

Perspiration After Shave LOUD LOUD MUSIC

12.15 a.m. Joe eased himself gingerly out of his car. His thoughts were breached by the resolute tread of feet on the gravel, the cocooned sound of the band, the inescapable smell of chips. An involuntary shiver reminded him of the sharp mid-night air and made the few hours he had spent in the warm conviviality of the pub seem all the more pleasant. There he had drank his customary six or seven shots of Saturday night spirit, played a few games of darts, reminisced and speculated with the lads.

He walked across the car-park, pondering the prospects of the dance ahead. A £2 admission ticket, a nod and a grunt from the doorman and Joe had passed through the inner doors of the ballroom into a wave of heat, a barrage of sound, the dancers clothed in rainbows against the backdrop of flickering lights and revolving wall slides. His senses struggled to adapt. The heat was momentarily pleasant but later on he would become clammy, tired and welcome the cold night air again. Condensation glistened on the walls as the lights flickered hypnotically.

The band was playing a fast set. Stacks of speakers flanked both sides of the stage. The barrage of sound gradually became a recognisable song from the charts. The pulsating throb of the bass guitar and the raucous tone of the singer's voice combined to fuel the gyrations of the dancers. The dancers responded, jerked, twirled, pointed. Some traded hip thrusts with their partners. A few boys headed imaginary footballs. A seventeen year old did the splits while his fingers scratched an imaginary guitar. Others moved sparingly to their own particularly

rhythm, sticking doggedly to their patch, repulsing and redirecting with subtle pushes the trespassing jivers.

The first set finished. The caged bird of conversation unfolded its wings and flew, filling the hall with a babble of voices. Stepping onto the dance floor, Joe sampled its energy, urgency, apprehension. The hall was thronged with happy couples and predatory groups. Girls scurried across the floor to rejoin their natural allies at pre-arranged spots and to describe the events of the previous set. At the sight of a few interested boys champing at the bit, some girls coyly turned sideways, continuing their conversation with an apparently fresh enthusiasm, their nervous fidgeting with earrings and buttons the only betrayal of their real thoughts. An occasional side glance revealed whether or not their feigned show of nonchalance had increased or dispelled the initial attention which had been directed towards them.

Some girls sat along the sides of the hall, genuinely preferring to sit this one out. Others stood in serried ranks awaiting the first notes of music and the onslaught of males that would inevitably follow. The lights stopped flickering and dimmed. The mauve fluorescent lights cast an eerie hue, changing the identifiable into silhouettes, making white shirts and even dandruff resplendent in a sea of uniformity.

The music re-started. Joe strolled towards the side of the hall where the greatest concentration of boys and hence girls appeared to be. Skirting the crowd he caught fleeting glimpses of girls, but he was not tempted,

preferring to measure a few times before making the cut. The flow of jostling males edged its way down the floor and Joe like most others was caught unwittingly; his hands-in-pocket stance which had given him the semblance of being relaxed, now thwarted his efforts to control his own pace or direction. Here and there the phalanx of males was dented as a newly acquainted couple strove to reach a dancing area away from the confusion within, the after-shave and perspiration.

Joe was pushed closer to the lines of girls. He could see them granting or withholding their favour, responding with smiles or cold indifference to the requests to dance. A boy's meat is often a girl's poison, so refusals were numerous. When girls did not yield to the customary "Will ya dance?" or "Wudjagetout?", a more forceful strategy was adopted. The old chestnut, "Did you bring your knitting?" was trotted out to be met with "Your face isn't red from sunshine". Many frank words were exchanged in a variety of languages. One fellow, his face a picture of wounded pride, muttered, "You're like a talkin' ferret, maybe you can tell us where the rabbits are, ha, ha, ha!" It was an epitaph to his feelings, but the purpose of his remark apparently escaped the girl because she smirked triumphantly at her girl friend. The

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whole exercise of asking and being asked to dance seemed to Joe to be a heartless business. Still he would take his chance.

As the first song ended the pushing became more frenzied, although the flow had thinned. Joe managed at last to squirm a path towards a girl he had spotted, "Can I have this dance?" he spluttered. A wavering, a hesitating, as she eyed him clinically; a morale crushing "No" was the answer. He felt like the man with the wart on his nose, that everybody was staring and laughing at him. The girl's vanity seemed insufferable because it had wounded his own. He wanted to say something that would salvage his dignity, but it wouldn't come. He slinked away sheepishly; better a quiet death than a public misfortune. Time would cool, time could clarify. He found an uncrowded spot and faced towards the dancers, half expecting a sea of faces looking in his direction, but no one seemed to have noticed his 'humiliation'. He tried to feel hopeful, but it was like summoning up the smell of roses in a cellar.

Most of the dancers 'walked' in varying degrees of proximity to the slow tempo music; the boys with their arms around the girls' waists, the girls with their arms around the boys' necks, their cigarettes pointed in the air like tiny fireflies. A few couples attempted the more orthodox waltz-style but they had to run the gauntlet of slow-moving couples who impeded their progress like bollards in a traffic-jam. One couple, disciples of the

theory that one should act out a passion before one can feel it, indulged in the business of kissing and hugging. Whether or not their kissing was a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation mark, Joe could not make out, but it was the kind of activity which the couple considered perfectly decent, probably because it kept them from going outside the dance-hall.

The slow set finished; Joe summoned his spirits for another attempt -----

A distraction

The mass production of distraction is now as much a part of our lives as the mass production of cars or washing machines. And there is hardly any distraction, any activity which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations and yet which fails so regularly as dancing. But it is like the measles, we all go through it. Tell a teenager, looking forward to his first dance, that he will become bored with it after a while and she will think you a mischievous liar. He drinks the wine of aspiration and the drug of illusion; life will never be totally dull as long as there is dancing. But every dance becomes the dance before in a duller dress, and the genuinely good dances are like ghosts which everybody talks about and few have seen. But the very thought of going to a dance is a kind of panacea for boredom. In this respect and in others Modern Youth differs little from those of previous generations. There are obvious differences, however, in the pattern of a night's dancing.

Changes

Five or ten years ago, the night out began for most people — especially girls — in the dancehall; now it is more likely to begin in the pub. So, with the dream of a thing in their heads many dancers reach their destination around mid-night. A disco provides the music between 10 p.m. and mid-night for those who shun or are too young for the pub scene or who like the wide open spaces of the ballroom. The band takes the stage at mid-night and finishes at 1.30 a.m. or 2 a.m.

Girls no longer stand or sit along a particular side waiting to be danced, but feel free to choose their own acre. Nor are girls solely dependent on boys for dancing partners. A girlfriend provides the ideal team-mate for fast dances contrasting with the ungainly, leaden-footed attempts of some boys. Years ago, the modesty implied in remaining seated was the surest bait a girl could use in angling for a dance.



Nowadays, there is a better chance of a girl being asked to dance if she is already dancing with her girlfriends. The act of dancing, sets off every talent at a girl's disposal, her looks, figure, personality, movement and particularly her keenness to dance. So, a boy, or more likely two boys, will strike out boldly, fortified with a greater hope of success, to ask two girls who are already dancing than to ask the more sedentary kind. And for a girl there is no longer any feeling of humiliation in passing a night without being asked to dance. She can be in a big noisy crowd, enjoy their company, shun herself and drown the clamour of her thoughts.

"Chatting up"

Dancing for some may be a disinterested commerce between boys and girls, but it is the time-honoured forum for meeting people. Some acquaintances are fleeting ones others bud into relationships, the first faltering steps of an acquaintance still follow the traditional line — "Are you enjoying the dance?" "Do you come here often?" "Do you like the band?" awards for imaginative content, but a more daring approach might mar one's prospects. If the girl agrees to "stay" with the boy for the next dance, he may well have negotiated a Beechers Brook, because the chances are that she will remain with him to the end of the night's dancing. In the olden days, a request to go to the mineral or refreshment bar was usually posted after the second or third dance; Now, because of the brevity of the night, this



part of the proceedings is left until after the last dance. By this time, the home straight is in sight and barring a "Devon Loch" disaster, the girl will agree to be left home or at least she will give the thumbs up to a date in the same hall next week.

So, through the snowstorm of passing generations, dancing has changed but not radically. Young people start dancing at an earlier age — averaging around fourteen years; discos, in some areas, are replacing live entertainment; loyalty to the local dancehall has been replaced by loyalty to a type of music and teenagers will travel long distances to hear their favourite bands; many go to listen, to dance for the sake of dancing and not necessarily to meet people; ties and jackets are the exception rather than the rule; the music is much louder nowadays — "but it is only good when played loud" — so conversational ability rarely gets a chance to break sweat; air-conditioning — formerly ventilation — is still a work of fiction; "Ladies choices" are no longer a feature but girls exercise their right to veto more frequently than before; dancers are less inhibited in their movements, and the belief that a good calf is better than a good head when dancing, still holds true.

For many, dancing was and is the initiation to the combative nature of life. It provides competition, excitement, tension, disappointment, happiness, escapism, and, despite its detractors and begrudgers it offers a fair dose of entertainment.

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