

Linedanceing - How Did We Begin?

A number of authors have tried to trace the historic roots of line dancing and, though they seldom agree, most seem to be of the opinion that, 'line dancing in one form or another has been around since recorded time.'

Some accounts attribute the birth of line dancing to the old prison chain gangs where convicts were hobbled together in two's - allegedly the source of the two count 'Merengue' dance, whilst others, like Californian Rick Bowen, believe that it 'evolved from the old 'Contra' dances that were very popular in the New England States from the early 1800's.' He added 'Contra style dances are still popular but in a slightly different form. In the 1800's two lines would form, men on one side, women on the other. The partners would join between the two lines and generally do their own routine down the middle. When they reached the end of the lines, they parted and moved back into their respective lines and the next couple would begin.'

Rick argues that dances like the JR Hustle, dating back to 1980, & The Travelling Four Corners, which were choreographed by Texan (Miss) Jimmie Ruth White owed their existence to 'Square Dancing'. Indeed, 'The Travelling Four Corners is, in its original form, a quad dance (square) but choreographed in the general concept of the line dance.' In fact he goes further by suggesting that line dance is, just like the USA, a melting pot of cultures and dance forms, 'Until recently, the most common move in line dances was the basic Schottische; step, cross, step, lift (or scoot). This, followed by the Polka and the Cha Cha, both of which play a large part in the composition of the line dance. More recently, still, syncopations of the style normally found in West Coast Swing have made a large imprint on the line dance choreography.'

Bowen is supported in this view by another US line dance choreographer, Fred Rapoport, who suggests that one of the most popular country dances of all time, the Texas Two Step, was created by frustrated military cadets passing through West Point's Military academy in the 1850's. This unusual link, he argues, provided a seminal influence in the birth of line dancing, 'Custer, along with Grant, Robert E. Lee, William Sherman, and other great Civil War generals were all young students at the United States Military Academy at this time...These future heroes might allow their hand to slip down the back of their dance partner, or an underarm turn might be executed without removing the hand from the lady's back, and allowed it to slide to her front...The story evolves into a direct order from the Commander of West Point. 'All cadets, while dancing with young ladies at formal functions, will now place their right hand on the lady's shoulder, and not on her back.' The 'Traditional' !

Texas Two Step is therefore done with the man's right hand on the woman's left shoulder.'

The Texas Two Step's longevity is amazing. Over a hundred years later it was to feature in the John Travolta film 'Urban Cowboy' and this urbanisation of country music in the 1980's, originated by Willie Nelson's 1975 crossover hit of the same name was instrumental in lifting Country music and dance to a new plateau in the USA. Quickly followed by the movie 'Nine to Five' and Dolly Parton's song of the same name - Dolly's music was to spawn a clutch of the earlier line dances such as Melanie Greenwood's 'Romeo' - saw Hollywood film productions catapult Country dance out of the dance halls of rural America and into the mainstream. It could be argued that this enabled the clutch of 'New Country' artists such as Garth Brooks, Randy Travis, Reba McEntire, George Strait, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Alabama to emerge resulting in the confirmation that the C&W music genre, after a barren period, was once again America's Number one music choice.

In the early 1980's, in a ballroom in Nashville, Jim Ferrazanno, in company with Melanie Greenwood and a band that refused to play any country, were about to establish a line dancing legend - Tush Push.

As Jim recalled, 'They were playing an awful lot of Cha-Chas when I wrote it. A lot of people have put in hip bumps since then but originally they were pelvic thrusts.' Jim scribbled his first line dance on a napkin kindly provided by the management and showed it to Melanie who promptly got up with him and began dancing the new creation. Other dancers took to the floor and the legend of the 'Tush Push' was born. This, like 'Electric Slide', 'One Step Forward' and other dances of that era, were to play a pivotal role in boosting the profile of line dancing but the real breakthrough was to come a decade later when 'New Country' & 'line dance' were paired together successfully for the first time.

Whilst Garth Brooks proved instrumental in reviving the flagging fortunes of Country Music his compatriot Billy Ray Cyrus, ably assisted by Melanie Greenwood, must be credited for the quantum leap forward that line dancing was to take in the 1990's. Not only was the track 'Achy Breaky Heart' a phenomenal recording success, spawning a new breed of country music fans referred to as the 'Cyrus Virus', but Melanie's 32 count, four wall dance of the same name was to catapult line dancing into the international limelight, it is why, as we approach the millennium, line dancing has reached almost every point of the globe.

A comprehensive and truly international body of choreographic work has been built up over the past decade and many experimental concepts have been added, hip and body rolls and techno-pop to name a few, though strangely enough, in Britain at least, we have seen much 'retrospective' re-introduction of older dances during the recent past.

Whilst the future direction of line dancing may be subject to change there is no doubt that not only it has earned its place as a legitimate form of Western dance but it has ensured that many of us will be 'pushing our tushes' for many years to come.

Short note about the author

A Walker - [Linedancecompany.com](http://linedancecompany.com) dedicated to promoting all forms of linedance and dancing in general, extensive information, articles and resources regarding linedance - <http://linedancecompany.com/>

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