

TELL ME MORE

Alan Birchall



In this occasional series we are going to try and find out about some of your favourite choreographers.

Dawn Middleton spoke with Alan Birchall.

What is the first memory of dance in your life?

Oooh, that's tough, it's way back in my childhood, I must have been about eight. I can remember family gatherings of aunts, uncles and cousins at Christmas etc.... Their favourite 'game' was to get in a circle, children in the middle (so we couldn't escape) put a pop tune on the radiogram (remember them?), Freddie and The Dreamers, Cliff Richard, Frank Ifield – even Tommy Steele's Little White Bull and we all had to dance while they watched! That was probably the first and last time I ever actually danced before Line dance. Unless of course when in a nappy I would 'bob' up and down to music as babies do but if I did I have no recollection of it.

Before you got into Line dance what was your favourite genre?

Before Line dance, well there was nothing dance wise apart from the standard teenage boy things at disco's, the obligatory 'handbag steps'. I was very much into the music of the era and live bands, so my heroes were The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Jethro Tull, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and Deep Purple and many others of that ilk. In fact, music and

good lyrics are very much a key element in determining what I listen to and write to. These days my listening choices are vast, covering every genre, I put that down to my parents as there was always music in the house of every style. My Grandfather played the piano, he played by ear in the local pubs (he couldn't use his hands!) My mother also played piano but I have no recollection of her playing in public. I play guitar and keyboard, both probably very badly now as I haven't played either properly for years.

When did you discover Line dance?

I would have been in my early to middle 40's. The neighbours were all raving about it but the local class was on a Thursday night and the 'Vicar Of Dibley' had just appeared on our TV screens, so no chance of me taking it up! However the series finished and I toddled off to the class, the rest is history.

What did it bring to you that other dance genres had not?

That one is hard to say, really, as in my case, there was no other dance genres to compare it to, I'd seen dancing on TV with The Young Generation, Pan's People and Hot Gossip, etc.



Did you know there and then that Line dance was your favourite style?

Yep! Incapable of any other form of dance to my knowledge, but then I'd never tried any others!

What did you instantly like about it? Did you have any dislikes then?

For one I could dance! All of a sudden I was listening to great music and surprise, surprise I could move to it and follow patterns that weren't too difficult to remember and the steps seemed to fit nicely to the music. I say 'seemed' because I was just learning and wasn't really looking at dances the way I do now. Unlike most people I would actually listen to the lyrics and comment on some of them, e.g. 'Matador'.

You are well known in the Line dance world but can you tell me about growing up and a little of your background before Line dance?

I have my parents to thank for a healthy interest in music, technology and practical skills in trying to find out how things 'work'. My mother, Annie was fond of music. My father, George worked for De Havilland/Hawker Siddley/British Aerospace. He was by trade an electrician/fitter. He would put together the propellers for spitfires, hurricanes etc. and later worked on the RB211 Rolls Royce engines. My father liked to take things apart, see how they worked and then rebuild them, hoping that they still worked! Which is what I love to do. I had a normal upbringing, well as normal as it could be with two sisters, Pat and Christine, both older than me. I'm very much the baby of the family. Pat lives

locally to me and Christine lives in South Africa, apart from her two visits back to England I haven't seen her for 35 years, I have a plan that I will go over one day and one day I will.

Family holidays were spent at Blackpool, Morecambe and Southport. Well before the package holidays and holiday camps. As I grew older we ventured as far as Wales. I have always enjoyed fairly active sports and dabbled in most but they never seemed to hold my attention too long. I like history, although I'm no expert, I do like to know 'how we have developed' through the ages. I like to get out and see places and hate going somewhere only to return without actually 'seeing' anything.

During the day I work as a Project Engineer for a company that makes 'labelling machines' I have been there since 1982. I started out as a Fitter on the bench making the machines. Now I 'project' them in their build, dealing first hand with customers during machine acceptance trials. The company supplies machines on a global basis to many household names from cosmetics and household goods to pharmaceuticals.

What do you think makes a good dancer?

A good dancer to me would probably be very different to most, as with not having a dance background I believe I have a different outlook. I don't look for grace, poise and style, although it is nice to see in the right context. I look at faces, are dancers smiling, laughing and enjoying what they are doing? Dancing is about movement, enjoyment and interpretation,

feeling the music. Also having the courage to go wrong and not feel guilty for doing so. Anyone who dances at any level and enjoys what they do is a good dancer in their own right.

When did you decide to take your interest further and become a choreographer/instructor?

I honestly don't ever remember making those decisions. I can remember the events that led to me teaching and the nerves that I got and still get, before and during, teaching. I'm always nervous, although not to the degree that I used to be, where my legs would shake, my stomach would be upset and that was just before a class. These days though it's getting easier, except when it comes to talking to large groups e.g. The Awards! – I'm still working on that one.

Choreography? I have no real idea how that happened, I think it started with teaching and not being able to do some of the steps that a dance needed. So I wrote a dance and then after that nothing for years. I can remember writing for the Dave Sheriff competition and failing to get past the first round but nevertheless I continued to write as and when I wanted to, as opposed to needing to.

Where and how do you find inspiration to choreograph a dance?

This is easy. Quite simply, the music. It's all in there waiting to be found. Of course I do have to like the music and lyrics. Everything I have chosen to write to, you will find in my everyday listening collection, if you don't like the dances, at least, the tracks bundled together make for good listening.



Do you have a certain process that you follow, do you have to find the music first for example?

Most definitely. I hear music that appeals to me, if it doesn't 'speak' I can't do it justice so I leave it alone. I have to be happy with the end result, it's no good writing out of necessity, it doesn't work. I hate this mad rush that seems to be around where everybody is clamouring to write to everything, it doesn't help the dance scene at all. Most of my dances are written relatively quickly but some take a little longer. 'Angels' took me a few months due to the phrasing of the music and the emotion of the lyrics but it was worth it. I always research the track to find out if there are existing dances. Inevitably there will be, so then I have to make a choice. I find it very frustrating when good dances are left alone simply because 'a name' has decided to write to the same track after the event, disregarding other choreographers!

I always make sure the track is easily and readily available. After all producing something that can only be done to a certain mix will not help. I check the song, count the beats, check for tags and restarts, if the track has a constant beat all the way through, why have a tag? Although in reality a lot of dances these days seem to require a tag, restart or both. Now I'm ready to write. Once completed I check to make sure it fits as I intended it to. Then I test it in class, I never tell them it's mine, but they often guess! Where possible I video it if I'm happy, release it to the world, and never assume it will be an overnight sensation! There are many influences out there.

In your opinion, what is your biggest achievement?

This is tough I have many that I treasure. Teaching at Superstars in Manchester, what made it extra special was turning round and seeing the whole back row was made up of The Superstars learning my dance, incredible! Of course getting a dance printed for the first time in Linedancer. Then becoming friends and working alongside Maggie G for a good few years, teaching and doing the comedy routines at Pontins, making people laugh is both important and rewarding.

Obviously the four Crystal Boots I've received, as each time was an extremely special moment and very emotional. 'Somebody Like You' and 'Human-Dancer' in particular. Receiving the awards was very, very special! But the biggest gobsmacking moment for me was Human-Dancer at the 2009 CBA. The year before it won, I had no idea how the dance was doing in the Line dance world, Gary announced it was to be the next dance played, Jacqui and I got up to dance it at the front so never really looked around till we turned to face the back wall and WHAM! The floor was packed, my heart stopped, I had a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes, what a sight and what a memory! Lastly and more recently, doing our first and ONLY serious 'show dance' at the Tampa Bay Classic in 2010, a collection of comedy, mime and dance, was amazing.

What are your dreams for the future?

Ahhh the future? Can I really say what I would like? I would like to be able to find it easier to speak in public, to be



able to thank all the people that have and continue to support me, without getting emotional. I constantly find it amazing that others enjoy my dances. I find it both humbling and an honour and if everyone gets a much satisfaction as I do - then what more could I ask for? I would like that to continue.

Over the years I have seen many changes in the dance world, some good, some not. Yes the industry has to move forward but not at the cost of the past, as I feel that would lead to a loss of identity. There is room on the dance floor for everyone at every level, we have to learn to be more tolerant of each other. I would like to see instructors being more adventurous in their dance selections and take risks on unknown choreographers. There are some excellent dances out there that are left behind simply because no one has ever heard of the choreographer. So how does new blood get a chance? I guess that's a discussion for another time. I believe our leisure activity is unique in what it has to offer. I would really like the general public and the media to see us as we really are and not portray us as they do. We are long, long overdue a change of image, a better image, one of my many reasons for joining Nuline dance.

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