

FEATURES

MONDAY, JULY 27, 2009

PAGE 13



Celebrants gather at a swing dance in New York's Central Park to honor legendary Lindy Hop dancer Frankie Manningo, who died on April 27. PHOTOS: AP

In a cramped basement in central London, two-dozen couples glide, bop and leap around a parquet floor. A few of the men have thin moustaches, waistcoats and two-tone shoes, while some of the women have polka-dot dresses that billow out as they twirl around their partners in a tuck-turn, flat spin or a Texas Tommy. In the background, scratchy records play out trumpets, saxophones and horns in a combination of six-step jazz, blues and swing.

The idea of couples dancing the Lindy Hop seems so dated that you would think this must be a revival night — a once-in-a-while nostalgic hark-back to the 1920s, when Lindy Hop was emerging from the shadow of the mighty Charleston as the dance for the young. But you'd be wrong. Lindy Hop (also known as swing, jive and jitterbug) has been gathering a steady following in the UK for more than a decade, spurred on by the popularity of TV dance shows. All over the country, there are day courses in Lindy Hop, holidays, drop-in classes, club nights, competitions and even a trade in the associated paraphernalia — for men, retro panama hats, suits and spats; and 1940s prom dresses for women.

"When you go out swing dancing, you actually go dancing," says Simon Selmon of the London Swing Dance Society — a Lindy Hopper of more than 20 years. When he first started teaching in the early 1990s, Selmon dreamed of getting 20 people in the class. "Now, we are busier than ever — we're running more events and classes. We're doing more corporate events and we're getting requests from schools, partly because of the health aspects. Teachers also tell me

it's good communication between people and there's teamwork involved."

I started taking Selmon's classes partly out of curiosity, but also because, with seven weddings to attend this year, I thought it would be useful to finally learn how to couple dance. I joined 150 or so beginners for his most popular class, Wild Times, on a Tuesday night. The lesson began with a stroll, which felt a bit like a jazzed-up line dance (I learned later that you should never call it a line dance in front of a Lindy Hopper). Ten minutes later, I was working through the basic footwork: a slow-slow, quick-quick on a six-step count. Then we headed downstairs, where more advanced dancers showed us how to do things properly.

I also tried out a smaller, more intimate class. The 52nd Street Jump, a club based in south London but named after the New York street that's home to such jazz venues as Famous Door and Three Juices, runs 10-week foundation courses to give shy beginners the chance to screw up in front of a smaller bunch of fellow newbies. I asked instructor Steve Mason: what type of person goes along? "One minute you could be talking to a bank manager, then you'd be talking to a policeman, then you could be talking to a plasterer. How many other things in society are there where we hang around in groups of people like us? I've always liked the fact it's such a mixture."

Lindy Hop dates back to 1927, when George "Shorty" Snowden was tearing up the dance halls of Harlem. He took jazz steps from the Charleston, introduced fast break-outs (in which the woman is thrown out

New craze for 1920s Lindy Hop

The UK is falling in love with a joyous dance style that originated in Depression-era New York

BY ALOK JHA
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



to the side, and then snapped back in) and won every competition and dance marathon going. After a win at the Manhattan Casino, a reporter asked what Shorty called the moves he was using. Shorty glanced over at a newspaper carrying a front-page report of the aviator Charles Lindbergh's successful solo flight in the *Spirit of St Louis* from Long Island to Paris, which bore the headline: "Lucky Lindy Hops the Atlantic." He shot the reporter back a name: the Lindy Hop.

The dance spread quickly thanks to the music of Count Basie, Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. In the 1930s, dancers introduced the "airsteps" — acrobatics in which the man throws his partner over his head or across his legs. By the early 1940s, ballrooms across America were hosting regular Lindy Hop competitions. Swing was the pop music of its day, and Lindy Hop the way you enjoyed it.

The scene changed after World War II: the US government put a tax on dancing clubs, so tables and chairs took the place of couples on dancefloors. Rock 'n' roll and bebop took over, and things only picked up again in the 1980s, in the clubs of New York. "Back then, if you'd said Lindy Hop, you'd have had half a dozen people who knew what it was," says Selmon. He was learning rock 'n' roll dances when, in 1986, his instructor suggested some new moves and a trip to the swing clubs of New York. On his return to London, Selmon set up the London Swing Dance Society. Four years later, he was teaching so much dancing he decided to take a year off his day job buying and selling antique jewellery. "That was 19 years ago," he

says. "It's been a very long year."

Back in the class, Selmon starts people off on the basic footwork, and adds a few turns. It's not that difficult to learn. "You need about three months to feel comfortable then, if you want to refine it, it probably takes about a year," he says. "You only need a dozen steps to happily dance socially all night long."

For the first three lessons, I stared at my feet as I jerked (I don't want to say danced) awkwardly around the floor. For the next three weeks, I was still mouthing the names of the moves, and keeping time very consciously in my head. It took around four months before I could think about leading someone for even half a song. But many of the people who started with me progressed much more quickly; my problem was that I didn't practice enough.

One thirtysomething Londoner has come alone to Selmon's class. "It's something to do other than drinking all night," he says. Another woman says she dragged her boyfriend along six months ago after coming to classes by herself for a few months. Now he's also hooked, and they dance three or four times a week.

Lindy Hop's appeal is easy to understand: it's a joyous dance. "Many of the pioneers of Lindy Hop grew up in the economic depression of the 1920s and 30s, and dance was escapism, a way to forget your troubles and have fun," says Selmon. Economic depression is not, it seems, the only thing 2009 shared with the 1920s. Eighty years later, the Lindy Hop is no longer consigned to dance history — but may just be the social dance of the future.

PLANET POP

South Korean pop star **Rain** faced off last week against Manchester United midfielder **Park Ji-sung** in what was billed as a "dream match" in Seoul.

Running side by side, Rain, also known as Jung Ji-hoon, joined Park and Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon in kicking off a charity match during Manchester

United's visit to South Korea, designed to capitalize on the club's popularity in South Korea.



Each demonstrated his dribbling and passing skills. "I think the world star is better," Park joked when asked to compare the mayor and the singer.

Team MU Rain — comprised of young aspiring South Korean soccer players — then battled Team Manchester United — teenagers selected from a worldwide YouTube competition. Manchester United forward Dimitar Berbatov and defender Gary Neville led Team MU, while defender John O'Shea and defender Jonny Evans joined the mayor and Rain in leading Team MU Rain. Team MU Rain won the match 6-4.

Manchester United plays FC Seoul on Friday, the third match of its Asian tour. Over in the US, the mother of octuplets born in Los Angeles last January has signed a US\$250,000 agreement for her children to star in a reality television show, the *Los Angeles Times* reported Saturday.

The newspaper said European production company Eyeworks **Rain lined up against Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-sung.**

PHOTO: AP

has inked the deal with **Nadya Suleman**, the mother of the children. Eyeworks lists *Breaking Bonaduce* and *The Biggest Loser* among its television credits.

Filming is scheduled to start on Sept. 1, the report said. The toddlers will collectively earn US\$125, for 36 days of shooting in the first year of production, US\$75,000 for 21 days in the second year and US\$50,000 for 14 days in the third year, the paper said.

The contract also states that 15 percent of the gross compensation will be deposited by Eyeworks into a trust account, and the money will not be touched until the children turn 18.

Bono and U2 rocked more than 80,000 fans in Dublin as the Irish supergroup's latest world tour hit new emotional highs Friday night on home soil.

A deafening roar welcomed the Dubliners as they launched their three-concert homestand at Croke Park, Ireland's biggest stadium and a cathedral to Irish nationalism. The band's "360" tour — featuring its underselling 12th studio

album, *No Line on the Horizon* — switches from Europe to North America in September.

"We are so young — as a nation!" shouted the 49-year-old lead singer Bono.

Before taking the stage, Bono joked that the band's performances in Barcelona, Milan, Paris, Nice, Berlin and Amsterdam were just "rehearsals" for the Dublin concerts.

The U2 gigs are delivering an estimated US\$70 million boost to Ireland's recession-ravaged economy, with most Dublin hotels booked solid for weeks. Even the Dublin Criminal Court shut down jury deliberations for the weekend because too many jurors had U2 tickets.

Also on Friday, singer **Amy Winehouse** was found not guilty of assaulting a dancer at a charity ball in London last year.

The ruling came at the end of a two-day trial at the City of Westminster Magistrates' Court, according to the Press Association. Winehouse, 25, had been accused on punching dancer

Sherene Flash in the face. The singer denied the charge, saying she had been intimidated when Flash put her arm around her and so pushed her away.

"Five foot seven [1.7m] in burlesque heels places you at quite an advantage over five foot two [1.57m] in ballet pumps," Winehouse's lawyer Patrick Gibbs told Flash in court on Friday, explaining why the singer had felt threatened.

Angelina Jolie on Thursday visited a settlement for displaced Iraqis in northwest Baghdad in her role as a goodwill ambassador for UNHCR, the UN's relief agency.

The actor met four families whose members said their children could not go to school and they could not afford to pay for medical treatment.

The UNHCR estimates that 1.6 million Iraqis were displaced within the country by sectarian violence, and that 300,000 have returned home amid improving security.

In a separate humanitarian mission, the Palestinian movement Hamas said on Thursday that Egypt



U2's Dublin gigs are giving a US\$70 million boost to Ireland's economy. PHOTO: AP

prevented Syrian actor **Dureid Laham** from crossing into the Gaza Strip through the Rafah border.

Laham was scheduled to arrive in Gaza on Thursday with the Egyptian actress Fardous Abdel-Hamid in a solidarity visit to the impoverished enclave that has been under Israeli blockade for more than two years.

Laham was also scheduled to inaugurate a local Palestinian play called *The Women of Gaza* and *The Patience of Jacob* that talks about how people in Gaza are suffering due to the siege.

It would have been the first time that a play was performed in the enclave since the end of the Israeli incursion into Gaza in January.

— AGENCIES