

# SWING WHEN YOU'RE WINNING

Our 2015 *Dance Today* Teacher of the Year talks to **Marianka Swain**

“I couldn't believe the joyfulness of it,” says our winning teacher Scott Cupit, recalling his first encounter with lindy hop. “I saw all these people dancing together, and they were just so happy.”

A relative latecomer to dancing, Scott worked in property management and banking in his native Australia before a fateful American backpacking trip in 1997 introduced him to the style that would change his life. “My parents were Baptist missionaries, and I grew up in the church loving everything to do with music – I played saxophone in a big band. When I stumbled across this dance that embodied the music I

adored, I thought ‘This is it!’ “I took a few classes in Washington, but back home in Melbourne, there wasn't much of a lindy scene. One fantastic teacher, Claudia Funder, asked me to be her partner, and together we started Swing Patrol. It covers lots of variations, but my number one is lindy hop.”

Claudia still runs the Australian arm, but in 2009, Scott and three fellow teachers made the courageous decision to move to London. “We were completely naïve about how hard it was to create a presence in a big city. If we had 10 people in a class, it was a good night! I taught seven days a week just to pay rent.

“People say ‘You're so lucky’, but I worked for that luck. I wouldn't go to bed without distributing another 100 flyers. We danced for free at Tube stops, charity events and festivals like Secret Garden Party and Latitude. I always remember those humble origins – it makes what we're doing now so satisfying, having been on that journey.”

Scott's persistence paid off. “During our third year, we went from 300 students to 900. The venues were absolutely rammed – we had to turn people away at the door. The key was a strong retention rate, and people bringing friends along. I was so proud, because it meant we were teaching good

classes and we'd created a really welcoming community.

“We encourage students to say hello to two people they don't know at the start of class, rotate round and stay for a drink afterwards. Our teachers dance with every student. It's a fixed mandate to make it a great night out, not just a class – good technical teaching combined with a lot of fun and laughter.

“Londoners are really busy, so if they're giving up a night, it has to be an awesome experience. And this city can be lonely. It's great to feel part of something and meet new people – without feeling pressured to go home with them! Although I have been to 15 Swing Patrol weddings, and held a few babies...”

The emphasis on community extends to Scott's teaching culture. “Our teachers have to be passionate about swing, happy to interact with



students on social media and go out dancing. I'm a laidback Aussie, so lindy suits my personality, but each teacher has to discover what excites them. We want them to teach in their own way.”

Scott particularly enjoys engaging beginners. One, whose girlfriend dragged him along to Swing Patrol's first ever class, was so enamoured he's since become a teacher. As

for advanced students, “it's a massive challenge coming up with something new every week to keep top students happy”.

Scott coaches one of Swing Patrol's four performance troupes, Brat Pack, along with *Strictly* Charleston choreographer Jenny Thomas. “They're incredible – our future teachers, performers and leaders. We tell them upfront what we expect and make sure they achieve it. There's no point having the most beginners in the world – your school's reputation depends on you also producing really great dancers. But I don't want troupes to become cliques or competition junkies. The number one love has to be social dancing – I don't want a massive division.”



Scott teaching at Wilton's Music Hall and, above, performing at London Swing Festival at Bishopsgate Institute

As well as expanding to 27 venues, Scott has

raised the profile of swing enormously through public appearances, from dancing on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth to *Blue Peter*, *Call the Midwife*, and – last year – *Dragon's Den*. Impressed by his diligent research, recent *Strictly* contestant Deborah Meaden made a phenomenal £65,000 investment. "I'm still working out how to spend it, but we won't be expanding to other cities. I have amazing peers in places like Manchester and Edinburgh – I wouldn't want to step on their toes."

One possible avenue is dance history. "I love telling students anecdotes, explaining why these moves are called what they're called. We've spent a lot of money bringing the most significant people in swing to London." They include Hollywood legend Jean Veloz and Norma Miller, last



surviving member of famed New York group Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. "Students had never heard of her, but they started Googling and watching clips – by the time she arrived, there was a frenzy. That link with the past is part of why lindy is having this resurgence."

Scott is honoured to play a part. "I've had teachers from all around the country shaking my hand, saying

people are coming to classes because they saw me on TV. And there's been such massive buzz about this *Dance Today* win – more 'Likes' on Facebook than when I got married! It means so much to lindy hoppers, because they don't always get the same attention as styles like ballroom.

"I'd love to see lindy continue to grow. It sells itself – fun, energetic and upbeat music – so it's down to good teaching and well-organised promotion. Stay humble, put the dance first, get people into class and make sure they have a great time. Nothing has given me more joy in the past five years than my own community putting me up for this award. The biggest thing isn't winning, but knowing people care enough to do that." ●



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