

YOU GOT THE LOOK, NOW LEARN THE MOVES

Geny Caloisi explores the relationship between vintage dance and vintage styling



Photograph © Carole Edrich

With vintage beauty parlours mushrooming at dance events, numerous repro designers offering retro-style clothing for dancers and the profusion of revival events with live bands and lindy around the UK, one cannot help but wonder

about the relationship between dance and vintage styling.

Let's face it: the glamour of the past is alluring, particularly in straitened times. Londoners need no excuse to shake off the mothballs from granddad's suit, but there are plenty out there

– from the London Bicycle Tweed Run, held every spring, or the Chap Olympiad in the summer.

Elsewhere in the UK fashion and dance come together at the Goodwood Revival and Twinwood. The dance styles where the fusion of dance and fashion are most predominant are those originating from the 1920s to 1950s. But what comes first, the dancing or the dressing up?

This summer, one of the most hotly anticipated movies, Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*, seems to have rekindled our love for the 1920s, and dance was, of course, an intrinsic part of that era. In fact, talking to diehard vintage fashionistas and dancers, we find that movies are top of the list on influences for getting the look and the moves.

Kate Woodiwiss, a plastic artist, vintage clothes model and dancer, explains: "I grew up obsessed with movies of the 1940s and 1950s, and the femmes fatales and glamour of the women on screen influenced my dress sense from a very early age.

"I was probably about 15 when I first consciously wanted to emulate the look of those films. I also was lucky to grow up listening to all kinds of music, including R&B, jump jive, rock 'n' roll, jazz and blues, so the movies, the fashions and the music came first for me. Then, when I moved to London 21 years ago, I discovered places where the music and dancing existed... the rest, as they say, is history."

The flicks also influenced Natasha Hall from an early age. Natasha teaches lindy hop and collegiate shag, as well as owning a vintage beauty company called

Pretty Me Vintage. "My dad is an actor, and he loved the old classics," she says. "I grew up dreaming of dancing like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire."

Her dance partner, Paul Crook, was attracted to the dance through the music, which also resulted in him adopting the clothing. Yes, the vintage trend is not reserved to women. Men can be meticulous about it too. Dancing in heavy, old-style suits is only for the brave, but there are people who do and look great doing it too.

With his elegant crowbar moustache, Russell Nash points out: "The vintage scene has lots of crossover with dancers. In my experience, more with swing dancing than with ballroom."

Aside from running menswear history tours in London, Russell dances with his beautiful wife at many events. He expands: "For us, the dancing came first, the clothes and music came afterwards. We started with ballroom dancing, learning the International ISTD styles and did our medal tests with Stardust Ballroom about five years ago.

"Shortly afterwards we got into the vintage scene completely separately. There we met lots of people who danced lindy hop and were into 1930s to 1950s music. There is very little crossover between the two; ballroom is a pretty insular world."

Originally from New Zealand but now living in London, Shona van Beers, owner of Heyday Vintage Style online clothes store, also started dancing but once hooked, she had to go all the way. "I learned jazz and ballet when I was young

and then went with my mother to rock 'n' roll lessons when I was 15.

"She wanted to learn because she missed out the first time around, and I liked the look of it too – I was personally inspired by the movie *Dirty Dancing*, but being so young my mother wouldn't let me go to salsa lessons. And then, of course, I needed the outfits to compete in, so I started making 1950s-style clothing for myself."

Shona and Russell point out that getting into an era goes beyond the movies, dressing up and partner dancing. Vintage car shows, steam trains, re-enactments and tea dances are also good entry points.

Alice Wooding, organiser at Twinwood Events, says, "The fashion does not influence dancing to a great extent, but the dancing influences the fashion to a very large extent. If you love to jive, you'll buy 1950s clothes, and if you love to lindy hop you'll buy 1940s clothes."

Whether the steps or the clothes come first seems to depend on the individual. But if you like the fashion of the 1930s to the 1950s, lindy hop, swing and balboa might appeal. As Russell says, "Those who dress the part first tend to learn to dance because it is another great way to enjoy the period."

According to Kate, the last decade has seen a resurgence of 1940s and 1950s fashions and, for those who like wearing them, dancing provides an opportunity to make new friends. "The dances of this era are partner dances, and people enjoy that sense of community, the energy, feeling and interaction."

The definition of vintage is that it has to be over 50 years old. Everyone I spoke to dresses vintage full-time, but their clothes are not exclusively "old". Fabric ages, and tearing a unique costume on the dancefloor might not be the best way of ending a night, so repro alternatives are also popular.

There are many regular events in London and beyond, where the clothes, music and dance are all part of the experience, such as the Black Cotton Club, Phoenix Dance or Palais de Danse. Then there are Bourne and Hollingsworth events, which are aimed at non-dancers but are hugely popular and introduce young people to the music and styles of the period. If you want an excuse to dance and show off your style, revival summer events abound around the UK. There will be one near you – if you can just find the right outfit... ●

For a few ideas, try...

- www.bandhgroup.com
- www.facebook.com/PhoenixDanceClub
- www.goodwood.co.uk
- www.ladyluckclub.co.uk
- www.swingdanceuk.com
- www.twinwoodevents.com
- www.vintagefestival.co.uk
- www.volupte-lounge.com



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