

# Etcetera

The Boston Center for  
Adult Education swings. /  
Photo by BCAE

## Dance Primer

**Fox-trot** – This dance developed in America around World War One was promoted by Irene and Vernon Castle. Dancers walk, trip, skip and generally move (quickly) around the floor in perfect unison, mostly in ballroom hold. (Time signature, 4/4)

**Jive** – Variations known as Lindy, West Coast Swing, American Swing, Rock 'n Roll, Jitterbug. Athletic, often involving spins and swings, the dance evolved in an attempt to keep pace with the ever changing sounds of Jazz. West Coast Swing is a slower, more "slotted" form, created for the music of Count Basie, where as East Coast Swing is faster, reaching up to 200 beats/minute, danced to the likes of Benny Goodman. "Jive" and "Jitterbug" are terms coined by Cab Calloway and created for his music. Jive has influenced almost every other existing form of ballroom, and its formations can even be found in today's Disco and Tango. (Time signature, 4/4)

**Rumba** – Developed primarily in Cuba, this dance has both Spanish and African roots. "Rumba" is a generic term conveying a variety of dances including Mambo, Danzon and Congo. These dances are all rhythmically similar, but vary in tempo. The dance was inspired, and rather resembles, the walk of the cock. Between 1920s-1950s, it was also influ-



enced by American Jazz, creating new forms of Cuban Jazz.

**Tango** – Immortalized by Rudolph Valentino in the 1921 movie, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the Tango was developed by the Gaucho horseman of Argentina. It is characterized by an emphatic 2/4 time signature and played with an unusual staccato accent on each beat. That the man is a particularly dominant lead, and the hold is tighter than other forms, partly explains the dance's notoriety as "passionate and romantic."

**Waltz** – When introduced to England during the early 19th century, it was considered scandalous. For the first time in European history, un-chaperoned men and women danced facing each other, limbs touching in a quasi-embrace. Today two forms survive, the Modern or Diagonal Waltz and the Viennese Waltz. With an elegant rise-and-fall motion, couples constantly turn or rotate across the ballroom. (Time signature, 3/4)

Source: From *The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing's Guide to Ballroom Dancing* and dance teacher/writer Jeff Allen

**You Asked For It!** By Sarada Justin

## May I Have This Dance?

Someone asked me, "Are people dancing more than ever, or is it my imagination?" So I asked my friend George, a devoted student of swing. Recently divorced, he explained that social dance is the "new" way to meet people. Personally, mention dance and I can't help but picture my high school gymnasium – sweaty palms and heartbreak. But George informs me, in today's social dance scene you don't have to look like Patrick Swayze or Jennifer Grey to have a good time; you just have to know how to dance. And he must be right, because nation-wide, singles, couples, young and old are "quick-stepping" it to dance class.

In the past year, the Boston Center for Adult Education's (BCAE) wait list for swing class has increased from 22 people to 100. Just as the early 1980s movie *Karate Kid* renewed interest in martial arts, many dance instructors point to movies such as *Strictly Ballroom*, *Shall We Dance?*, *Dance with Me* and even the Gap swing commercials as engines driving the recent ballroom craze. But the marketing of dance as "cool" is nothing new – think Irene Castle, the smoking flapper, Gene Kelly and the imitable Fred Astaire.

### Partners Are In

What's really new here is that people today are discovering (actually rediscovering) "partner dance." Jeff

Allen, author of the best-selling guide *Quick Start to Social Dancing*, believes that at the root of this resurgence is a significant shift in our country's social climate.

Sounding like a gym teacher and a poet, Allen uses dance as a prism through which to view American social movements of the past 50 years. Through the 1950s, partner dances such as swing and mambo monopolized North American sock hops, juke joints and clubs. Then came "the rock revolution," and the Twist, when for the first time, people danced solo.

As Allen sees it, rejecting swing and other partner dances was one way today's boomers rejected the status quo of the era. The music and self-expression of the individual dance were so exciting, no one missed the old forms. But Allen believes that unlike free-form dancing, partner dancing allows people to interact and develop chemistry. "If that chemistry isn't there when you dance, you know a relationship isn't going to work," he notes. "In the 1960s and on, people didn't learn how to touch each other in a social sense. They didn't know if there was chemistry – they just got it all at once, in bed." Allen and other dance instructors feel people are now returning to partner dance to rediscover that lost chemistry. Ingrid Fowler, marketing director at BCAE, finds that social dance elicits a sense of nostalgia in people. "They want to recapture the romance of the social occasion," she enthuses.

### Dance Transforms

Bill Morganti, owner of New England Ballroom, believes dancing skips a generation as teen-agers come to embrace the same dances that brought together their grandparents. Boomers, he observes, are finally realizing they may have missed out on something, and are only now finding their way to dance school. Morganti believes people are no longer

taking classes just to prepare for a wedding. Instead, he says they're turning to social dance as exercise, as an alternative to drinking, or a way to rekindle a relationship after the kids have grown. And, as with my friend George, many divorced men and women are turning to dance as a reintroduction to the dating scene.

"Asking someone to dance isn't as hard as starting a conversation," says Joni Lohr, a swing instructor at BCAE. She has watched otherwise shy people transform on the dance floor. If you can dance, she says, "you don't have to be handsome or beautiful." While several marriages have come about through Lohr's classes, she points out that partner dance in Boston is not exclusively about couples or singles. There are many places you can dance without a partner, she explains, "and then there are a few, such as the Bay Tower Room, where you just wouldn't go without a date."

Lohr has made some astute observations about men and women by watching their approaches to dancing. She finds, for example, that singles tend to stick with dancing longer than

couples. Often with couples, one is better than the other, which can cause serious tension. She recalls one couple that couldn't even get past the door. Single or in pairs, she believes the best classes have people rotate partners, since "nothing is more boring than dancing with the same person."

### Dance Is Visual

Whether dancing with a stranger, spouse, or someone in between, Lohr offers several basic tips for partners: First, she explains that dance is very visual. You must watch carefully and try to picture the steps. Since it's all about communicating, the man must be willing to make clear what he wants, without being aggressive. Women, on the other hand, will generally take away the lead if they sense their partner can't do it. They must let themselves be led, and try not to anticipate what's going to happen.

Jeff Allen has noticed that in learning to dance, men and women often listen to different voices – for women, the experience or the emotion of the dance may draw them. Men, on the other hand, want first to know exactly

what they're doing; they don't want to risk looking ridiculous in front of their mates. And, Allen reminds us, dancing is fundamentally about attracting a mate.

Ultimately, emotion plays a part for both men and women in their choice of dance. "What sparks one person to wear red and another brown is the same as what sparks one to dance tango and another swing," says Morganti. "One may be drawn to the passion; the other, the exhilaration," he concludes. But Morganti never worries his students won't want to branch out. With each new dance, he says, "the music just gets to you." Supporting the importance of not specializing to the point of exclusion, Allen notes that "dancing is all the same – it's the music that's different."

While Morganti does admit that Boston has an historically puritanical relationship to dance, we are rapidly becoming a dance-friendly city, in the same way our cuisine has become more sophisticated. The reason? Our growing international population.

While Bostonians may still have some "loosening-up" to do, Morganti believes that as Americans, we have an advantage. "American culture is so rhythmic. If you live in America, you have rhythm. You don't stop moving. In this country, we are a locomotive," he laughs.

While few can deny the allure of the dance, most of us experience some of the self-doubt Lewis Carroll expressed when he wrote, "Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?"

*Sarada Justin writes frequently for Booming and is also a free-lance TV and film producer, living in Cambridge.*

