

# MEET THE BAND

What makes Argentine tango music unique? What does the clave do in salsa? And what are the qualities of a good bandleader? **Geny Caloisi** meets musicians who play for you on the dancefloor and gets some answers

## *Slow slow quick quick slow*

### **Dance styles: Ballroom and Latin**

Old-style charm and grace are words that spring to mind regarding bandleader Ross Mitchell, who first started playing for ballroom dancers at competitions 30 years ago. The core of his band has remained the same since.

Ross started his career at the age of 18, working with a trio in Norwich for Mecca Dancing. "This was a long time ago – 50 years have passed since then," he says, adding: "I stayed with Mecca as a resident bandleader for 25 years playing in many of their ballrooms in towns and cities all over the UK, with the band steadily growing in size.

"Mecca eventually moved me to London where we played at various venues including The Mayfair, Hammersmith Palais and The Empire in Leicester Square. All these ballrooms have long ceased to exist, either being pulled down or put to other uses."

As these dancing havens for ballroom and Latin have gradually disappeared, Ross has had to find new ways to continue doing what he loves. "When I left Mecca I basically went 'on the road' as a touring band, which is

still what I do now, playing one night stands all over the UK and many countries of the world."

For special occasions, such as the International Championships, Ross has, in fact, two bands. One is the Ross Mitchell, His Band and Singers which, at its largest, features four vocalists. "This is also my road band in different forms and different sizes, from

every January in Bournemouth for the United Kingdom Open Championships. Both the bands are involved in both these competitions, but play either on different days or at different times."

Ross comments: "The tempos and rhythms of the bands are the same, but the sounds are completely different, the Dance and Listen Orchestra being more

suited to ballroom music and Ross Mitchell, His Band and Singers being more suited to Latin. Some nights, however, both bands play both formats.

However, travelling with the whole company all the time is not always possible – and does not fit every budget. "I often work with just a five- or six-piece: just myself, a female singer, keyboards, bass and drums; this size is especially suited to tea dances and small dance school balls," says Ross.

A bandleader's life requires meticulous planning: "I judge what I think the dancers require and adjust the programme accordingly on the night; this is part of the art of being a bandleader playing what the public requires and making any changes appear seamless."

[www.rossmitchellband.com](http://www.rossmitchellband.com)



Ross Mitchell (far right) with members of his band

a five-piece up to an 18-piece."

The other band is Ross Mitchell's Dance and Listen Orchestra, a full, conventional big band of 22 pieces, including four trumpets, four trombones, five saxophones, a six-piece rhythm section, a male singer and a female singer. Says Ross: "This band only plays at the Royal Albert Hall every October for the International Championships and

## The heart of tango is a squeezebox

### Dance styles: Argentine tango, milonga and waltz

Tango is “a feeling that you dance”, say most tangueros, but dancing to a live tango band is not always the easiest task, owing to the creative fluidity of the genre and the variations in the music – though it is most enjoyable.

Tango has three core rhythms: tango, milonga and waltz. In social dancing these are arranged in sets of three or four songs or “tandas”, separated by a short piece of a different sort of music. This is done so that dancers know that for the duration of the tanda they will be dancing to one rhythm.

Los Mareados, a British quintet that has mastered the art of playing for dancers, was founded over ten years ago in London, as a trio, founded by violinist Aleksander Kolkowski and accordionist Ian Hill.

Bandleader Ian says that tango chose him and not the other way round. “I was playing

accordion at the time, mostly for east European folk music. I had started learning to dance tango, so one evening I went to an Astor Piazzolla concert. That was when my life changed. Here was a sophisticated urban dance form that had a ‘squeezebox’ at its heart. That was the starting point for me.”



Los Mareados

Although the musicians, who play piano, double bass, violin and, of course, the bandoneón, are British, the band's vocals are Argentinian, with Guillermo Rozenthuler or Corina Piatti on the microphone. Says Ian: “The bandoneón is the iconic sound of tango, but really it's the musical

form itself, the typical rhythm structures, the lack of percussion elements, the references to the orchestral canon as well as Italian folk traditions that make tango.”

Los Mareados play in theatres and have released a CD, but their reputation has been built on a passionate commitment to being a great dance band. Singer

Guillermo notes that the tandas are key when the band plays for dancers. Ian agrees that there is a big difference between playing at a milonga (social dance) and at a concert.

“Dancers require a different repertoire. Obviously every piece needs to be danceable. The

speed is important – not too many over-dramatic pauses for instance. Even when there are well-known, traditional pieces, we are always conscious of whether we are playing it for dancers or concert-goers.”

[www.losmareados.co.uk](http://www.losmareados.co.uk)

**“Tango has three core rhythms: tango, milonga and waltz”**

## It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing

### Dance styles: Lindy hop and all things swing

The swing era was all about dancing and without dancing there would not have been swing. Ronnie Scott's Rejects (RSR) specialise in swing music for lindy hop events and have been delighting dancers since the early 1990s.

Bandleader Niall Oates recalls, “The band formed in Canterbury in 1989 and could often be spotted busking outside the Reject China shop opposite Canterbury Cathedral. It wasn't until the band were refused admission to Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in Soho, due to their underage looks, that they adopted the name ‘Ronnie Scott's Rejects’. Having a keen interest in 1930s and 1940s music the band auditioned for Simon Selmon's iconic swing dance night at the 100 Club on Oxford Street where it started playing.”

The band performs as a five-piece or six-piece, with lead female vocals, piano, double bass, drums, saxophone and

trumpet. “There are many ways to play swing suitable for dancers,” says Niall “The feel has to be ‘swing’ or what musicians know as a dotted rhythm. Playing a straight rhythm, such as those heard in Latin and rock, would be difficult for swing dancers.



Ronnie Scott's Rejects

“A strong ‘four beats to the bar’ simple bass-line is always helpful though, as this shows where the phrasing begins, which is beneficial for executing a lindy turn on the dancefloor. Whilst there is musical freedom within the band, swing dancers like the

music to be uncomplicated – ie not too jazzy and no lengthy solos!

“A swing band's rhythm section usually consists of piano or guitar, double bass, drums and the remaining musicians can be made up of saxophones, trumpets, trombones, clarinets and violin.

It's always good to have a singer in the band, although not necessary.”

The band's cover of Etta James's hit ‘I Just Want to Make Love To You’ is a favourite at dance events, with Hazel Holder's vocal delivery and Niall's baritone saxophone solo.

Niall concludes, “A lot of work goes into putting on an event with regards to song choices, travel, setting up sound equipment, sound checking,

rehearsals and so on, but everything culminates in two sets of pure fun on the night! Filling the dancefloor is definitely the band's favourite part of the job.”

[www.romniscottsjazz.com](http://www.romniscottsjazz.com)

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## The clave is key

### Dance styles: Salsa

What can be better to ward off the April blues and give us a bit of a Caribbean feel than salsa? Energy and passion are the elements mixed in the Salseology lab.

Darius Johnson, the bandleader, says Salseology has been built piece by piece to be "the ultimate dance partner".

The two-year-old band has 12 artists, a mix of Latin, European and American musicians: three singers, two trumpets, two trombones, bongos, timbales, congas, piano and bass.

Darius says: "Salsa music is meant for dancing. That means Salseology doesn't play neverending

songs. Instead, the band produces authentic, high-energy salsa played passionately with the dancer and music lover in mind. If you love salsa, you won't be able to resist the pulse and swing of Salseology. If you don't yet love salsa, you will after you encounter the unstoppable energy that we bring."

The band was created specifically to play old-school salsa. The music is rhythmically centred on the clave, a percussive instrument typically made of wood. The uniqueness of the genre comes from the complex, syncopated rhythm and the music's high energy.



Salseology

fans have started referring to our style as the London salsa sound.

"Our favourite moments are always the moments when we can feel the audience enjoying our music and sending us positive energy from the dancefloor," concludes Darius. The band's signature tunes are covers of

"Indestructible" by Ray Barretto, "Esa Mujer" by Tony Vega and "Ahora Si" by Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

The band has a busy schedule touring around the UK, but is particularly excited about releasing its first album this year, which will feature a collection of its own songs and new

versions of a couple of classics. Bringing the music even closer to dancers, Salseology will also be pairing up with *Dance Today* writer and author of *Find the Rhythm*, Lee Knights, to create a high-octane blend of live salsa music with dance lessons.

[www.salseology.com](http://www.salseology.com)

"What makes the band so successful is that we know who we are," emphasises Darius "We aren't a group of musicians grasping at every possible opportunity to play any type of Latin music. We play salsa, and we work very hard to be the absolute best at it. We have such a distinct presence and energy that our

**"We play salsa, and we work very hard to be the absolute best at it"**

## Travel in time with the Kings Cross Hot Club

### Dance styles: Swing, Latin and waltz

Regulars at the Seven Dials Club in Covent Garden, the Kings Cross Hot Club (KCHC) transport listeners and dancers to 1930s Paris with its gypsy jazz and Latin sounds.

The leader of the band, Bruce Beach, founded it 15 years ago and he says invaluable talent has accompanied him. The band comprises a female vocalist accompanied by guitar, violin, tuba, accordion, piano, clarinet, trumpet and, occasionally, a percussion kit. There is collective of about a dozen musicians.

From this, an average of five musicians get together at a typical gig, where a line-up might consist of vocals, two guitars, tuba and clarinet.

Lead guitar David Ahmed explains: "The KCHC has been around for many years and

the current band has grown out of the core group through many jams and experiments. There are bands within the band, but ultimately we all play swing in the style of a bunch of unique individuals or misfits."



Kings Cross Hot Club

David fell in love with the genre watching a documentary, *Django's Legacy*, which introduced him to the style of gypsy jazz and, ultimately, more mainstream swing and jazz styles. The KCHC rhythms encourage dancers to

try new styles. Although when they started playing in Covent Garden a year ago, swing dancers predominated on the floor, today the band doesn't shy away from waltzes or Latin songs.

David notes: "What makes

us unique for swing music are our gypsy-style guitars, which take the place of any percussion."

The band's signature tunes are "Gypsy Fire" from the gypsy jazz repertoire, "Sweet Sue" from the swing canon and "Sous le ciel de Paris", which is a Parisian waltz.

With the KCHC playing, dimmed lights

and couples on the dancefloor, it could be Paris 1930! The only thing missing, luckily, is the cigarette smoke! ●

[www.kingcrosshotclub.com](http://www.kingcrosshotclub.com)

**"We all play swing in the style of a bunch of unique individuals or misfits"**