



Ballroom champion

American dance fans are lapping up a show made right here, in Sydney.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, live from Studio 1A, coast to coast across America, we bring you the star of the Ballroom Glitz [drum roll], Ben Starr." When mums and dads across the United States snuggle up to their radios on a Saturday night to listen to ballroom music, little do they realise the program is produced at Five Dock by a Sydney presenter who wasn't born until the 1970s.

Three years ago, Ben Starr thought his radio career was all but dead. Years of working late-night shifts at 2CH had ended with a whimper when his role was automated. He turned his attention to teaching media at Sydney TAFE instead but between classes he kept tinkering with an idea he had been trying to interest 2CH programmers in for years. A radio show about ballroom dancing, incorporating big band sounds, expert tips on how to do the rumba, samba or foxtrot and interviews with the dance and music theatre stars of yesteryear.

A few months ago, with the popularity of ballroom dancing soaring due to television shows such as *Dancing with the Stars*, he again tried to interest 2CH in the concept. When that failed, he jumped on a plane to New York and knocked on the doors of the big American radio networks. Starr says the Arthur Murray Dance Studio, which has 273 franchises around the world, agreed to sponsor the show with one proviso: "Get us a million listeners and we'll be on board."

Most of the American radio bosses told him they liked his tenacity but were only interested in programs for



Old school ... Ben Starr, host of *Ballroom Glitz*.

audiences under 40. Finally, he was put in touch with the boss of the US satellite network Music of Your Life, which caters for older listeners. The result was a contract to host a Saturday night program called *Ballroom Glitz*, relayed through 150 stations across America to an audience of 1.25 million.

Starr, 32, says ballroom dancing has had a huge resurgence in America, with the US version of *Dancing with the Stars*

watched by 14 million viewers, out-rating *Survivor*.

Starr might have been born in the rock era but his love for ballroom dancing seems genuine. He spent a large part of his youth learning ballroom dancing at Belmore RSL Club, despite considerable ribbing from his schoolmates. "I was like one of those kids in [the movie] *Strictly Ballroom* and did competitive dancing with my sister all through school," he says. "I love the era of ballroom, the music, the sophistication and the class. When I started working at 2CH, mates at Triple M wondered what I was doing at an oldies station, but I loved it."

Despite Starr's gentle Australian accent, the American audience probably assumes the program is homemade. He uses theatre of the mind to create the mood on the dance floor, with recordings by Frank Sinatra, Dusty Springfield, Peggy Lee and Lou Rawls

among others, and he has interviews with the great performers of the past, such as Andy Williams, Johnny Mathis, Shirley Jones and Barry Manilow.

"People will say, 'Who cares about the Ames Brothers and all these wonderful people', but they more or less shaped the music of today's world and what's interesting is when you interview them they are still living in the wonderful world of the '50s."