



LORD OF THE DANCE

Being a hit on the dance-floor takes more than just a pair of white, flared trousers and a chest wig, says Nick Abbot.

For your average thirties-plus male, dancing is like greatness: it's not something you seek but occasionally it's thrust upon you, usually at inopportune times. If it was thrust upon you at home, say, with just a mirror for company, then it would be fine, no problem at all. But most often we are required to dance in situations where the potential for embarrassment is at its zenith, in front of relatives for example, or worse, people you like.

You may remember and have even tried The Twist, the Funky Chicken and the Bus Stop - all set moves to help those that can't dance - but they are history and are not to be tried unless in an ironic, knowing way and only by the very skilled. Nowadays there is no set pattern, no step by step guide and the only rule is not to look like a geek.

Geekdom is a tough one. What is acceptable on the floor of a

Jungle club might not look inconspicuous at a wedding, for instance, while the dance you used to express yourself to Lynyrd Skynrd's *Freebird* at the student rock club won't get you a second date with the girl you take to Stringfellows.

Dancing is all about getting into the music, apeing those about you while expressing the inner you. It can be an end in itself - a tremendous cathartic release of energy and the single most enjoyable thing you can do with your clothes on. Enjoyable, that is, if you can get over the mental barrier of embarrassment. Like walking, if you think about what you are doing, you can't do it. It has to come from your subconscious, and that's not an easy place to get at. Unless you've been down that route before it is like trying to find the letter Q in a scrabble bag by willpower alone. Chances are you will get another E. Which would help, of course. Ecstasy is an expressive route to dancing nirvana - it doesn't make you a better dancer but it makes you less concerned that you're not. And as long as everyone else in the room is off their face, they won't mind either.

Assuming that Class-A drugs are not on the agenda you will have to manually access the inner you and try to relax completely. You must be truly loose as you can't "shake that thing" if you are so clenched that when you stand up the chair comes with you. This relaxation may not come naturally and the more rigid are often quite happy to avoid dancing altogether. Those that persist should be accompanied by a friend who feels enough compassion to tell them that the reason they are always allowed so much room on the dance-floor is so others can study their moves while not appearing to be with them. These onlookers can learn from any mistakes and

have something to laugh about when taking a bar break.

The Wedding

Not all dance disasters occur in clubs. The family wedding is chock full of potential pitfalls, the biggest of which comes in the shape of an overweight, over-affectionate aunt. After four G&T's, two sherries and a bottle of wine she is ready to tell you how much you have grown and how you look so like her husband in his youth.

For hours you've been the epitome of the debonair adult that family members who last bounced you on their knee must now accept you've become. The niece you last bounced on your knee has grown to be a big girl, but just as you are on the verge of asking if she would like to repeat the experience, the Aunt comes at you from your blind side and catches you off-guard. The initial reluctance to join her on the floor that plays across your face is seen as a cry for help by your close family members, and they respond by encouraging you to go, simultaneously blocking your escape route and crossing themselves off your gift list should you win the National Lottery.

The dance floor at a wedding is surrounded by tables and so is rather like the stage in a strip club - you could not be more the centre of attention if you had your arm around Madonna. What's worse, rather than dancing close, like a waltz, she dances away from you in a style that had rarely been witnessed in the days of The Brotherhood Of Man. A final grab and squeeze against two breasts you had never hoped to get near and you are spun off, the game over, as you repair to the toilets to hyperventilate and allow the blushing to subside.

The First Date

You met at work, or at a party perhaps, a place where your most co-ordinated action was to pull out a wine cork while not letting the strain show on your face. The next step was to meet again and for the first date you suggested a club. A subconscious reaction this, as it is the place you most associate with finding sex. What you do not do, through the lazy haze of lust, was complete the equation: drink + music = dancing, and that despite any evidence you may have picked up to the contrary, your performance on the dance floor is judged as a signpost to your ability in bed. If you suck on the floor, she will think you are a stiff in bed, as they say.

The build-up goes well. You negotiate the other punters and even manage to get most of your drink in your mouth. The conversation is effortless, the eye contact lingers, she smiles and touches your arm to emphasise a point. You are Cary Grant's more sophisticated nephew. Then she hears a favourite song, I think it's called The Death Knell, and she's standing up, pulling you up by the hand and saying: "Come on, I love this."

Your one-second pause is just enough time to run a feature length film in your head of what is about to happen - and all the reviews are bad. On the way to the floor, tunnel vision sets in and you lose control of your arms which hang by your side as she finds a spot, turns and starts to move. Not wanting to stay completely motionless, a kind of shake sets in which looks like alcoholic withdrawal. You glance anywhere but at her. A slow wave of panic engulfs you - there is no way out of it and despite being so tense you could snap a tendon there is nothing for it but to wiggle.

Confident men from Latin countries can move all parts of their bodies independently while making love with their eyes to the girl of their dreams dancing two feet away. The disability of being British makes it possible only to move your legs and head independently of the beat of the music while staring at the lights in the ceiling. If teenagers in the '50s had never started the craze of dancing apart you'd have hold of her and she'd not be able to witness the depth of your inability. She might get trodden on but that's a price you would be prepared to pay.

If she's kind she'll notice that you have a wild-eyed grin set on your face - similar to those on men found frozen to death - take you to a dark corner, press you against a wall and kiss you better. On the other hand, this is the real world and there is a Mediterranean approaching at three o'clock, shirt open to his knees, and with his hips on springs. Make a note: next time, dinner and a movie.

Out With The Lads

Strange sport clubbing. David Attenborough should make a series about it. Men and women arrive separately in packs and stake out their territory. Women gather in toilets and talk about men, who are clustering around the bar and disagreeing about football. The field of combat is the dance-floor which is laid claim to by the girls, while boys skirt its environs holding off until they've had enough beer.

The world's sexiest dance, the tango, is one stuffed with sensuality, all confident and cocky and loose but strong. But physically inarticulate British lads treat dancing as a kind of contact sport, with their chosen weapons the elbow and shoulder. Some display to the opposite sex by simulating the actions of battle,

fists clenched, pounding an imaginary punch bag. Others relinquish all attempts to acknowledge the object of their desire or anyone else in the room and leap around out of time to the music like a human bumper car - the pogoing school of asexual movement - while many move so minimally as to appear part of the fixtures and fittings.

After a certain age, probably somewhere in your thirties, clubbing no longer seems as exciting as it once was. Staying in sounds a much better prospect and forays into clubland get ever less frequent. Desperation, nostalgia or extraordinary circumstances will sometimes take the thirty something to the land of the rising din and it's here that you may get the first notion that you are now officially old. Dancing has become fairly demarcated by age. There's a full three decades in which you feel too old for clubs and too young to waltz.

Clubbing is an aquired taste. It gets better if you do it a lot; it becomes less bearable the less you do it. The sexual desire may still be there, and you may think you've got the moves, but gravity, heat and alcohol can have disastrous effects on the face which, at 4am, after dancing for three hours, has slipped from the front of your head and is swinging around your knees. Let's face it, if no amount of expertise on the dance-floor will compensate for you looking like Droopy after midnight, it might be time to forsake nightclubs and start organising dinner parties. If this is the case, congratulations - you've just become your parents.

Nick Abbot