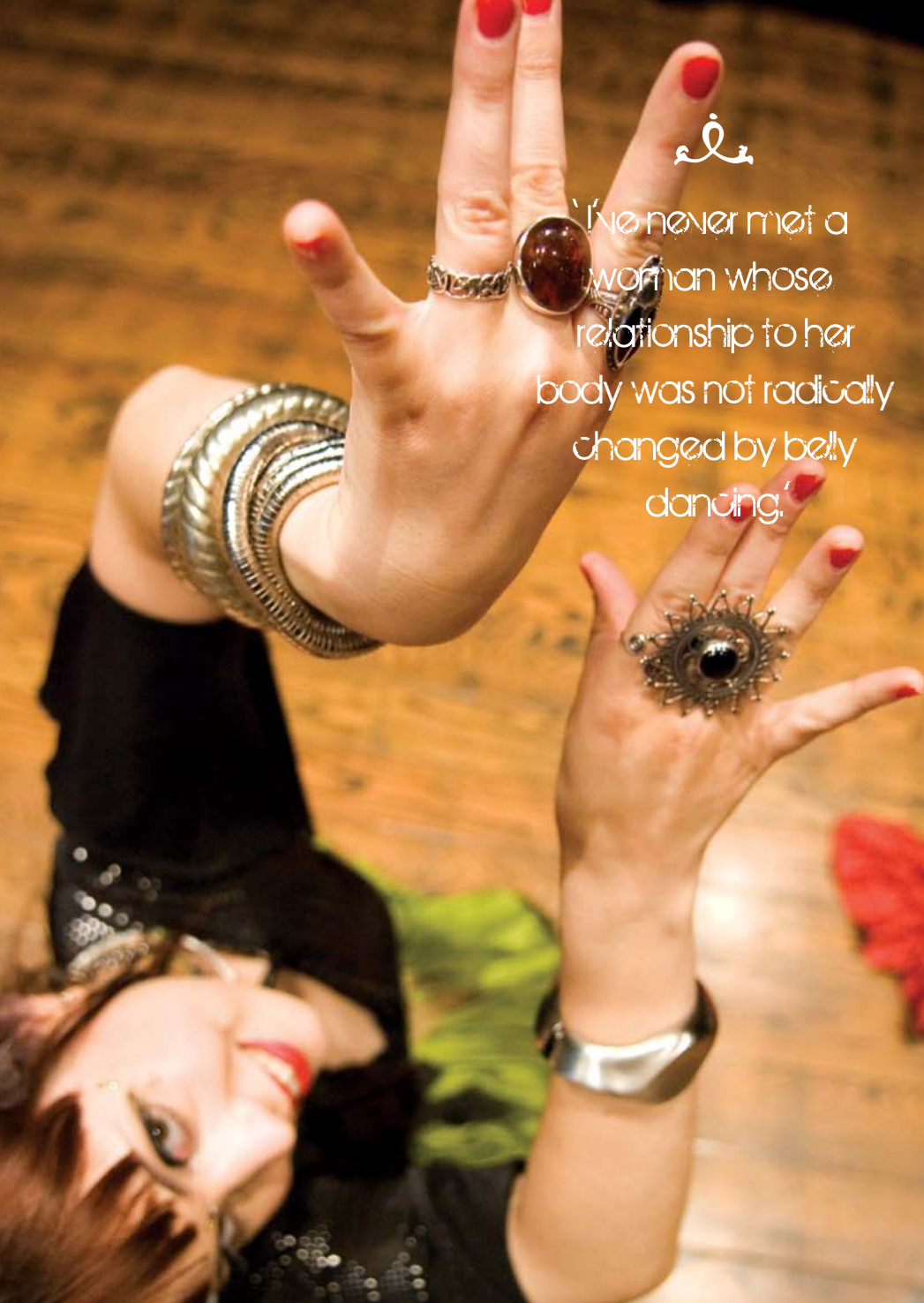
They range in age from 5 to over 80, and include women of all shapes, sizes, and professions. Doctors, lawyers, and politicians twist their hips and undulate their arms alongside massage therapists, gas station attendants, and Wiccan priestesses. Decked in billowy skirts, glittering jewels, multi-tiered hair ornaments, and some very intense makeup, they form a startling portrait of feminine beauty characterized as much by power as by grace.



BY Elisabeth Andrews
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Adam Reynolds



A sample from B-town's sparkling cast of teachers/performers:
(left to right) Jeana Jorgensen, Bridget Ralston, and Margaret Lion.



‘I’ve never met a woman whose relationship to her body was not radically changed by belly dancing.’

(above) Teacher Jeana Jorgensen delights in self-expression.

(right) Members of Dark Side Tribal’s student group, the Tribalistas, rehearse a routine.



Their performances permeate the life of the town: You can find belly dancers at the Fourth Street Festival and the Farmers’ Market; at roller derby bouts and at Casablanca Cafe; at weddings, birthday parties, and fundraisers; and headlining in the annual Bloomington Belly Dances event.

Every day of the week, they are gathering to study their craft: at dance studios like Windfall Dancers, Panache School of Ballroom and Social Dance, and Arthur Murray Dance Studio; in recreational facilities of the city’s Parks and Recreation Department and the Monroe County YMCA; through adult education efforts of the People’s University and the Bloomington Area Arts Council; and in rooms of schools and private homes.

In short, “You can’t swing a cat in Bloomington without hitting a belly dancer,” observes belly dance teacher and henna artist Heather Pund, a member of the Dark Side Tribal dance troupe.

The benefits of belly dance

Why is our town so thick with dancing bellies? According to its proponents, there is nothing like this dance form to provide artistic expression, camaraderie, physical fitness, positive self-image, and even spiritual fulfillment.

These claims may sound bold for a practice known for its gentle impact on the body, but teachers insist they are not exaggerating belly dancing’s benefits.

“I have a very deep belief that belly dance is transformative,” says Lois Silverman, a belly dance teacher, social worker, and museum consultant. “As a teacher, you see the personal development and social development that belly dance provides, ranging from an accepting body image to hanging out with a really cool group of women to becoming more assertive.”

Adds belly dance teacher Ann Shaffer, also of Dark Side Tribal, “I’ve never met a woman whose relationship to her body was not radically changed by belly dancing.”

What makes belly dancing so physically pleasurable, they explain, is that unlike some other forms of dance it doesn’t rely on contortion. There are no turned-out feet or toe shoes, no requirements of extreme flexibility or strength, and, perhaps most importantly, no expectations in terms of body shape.

“It’s friendly to all types of bodies,” says Donna Barbrick Carlton, a longtime belly dance instructor who literally wrote the book (*Looking for Little Egypt*, International Dance Discovery Books) on the history of belly dance, which is used in classes across the country.

Cathleen Ingle Weber, a community health educator at Bloomington Hospital and one of Silverman’s students, says that belly dancing has given her new appreciation for her womanly shape.

“My weight continues to climb up and down over the years, but I think of it differently these days,” she says. “My struggle will continue, but my belly will continue to dance!”

Many belly dancers say the movements come so naturally that they quickly become a vocabulary for self-expression. “It’s a way to say things through bodily movement that aren’t

covered in words,” says Eliza Steelwater, a writer and historic-preservation consultant. Carlton says that facilitating communication through belly dance is one of her main goals as a teacher. “I try to create an atmosphere where women can feel free to express themselves,” she says, describing the dance form as “an exploration.”

It’s about the music

Equally important to Carlton is helping her students draw a connection between movement and music. “Belly dance is meant to interpret the music,” she says. The dancer’s movements—some staccato and percussive,

others flowing and smooth—serve to emphasize the qualities of the music to which they are performed.

Traditional belly dance music comes from the Middle East in areas like Egypt and Lebanon. Drums, harps, flutes, horns, and string instruments combine to form a sound that Carlton calls “enchanting.”

“It’s just beautiful music, and very fun to dance to,” she says. “It can be upbeat and energetic, bursting forth. Or it can be almost mournful and longing.”

‘You can’t swing a cat in Bloomington without hitting a belly dancer.’

(above) Heather Pund casts a spell.

(right) Tribalistas front to back: Mollie Ables, Bridget Ralston, and Darja Malcolm-Clarke.





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weight] will continue,
but my belly will
continue to dance!'

For many belly dancers, however, part of the fun is branching out into nontraditional soundtracks.

"I dance to the music of my people," says Margaret Lion, webmaster of the IU kinesiology department, belly dance teacher, and founder of the Different Drummer dance troupe. That music is American and she enjoys incorporating rock 'n roll, alternative, hip-hop, and heavy metal into her performances.

College student Emma Loveland, who started taking classes with Silverman at age 13, says there's no limit to what qualifies as belly dance music. "If I'm out with friends at some crazy punk show and I feel like belly dancing, I'll do it," she says.

Silverman, meanwhile, has settled on Jewish traditional rhythms. Whether klezmer or the Judeo-Spanish form Ladino, she finds herself compelled to dance to "music that has some Jewish connection." Doing so helps her feel connected to both her own roots and those of belly dancers everywhere.

"The history of belly dance, according to some, goes back as far as biblical times," she explains. "Some of the most fascinating articles I've read about belly dance contain excerpts from the Bible, like Miriam with the timbrel.

It's a dance form that goes back to the matriarchs."

With these ancient forerunners in mind, Silverman feels "connected to time and space" when she belly dances. For her, the experience is "very special, very fulfilling, very spiritual."

Erotic or not?

These self-confident, expressive, spiritually fulfilled women do have one gripe about their craft: It is often mischaracterized as an erotic performance akin to striptease.

"The idea that belly dance is sexual is a misconception," says Jorgensen. "It's not automatically provocative."

Shaffer acknowledges that "sexiness is a by-product" of portraying poise, skill, and strength, but seduction is not the dancer's objective. "It's fine with me if someone is really into what we're doing, but it's not my goal to get them aroused. It's my goal to get them engaged," she says.

Steelwater, who says she's old enough to remember "some pretty heavy-duty sexism," enjoys this opportunity to boldly demonstrate her magnificence. Growing up, she recalls, "I was told that if I exposed my beauty at all I deserved everything I got." Feeling both attractive and in control as a belly dancer is delightfully "transgressive," she says.

For all this high-minded cultural critique, there is also a very basic appeal that belly dance holds for many women: the eternal allure of dress-up. It can take up to two or three hours to get fully into costume and apply makeup, but dancers say it's one of their favorite things about performing—it brings out the little girl in them.

"At its heart, it's just fun," says Pund, summing up the sentiments of hundreds of Bloomington women. "Belly dance is something I just really enjoy doing." ✨