

The standard ten no longer reign supreme on *Strictly Come Dancing*. Over the years, we've seen very successful additions (Argentine tango, Charleston), fairly successful (salsa, swing, lindy hop) and... forgettable (rock 'n' roll). Should the ballroom world follow suit and open its doors to new styles?

"The growth of competitions among these dances suggests it could work," believes ballroom coach Angela Bryant. "It's no longer as simple as the standard ten have set rules and thus work in competition and dances like lindy hop are too free-wheeling. Yes, we do have a strict curriculum in ballroom, but that doesn't mean there isn't diversity and creativity; likewise, you can agree on certain criteria for judging the alternative dances."

However, reining them in might not prove popular, notes Joseph Sewell, founder of JiveSwing: "When I was first invited to a dance class, I said 'No way', because I had a vision of the original *Come Dancing*. It wasn't until I experienced lindy hop that I got hooked – this great community, and the combination of vintage clothes and music with something cool and new."

"JiveSwing classes keep that same welcoming, liberating vibe. Whenever I travel to other countries, I love experiencing different dances and being open to new inspirations, so it's great when people come to JiveSwing with that openness." In contrast, Joseph was put off by ballroom: "I didn't like that most students come to class with a partner, dance only with them and just do their set moves – and it's the same with ballroom competitions."

THE ONES
THAT GOT
AWAY

Dances like the Charleston and lindy hop have a great deal in common with the competition standard ten, notes **Marianka Swain**, so why aren't they included and should they be?



"If you look at swing competitions in the 1940s, people are enjoying each other almost like a social, improvising, showing off in a fun way. The winners are the ones who are most creative and take risks, rather than people who do what's expected."

"The appeal of some of these dances is that it feels like you're doing a different style every week," agrees Darren Royston, dance history specialist, movement coach and artistic director of Nonsuch. "There are books telling you exactly how to move your knees and feet in Charleston, but when you look at archive reviews and photographs, you realise just how many versions there were."

"It began as a revue dance, so people copied what they saw on stage, but then it became a vehicle for self-expression. That shift from mimicking to creating your own version was key to its popularity – learning all the rules and then bending them as far as possible, being rebellious."

"That's why styles like Charleston work so well on *Strictly*. The pros are already bending the ballroom rules – none of those routines would be approved by Victor Silvester! – so dances with fewer set rules, which reward creativity, are perfect for the show."

"It's really a question of whether people would want limitations imposed on those dances," explains Angela. "The standard ten were once evolving alternative styles, but we chose a point at which to establish them as competition dances and essentially curtail some of the exploration. We could do the same with something like swing

by deciding which elements to set as standard – but would swing devotees take umbrage? And would the ballroom establishment welcome the change?"

There are already changes in the swing world, notes Joseph, with a number of competitions springing up over the past ten years, "but it's still very organic. We have Jack and Jill competitions in lindy hop, where you get paired with a random partner, so it's more a test of your social partnering skills, your ability to develop a rapport with someone new and improvise."

"The best thing about lindy is that people are creating new tricks all the time, or putting their own spin on established moves. Unfortunately, we're also seeing the rise of 'YouTube style' – people copying not just other people's moves, but also their style. That's a real shame – these dances are a brilliant way to express your individuality."

Darren adds: "Styles like Charleston are called 'character dances' for a reason, and they work best when you put your stamp on them. Aspects like costume and music are just as important to the experience, because the frills and beads aren't simply pretty, they express the movement and character of the Charleston and how you interpret it. Putting those dances within a larger competitive framework could sacrifice some of that."

"There is a big difference between a technique-focused class and that ritualistic experience, and it's easier to translate the former to a



Victor Silvester and his wife demonstrate quarter turns in "the Swing Step" in 1936

competition floor," agrees Angela. "What we'd need to consider is whether they appeal to different crowds, and whether or not it would be mutually beneficial for standard ten and alternative styles to join forces. I do think the addition of new styles has helped keep *Strictly* fresh, so it could do the same for competitive ballroom."

Joseph admits *Strictly* has helped bring lindy hop to a wider audience, "so I don't mind that

the show ballroom-ises it – if people then watch lindy online or go to a class, that's fantastic. If you love something, you want everyone to know about it.

"We take these styles into schools now and show kids how much street dance originates in those 1930s dances – people doing the moonwalk, spinning on their heads, trying to outdo each other with insane tricks. Their reaction is incredible – I wouldn't trade that for keeping it niche."

"However, I think it's important to have the fun vibe even in competitions, otherwise we might lose that appeal by appearing too stuffy. The age range at our camps used to be forties, fifties; now, it's people in their teens, twenties and thirties. If you want a dance to thrive and survive, you have to appeal to the next generation, and being a bit different from strict ballroom helps us do that."

"We'll never know exactly why some dances were accepted into the fold and others weren't, but it seems to have worked out," observes Angela. "Perhaps we should just trust in that wisdom – or blind chance! – but also take lessons from each other, looking at what works in a social setting, classes, competitions and entertainment. Whether or not we have official affiliations, we're all part of a greater whole, and the more people dancing, the better!" ●

JiveSwing: www.jiveswing.com
Experience swing at the Goodnight Sweetheart camp in February: www.gnsh.co.uk
Nonsuch History and Dance: www.nonsuchdance.co.uk