

LIVE
LIFE
LOVE



Tony Demarko Powell and Rita D. Redfern-Powell hit the dance floor at the Stardust Ballroom in Bellmawr, N.J. The couple have been dancing partners for 22 years.
ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

PHILLY SMOOTH STEPPERS

Freestyle ballroom's tight-knit community keeps the Stardust's dance floor swinging.

By Cassie Owens
STAFF WRITER

In the first moments of a song at the Stardust Ballroom, you can see guests scurrying to get to the dance floor. The popular numbers make people cut conversation at their tables. If it's a song for couples, as many of the songs at the Stardust are, you can see dancers rush to find a partner or maybe even just reach out their hand to the person right in front of them.

Rita D. Redfern-Powell is one of the partygoers who's listening for what the DJ will play. In her words, "it's a feeling,

you have to feel it."

It's after midnight — oldies and R&B night at the Stardust goes till 1 a.m. She just turned 62 that week, and she chose a black, crepe silk gown with gold trim to wear for her birthday weekend. Outside, a storm had been raging, but you'd never tell that from seeing the dancers inside. Marc Anthony's "I Need to Know" came through the speakers. She and her husband, Tony Demarko Powell, 72, were going to have to cha-cha to that.

Being back out there was "heavenly," Powell said later. In their community of oldies aficionados, many of them Black

“A lot of younger guys like to stand on the wall, drink in their hand. We don't got time for all that. We come to have a good time. We don't come to grandstand.”

Will Martin, manager of oldies and R&B at the Stardust Ballroom

dancers above the age of 45, they've lost friends who were like family to COVID-19.

"Even though they're not there in person," Powell explained, "they're there in spirit. We still think of them, know where they sat and how they moved."

While impacted by COVID-19, Philly's freestyle ballroom scene has kept swinging. Powell, Redfern-Powell, and their dear friend Kimberly Alston are stalwarts in a scene of smooth-stepping dancers in the city who have kept a uniquely Philadelphian ballroom approach alive. In their oldies and R&B culture, dancers maintain tight commu-
See **BALLROOM** on D4



The Philly music-scene veterans behind the Anchor Rock Club — (from left) Greg Mungan, Chris Ward, and Adam Garbinski — on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City. MONICA HERNDON / Staff Photographer

New club aims to draw an indie crowd to A.C.

Anchor Rock Club is offering alternatives.

By Dan DeLuca
MUSIC CRITIC

Just off the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, in a casino town where cover bands rule and Shoobies go home at summer's end, an independent music venue that plans to operate year-round is getting ready to open, bringing in buzzworthy acts that regularly play Philadelphia showplaces like Union Transfer and World Cafe Live.

The room, a relaunch of the Anchor Rock Club that opened briefly pre-pandemic, is located steps from the beach on New York Avenue. The 650-capacity venue with deep Philly connections is being booked by

Chris Ward and Greg Mungan — veterans of Johnny Brenda's in Fishtown — and is part of Atlantic City's "Orange Loop" entertainment nightlife district, named after the street's identifying color in Monopoly.

The club plans to host as many as 150 shows a year. The first three will happen Aug. 13-15, "Phish weekend," coinciding with the three days of Atlantic City beach concerts by the massively popular Trey Anastasio-led band.

That weekend, Anchor Rock Club will be a jam band venue, with the Orchard Lounge trio of Chicago house DJs playing
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The best new books for August.



DO BETTER | D6

Where to pick your own produce.



MOVIES | D9

Matt Damon, Abigail Breslin talk "Stillwater."



Diners seated outside at Clementine's Stable Cafe along North Broad Street. YONG KIM / Staff Photographer

Ambition, casual vibe blend on North Broad

I took a sip of my Vaccine — the summer cocktail, that is, not the jabs I got this spring. As its candied ginger spice with honey and bourbon coursed across my palate with more verve than its classic inspiration, the Penicillin, the world suddenly seemed brighter from our picnic table perch beside North Broad Street at Clementine's Stable Cafe.

DINING REVIEW
CRAIG LaBAN

And we had quite the lively view: Motorcycles rumbled past us in boisterous wheelie parades toward North Philly, while cyclists quietly threaded their bike shares south down the busy sidewalk in the opposite direction. Across the street, people dressed up for a big night



The Vaccine cocktail features bourbon, candied ginger spice, and honey.

out were leaving their cars with valets at South and Osteria, a familiar scene before the pandemic at these upscale pioneers on the west side of Broad.
See **CRAIG LaBAN** on D8



ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

Ballroom

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nity and lifelong friendships. For the couple, who often dance twice a week, and sometimes, three or four times a week, it's a passion that allows them to time travel in a way, pulling in moves and trends not simply from their eras, but also from across the eras their world has survived.

Freestyle ballroom — their favorite iteration of ballroom dance — allows for that. Powell and Redfern-Powell also attend nights for more mainstream, competitive approaches to, say, tango or rumba, but those styles, as Powell explained, are far more regimented. Freestyle ballroom welcomes social dances shared among Black Philadelphians since at least the 1950s, if not earlier. It also welcomes dancing however you like, whether that's busting your own move or incorporating more than one style of dance.

Third Saturdays at South Jersey's Stardust are the freestyle ballroom night. So when Powell does the Philly bop, he might pause, back up, then slide his slippers across the floor to perform the sloop, a dance he learned from his parents. Or as Redfern-Powell bops, she might pull in turns and kicks from swing.

"I've danced for a long time, probably since I was about 10 or 11. I guess it's just in my soul," she said.

Powell and Redfern-Powell have been together for 29 years, husband and wife for 26, and dancing partners for 22.

When they're out dancing with Alston, Powell might be spinning them both at the same time. As a team, the trio have been booked to dance and teach at events, like fashion shows, private parties, and weddings across the region.

"Back in my period, it was mandatory to dance. If you didn't dance, you got no girlfriend," Powell explained.

In the late 1950s and '60s, when Powell was a kid, social clubs were very popular in Philly, especially in North Philadelphia, where he grew up. Powell joined the Yock's, a club that required dressing to the nines,



Kimberly Alston, Tony Demarko Powell, and Rita D. Redfern-Powell dance as a trio and teach their craft at events. ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

at all times. The social clubs would often frequent dances together, at block parties, Barber's Hall, Town Hall, and so on.

These days the dances they used to do at the speakeasies and the blue-light basement parties have evolved. They cha-cha, bop, strand, and two-step at select venues on select nights that include line dancing, too. Powell has been going to the Stardust since he was 20, first going to its former location in Pennsauken and now to Bellmawr, N.J.

"Our circle has been around since 1965," Powell, a retired fashion designer, said. "The same people that I danced with when I was 20, I dance with them now, all that are still living."

'They come to get down'

In Bellmawr, the Stardust Ballroom sits inside a strip mall. The entrance leads to a hallway where a team of workers ask ticket holders for their IDs and their vaccination cards. At the end of the hallway is the entrance to the actual ballroom, which can fit 600.

At this oldies and R&B night, it's BYOB and bring your own food. No jeans, no tees, no sneakers are permitted, so guests sat around their spreads of snacks, sodas, drinks, and catering trays wearing cocktail dresses, ball gowns, suits, and linen sets

with boaters. Even in July, some guests opted for full suits, many in all white.

Will Martin, manager of oldies and R&B at the Stardust Ballroom, said their regulars have different attitudes than the younger set.

"A lot of older guys like to get out there and dance. A lot of younger guys like to stand on the wall, drink in their hand," Martin said. "We don't got time for all that. We come to have a good time. We don't come to grandstand."

"They put on their glad rags, and they come to get down," added Martin, who's worked in events and entertainment for 26 years.

Before the pandemic, the event would pull around 400 to 500 guests, Martin explained, but coronavirus restrictions cap attendance at 200. For July, they sold out. The Stardust Ballroom opened first to other audiences in April, when restrictions limited their events to 75. Martin reopened the oldies and R&B nights in June, explaining that their affairs needed bigger crowds to operate.

Before the Stardust reopened, the couple danced outdoors last year in the parking lot of Treasures Banquet Hall in Germantown, but those events met their sunset by October due to the cold. As restrictions kept them inside, they danced more at See **BALLROOM** on D5



The Powells dancing through the years. Courtesy of Rita D. Redfern-Powell



Alston and Powell on the dance floor at a Third Saturday event at the Stardust Ballroom. ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer



The couple, each of whom learned moves from their parents, danced outdoors in a parking lot when the Stardust was closed last year. ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

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home in Eastwick than they ever had.

"You fill the gap by looking forward to it," Powell said. "Knowing it will come again."

"Later in the evening, put on some music on YouTube," explained Redfern-Powell, who works as an administrative assistant at Motivation High School. "Listen to different things like the Whispers, whatever. Maybe dancing around a couple of times, or whatever. But it's nothing like being out."

The couple first met during springtime in 1992. Powell noticed her passing by in front of his house at Seventh and South Streets. Powell liked her from the way she moved. He followed her into a card store, approached her, but she curved him and wouldn't tell him her name. Months later, they met again, at Starr Garden Playground, where Redfern-Powell was out with her daughter, Avrielle Jones, and she said hello.

They've been together since that day. The couple have children from previous marriages and relationships: Jones and Powell's three children, Jamie Mitchell, Tony Woods, and Tony Sutton. Both Tonys gave Powell grandsons named Tony, so they've got five Tonys.

"It's like a George Foreman family," quipped Redfern-Powell.

Redfern-Powell, being younger than her husband, came up in a different nightlife generation. In the '70s and '80s, she used to do the hustle at the iconic Paradise Garage in New York. She had learned older dances from her big sister and mother at home, however. When she heard about the oldies and R&B scene at her 40th birthday party, she went back to her mother for a refresher, and the couple started bopping together all the time.

A long-held Philly tradition

On Third Saturday at the Stardust, under purple, green, and blue bejeweled lights, Alston, Redfern-Powell, and Powell did the Philly bop to Luther Vandross' "You Really Started Something." Alston explained why they impress as a trio: Sometimes Powell may lead them into the same move or different moves, while they all maintain the same beat.

"You have to have some musicality," Alston said.

Their bop is a Philly special, a regional tradition, that can vary depending on where you grew up, said Alston, who's from Mount Airy.

A lot of the songs played by DJ Butch Thomas hail from the '60s (by artists like the Elgins) or the '70s (like Teddy Pendergrass in his heyday), but sprinkled in are more recent staples from artists like Tamia.

Dance educators (and wife-and-husband team) Audrey and June Donaldson are Philly bop experts, or to use their term, *bopologists*. According to the Donaldsons, the dance traces back the rise of the Lindy Hop, which, Audrey Donaldson explained, emerged in the 1920s after another pandemic had subsided.

"The Lindy Hop traveled across the country. [It] became the Jitterbug, and in Philly, it became the bop," said Audrey Donaldson, who coauthored the book *Philly Bop: A Six Count Dance* with her husband.



Alston and Powell take a spin on the dance floor.

The Philly bop can be compared to similar dances seen in places like Detroit and the Carolinas, she continued. However, the comparable nightlife scenes elsewhere often keep to one primary dance — like Chicago stepping, or hand dancing in Baltimore or Washington. Philly's community mixes it up between a number of styles.

"There are some towns that are one-dance towns," she said. "We do everything in Philly."

Alston is concerned that the dance culture they've preserved over time could fade away.

"We still had similarities to our parents and to our grandparents," Alston, 60, said of her generation. "Most of us began to have children, I

would say, in the '80s and '90s. Those children are millennials now, and the world is different. They have more hip-hop, and they have more freestyle, and they have more other types of styles of dance that are specific to them that they want to do, so the interest is not there."

The Donaldsons have been working to teach younger generations but know what Alston's talking about.

"Audrey and I thought about going to their parties, because we can dance to their music and they need to get a little bit of exposure," June Donaldson said. "As I'm talking to young people, I say, 'You know, one day, you're gonna want this dance, so you might as well learn it now.' We promote it as much as we can. But

again, young folks are a lot different. But we're trying. And we're not going to stop."

When Redfern-Powell and her husband consider the culture's survival, they see it differently. Powell believes firmly that the old trends come back.

In the 1995 book *From Huckebuck to Hip Hop: Social Dance in the African-American Community in Philadelphia*, dancers gave responses in line with Powell's thinking today. John W. Roberts, the book's author, wrote that many Black Philadelphians weren't versed in other generations' dances; at the same time, many Black Philadelphians were still learning many dances at home, from elders.

"Everything revolves," Powell said. "Everything revolves back to what once was. Everything."

He figures a lot will live on through the music: "'Leave the Door Open' is a strand record."

Redfern-Powell, however, like Alston, remains concerned. She sees how few millennials and Gen Zers there are at the functions. They've noticed that the young people are often there with older relatives, not coming to dances with friends their age.

"If the older generation doesn't respect, or teach, or share or pass on these dances to the younger generation or the millennials, I think it won't [carry on,]" she explained.

"Certain dances might not last," Redfern-Powell cautioned. "They need to be taught."

"All the dances that I've done through the years," she said. "I feel like that's something that I want to pass on to my loved ones."

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Rita D. Redfern-Powell hugs a friend at the Stardust. The freestyle ballroom community has cultivated lifelong friendships.