

Seattle Dance Instructor Mark Kihara Lights Up the Ballroom

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Posted in [Arts](#), Volume 39 No. 22



Mark Kihara exudes joy with every step. And every hop — Lindy Hop, to be precise.

Born and raised in Bellevue, Kihara moved to Seattle ten years ago. But it was farther north, at Western Washington University in Bellingham, where he first became interested in swing dance and Lindy Hop, swing's earlier cousin born in Harlem ballrooms of the 1930s.

"Unlike some, I did not grow up with dance," Kihara says. "I struggled mightily at the beginning with even hearing the beat of the song. But as my passion for Lindy Hop grew, things started to click and develop."

Kihara owes much of this passion to Frankie Manning, whom he calls the "Ambassador of Lindy Hop." Says Kihara: "His teachings and spirit guide all that I do in dance today."

Gradually, Kihara devoted more and more time to Lindy Hop. "My little hobby became my full-time profession ... though it rarely feels like work!"

Over time, Kihara has expanded into multiple realms of the Lindy Hop and swing dance community: "Today I teach, DJ, perform, compete, judge, emcee and produce Lindy Hop events all around the world," he says.

Kihara has won or placed in several major and local competitions, including Ultimate Lindy Hop Showdown and American Lindy Hop Championships.

“One of my biggest honors was to be asked to teach at Herräng Dance Camp, the biggest and longest-running swing dance event in the world.”

He also runs a business: Swing Jam Productions.



Kihara performs the Lindy Hop with real estate agent Susie Detmer at a dance competition fundraiser. Photo credit: Seattle Dances!

“Garfield High School asked me to start teaching swing dancing to their student body,” Kihara explains. “I needed a licensed business to do so, and so Swing Jam Productions was born.”

By juggling this combination of activities, Kihara was able to leave non-dance employment behind. “It took a few years, but I am today able to support myself through Lindy Hop,” Kihara says. “I am fortunate to have the best problem: deciding which jobs to take and which to turn down.”

These decisions are complicated by the international nature of Kihara’s career, and the high level of energy required by Lindy Hop.

“I currently spend almost three months of the year in Europe, traveling there four to five times a year,” Kihara says. “I have resigned myself to accepting that you cannot take

every job or travel to every event. Time is limited, and my legs can only dance so much.”

Even so, Kihara dances as much as possible.

“Truthfully, most of my time is spent with swing dance-related activities,” he says.

That’s because Kihara remains full of ambition.

“In terms of my own dancing, I am still far from where I would like to be,” he says. “Lindy Hop, like the music that inspires it, is incredibly rich and full of possibilities.”

And Kihara enjoys sharing those possibilities with others.

“Lindy Hop allows for both improvisation and creativity while still celebrating partnership in dancing,” he says. “It is most often characterized as a happy dance and is currently being danced all over the world.”

He particularly relishes the spread of Lindy Hop and swing dance throughout the Pacific Northwest.

“I truly enjoy bringing people together to celebrate life and community,” Kihara says. “I especially love taking someone who never thought they could dance and showing them that anyone can do it.”

“Lindy Hop puts a smile on people’s faces and I love to see that.”