

Thank You John for Disco Freestyle!

In this, the second of a four part series, Glenn Fisher gives us his personal view of Disco Freestyle Dancing from its early beginnings in the '70s.



It was a cold January day of '78, when I attend the first official Disco Dance class. In a space of just a few months an advanced disco dance class was started. The line dances, as we called them, just kept coming until all the tracks with the disco beat on the album had been used up. This did not create an issue, as there was plenty of other music in the charts that were ideal.

So how did the competitions start, I hear you ask?

Well, with everyone doing this style of dance, and in my estimation, 95% of Ballroom and Latin schools teaching Disco, it was only a matter of time before the Disco dance competition was added to the end of a Ballroom and Latin competition day. To begin with it was a free for all - no matter what age. A Saturday Night Fever sound track or "You Should be Dancing" would be played, the judge would walk in and out of the dancers (only one judge) tapping them on the shoulder. Having a number was not heard of. Those tapped on the shoulder waited for the next round to return to the dance floor.

Costumes, too, were vastly different from today with many just wearing normal clothes with some girls still in their Latin dresses and boys in their cat suits. I usually got changed quickly into normal clothes so that as soon the competition finished we could leave and hopefully get home for a late Sunday roast - fat chance!

After a few competitions things started to progress and dancers made a quick change while the raffle tickets was called ... and that is a point - we don't see raffles very often at disco freestyle comps - maybe I will have to bring them back!

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We now had lots of people in black leotards with gold belts. This was the girls of course! The boys quickly followed by wearing black trousers, black shirt, gold belts, and glitzy waist coats and shoes - seriously, they did!

The next development was the age groups - Juvenile, Junior and Adult. This meant that there was less chance of getting slapped or kicked in the chops. Looking back at the dress and 'dance' steps, the whole thing was laughable, but at the time it was 'cool'. 'Hot Gossip' were on 'Top of the Pops' back then and that was also 'cool'. Nowadays you would laugh at it, but that's just down to progression... and that's what happened... it moved on!

It grew so much that Disco Dance Competitions were springing up all over the place with the inclusion of Disco Pairs (also known as Doubles).

The best thing to happen was the introduction of Disco formation teams, now known as teams. This was something else. We had all seen Latin formations from Peggy Spencer on 'Come Dancing', so I suppose someone decided to have a disco formation team.

This for me was great. I recall myself, my current Latin partner, her sister, her doubles partner, and a few others made up our own team at a hall we used to hire to practice. We used a song by Rose Royce, it was called 'Pop Your Fingers' which was in fact a 'B' side. We went up to 'SEVEN!' Len Goodman's studio, one Saturday and asked him if we could show him something. Len, with half a Big Mac in his mouth, said, "Well, what is it?" I'll never forget his response, as he was chewing on his burger muttering, "It had better be good," before jumping up and down saying, "Ah that fab! That's FAB! (The burger or the dance?) I'll tell you what, I'll get eight of my dancers to join in and we make a big team."

This is exactly what happened and we were joined by people such as Louise Bryant, (now Louise Carlier) who went on to be a fantastic Disco Freestyle dancer. She now teaches at Goodman's Dance Centre and is very successful with her Street Dance Classes producing not just some of the UK's top dancers, but also Europe's. It's great to see her 7 year old daughter, like my 10 year old, has taken up Disco Freestyle, which is very different today.

Many professionals in other dance styles screwed their noses up at Disco Freestyle, but those youngsters who took it up will tell you that they picked up routines in other styles quicker and were stronger dancers, which improved their technique and made them stand out from the crowd.

So now we had Disco competitions - days just for Disco. Soon, Rock and Roll was added on to the Disco competitions. Why? I will never know! Was it due to the rotten hand jive? Was it because the majority had originally been Ballroom and Latin dancers? Was it to make the day longer? One will never really know.

I remember my parents helping Len Goodman run his first disco competition at a venue called Greenways. Len had enough pupils to fill the hall himself and I recall Len pulling his hair out as he was concerned there would not be enough seats - the queue outside was enormous. In those days you did not sell tickets through schools. Just like the Ballroom and Latin competitions, schools just turned up. So it was a little cramped but the atmosphere was amazing. I had never seen so many people dancing on one floor.