

All of a Sudden, My Heart Sings

A history of Y-Co, By Chuck Pora, from his book "Why We Never Had Dates"

“The secret way you hold my hand, to let me know you understand...”

If those words mean something to you, you were likely an attendee of the weekly Y-Co teen dances held at Erie’s Downtown and Glenwood Park YMCAs during the 50s and 60s.

Those words were from the song “(All of a Sudden) My Heart Sings,” by Paul Anka or Mel Carter, the traditional last song of the evening at Erie’s legendary dance. It was played just prior to midnight under a romantic aura of swirling colors splashing down onto a dance floor filled with friends and young lovers delighted to be together but sad that their fun evening was drawing to a close.

The only problem was, if you were dancing too close you were at risk of getting tapped on the shoulder and told to separate by Y-Co director Andy Petersen, who patrolled the dance floor like a hawk to make sure that nothing but good, clean fun was being had by all, and at all times.

Which was what Y-Co was all about: a good time for good kids in a safe, wholesome environment meant to keep them off the streets and out of trouble.

There were several weekly teen dances in Erie back in those days, held mostly in church halls, such as St. Jude’s, Holy Rosary, Holy Trinity, Mount Carmel and St. John’s Lutheran, or school gyms, or larger halls like Waldameer’s Rainbow Gardens. Y-Co was far and away the most popular, though, as well as the most prestigious to attend. It also ended up being the longest-running.

With several hundred teenagers attending the dance every Saturday night from 1958 to 1968 at Senior Y-Co and until 1974 at Junior Y-Co at the Glenwood YMCA, one can only imagine the arrests, auto accidents, underage drinking and teen pregnancies that it prevented.

That was what YMCA executive director Max Darone had in mind when he formulated the concept. Then, he commissioned Andy Petersen, from the Y’s boys department, to get the dance off and running.

Prior to Y-Co, Andy had been running teen dances for the Sarah Hearn Youth Club, also called the “SHY Club,” and was the perfect choice to create what Max had envisioned for the YMCA. Along with Andy’s overseeing, and the work of assistants Ed Duffin and Larry Sample and a crew of a dozen or so young people to help run things, the Y’s new teen dance became a reality.

When the dance originally began it was geared only toward Erie city high schools, and was called “ASTEC,” which stood for Academy, Strong Vincent, Tech, East and Cathedral Prep. It instantly became a smash hit. But the word quickly spread about the great fun that it was, and kids from other schools begged to participate, prompting its boundaries to eventually expand.

In 1959 the dance was opened to Villa Maria, St. Benedict’s and Mercyhurst Prep, and nearby county schools, including McDowell, Harborcreek, Wesleyville, Lawrence Park, North East, Fort LeBoeuf, General McLane, Fairview and Girard. Accordingly, its name was changed to “Y-Co,” standing for “YMCA Co-ed.” Practically overnight the dance’s popularity increased exponentially.

With the dances being held on Saturdays from 9 p.m. until midnight, the area around West 10th and Peach Street would always be jammed around 8:30 p.m. with parents dropping their kids off at the Y’s doors. It was a common sight to see lines extending all

the way to State Street on one side of the building and West 11th Street on the other side waiting for the doors to open.

Keeping the Y's mission in mind, and needing a way to control the dance's overwhelming popularity, a membership system was designed to allow equal participation for all of the schools while also ensuring that there would be no trouble. Along with that, "Y-Co representatives" were established, where upstanding students named by their schools would participate on a panel to screen prospective members and plan the dance's weekly agenda.

The city schools, being larger, were allotted two male and two female representatives per class, while the county schools were allotted one male and one female per class. Membership quotas were then set, with an equal distribution of boys and girls allotted to the schools per grade based on their size.

During its first several years Y-Co was only for kids in senior high school, and they could no longer attend after graduation. In later years the Glenwood Park YMCA, which opened in 1962, held Junior Y-Co for kids in 7th through 9th grades. Dances were also held on the rooftop of the Glenwood YMCA during the summer, when it was too hot at the Downtown YMCA. Also, once a year a dance was held at Rainbow Gardens to allow more people to attend.

Becoming a Y-Co member was prestigious, and not easy. First, you had to be nominated by a member, then you had to be approved by your school's representatives. Then you had to wait for an opening for your gender in your school. In the meantime, you could attend with a guest pass from members, who were allotted two per week, but you could only be a guest four times.

Admission was 50 cents, and it never once increased. A strict dress code required attendees to dress as they would in school, with girls required to wear dresses or skirts and boys dress pants with sweaters or dress shirts. Jeans, t-shirts and long hair were prohibited, and would get you turned away at the door. And there was never any trouble during all those years.

In addition to playing all the latest hits, Y-Co often conducted contests for the attendees, such as bubble gum blowing and dance contests, free-throw shooting contests, name that tune, hula-hoop and limbo contests, and ping-pong tournaments.

Andy and his staff also regularly lined up exhibitions, such as judo, scuba diving in the pool, body building, fashion shows, dancing and gymnastics. Also, each week had a "theme," such as letter sweater night, poodle skirt night, lollypop night, cupid night on Valentine's Day, and canned goods night, where admission was a canned good for the food bank. Also, a king and queen of Y-Co were annually named, and crowned in a ceremony on the dance floor.

A typical night at Y-Co started with deciding what to wear, then walking with your friends, getting a ride or hitchhiking downtown. Hitchhiking, which only boys did, was perfectly safe back then, and for many, the main mode of transportation.

After waiting in line for the W. 10th Street doors to open at 8:45 p.m., you'd enter the massive lobby and present your membership card or guest pass and pay your 50 cents. Then, at 9 p.m. there would be a mad dash up the stairs to the second floor gyms, called the "old gym" (the larger north gym, with the overhead track) and "new gym" (south gym), which was far from new, but is still referred to as that to this day.

Before hitting the dance floor girls would leave their purses at the purse rack, where they'd be placed on a shelf by an attendant and watched. Tickets were not given out, and the purses were retrieved simply by identifying them. There was never a problem with stolen or lost purses, and the purse attendant had the best job at Y-Co, as it was a great place to meet girls.

Entering the dance floor, attendees were greeted by a warm, cheerful atmosphere consisting of soft lighting, decorations, the latest top-40 hits played on scratchy 45s, and

wall to wall people. Each school had its unofficial "corner," where its kids would hang out, and you'd head to your school's corner when you'd enter, where you'd find all your friends. Then, you'd either hang with your friends or dance.

Kids too shy to dance or mix would hang out along the walls, and hold onto them tightly to keep them from falling down. Female wall-hangers were called "wallflowers," while male ones were called "wallweeds," and they'd just blend in with the scenery and watch.

And how great the music was! The disc jockey, who was Jim Treiber throughout senior Y-Co's entire run, would mix up the music, usually playing three or four fast songs in a row and then a couple of slow ones, and mix in the latest dance crazes, such as the stroll, twist, mashed potatoes, Watusi, monkey, jerk and cha-cha-cha numbers, and jitterbug numbers, to which the kids would dance up a storm.

And of course there was lots of Elvis, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Bobby Darin, Ricky Nelson, Connie Francis, Lesley Gore, Brenda Lee, Fats Domino, the Drifters, the Coasters, the Beach Boys, Motown, girls groups, and the Beatles and Rolling Stones.

Treiber never tried to steal the show, all he'd do would be to play the music and occasionally make an announcement, such as a high school football or basketball score, which always brought a rousing chorus of cheers or boos. Occasionally Treiber would call out, "This song is a ladies' choice," which gave girls the opportunity to dance with boys that they had an eye on, or those who might have been too shy to ask them. Girls also used to dance with each other back then, but heavens, never boys with boys.

The "old gym" was where the action was, but if you wanted a break from the music you could go to the third floor lounge area and play ping-pong, checkers or chess. The "new gym," which was quieter, was "the couples' gym," where lovers hung out when not dancing.

In latter years, local garage bands played in the new gym. They were paid just \$5 to perform, but there was a long waiting list willing to play for virtually nothing with hopes of making themselves known.

As the night rolled on the music softened and the mood mellowed. Precisely at 11 p.m. the overhead crystal ball would be turned on, and from then until midnight Treiber played mostly slow dances, with a ladies' choice interspersed here and there.

Then, at 11:57 p.m. Paul Anka's "My Heart Sings" would play, and lovers would dance cheek to cheek while at the same time keeping a watchful eye out for Andy. In 1965 the Paul Anka version became worn out, and unable to find another copy, Treiber purchased the Mel Carter version, which he played until the dance's final days.

The dance thrived through the mid-60s, but then the world started to change, and so did Erie. It was a time of war and revolution, and things everywhere were tense. In April, 1968, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the nation had become a powder keg, and trouble was even erupting in little old Erie. With the innocence of the 50s and early 60s a thing of the past and not coming back, Senior Y-Co closed its doors on April 13, 1968, ending its glorious 10-year run.

And then hearts quit singing.

Junior Y-Co managed to remain in operation until 1974, but it wasn't the same.

Y-Co tribute dances are now held each fall at Rainbow Gardens, where the original Y-Co spirit is recreated, and they bring back precious memories to the original attendees who are still around, as well as give others a feel for what the original Y-Co was like. But something like the actual Y-Co is not likely to ever take place again.

It was a special time. As Simon & Garfunkel sang, "Time it was, and what a time it was, it was."

For a pictorial trip back to those glorious days of Y-Co, continue below. It's guaranteed to make your heart sing!









































