

Social Dance

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Social dance is dance, which is recreational and usually performed with a partner and in groups or as a community activity for fun and enjoyment. Sometimes it does not require a partner but simply a number of people in a group.

It is not performance or display driven as in formal dance organisations such as ballet, stage or folkloric display, nor is it ceremonial or ritual based; or for competition and judging of performance such as in solo Highland dance, or ballroom dance medals, or in championships or ‘dance-sport’ for television presentation.

Generally social dance is organised within a community by volunteer leaders or to raise money for benefits rather than by professional engagement and management. Of course some professionals make their business from teaching social dancing and some initial basic learning can be advantageous for a beginner or for refinement of more advanced technique. Nevertheless the handing on from person to person and generation to generation is more a community based tradition and much of the development of social interaction in traditional dance is acquired through regular participation with older veterans handing onto the enthusiastic young.

In contemporary times it may also be the activity of a specialist dance club in providing a particular form of social dance where people may meet and engage regularly with a change of partners from dance to dance. A bit of a chat as part of this interchange is of paramount importance on the social side, that’s what it’s meant to be about.

Social dance can derive from or be an activity within many different genres. It may be the folk dances of a particular village performed on the local green or community centre or it may be old time dancing conducted in a barn or public hall or even ballroom dancing, Latin American, salsa, rock n roll or any contemporary dance that is public recreation rather than for display or commercial benefit.

Many social dances are *couple dances* and the main thing is that people should mix and regularly change partners. The optimum forms of social dances involve groups of people enjoying activity within *sets* where *groups and couples regularly change places or even partners*. Some of the main forms of group dancing within sets known as ‘**country dancing**’ are those in which couples are aligned in either longways, circular or columnar formation, or in squares called ‘quadrilles’. Interaction with other couples and sometimes progression of partners is an integral part of this dance form. There are various categories of these dances within British, Scottish and Irish traditions percolating across to a similar evolution from Colonial Australian time to the

present and acknowledging an even larger proportion of the European mix of fashionable dances that in turn developed from national and folk dance to become world-wide ‘crazes’.

Within the couple dance genre there are dances that follow a particular **sequence of steps** to a regular amount of bars. These in the more traditional form are referred to as ‘**old time dances**’ where there has generally been a mainstream community handing on over several generations. There are also newer ballroom sequence dances which in Britain are known as ‘**modern sequence dances**’ or as ‘**new vogue**’ in Australia. Whilst many very good dances have come from this contemporary form the proliferation of them in a programme is nowhere near as social as that of the old time counterpart consisting mainly of regular tried and proven favourites; compared to the more complex of competition origin. Likewise it is the same with folk dances that are favourites versus a domination of choreographed dances from new dance competitions. And yes, sometimes as with the new vogue, a very good new folk style dance works into the repertoire to become a favourite. Dancing the well-known old favourites where preoccupation on steps and figures is minimal, allows more freedom for conversation and fun rather than a concentrated workout.

The **standard ballroom dances**, once referred to as modern, were free-lance with no fixed routine and much improvisation which added to the attraction of the gliding Foxtrot, sensuous snappy Tango, lively and sparkling Quickstep and romantic Modern Waltz. Nevertheless this tended to make them more a “dancers’ dance” in comparison to the easy to follow sequences of the old time style. There were also old time forerunners of the modern free-lance dance in which again there was no particular sequence apart from the basic step allowing a hypnotic type of pleasure in whirling round the ballroom or public venue in the vivacious Waltz, racy Galop, infectious Polka and snappy heel clicking Mazurka. Sometimes these incorporated simple improvisation with reversing and all were from various countries or eras that added to the interest and vibrancy of social dancing.

Competition ballroom dance has tended to sanitise the variety of improvisation causing much of the older social side and fun for which this dance genre was famed - in being lost.

Likewise other contemporary categories such as Rock n Roll, Latin American and Salsa or even American Square Dancing, have become so regulated and mechanical during periods of revival (I could say the same of modern bush dancing) that they have also become sanitised. Adoption of flamboyant dress (almost a uniform) seems part and parcel of revivals again aligning more with the competition dance scene.

Overall, social dancing should be fun and with a certain amount of free expression, providing it’s to the benefit and not the detriment of the partner or the group.

In social dancing and particularly in the Australian tradition, there was no such thing as “dancers’ dances!” (This has developed within the contemporary folk dance circuit and could be conceived as snobbish and exclusive and it is quite alienated from that of the mainstream

tradition). This is not to say that the good dancers shouldn't be able to conduct a special dance for their enjoyment in which workshopping and teaching is not required as distinct from a basic beginners' dance which will often require considerable assistance in instruction and leading the dances with experienced head couples. At regular balls and dances in both town and country however most people have had some basic learning of the social dances of the period and there would never be any restriction on taking to the floor for a dance and if uncertain, they can simply follow a better dancer as 'birds in a flock'. It would be unheard of in these situations for any dances to be workshopped or walked through, but of course any sets would be 'called'.

Colonial dancing in Australia is specifically that of the social dances introduced and developed from the era of settlement in 1788 to nationhood with Federation in January 1st 1901. **Heritage dances** include the *favourites* from this period along with other cherished dances that have either been popular at Old Time dances or that have been collected as dances developed by the folk process from both genres. Competition or invented folk style dances cannot fall into this category until at least they've run a period of time and popularity to be accepted into general Australian culture. That's the nature of folk dance after all.

A tremendous social aspect of dancing was of paramount importance in pioneering Colonial Australia and more so 'in the bush' as distinct from 'society' of the upper classes. The 1970s revival of '**bush dancing**' is extremely social but is a city based whim from British, Irish and European folk dance sources rather than any real connection with the Colonial or Old Time era in the bush. Its wide popularity over the course of time in mainstream culture since the 70s places it well within Australian heritage however; it is simply the classification which is at odds with the name. That which now predominates within the clubs as 'bush dance' is more from the competition and invented folk style dance arena and from other world traditions. It requires extensive workshopping between each dance and hardly qualifies as social dance if programmed at a ball for example. *New Vogue Folk Dance* would be a better term as it parallels in the same way in which New Vogue sequence dancing took over and caused the neutering of a once vibrant and social old time dance scene in which all communities and ages participated.

That is not to say occasional new dances should not be included for interest or variety, it's a matter of balance. There are many dance clubs for the elderly based on the new vogue style and this gives them much pleasure because age and arthritis generally prohibits them from participating in the real old lively dances of their youth.

The Master of Ceremonies (MC)

The once traditional dance MC always programmed for the majority of the attendants and would ensure a more challenging or advanced dance was alternated with a simple dance for all, that lively dances alternated with gentler forms, that time signatures were mixed particularly between couple dances and that formations and time signature differed between the various sets -

longways, circular, quadrille; or reel, waltz, polka, Schottische or barn dance, two step, jig, mazurka etc.

The MC ensured there were no 'wallflowers', and encouraged regular change of partners and would lead off the couple dances so that all knew the district version to be followed, as in Rome and all commenced in step with the music following the introduction. The MC also announced 'thank you' or 'seats please' at the end of each dance so people would be clear it had finished and could escort partners to their seats.

Bands and musicians followed the MCs direction at all times as he or she would have considerable experience and knowledge - basically a community figure of esteem that was revered within the district by the circle of dancing patrons as well as by the dance musicians.

A caller might be the MC or another experienced dancer and would 'call to the crowd' regardless of timing if required to allow novices to catch up; the musicians followed and could add or cut short music or bars if necessary, and only stopped when the caller indicated that the figure had finished (by a single clap of the hands a bar or so ahead, while eye balling the lead musician). Even if the caller made a mistake, the dancers and musicians were expected to follow, as that way everything held together. To indicate the caller was wrong could cause utmost confusion, as it may be the dancer that was wrong. Thus to prevent disaster only the caller can rightfully hold it together and catch up on mistakes.

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Harry McQueen of Castlemaine once made the point, you might have a poor or inexperienced group of musicians, but a good MC would make a good night of it. A poor MC (rare) would mean a dull dance, no matter how good the band.