

A PASSION FOR FASHION

Marianka Swain examines the good, the bad and the bedazzled of dancewear through the ages

What do most people think of when you say the words “dance fashion”? I’ve conducted a highly scientific experiment (and/or thrown a question out to the Twitterverse), and I’ve concluded that for those outside the ballroom bubble, pop-culture icons most readily spring to mind: era-defining *Fame* and *Flashdance*’s leotards and legwarmers, Michael Jackson’s taste in gloves, or either of the *Strictly* phenomena, packed with fake-tanned, feathered and sequined die-hard extroverts.

It may be a tad frustrating that such extremes represent an industry which also exemplifies

athleticism, dedication, emotional connection and, at times, subtlety and cultural sensitivity, but social

perception and dance attire have always been inextricably linked, explains fashion historian Caroline Barton. “While some dances grew out of long-established cultural norms, such as courtship rituals, competition, celebration or prayer, others were a form of rebellion – and the dress reflects that.

“We may think of some of these styles as conservative, particularly the older ballroom dances, but you have to compare ➤

Photographs from the Dancing Times collection

TOP FIVE BEST DRESSED

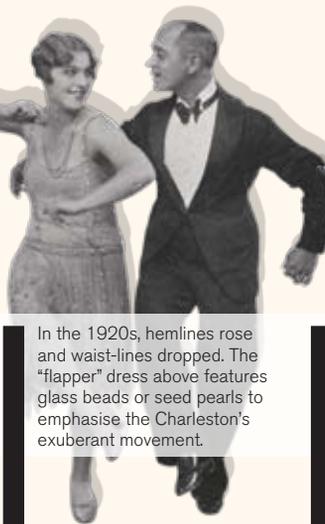
5. Most competitive dancewear dates quickly, but Donnie Burns and Gaynor Fairweather’s combination of sexy and spectacular still impresses.
4. Michael Jackson is the ultimate “Smooth Criminal”, both tough and stylish.
3. Cyd Charisse in *The Band Wagon* is a sizzling seductress in scarlet. “It’s still instantly recognisable,” notes reader Kate Jefferson.
2. *Dirty Dancing*’s Johnny and Baby triumph in simple but flattering outfits, proving that sometimes chemistry tops crystals.
1. Similarly, Fran’s authentic paso dress and natural styling puts her OTT *Strictly Ballroom* competitors to shame.

1910s



Demonstrating a hold in the Boston in 1912, Suzette wears an empire-line gown, a feather headdress and gloves. In 1913, the tango arrived, bringing with it more risqué dancewear.

1920s



In the 1920s, hemlines rose and waist-lines dropped. The “flapper” dress above features glass beads or seed pearls to emphasise the Charleston’s exuberant movement.

1930s



Doris Lavelle (dancing here with Pierre) wears a bias-cut satin ballgown. Her move is inspired by Ginger Rogers in *Roberta*. Rogers had a huge impact on fashion in dresses designed for dancing.

1940s



At the end of the 1940s Dior’s “New Look” became extremely popular, its full-skirted silhouette influencing fashion and other designers.

"VIENNESE WALTZ WAS CONSIDERED SCANDALOUSLY SENSUAL, WITH ITS INTIMATE CONTACT BETWEEN TWO UNCHAPERONED PEOPLE AND EXTRAORDINARILY VIGOROUS MOVEMENT. THERE WAS NO CONCEPT OF 'DANCEWEAR' DISTINCT FROM USUAL DRESS AT THE TIME..."

them with the social norms of the time. Viennese waltz was considered scandalously sensual, with its intimate contact between two unchaperoned people and extraordinarily vigorous movement.

"There was no concept of 'dancewear' distinct from usual dress at the time, but this is an early example of dance dictating alternations to fashion, and then fashion returning the favour." Early waltzers were subject to the restrictions of formal dress – and if you think it's difficult making it through a Viennese track now

without collapsing in a heap, try to imagine doing it with such impediments as a tight-fitting bodice or a sash weighed down with a cumbersome sword.

"In some ways, such dances were conformist – the strong man leading the pliant woman – but they also challenged conventional wisdom," notes Caroline.

"The woman had to demonstrate as much physical fitness and endurance as the man, which led to questioning of such constrictive clothing and emphasis on female frailty. Over time, the creation of more

energetic and creative styles contributed to more variation in dress in order to match the movement and feel of the dances and suit the dancers' needs. That influenced wider fashion, which in turn arguably contributed to social reform and evolution."

During the 20th century, dancewear continued to both dictate and reflect wider changes, from more provocative and exotic costumes to the blurring of traditional gender roles. The relationship between dance fashion and mainstream fashion also stayed strong, observes designer Helen Conrad: "There's always been a big crossover, with dancewear creators taking inspiration from fashion icons like Coco Chanel or from street style, films and TV, music videos and so on. And you see that reversed – I fully admit to sporting a *Fame* headband and legwarmers when I was nowhere near a dance studio...

TOP FIVE FASHION DISAAAAHSTERS

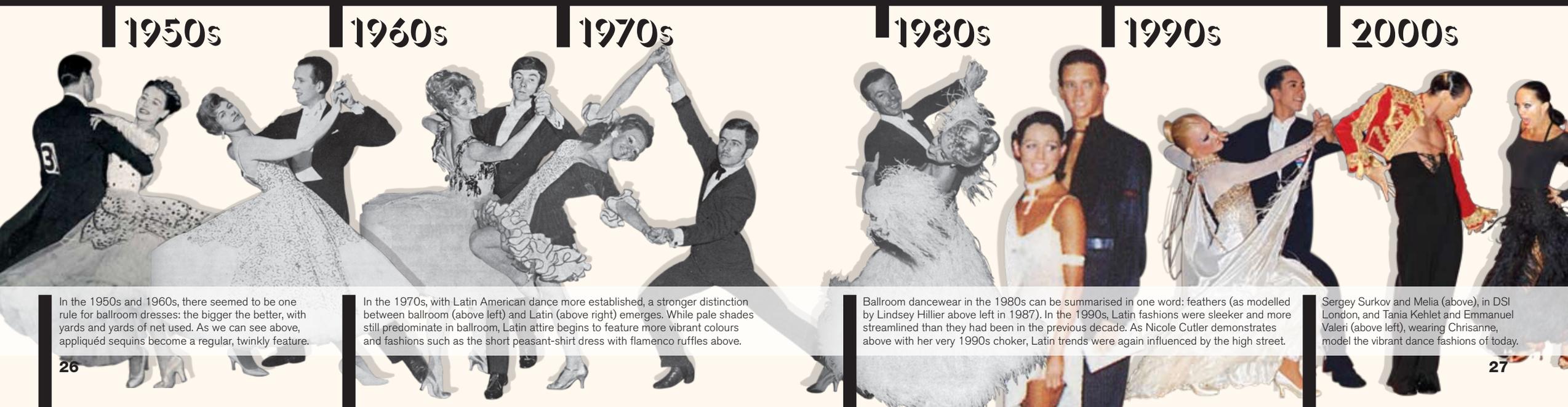
5. It's cruel to judge clothes from another era. Right? Right. But we might make an exception to this rule when it comes to some of the 1980s Latin fashions – high waists, leg-of-mutton sleeves and shoulder pads galore. Yikes!
4. Stanley Tucci goes cheese-tastic in *Shall We Dance?* including fright wig and false teeth.
3. Janet Jackson popularised alternative dance styles, but also, tragically, such unfortunate items as "ironic" blazers and garishly patterned waistcoats. "She led us all astray," moans reader Jane Doe*. (*Name changed to protect the innocent.)
2. Really, all five could be entrants from the original *Strictly* – Baz Luhrmann skewers the worst of dance fashion so brilliantly. Liz's astonishing canary explosion at the Pan Pacific Grand Prix Championship still burns brightly in the memory...
1. But the number-one eyesore has to be bogo pogo-enthusiast Wayne's sleeves.

"Today, lots of people want 'normal' clothes inspired by dancewear, because the construction gives you security, comfort, range of movement and a flattering silhouette, as well

as making a major statement if you go for all the trimmings!" However, the most recent trend in competition-wear is for a more subtle approach – at least, as subtle as you can

be while battling to catch a judge's eye. "When Chrisanne was established in 1986, most standard dresses used 8–16 metres of feather boas to give the skirt volume," says marketing executive Shailini Parmar. Today, dancers are more likely to take advantage of an expanded range of colours in fabric and crystals and stick to a slim-line skirt, better suiting ballroom's increasingly athletic movement.

Gerald Schwanzer, the managing director of DSI London, agrees that's it's all about quality. "It's a no-no to try to cut corners with inferior fabric as the dresses will then lack the vital movement, outline and fluidity that is essential. We're unbelievably lucky to be able to design for Professional Latin stars Sergey and Melia – they are such an exciting couple on the dancefloor that it gives our design team the opportunity to translate that freedom of expression into some truly outstanding costumes. ➤



1950s

1960s

1970s

1980s

1990s

2000s

In the 1950s and 1960s, there seemed to be one rule for ballroom dresses: the bigger the better, with yards and yards of net used. As we can see above, appliquéd sequins become a regular, twinkly feature.

In the 1970s, with Latin American dance more established, a stronger distinction between ballroom (above left) and Latin (above right) emerges. While pale shades still predominate in ballroom, Latin attire begins to feature more vibrant colours and fashions such as the short peasant-shirt dress with flamenco ruffles above.

Ballroom dancewear in the 1980s can be summarised in one word: feathers (as modelled by Lindsey Hillier above left in 1987). In the 1990s, Latin fashions were sleeker and more streamlined than they had been in the previous decade. As Nicole Cutler demonstrates above with her very 1990s choker, Latin trends were again influenced by the high street.

Sergey Surkov and Melia (above), in DSI London, and Tania Kehlet and Emmanuel Valeri (above left), wearing Chrisanne, model the vibrant dance fashions of today.

"Sergey has been responsible for a whole new level of interest in what the *male* dancer wears too – he has really liberated thinking on that side of design and it's fantastic to see that development; it's about time the boys had some of the glory!"

Shailini notes that Latin dress, which grew progressively more daring over the years, has undergone something of a reversal, with dancers requesting longer skirts and more coverage. Instead of showing skin, they prefer "decorative features such as heavier stoning patterns" – again, more suitable for adventurous movement, but also perhaps showing that flesh has lost its shock value.

"THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN A BIG CROSSOVER, WITH DANCEWEAR CREATORS TAKING INSPIRATION FROM FASHION ICONS LIKE COCO CHANEL OR FROM STREET STYLE, FILMS AND TV... AND YOU SEE THAT REVERSED – I FULLY ADMIT TO SPORTING A FAME HEADBAND AND LEGWARMERS WHEN I WAS NOWHERE NEAR A DANCE STUDIO..."

Instead, designers keep an eye on catwalk and high street trends that might bring a new dimension to their work without impeding the dancers, such as bold prints or pleating.

Most important, fashion should reflect the wearer, believes Helen: "Dance is a wonderful means of self-expression, and so is

dancewear – that's why it's often popular among non-dancers as well. You can live out a fantasy, from chivalric or dramatic to flirtatious or flamboyant, and you can broadcast who you truly are. The best dance fashion is basically a dressing-up box for adults, offering a never-ending range of fabulous possibilities." ●

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