



Photos by Joshua Bright

LEAD DANCER Goussy Celstin of the Retumba Dance and Music Ensemble shows the audience how to shimmy to the ground at the first of several Barefoot Dancing events.

Barefoot Dancers kick up their heels at Vannie



THE SHOES MAY be on, but dancing was in full swing on June 21. Seven-year-old Ely Schartz, Emiliano Bogdanos and Caridad Muldro watch and learn. At right, Mabel Cohen, a Riverdale resident, gets in on the action.

By Tommy Hallissey

Margot Perron sat, curls bobbing, legs crossed and feet bare in honor of the opening night of Barefoot Dancing at Van Cortlandt Park last week.

A six-piece Caribbean band called Retumba wiggled the groove through a small room with their flowing white skirts sashaying to the beat. While the 60 or so participants seemed tempered at the start, before long a dance party ensued with Riverdalians swinging round arm in arm and Retumba girls getting jiggy with it.

"By the time I left at 9:30 p.m. it was packed and it was a night club scene," said Ms. Perron, Van Cortlandt Park's new administrator.

June 21's solid turnout — despite the rain — is no surprise to Ms. Perron, who has seen Barefoot Dancing flourish under her reign for 12-and-a-half years at Wave Hill, where she previously served as director of education and public programs.

In fact, the event became so popular at Wave Hill, said Ms. Perron, that administrators at the public garden thought it'd be better to move it elsewhere. (There was fear that all those bare, dancing feet were damaging Wave Hill's well-manicured lawn.)

So when Ms. Perron took the helm at Vannie in November, Kate French, execu-

tive director of Wave Hill, suggested transferring Barefoot Dancing there, too.

As summer approached, Ms. Perron scrambled to find funding, and eventually Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión Jr. came through, providing a good deal of the necessary money. A community development block grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development supplemented the rest of the \$25,000 needed for the series.



Ms. Perron and her staff scoured the city for talent to bring an eclectic mix to Vannie. "In a way we're becoming performance brokers," Ms. Perron quipped.

For the initial performance last week, which coincided with the launch of Bronx Week, Ms. Perron booked the Bronx-based Caribbean band. Future performers will play Irish, West African, North Indian and Mexican music each week.

While the rain kept the last performance indoors, in the basement of the Van Cortlandt Museum, Ms. Perron can't wait to get dancers outdoors.

"My goal is to get people closer with nature," she said. "You can feel the grass between your toes."

And, of course, the event continues to be free.

"I want to give back to the public," Ms. Perron said. "I want people to come in and enjoy" the park.



YVETTE MARTINEZ, co-director of the dance troupe, is a ball of energy as she teaches the dance steps.

Upcoming Barefoot Dancing shows:

■ Today, Thursday, June 28: Estampas Mexicanas Folkloricas, accompanied by Real de Mexico mariachi

■ Thursday, July 5: Jerry O'Sullivan & Friends play the Uilleann Pipes from Ireland

■ Thursday, July 12: Grand Picnic: North American Contra Dancing

■ Thursday, July 19: Tokounou, West African drumming

■ Thursday, July 26: Pandit Charka Kathak Dance Company from Northern India

All performances take place at 7 p.m., on the grass by the Van Cortlandt Museum, just south of the Parade Ground off Broadway. In case of rain, the location will be the basement of the Van Cortlandt Museum.



MORE THAN 60 people turned out to learn the seductive and sultry art of Caribbean dancing.