Music that's made to make you dance
Salem Big Band plays the classics for fox trot, waltz, swing dancing

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Fall celebration: Big Band
Dance at the Mill
When: Dance, 7 to 9 p.m. Sunday, with 6:30 p.m. dance lessons
Where: Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill, 1313 Mill St. SE
Ages: All
Cost: $10, $5 for center members and students, free for ages 12 and younger
Information: (503) 585-7012 and www.willametteheritage.org

Members of the Salem Big Band will get into the swing of things at a Sunday dance at Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill. / Special to the Statesman Journal

New, old. Young, old. Old-fashioned.

Those words may be tossed about Sunday evening at the Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill when the Salem Big Band warms up its instruments for an evening of music and big-band dancing.

"It is not a concert. It is specifically for dancing, ballroom-type dancing," said Ken Bonnem, a longtime band member who has been playing the tenor saxophone with the group for 20 years.

"We've had a long standing tradition of hosting the Big Band at our site," said Peter Booth, executive director of Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill.

He said the 17-piece ensemble plays at the center about three times each year, and this Sunday will be the band's fall presentation.

Music will include favorites from the big-band era.

Booth said he has seen a larger than usual number of Willamette University students participate in big-band dances at the center, in part because of what Booth calls "the swing-dance craze."

"It's been interesting ... 10 to 15 years ago, (contemporary jazz musician) Harry Connick Jr. started something with young people," Bonnem said. "The high schools were big into that in the mid-90s. I don't know what it is now. You see ballroom dancing being taught at (fitness centers) and dance studios. Our standard audience is probably in their 40s to their 60s."

Yes, students and young adults are joining retirement-age couples on the dance floor because many grew up listening to swing music with parents and grandparents, Booth said.

Before the dancing from 7 to 9 p.m., people can learn some new dance moves from Debra Seeck at 6:30 p.m. Known as Mz. Jitterbug, she has been partnering with the Salem Big Band at the center for years.

"She's got it down to (teaching) the basics of a swing step," Bonnem said.

The music will follow the big-band traditions.

"It will be swing, some Latin, some waltz, some fox trot. It is not a jazz concert. It is the type of music they use to teach ballroom dancing," Bonnem said.

Salem Big Band plans to play old standards, in the vein of classics such as "Stardust" and "In the Mood."

Booth said the Sunday evening time will be good for people who work early on Mondays, and it is easier for parents who bring school-aged children to dance and listen to big-band music.

"This particular group has developed quite a following over the years," Booth said. "They are Salem-based. Many band members are products of the (Salem) public school system, which has a well-known music education program."

The event will cost $10 for center members and students and $10 for adults. Ages 12 and younger attend for free. Light snacks and beverages will be available for purchase.

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