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Val Air Ballroom: From sock hops to fiestas

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It was Alicia Celaya's 15th birthday party, and, like many of her friends, she celebrated it at the Val Air Ballroom. With 700 people.

Children chased each other through the crowded party. Couples of all ages rotated and pressed each other close under the soft blue light from the curved ceiling.

Two and three generations ago, the Val Air hosted high school proms. On summer nights, young people from the Des Moines area danced to Glenn Miller in the open air. Now a new generation is making a new set of memories at the landmark ballroom, and what they'll remember is quinceaneras, huge wedding receptions and dances presided over by nationally known groups.

The ballroom has in the past decade become a central destination for metro Des Moines' Latino community, now totaling about 30,000 in Polk and Dallas counties, according to U.S. Census estimates. That's about 10 times the number of Latinos who lived in the entire state in 1940 around the time the Val Air opened.

This past summer, several hundred Latinos showed up for dances at the Val Air every other weekend. Wedding receptions and quinceaneras - the 15th birthday and coming-out party for a Latina girl "on a wedding budget," Val Air manager Scott "Chewi" Lockhart said - often morph into gigantic public events sometimes featuring groups such as Los Tigres del Norte and Intocable.

"If you want a party, everybody's going to come," said Celaya, who was running back and forth in a dark red dress with a hoop skirt, greeting friends and family. "It spreads by word-of-mouth. It's like a rumor."

Sure enough, about 7:30 p.m. on a recent Saturday, staff at the Val Air

removed a barrier to the raised seating area opposite the stage. The crowd quickly filled it, and young people lined the edge of the dance floor to watch Celaya and nine boys in white suits perform choreographed dances they'd rehearsed for a month.

The boys, including her 17-year-old brother, Oscar, picked her up, put her down, twirled her, knelt before her, and raised her on their shoulders as she toasted the crowd.

"There ain't too many halls like this any more," said Juan Gomez, 46, a saxophonist for the band *Rebeldia Musical*, watching the festivities before taking the stage. "It's a spacious place that brings people together."

West Des Moines has a long Hispanic tradition. Dozens of Mexican families founded a distinct Latino community when they settled in Valley Junction in the late 1800s and early 1900s, drawn by jobs in the thriving railroad industry.

Lena Rocha's parents in 1923 immigrated to Valley Junction from Mexico, raising eight children. Rocha still lives on Seventh Street, and remembers going to wedding receptions at the Val Air when she was a young woman. Other venues were more important to the Latino community then, but the Val Air occasionally hosted Latino events, even in the 1950s and 1960s, she said.

"The Hispanic community would have wedding receptions there, or a wedding dance, but it was on nowhere near the scale of what a quinceanera is, or some of the wedding functions that take place now," Rocha, 77, said.

Lockhart, the manager of the ballroom, said the venue has held about 35 specifically Latino events, public and private, in 2010. The line between public and private is often blurry.

"I had to start charging for parking because the family would tell me there would be 200 people and 2,000 people would show up," Lockhart said.

The large concerts and parties - and the noise that comes with them - have helped push the Val Air into the spotlight. Neighbors, including those in Des Moines' Waterbury neighborhood, have complained about the noise, particularly the thumping bass. Not all the complaints have come during Latino

events. Police issued three tickets to the ballroom this year, including one against Lockhart for refusing to interrupt a Sunday Latino concert so police could measure ambient noise.

Those problems appear to be nearing resolution. In September, a judge tossed a noise citation against the venue because the city didn't allow for enough margin of error with its sound-measuring equipment. The city and ballroom have since settled the other two cases, and the City Council has adjusted the noise ordinance to allow for the imprecision of sound measurements.

For Vanessa Morales, 17, and her cousin Isabel Perez, who attend quinceaneras, weddings and dances at the Val Air regularly, the noise controversy has been worrisome. Rumors spread quickly among their friends and family that the place could be shut down.

"That's something we don't like, because that's a place where we go and have fun, and where we make a lot of our parties - family parties and events," Perez said.

Going to the Val Air is like going to a club, but more innocent, Morales said. Girls wear dresses and high heels. Boys wear cowboy boots and hats. The events are part dance party, part family reunion and part a return to cultural roots.

"A lot of kids our age are really getting into our culture again," Morales said. "Kids are listening to this kind of music again, and they're liking it."

The Val Air opened in 1939 and its first event was Roosevelt High School's prom. Big names started playing there - Duke Ellington and Miller, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Lawrence Welk, and later Jerry Lee Lewis, the Beach Boys and Gregg Allman.

When the doors closed in 1996, a group of investors led by Roosevelt graduates Mark Kennedy and Phil Kaser bought it and vowed to make improvements. By 2002 it was up for sale again.

In stepped Pedro Zamora, whose Detroit-based Zamora Entertainment Group owns a talent agency in New York City and stakes in music venues and

Spanish-language radio stations across the country. He bought the ballroom in 2003. He now also owns 105.5 FM La Ley, the Spanish-language radio station broadcast from Perry, which heavily promotes the Val Air's Latino concerts.

Zamora, who immigrated from Mexico in the early 1980s to go to college in Chicago, has tapped in to the market for Latino entertainment in towns like Birmingham, Ala., South Bend, Ind., Columbus, Ohio, and Tyler, Texas. He says the success of the Val Air and his other venues depends on a mix of Latino and mainstream American acts, but he prides himself on bringing top Latino talent to West Des Moines.

"We're always trying to look for areas where the Latinos do not have the luxury of having a little part of their culture," Zamora said. "I come from that culture, so I know what it is to see a little bit of your past, and it's nice."

As Celaya's quinceanera slipped toward midnight, the children chasing each other returned sleepily to their parents and the population on the dance floor grew younger.

Rogelio Carlos, 14, of Des Moines stood with three friends on the edge of the floor, waiting for the right moment. He said he prefers Latino dances to other kinds of dancing because the music is made for couples.

"You dance with somebody," Carlos said.

Lockhart said when he first took over as manager of the Val Air in April, the ballroom didn't promote Latino events as much as mainstream acts. The radio station and posters in Hispanic groceries promoted Hispanic concerts. Shows like Korn, Band of Horses, Passion Pit, Mike Posner and LeAnn Rimes - all of which have played the venue this year - were promoted by the ballroom.

He's working to change that. "A Val Air event is a Val Air event," he said. Even if the bouncing Mexican music isn't his first choice personally, he has grown to enjoy the spectacle of so many people dancing in one place, which doesn't happen at other shows.

"I see 2,000 people enjoying themselves," Lockhart said. "It's always good to see."

The Val Air flows with the era

EARLY YEARS: In the 1940s, the Val Air Ballroom attracted thousands of young adults on Saturday nights to listen and dance to top performers of the Big Band era.

MIDDLE YEARS: Up to 1,200 people showed up on Wednesdays and Saturdays in 1976 to enjoy rock 'n' roll music.

NOW: A Detroit-based group bought the ballroom in 2003 and now regularly books Latino bands that play to overflowing crowds.

The Val Air through the years

1939: Tom Archer opened the Val Air Ballroom on June 6 as a summertime place where Iowans could dance under the stars.

1940s: Thousands, mostly between the ages of 18 and 25, jam the ballroom every summer Saturday night to listen to the top performers of the Big Band era at a cost of 75 cents to \$1 per person. "Listeners" pay a dime to stay in the parking lot and hear the bands.

1955: Archer puts a roof on the Val Air to make it a year-round venue.

1962: A fire causes more than \$100,000 in damage to the ballroom.

1963: Archer dies, but his family carries on ownership.

1971: Sen. Edmund Muskie, D-Maine, and Sen. Harold Hughes, D-Ia., hold a September fundraiser at the Val Air for Muskie's presidential bid.

1974: President Gerald Ford speaks to Republicans at the Val Air during an October visit to central Iowa.

1976: Frances Archer tells the UPI news service that the Val Air was attracting 700 to 1,200 dancers every Wednesday and Saturday night, and attributed it to a national ballroom resurgence. "The hustle is in and with old tunes being played to rock music, the jitterbug is really big again," Archer says.

1984: The Russ Morgan Orchestra celebrates its 45th anniversary at the Val

Air.

1996: The Archer family closes the Val Air and puts it up for sale.

1997: A partnership with Mark Kennedy as manager and principal investor buys and reopens the 28,000-square-foot ballroom and its 8.5 acres.

2002: Kennedy and company decide to sell the Val Air.

2003: Pedro Zamora of Detroit-based Zamora Entertainment signs a deal to buy the Val Air, helping the venue avoid demolition. The venue begins to regularly book Hispanic acts as part of a nationwide model for Zamora's business.

2004: Los Tigres del Norte — the Mexican "equivalent to our Rolling Stones," then-manager Chris Cardani says — plays the Val Air in September.

2009: Noise complaints from the nearby Waterbury neighborhood lead the city to commission a sound study to figure out how to enforce a fair noise ordinance.

2010: Scott "Chewi" Lockhart takes over as manager of the Val Air in April. The City Council passes a new noise ordinance in June. In November, the council reworks the noise ordinance to allow for the imprecision of sound-reading equipment.