



Shall we dance?

Successful American franchise Fred Astaire Studios has found its first British affiliate; **Marianka Swain** wonders: will others follow suit?

learning skills like rhythm, footwork and expression, but you do it at your pace," says Jack. "You graduate from each level by taking a test in our Trophy System."

"We recommend a combination of private lessons, group lessons and practice sessions. In group lessons, you build up physical confidence, balance, fitness, control, and basic steps and technique, without relying on your teacher."

"Then you refine those elements in private lessons, mixing patterns, developing musical interpretation. Our practice sessions let you experience more of a real-life situation, so you're comfortable dancing anywhere."

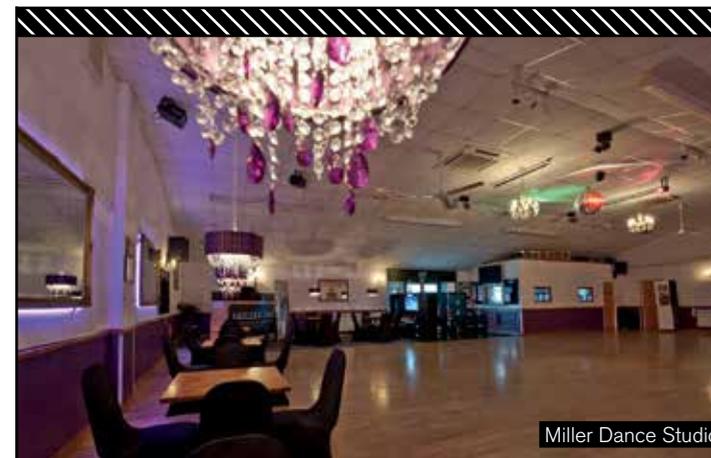
Those practice sessions differ from the UK equivalent, notes teacher Melodie Brannan, who's experienced both. "Teachers are always present at Astaire sessions, which are part of the lesson structure, and they continue to work with their students. If there are loads of women, a male teacher will make sure they're dancing all night. Here, teachers often just watch or aren't around for practices."

The key distinction is that many British dance teachers are freelance, paid per hour at different venues, rather than working at one studio long-term. "We wanted to offer dance professionals a secure, life-long career path," explains Jack. "You might have a strong record in competitions, but what's next?"

The Astaire system offers rigorous training for teachers, not just in the basic syllabus, but addressing specific issues like musicality or dealing with couples,

of lessons that gets them dancing as soon as possible." The Astaire model also gets students on the floor quickly, "which builds confidence," says Jack Rothweiler, president and CEO. The ethos is putting the student first, with a Pro-Am bent – ideal for keen social dancers. The franchise was founded in 1947 by Fred Astaire, a great believer in proper dance training. He established a chain of studios to ensure his techniques would be preserved and passed on to the public. There's a detailed curriculum, taking students from beginner to gold level. "It's tightly constructed,

Sammy Stopford brought them together. A year ago, the Latin legend asked Richard Miller, co-director of Miller Dance Studios in Norwich, if he'd be interested in joining Fred Astaire Studios. "Sammy knew we'd developed a system that transformed the way people learned to dance," explains Richard. "Many come in wanting to try, say, waltz, but that week's class is jive, or it's not the right level or speed. So we started doing consultations with potential students, finding out why they wanted to learn, and designing a programme



Miller Dance Studios

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Richard and Lynn Miller

and also life skills: business and communication. "We have lessons for teachers every day, plus events and activities – it's ongoing development," declares Jack.

"You start off as a newcomer teacher, then you can progress to advanced teacher, dance director, regional dance director, even our National Dance Board. You can also travel to other studios and train their teachers."

Richard's had guidance from an Astaire representative and Melodie and her partner, Brad Adcock, plus constant communication and "a very thorough opening kit! It's been an easy transition".

Melodie came into the Astaire world with dance training, but no experience of ballroom. "They give newcomers fantastic tools, and I learned how to teach different types of students. It's nice having that level of security – set salary, health insurance, really being treated like a professional."

It's a philosophy Richard shares: "We've always run Miller as a proper business. We employ staff full-time, including an office administrator, head teacher and regular teachers; it means you're all fully invested."

The downside of a set system is feeling constrained, confesses Melodie, or giving the American hard sell, "but I'd rather that than the customer service at some studios here, where you walk in and no one acknowledges you. It's scary trying something new, and if people embody the franchise mission statement, it ensures every student has a wonderful experience as part of a community and is taught well."

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"Teaching under the name Fred Astaire, you're honour-bound to excel," states Jack. "Our training system is lengthy, so we want people who are really committed."

That commitment extends to special events, like performance showcases and guest party nights, "where you bring friends along," explains Melodie. "You can also enter Pro-Am competitions – still just for fun, but it gives students and teachers a real goal."

"It would be great to see more Pro-Am here," says Richard. "We hold some dinner dances and showcases, and they've been hugely popular." Pro-Am can involve shelling out a bit more, but it's worth it, believes Jack: "You develop so much faster with a teacher versus someone at your level, and you pick up nuances like the character of each dance."

However, the growth of Pro-Am and Astaire in the UK depends on attitudes towards them.

"There does seem to be a stigma attached," observes Melodie. "I was at the ISTD Conference and mentioned I'd worked at Astaire, and was immediately lambasted by someone who thought it was 'a money-making machine.'"

Richard's reservation was giving up the Miller brand, "but we've found a way to keep our identity while coming under the Astaire umbrella. I'd definitely recommend that to other British studios. The Astaire name is respected worldwide, and it's a brilliant, tried-and-tested system."

The brand has grown rapidly since gaining international rights in 2006, now at 155 studios, with venues in Africa, Lebanon and Hungary. Jack spends a lot



of time travelling – "you have to meet people and understand their way of doing things.

"The issue of autonomy was unexpected, but we understand it now. If studios are passed down through the family, people want to keep that name. We're open to compromise: studios taking on our brand as well as theirs, or gradually evolving into Astaire.

"We're absolutely passionate about getting people on

the dancefloor – it's so good for health and fitness, well-being, expanding your horizons – and we hope our system helps studios thrive and more great teachers inspire their students." ●

To discuss joining the Astaire franchise, get in touch via www.fredastaire.com