

HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF MODERN SOCIAL DANCE

The desire to dance is one of the most primitive instincts of mankind. It has been said that "dancing is older than anything except eating, drinking and love" and that "rhythm is life". . . and rhythm is the basis of dancing. Cave drawings depict dance as a form of expression even before language was developed. The first rhythm is thought to come from the heartbeat. Spontaneous expressive movements became formalized, then traditional, adapted to various tribes and cultures as part of their customs. Although their origins may be forgotten, the dances themselves lived on to become the foundation of folk dance.

"The desire to move in response to emotion is a psychological fact which will survive, no matter how it may be suppressed, as long as people exist." Dance is born when rhythm and movement come together. Even in the Dark Ages, every country had it's form of traditional "folk" or national dances, indigenous to the soil. There were dances for religious festivals, courtship, harvest, rites of passage, etc. in every culture.

Arbeau published his "Orchesographie" in 1588, the earliest written account of the popular social dances of the day. Each province had it's "BRANLE", the MINUET and GAVOTTE were branles from provinces in France. Other dances included the GALLIARDE, PAVANE and Quadrilles. But it wasn't until Louis XIV, that hard and fast rules were laid down based on ballet's five basic positions. Peasant dances such as the Minuet from Poitou, France, were now introduced to Paris courts and danced by royalty for the next 250 years. When ballet left the courts for the stage, the remaining social dances continued to be taught by dance masters who also ruled the ballet, insisting on rigorous technique.

The first modern ballroom style dance was the WALTZ, introduced in 1812. It met with tremendous opposition with an Anti-Waltzing party formed in English Society amid a storm of protest that it was obscene and vulgar. Proper ladies and gentleman who dared dance it were publicly criticized. "Society surrendered to the new dance craze, when Emperor Alexander of Russia was seen waltzing at Almack's, the highly exclusive assembly rooms." The waltz is usually traced to the LANDLER, a folk dance of Southern Germany, though some believe it's origins are from the VOLTA, which was popular in Great Britain and France, but was originally a peasant dance from Italy.

In 1840, the POLKA from Bohemia, the MAZURKA from Poland and the SCHOTTISHE from Germany were introduced and refined from their humble peasant origins. The younger generation was demanding simpler dances with fewer decorative steps and with these new dances, ballroom dancing had a new lease on life.

Another younger generation rebelled against the artificial technique of the old-time teachers with its five positions and "pretty" movements. With the onset of the First World War, when many old institutions fell by the wayside, the dancers themselves, not the teachers, introduced a free and easy dance style

based on natural walking movements without ballet turnout. The Foxtrot of 1914 fanned this rebellion making walking steps acceptable, but it wasn't until the Armistice that order was restored to ballroom dance. In 1920 a dance teachers conference called "The Dancing Times" attempted to standardize both the Foxtrot and the One-Step. It was the first time that dancers and teachers broke with ballet tradition to evolve and codify a modern ballroom technique based on natural movement with feet in alignment. A ballroom branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (what we now call "English Style") was born from this conference.

Social dance is a living thing, not cut off from the world, but influenced by world events, fashion, popular music, and cultures. Like other living things, dance must develop or disappear, it cannot remain unchanged. When it becomes so standardized it can no longer develop it is shelved with the gavotte and minuet, favorites of a bygone era.

For a new ballroom dance to be born, it must have a new rhythm to which no existing dance can be satisfactorily fitted without some subtle change which alters the whole nature of the steps. For instance, the Rumba only became popular when bands began to play it with true Latin feeling--rather than like a foxtrot.

So where do these new rhythms come from to form new dances? In every case their origins are in native folk dances. When virtually every folk rhythm was tried out in Europe, some discarded while others reached popularity, the White population of North America turned to rhythms of other cultures. The Foxtrot rhythm, for example, is of African origin, the Tango hails from the most disreputable barrio in Buenos Aires, Argentina and the dazzling Paso Doble was an exhibition dance in Spain.

As soon as a new dance appears, its steps are tried out by hundreds of dancers and teachers. Modifications are made with movements added, omitted and changes made to existing variations, much the way the Minuet was transformed from a peasant dance to a court dance. The new dance will spread socially from its start as a simple, fascinating rhythm, then taken up in a modified form by the sophisticated. Often the dances are picked up by travelers, and taken back to catch on in their home country. This has been the pattern of all successful social dances in the last five centuries.

Reference:

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