

What is a June German Ball?

In the 1930s jitterbugging was a good way to “do your number” on the dance floor. A 1939 edition of the black newspaper, the *Journal and Guide*, published weekly in Norfolk, Virginia, described an upcoming dance and how “devout Shag Hoppers and jittering Jitter Bugs” would soon take the floor “until their feet swell too large for their shoes, they sweat their collars down, every muscle fibre cries ‘enough,’ and the sun ushers in a new day.”

According to the article, “**This is what is called in these parts a June German.**”

The city was Rocky Mount, North Carolina, but it could just as easily have been Martinsville, Virginia.

While many in Martinsville have come to associate the dance with the North Carolina-born Baldwin brothers who organized the annual June German Ball, the phrase “June German” did not have a connection with Dr. Dana Baldwin’s time overseas in WW I in France.

The term “german” does have European roots, though, because as early as the 1800s new dances like the waltz and the polka were showing up in America along with newly arriving immigrants. Dances were no longer small private affairs. Partners often met in **figure dances**, similar to square dancing, with a caller giving instructions. The german was a popular one of these, according to dance historians. By 1900, formal dances called “Germans” were happening in Charlottesville, Richmond, Henderson, and Rocky Mount, N.C.

Many of the german dances were largely white events, but as early as 1918 a June German Dance was born in Rocky Mount, North Carolina for the area’s black residents. Held the day after the annual white dance, blacks gathered in the same location – traditionally a large tobacco warehouse – and celebrated throughout the next night with their own musicians, but sharing the costs of the elaborate scenery, decorations and other stage setups used the night before. By the 1930s, the black event was drawing upwards of 8,000 dance fans to Rocky Mount, and reporters called it the “South’s largest dance.”

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Early editions of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, published for African American readers since 1900, are available on microfilm in Virginia libraries, including the Library of Virginia in Richmond and the University of Virginia library in Charlottesville. Information about the origin of “german” dances was obtained from assorted dance history texts.

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WORKING AND PLAYING ON FAYETTE STREET: an exhibit created through the partnership of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the Fayette Area Historical Initiative.