Ballroom Dancing – A way of Life

The hall was dimly lit, the music was slow but powerful, they moved as one, each step, each beat, there was perfect unison them. It was, indeed, a vertical expression of a horizontal desire.

Ballrooms dancing has its origins dating to the 16th century. Though the image evoked by the word "ballroom" for most people is a couple, with the man in tailcoats and the lady in a long dress, the modern use of the word merely refers to any dance that requires a large hall (like a Ballroom). The World Dance Council (WDC) has 10 dances included under this umbrella term, in two categories of five dances. The international standard (what most people call "Ballroom dancing") which includes the slow waltz, Viennese waltz, Quickstep, Foxtrot and Tango and the international Latin which includes the Jive, Cha cha, Samba, Rumba and Paso Doble.

Peasants in "Provence", France, danced the first record of a dance to a ¾ rhythm to the "Volta" in 1559. The music 'Volta 'required couples to dance in a closed position; the man holding the lady around the waist, the lady's right hand on the man's shoulder and holding her skirt in her left hand. This was necessary to stop it from flying up, as the tempo of the music was around 180bpm(beats per minute). In 1754 the first music for the 'Waltzen' appeared in, Germany, any connection between then Volta and the Waltzen' remains obscure, although Waltzen in German means to 'revolve'. In the early 1800's the dance became very popular in Vienna and in 1812 it was introduced to England as the German Waltz. Throughout the 19th Century the dance stabilized, and was further popularized by the music of Josef and Jojann Strauss heralding the Viennese Waltz.

In the early 19th Century, the 'Waltzen' had become popular throughout Germany and Austria, with local variants evolving and named after those areas. A more sedate version of the 'Viennese Waltz' originated in America in the 1870s under the name of the 'Boston'. The present Waltz originated in England around 1910 and was described as being a variant of the Boston' and the 'Lander' although the tempo had been reduced from 180bpm to 90ppm.
Foxtrot originated as the 'Castle Walk' and was introduced into the Nightclub performances of 'Vernon' and 'Irence Castle' , and later popularized by 'Harry Fox' in the stage show "Ziegfield Follies" in New York in 1913. The 'Foxtrot ' was originally danced with both the left and right foot falling in a single until a revised technique was introduced in the 1950s; the feet no longer tracking in a single line but moving along their own separate tracks.

The 'Tango' has always been a light spirited Spanish Flamenco style dance. With the Spanish conquest of South America along with several other folk dances, this migrated to the new lands. The 'Tangano' an African dance was also imported into South America with the Negro slaves. Over the years one or may be both of these dances merged with other dances in the New World, in particular Argentina, to create a new dance the 'Milonga'. By the turn of the 20th Century it had gained acceptance by the upper classes in both Argentina and Western Europe. Interest grew rapidly, initially in Paris (then London and New York) where the character was dramatically changed during the 1930s the dance was combined with the proud torso of the other ballroom dances and given a staccato action, which remains today.

As ragtime music evolved into swing through the 1920s, new dances such as the 'Charleston' and the 'Black Bottom' became popular. They only become popular with white society after its inclusion in the show "Running Wild", performed by the Ziegfield Follies whilst touring the U.S.A. It was popularized in Europe, by a young lady by the name Josephine Baker during the 1920s in Paris. It was danced with wild swinging arms and side kicks to music between 200 and 240 bpm. The dance subsequently become popular worldwide, but the wild nature of the dance caused several of the more sedate ballrooms to either totally ban the dance, or display notices simply saying "PCQ", (Please Charleston Quietly). The 'Quickstep' has retained the walks, runs turns and chasses of the original dances, but several others have been added such as locks, hops and skips.

Jive originated with the Negroes in the South East of the USA, where it had an affinity with the war dances of the Seminole Indians in Florida. It is suggested that the Indians copied it from the Negroes, who brought the dance from Africa. The word 'Jive' is probably derived from "Jev" meaning, "to talk disparagingly" in the West African Wolof language. The word "Jive" also has a similar meaning in Negro slang: "misleading talk, exaggerations", although this could have been derived from a modification of the English word "jibe".

In the 1880s, the dance was performed competitively amongst Negroes in the South, and the prize was frequently a cake, so the dance became known as the Cake Walk. This exuberant dancing and music amongst Negroes contrasted with the limited and dour dancing of the upper white classes of the USA and UK. English speaking society perhaps felt free to engage in more energetic dancing and a series of simple dances based on those of the Negroes becoming popular in white society.

Many had animal names, betraying perhaps a rural and pantomimic origin: The current Jive still has a Bunny Hug as one of the standard steps. The dances were all done to 4/4 Ragtime music, with stress on beats 2 and 4, and have syncopated rhythms. They all used the same elements: couples doing a walk, rock, swoop, bounce or sway. The closed position was considered by many to be indecent, and sometimes the lady wore "bumpers" to preclude body contact.

The name Cha Cha could have been derived from the Spanish 'Chacha' meaning 'nursemaid', or 'chachar' meaning 'to chew coca leaves', or from 'char' meaning 'tea', or most likely from the fast and cheerful Cuban dance: the Guaracha. This dance has been popular in Europe from before the turn of the century. It has also been suggested that the name Cha Cha is derived onomatopoeically from the sound of the feet in the chasse, which is included in many of the steps. This would account for it being called the 'Cha Cha Cha' by some people, after the rhythm. When the English dance teacher Pierre Margolie visited Cuba in 1952, he realized that sometimes the Rumba was danced with extra beats. This is said to be an innovation introduced in 1948 by the musician Enrique Jorrin, combining two Cuban dances, the 'Danzon' and the 'Montuno'. When Pierre returned to Britain, he started teaching these steps as a separate dance; the Cha Cha.

A composite dance evolved in the 1830s combining the plait figures from these Negro dances and the body rolls and sways of the indigenous Lundu. Later , carnival steps were added like the Copacabana (named after a popular beach near Rio de Janeiro). Gradually members of the high society in Rio embraced it, although they modified it to be done in closed ballroom dancing position (which they knew was the only correct way to dance anything). The dance was then called the Zemba Queca, and was described in 1885 as "a graceful Brazilian dance". This was later called the 'Mesemba'. The origin of the name 'Samba' is unclear: perhaps it is a corruption of Semba.

Rumba has its origin with the African slaves imported into Cuba, whose dances emphasized the movements of the body rather than the feet. The tune was considered less important than the complex cross rhythms, being provided by a percussion of pots, spoons, bottles. It evolved in Havana in the 19th century by combination with the Contradanza. The name 'Rumba' is possibly derived from the term 'rumboso orquestra' which was used for a dance band in 1807, although in Spanish, the word 'rumbo' means 'route', 'rumba' means 'heap pile', and 'rhum' (Rum) is of course an intoxicating liquor popular in the Caribbean, any of which might have been used descriptively when the dance was being formed. The name has also been claimed to be derived from the Spanish word for 'Carousel'.

The Rumba was introduced to the USA in the 1930s. It was particularly popularized in 1935 by George Raft, who played the part of a suave dancer who wins the heart of an heiress through dance, in the movie 'Rumba', although mainly Frank Veloz did the male dancing. With only a transfer of weight from one foot to the other on beat 1 of each bar, and the absence of an actual step on this beat, the dance has developed a very sensual character. Beat 1 is a strong beat of the music, but all that moves on that beat are the hips, so the music emphasizes the dancing of the hips. This together with the slow tempo of the music makes the dance very romantic. Steps are actually taken on beats 2, 3, and 4. Weight transfer and turns are performed on the intervening half beats.

There are many benefits of social dancing. It is no secret that moderate exercise and sensible eating habits are the key to remaining trim and fit. However, the thought of spending thirty minutes on a treadmill, or jogging around the playground five times is out of the question for many of us. Dancing works as a stress and tension reducer. For people on a hectic schedule it can become a passion that helps you to improve your attitude and increase your confidence in both social and business situations. That's what makes dance the ideal exercise. After all, dancing is a mild aerobic workout minus the boring part! When you take dance lessons, you make exercise a fun and enjoyable social event, every night of the week. Your dance "work out" takes place with pleasant music and everyone's in a good mood. It's fun.

KDU has made social dancing an integral part of its curriculum. All officer cadets undergo training in popular dances which help them to relax as well as socialize. Talented cadets are given the opportunity to compete in local and international competitions. KDU also held its inaugural Annual Ball in July 2012 and hopes to continue the tradition.

"And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music." - Friedrich Nietzsche

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