

# The New York Times

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## Life Style; Artist's Hot New Medium: Cha-Cha

By Ron Alexander  
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The New York Times/Bill Cramer  
Gretchen Dow Simpson and her partner, Jeff Allen, do the cha-cha at a recent championship held in Cherry Hill, N.J.

Phoebe Simpson, 18 years old, admits to being "a bit embarrassed when Mom practices hip movements in elevators or a waltz step in the middle of Bloomingdale's."

And her sister, 15-year-old Megan, "can't believe it when Mom stops in front of shop windows and looks at feathers, rhinestones and sequins." But, she added approvingly, "Mother's clothes have become more stylish, hotter."

Heretofore their mother, Gretchen Dow Simpson, was a straight-laced artist noted for her spare New England

flavored architecturally detailed paintings and magazine covers for The New Yorker. That was before she became a cha-cha champ.

To back up a bit, she once promised herself that by the time she turned 50 she would have created 50 covers for The New Yorker (the first appeared in 1974, after nine years of encouraging rejections). Her 50th birthday isn't until May, but her 50th cover (issue of April 3) will be on the newsstands Monday. What's more, it's a cover with a difference.

"There's not a straight line in it," Ms. Simpson said with pride and some astonishment about the cover, which, on first glance, appears to be abstract. On second, or perhaps third, look it turns out to be sections of gold and silver dance shoes complete with open toes and rhinestone straps.

Rhinestone straps and Latin heels from the artist noted for her clapboard houses? That brings us back to the cha-cha dancing.



A year and a half ago, Ms. Simpson, who was born in Cambridge, Mass., studied painting at the Rhode Island School of Design and did freelance photography, attended a dance at a yacht club in Jamestown, R.I. 6 Feet Tall in Stockings.

"My ex-husband had always said that I wasn't a good dancer," Ms. Simpson recently recalled, "and I hadn't done much dancing since my coming-out cotillion in Boston." At the cotillion, in fact, some of her partners stood on steps while they danced with her: Ms. Simpson is 6 feet tall without heels. She so much enjoyed dancing at the yacht club that she

called Dance Trax, run by Jeff and Lisa Allen, in Rumford, R.I.

"Do you have any tall men who dance?" she inquired. They did. So it is there, two hours a week, that she studies the "smooth dances" (foxtrot, waltz, quick step and tango) as well as the Latin dances (rumba, cha-cha and jive).

"They get into your soul," she said of the dances. "I love sports but jogging bores me, aerobics gives me a headache, tennis is too social and squash too claustrophobic. With ballroom dancing, you're using every muscle and along with that you have the plus of glamour and illusion."

She loves "the obsession of dance contenders." In January, with the 5-foot-10 1/2-inch Mr. Allen as partner, she entered the New England Imperial Championship held at the Marriott Hotel in Newton, Mass. She won first place in cha-cha in the Pro-Am Over-40 category.

Early this month, they went to the Cherry Hill (N.J.) Hyatt where, at 9 A.M. one gray Saturday, after the allotted minute and a half, Ms. Simpson took third place in rumba.

Ms. Simpson, who lives in Providence, has amazed even herself by ordering a deep purple sequined gown with a slit up the side (for the Latin competitions). Another number on order (for the smooth dances) combines velvet, chiffon, silver sequins and feathers.

"I'm going to follow this as far as I can go," she said. "Learning all seven dances benefits each of them; working back and forth between oil and acrylic has the same effect."

"She's constantly growing in her work, as the best artists do," said Lee Lorenz, art editor for The New Yorker. "There are always new layers of richness." Ms. Simpson said the idea for the shoe cover (acrylic on paper) came to her when she tossed some dancing shoes in the trunk of her car.

Has she any more surprises up her stylish sleeves? "I used to want to be a piano player in an all-night club, wearing a red dress, and a cigarette hanging out of my mouth," she said. "But I guess that's not to be. It would mean sitting and I sit enough when I paint. I don't smoke. And I don't have a red dress. Yet."

Her daughters suspect it won't be long now



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