

KARINA DUKALSKA

# BACK TUP

TO WHAT EXTENT  
CAN WE ARCHIVE  
SOCIAL DANCE?

The intangibility of social dances create a disruptive beauty of pure fulfilment in the moment, a true sense of flow, as well as a yearning for the fleeting memory that may be lost forever. In *Back It Up*, Karina Dukalska set out to investigate whether, and to what extent could this experience be recorded. After years of dancing, it seemed feasible for a designer to translate structured ballroom steps in a graphical form. This was until swing dance was introduced to the mix, and her focus broadened beyond footwork.

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SURVIVAL OF  
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# 1 History of Swing: Its Birth and Revival

Swing dance is an umbrella term for a few different social dance forms which developed in the United States by African Americans<sup>1</sup> in the mid 1920s, reaching their peak in the '30s and '40s. They are danced to jazz music<sup>2</sup>, which due to its free and improvised nature thanks to syncopation, created an open blueprint for dances to play with. These improvised social dances fall into a few common styles: Lindy hop, Charleston, Balboa and Shag<sup>3</sup>. They did not have strict rules or steps, yet each style can be identified by its tempo, vibe and rhythm. Lindy hop is goofy, with open positions and turns. Charleston is energetic and has fast kicking steps. Balboa is sweet, has a close connection and has subtle small steps to fast music. Shag, similarly to Balboa, is fast, but has more expressive footwork and a silly vibe.

Lindy hop, being one of the most famous swing dances, began in Harlem at the Savoy Ballroom<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1). It was a way for people to escape the thought of war and let loose, socialise and laugh. Famous dancer Frankie Manning said, "These were the depression years (which didn't make that much difference to my family since we were poor anyway) and dancing was an outlet for people because there wasn't much else they could do. We all stayed in Harlem, but you could find someplace to step out every night of the week. Going to a ballroom became our social life." (Manning and Millman, 2007, p. 67). With time, politics, social tension and financial instability started calming down. Therefore, people focused on work, family and rebuilding the economy. There was less time for dancing in ballrooms in the evenings, and swing died out. It also evolved into other dance styles, such as rock and roll and hip hop.

In the mid 1980s there were a few dancers from the Whitney Lindy Hoppers, a popular dance group who performed at the Savoy during its craze, who started teaching swing to the youth around the world, despite their old age. The dancers we can thank the most are Frankie





**Soundtrack**  
 Hugo Reyne & La  
 Simphonie Du Marais -  
 Les Ballades &  
 Mascarades: Le Mariage  
 de la Grosse Cathos ou  
 la Noce de La Couture:  
 Passepied (2011).

### Favier

The first Western attempts to graphically notate dance was in 17th and 18th century France. Choreographer Jean Favier notated a Baroque masquerade, *Le Mariage de la Grosse Cathos* (Figure 4), in 1688. The notation consists of three aligned five-line music staves. The first one is dedicated to music notes. The second directs the movements of the left dancer on stage, whereas the third directs the movement of the right dancer on stage. The instructions for the dancers are focused on their footwork: d for *droit* (right) or g for *gauche* (left).

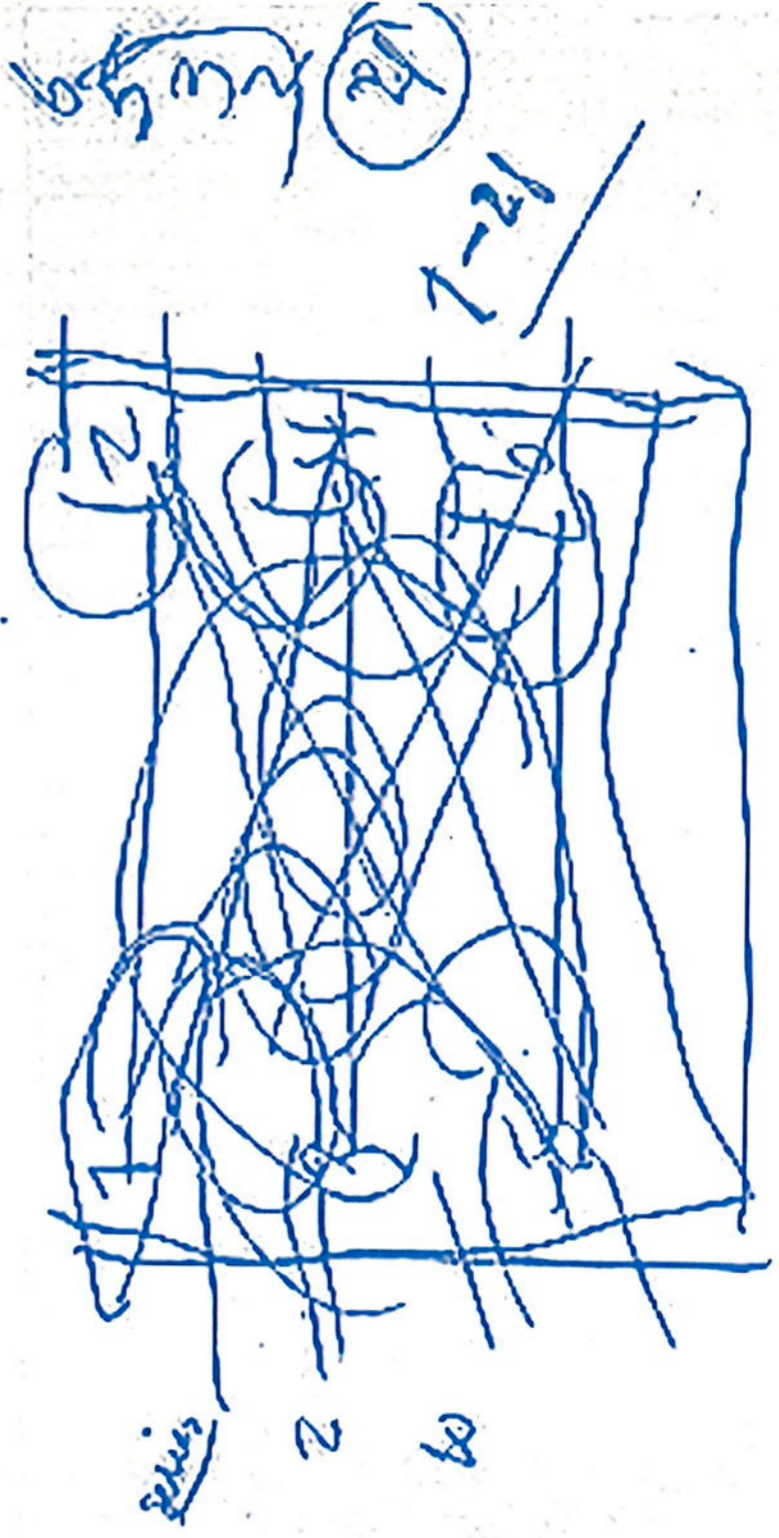
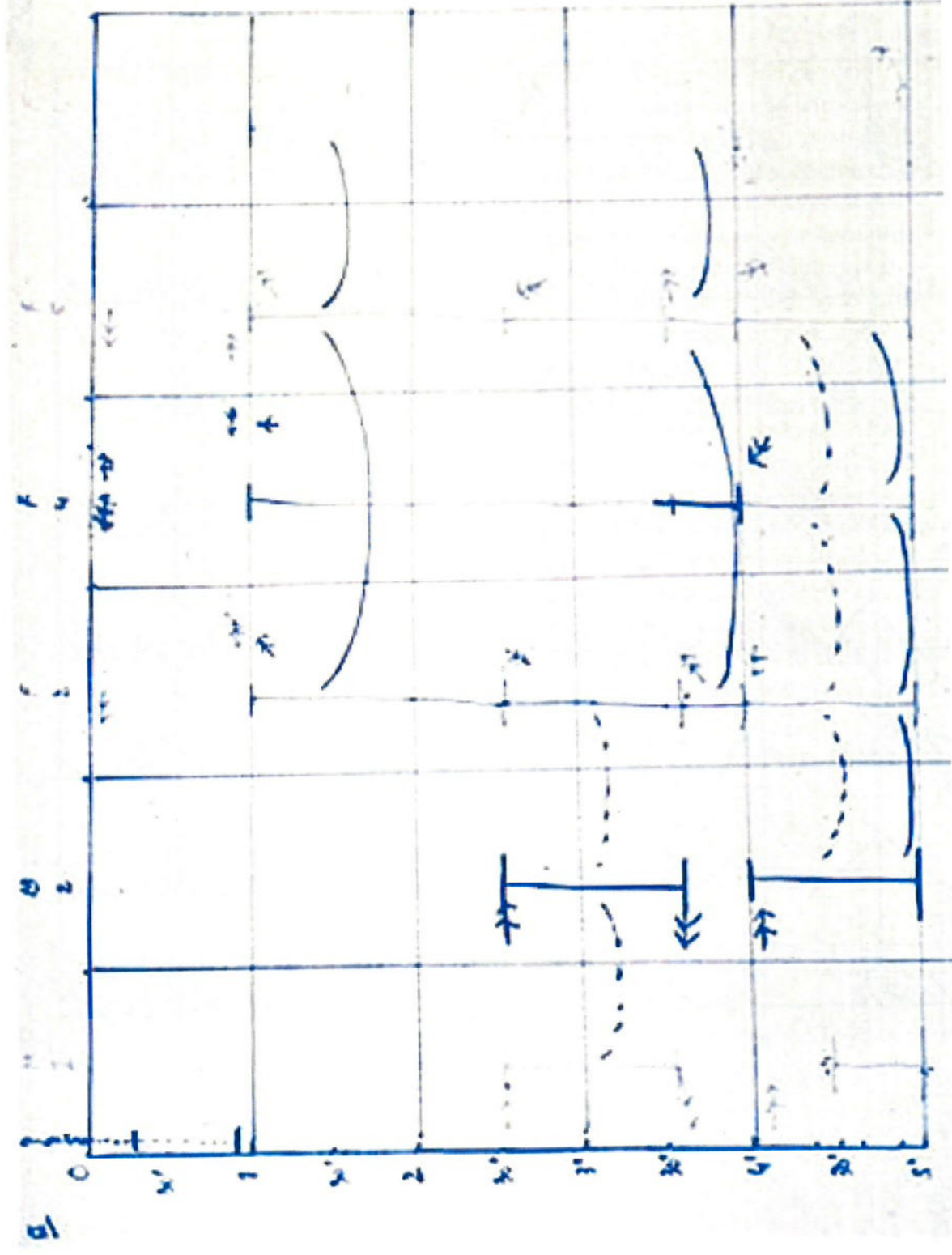
Favier's main focus was to communicate footwork, yet it lacks an explanation of body movement itself and the direction in space. Also, hypothetically, the movement staves being aligned to the music stave should allow the reader to interpret how the rhythm of the dance matches the melody of the music. However, the dance notation does not explain what happens with the feet: do they stomp, clap, shuffle or glide? This lack of information makes it difficult to decode a rhythm, as the silent steps, such as sliding, could cause breaks in the rhythm.

*Marche pour 9 Hautbois, 8 Danseurs, et 9 Musiciens.*

Fig. 4

Fig. 534 <sup>g</sup>





## 5 Time Perception in Dance

Although breaking dance down into separate elements may help understand its structure better, there are other elements that come into play when learning a new dance. Notation doesn't cover time perception, which is relevant to how the brain processes dance and how we read scores.

Previous psychological theory research on time perspective and cultural diversity has left me wanting to explore more of Robert Levine's clock-time and event-time in relation to dance. Clock-time is a way to perceive time as the clock directs it, whereas event-time is a perception of when participants *feel* an event should start or end (Levine, 1998). Levine travelled around the world for research and saw clear patterns in preference between cultures for either one or the other time perception.

This binary division in understanding time can be also found in Robert Wiener's view on Newtonian and Bergsonian time (Wiener, 1965). He explains this contrast using astronomy and meteorology. Newtonian time, just like astronomy, is strict and mathematical. Wiener describes, "the positions, velocities, and masses of the bodies of the solar system are extremely well known at any time" (Wiener, 1965, p. 32). Newton used this time perception for engineering and space, not as a social human system. Bergsonian time on the other hand, like meteorology, is flexible and more adaptable to human experiences. Wiener continues, "the number of particles concerned is so enormous that an accurate record of their initial position and velocities is utterly impossible" (Wiener, 1965, p. 33). Bergson emphasised the difference between Newton's reversible time in physics (where if the movement of the planets was rewound, nothing would change) and Gibbsian irreversible time in evolution and biology (where rewinding would always cause something new). When analysing Levine's and Wiener's work, both mention two contrasting perceptions of time: one concrete and mathematical, the other adjustable and human.



RUMBA		
Song	Artist	BPM
Chan Chan	Buena Vista Social Club	81
Sway	Dean Martin	120
Girl From Ipanema	Joao Gilberto	128
Those Sweet Words	Norah Jones	103
My range		81 - 128
Range: Sheri Leblanc Musings		-
Range: Beats Per Minute Online		100 - 108
Range: Hollywood Ballroom DC		96 - 112

SAMBA		
Song	Artist	BPM
Tu Picadura	Dancelife	102
Dejarè La Puerta Abierta	Danilo	100
Bailar	Deorro ft. Elvis Crespo	128
Suavemente	Elvis Crespo	124
Lambada 3000	Kaoma, Gregor Salto	127
My range		100 - 128
Range: Sheri Leblanc Musings		-
Range: Beats Per Minute Online		96 - 104
Range: Hollywood Ballroom DC		96 - 104

TANGO		
Song	Artist	BPM
La Cumparsita	Carlos Di Sarli	116
Santa Maria	Gotan Project	118
Una Música Brutal	Gotan Project	107
El Tango De Roxanne	Jose Feliciano	108
My range		107 - 118
Range: Sheri Leblanc Musings		approx. 120
Range: Beats Per Minute Online		80 - 160
Range: Hollywood Ballroom DC		120 - 132

VIENNESE WALTZ		
Song	Artist	BPM
Waltz No. 2	Dmitri Shostakovich	187
The Blue Danube	Johann Strauss II	183
Vienna Blood Waltz	Andre Rieu	190
Sleeping Beauty	Tchaikovsky	190
La Valse d'Amelie	Yann Tiersen	192
My range		183 - 192
Range: Sheri Leblanc Musings		approx. 190
Range: Beats Per Minute Online		174 - 180
Range: Hollywood Ballroom DC		150 - 180



dance, because I feel like you can read a lot of that from watching him dance. I guess I wanna know a little more about the music that was played at the Savoy, because I'm aware from his book and other places that there was a range of tempos. Chick Webb's Band played, but there were also other bands. I'm particularly interested in the scope of the music that was social danced to and the dynamics of the ballroom, outside of the Cat's Corner and the contests. Something along those lines.

**K: How do you think Frankie and Norma would have answered the question: to what extent can we archive dance?**

E: I don't know. I don't think I know either one of them well enough to know what their answer would be. I think both of them would have different answers on how we can archive the dance. I think, like a lot of these kinds of, particularly a lot of the stuff comes out of African culture, African American culture, and the lot of indigenous cultures as well, is very much things being passed on verbally, or by song or by dance - word of mouth. I think, as much as we can strive to record the dance so that it can continue to be done in exactly the same way, I don't really know there's a way to do that, because much of it is feeling. And I think actually the dance today is very, in so many ways, very different to what it was. I don't think that's a bad thing, as long as there's a strong tradition of really trying to understand and connect to the music. The music is always going to keep the dance true to its origins. Whereas west coast swing for example is something that diverged wholly. It's not a swing dance anymore. The dance is a swing dance, but the music is not swing. So is it a swing dance? As long as the music and that rhythm is at the root of what we are doing, I think that actually for it to evolve over time, for it to change and adapt to people who are doing, is a good thing. It captures what the people who are doing it need.

**K: I have a thing called 'Final Swing Out'. I'm going to fire short questions at you. There are no right or wrong answers. Just say the first thing that pops into your mind. Just one or two word answers. That's it.**

**K: Favourite song?**

E: Oh my god, oh my god. Shiny Stockings, but not if I have to hear it all the time.

**K: Best dance memory?**

E: I had a dance with my friend, that I mentioned earlier, his name is Charith. We had a dance in Australia a year and a half ago, or so. It was like floating on a cloud. And I've heard so many good social dances. It was the most connected and joyful, rhythmic and simple, beautiful dance. That's my best memory.

**K: Where is your dream place to perform?**

E: I haven't done it yet so, but I'm hopefully going to at the end of the year, so it could be absolutely horrible. But I think something at the event Lindy Focus because of the kind of approach that Michael Gamble and his wife Jaya have to the dance and the stuff that they try to showcase in the community and build in the community. Their values are close to my values, and being a part of that would be really great.

**K: 40 or 250 BPM?**

E: Oh 40?! Ha, either. That's so slow.

**K: Favourite dance shoes?**

E: All the best dance shoes I ever had were street shoes that I bought. But dance shoes, I had a really good pair of Balboa Zins.



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