



HOT TO TROT!

Trouble ahead? Then grab a partner, face the music and try dancing with the old-time party animals who are flocking to wild jive nights and afternoon tea waltzes all over Britain

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN GOLDSMITH



It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing: Deborah and friends put on a show for fellow dancers at the Rivoli's Jive Party

Britain may be in financial turmoil, but inside south London's Rivoli Ballroom, you'd never know it. Under the scarlet glow of the venue's giant Chinese lanterns, hundreds of people are jiving the night away, while a band in 1940s garb swing out on stage. At the centre of the dancing mass, a beautiful girl in a white 1920s-style flapper dress is kicking her heels on the wooden floor, a gleeful smile on her face. In fact, Deborah is 41 and works in HR, but the carefree way she moves makes her look 20 years younger. No one else can match her, but they try anyway: from the eight-year-old dancing with her dad, to the teenagers with indie hair and vintage frocks. There are white people, black people, Asian people; old, young and middle-aged; all dancing together, as if they don't have a care in the world. "We invite everybody along, as long as they behave themselves - and why not?" says the Rivoli's amiable owner, Bill Mannix, who has been running the grade II-listed venue for 30 odd years,

and dutifully preserving its original flock wallpaper, chandeliers and plush velvet furnishings.

In the past, this is what people have always done during troubled times - they cobbled together their glad rags, and went out dancing. "While some were jumping out of windows during the Great Depression, others went dancing," says Simon Selmon, who runs the London Swing Dance Society. "It's escapism and one of the cheapest forms of entertainment. You do a few hours dancing, you build up a little sweat, you interact with people and you forget your troubles."

The renaissance of partner-dancing - as opposed to the awkward solo shuffle - has been quietly brewing for several years. In artsy east London, twentysomething hipsters have been barn dancing for several years. On the telly, *Strictly Come Dancing* increases in popularity with every passing series. And in 2005, Marilyn Agrelo's cute-as-kittens film *Mad Hot Ballroom* - which follows a group of children as they foxtrot their way to happiness in New York City - was one of the highest-grossing documentaries of the year.

For the first time since the 1950s, partner-dancing has returned to the mainstream. "We had 130 people in our beginners' class last week," says Selmon. "If you had told me that a few years ago, I would have laughed. There has definitely been a resurgence, and it's partly fuelled by all these TV shows. But then again, the reason those shows came about was that there was a growing market anyway - people were dancing again." And not just in the capital either: dance societies and clubs have been popping up all over the country, from Newquay Jive to the Glasgow Swing Dance Society.

According to Selmon, some people were dancing Second World War-style as early as the 1980s (though most of us, admittedly, were not). But why did it ever go away? Selmon blames the 1960s: with the advent of the twist, LSD and free love, asking girls to dance suddenly became a rather quaint concept, reserved for your out-of-touch parents. We've been doing the solo shuffle ever since. Acid gave lone dancing a certain groovy mysticism, while Ecstasy and alcohol kept it going through to the 21st century. (Ever tried dancing ->

on the spot to "Crazy in Love" without the aid of a drink or two? It's nigh-on impossible.)

On the other hand, at the Rivoli's Jive Party, drunkenness is conspicuous by its absence. Sure, there's alcohol on sale for those who want it, but nobody is falling over, having a fight, throwing up in the toilets or being groped. Instead, they are just dancing – men with women, women with women, spinning around the room in a leg-kicking blur.

Swing is but one style of partner-dance that is enjoying a renaissance. In the past few years, the young troupe Cut a Shine, who formed on the London squat party scene, has converted thousands to the joys of barn dancing. Its summer calendar took in major music festivals including Glastonbury, Lovebox and Festival, and its club nights are always crammed to the rafters.

And at the dancier end of the scale, the humble afternoon tea dance – at which people perform waltzes and tangos in between tea and biscuits – is back in a big way. The Brighton-based performance company Ragroof Theatre recently started running tea dances as a way of publicising one of its productions. "We did it as an aside," says Iwan Fabrega, a member of the company, "but it really took off. We did one at Ragroof Festival this year, and it was sold out." And like the Jive Party, you'll find all sorts of people at the Ragroof dances. "And that is one of the most beautiful and amazing things about it," says Fabrega. "You'll get a hall full of people of all ages dancing with each other, from students to those in the seventies."

What is it about partner-dancing? "It's like a conversation without talking," says Fabrega. "You can just go up to someone – whoever they are – and say, 'Can I have a dance?' It's so tragic, because it used to be the norm. People are now scared of dancing with each other." As Selmon puts it, "At the Rivoli, people will ask you to dance all night long, without knowing who you are. At the end of the dance, they say thanks very much, and then they're off to the next person."

By contrast, in other British nightclubs, most interaction between strangers of the opposite sex is limited to those seeking romance – or, let's be honest – sex. Ironically, swing dance – which was once considered racy and vulgar – is now a rather wholesome, healthy activity.



Emily Fiddian Barrister, 36

"I started dancing about a year ago, after I came to the Jive Party Christmas special at the Rivoli Ballroom. I actually found it really frustrating, because I couldn't do any of the steps. Afterwards, I had a real urge to carry on and learn how to do it properly. It's such good fun and it's great for meeting people – I'm here tonight with friends who I met through jiving. The dancing itself is just exhilarating, and it's the only reason people come here: to dance."

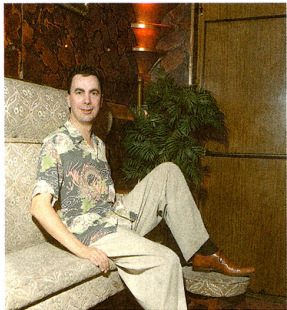
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Just ask Lorraine Drolet, who for the past five years has been teaching ballroom and Latin dance to thousands of primary-school children in Westminster and Croydon, and has seen demand rise with every passing term. "Everybody wants it in their school once they get wind of it," she says. Drolet is a firm believer in the power of dance, and has seen it with her own eyes. "In every school, in every child, there is some kind of transformation when they learn to dance. The children whose energy goes into being naughty, they channel it into dancing. They can overcome behavioural difficulties."

There's a twist to the tale: as Selmon points out, "The resurgence of swing has now lasted longer than the original heyday." But while we can keep the dance alive, the same may not be said for the Rivoli, whose owners are desperate to retire, but equally unwilling to sell their beloved ballroom to property developers, who are intent on turning it into a supermarket. "It's a beautiful place in a beautiful city, but I can't keep running it forever," says Manix. "I'd sell it tomorrow if the right person came along."

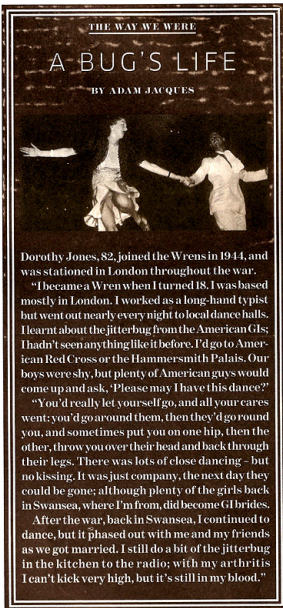
If you have a few quid to spare and fancy running one of London's greatest treasures, give him a call. Either way, it's time to damn the mortgage, forget the crunch, and put on your dancing shoes. ■

For more information go to www.londonrivolibalroom.co.uk, www.swingdanceuk.com, www.newquayjive.com, www.glasgowswingdancesociety.com, www.cutashine.co.uk and www.ragrooftheatre.co.uk/teadance



Barry Blackledge
IT director, 40

"I had two left feet before I started dancing, which was more than 10 years ago. I love rhythm and blues and I get to dance with all the best girls; my dancing has taken me all over Europe, and the scene is a real community. I come to the Jive Party every month, and the amount of people here has definitely gone up. I don't know why people stopped partner-dancing – these days, I can't actually dance without a partner any more. It's all about the right song, the right girl, the right night."



Christine Heward- Mills
Environmental consultant, 30

"I've been dancing for about six months. I stumbled upon it when I showed up at a venue for a capoeira lesson, but it turned out that I had got the wrong day – they were teaching Jive, so I gave it a go. I was instantly addicted and by the end of the session I couldn't wait for the next week. It's fun, great exercise and good for socialising and flirting. I'm a single girl and it's an ideal way to meet guys and make friends, without having to go to a sleazy bar." **LS**