

Simon's guide to *Swing*

Simon Selmon considers the “opium effect” in the Lindy hop

Dancing a set choreography for a show or a competition has its own rewards: I love to entertain and put a smile on people's faces, it's a wonderful accomplishment to remember a routine and execute it without mistakes, and there is a synchronicity that develops between two individual people who rehearse a piece of choreography to perfection. All that said, performance is not the primary objective of a social dance. Jazz dance, which is what Lindy hop is, has an African American heritage and is about improvising and telling a story. It has a call-and-response dynamic in which two people move in harmony with one another and the music, complement each other and blend seamlessly into the community on the dance floor, but – an important point – with their own individual personalities shining through.

Last month, I talked about the concept of lead and follow, the subtle communication between two people, and how it makes the Lindy hop one of the greatest dances ever (in my opinion of course). Often, when we think about the dance, we think of one leader and one follower. Traditionally, the gentleman would have taken the leader's role and the lady the follower's role, although of course today in the 21st century that is no

longer a given assumption as many men choose to follow and women lead (this could actually be found throughout the history of the dance – it was just never an official aspect of it, but I am digressing).

More important for today, it's a myth that the leader's role is to only lead and the follow's is to only follow. In reality for the best dancers (and generally the best dances I've had) the role is subtly and constantly switching between the two partners. You still need one primary leader and one primary follower, otherwise the dance can become like a wrestling match, but when I dance with a very good follower, they have a way of making me do movements and patterns I was not thinking about or would not have initiated on my own. For example, as they come out of an underarm turn, the follow might slow a movement down (usually adding a styling of their own – maybe a hip roll), and a good leader would, first, notice the additional styling or movement and then react to it, either by responding with their own styling – ideally inspired by the follower's – or by following the flow of that movement and letting it lead into the next pattern, creating something they wouldn't have done on their own. That's the subtle art of call and response, which allows for the unique conversations we create as social dancers between two people on the

dance floor. This is what feels very special and often very intimate, and it's one reason why we fall in love with this dance.

I have often felt this type of connection – the weaving of a dance between two partners – when I was lucky enough to dance with some of the great legends of our dance such as Dawn Hampton, Norma Miller, Jean Veloz and sadly many whose names I can no longer recall or never knew, but who were gracious enough to dance with me as I was learning. As a young dancer, I would seek out the venues where the older, more experienced dancers would hang out and partner as many different dancers as I could. I would come away with this magical feeling of “I can dance”, simply because they would bring out the best of me. I always teach that the leader's job is to make the follower look good, but the reverse is just as true: a good follower will make the leader dance better.

Simon Selmon.



A word of advice however: followers, if you get a leader who only leads, intent on finishing the movement they started, strong-arming you through their slick and highly polished moves (often very similar moves regardless of the song, because listening to the music is another aspect of lead and follow), just smile, enjoy the ride and choose your next partner wisely.

In fact, it's not all bad, that is the way many people dance their whole life, and it can be a lot of fun. It might allow you to just enjoy the movement for its own sake, like putting on that comfortable pair of slippers! Likewise for leaders, you may get a follow who is a marvel at following your every lead and makes it feel so easy but doesn't contribute any of their own to the dance, and whilst you may not be pushed to create something new, that's also fine sometimes. That follower has a wonderful skill but maybe won't inspire the leaders to pay quite such close attention, or challenge their listening and reactive skills, but it's still fun.

However, creative leading and following is the goal in my book. Yes, it requires more effort, it can be mentally and physically challenging, it requires greater skills and comes with a greater risk of failing at first (a leader might be missing their partner's subtle cues, or a follower might overdo the number of variations, effectively becoming the leader). Yet when it's done well, it definitely has the wow factor – the opium effect that will keep you coming back for more! ■

Photograph: Courtesy of SIMON SELMON.