

The Richmond Old Time New Vogue Dance Group

Report & Insight

BRIEF HISTORY

The dance has been in existence for over 40 years. In its heyday, when sequence dancing was at its peak in Australia, dance attendance was in excess of 150. The dance was held in the ballroom which is no longer in use. Renovations had been planned but never carried out. Any plans that may have existed have been put on the back burner over recent years. Given the much publicised financial plight facing registered clubs in NSW, it is doubtful if any renovations will be undertaken in the foreseeable future. 5 years ago, the Bligh Room was renovated as a gym & this became our new home.

Up until 4 years ago, the Club hired organists to provide music for the dance. The final organists were Pat Walsh followed by Tina. Due to financial restraints & lack of patronage by dancers, Tina's services were terminated by the Club. The disused organ can still be seen lying idle at the entrance to the Bligh Room. Compensation of \$1000 was offered by the Club to the dance group to buy sequence cds. I gave the Club a list of the cds required & I enquired many times with the Club about the arrival of the cds. The cds or the money has never materialised. Having said this, the Club has always provided a room for the dance and Club vouchers for prizes.

When Tina left, Lynette & I became involved voluntarily with the dance group. We had initially planned on doing the music for 2-3 weeks only as fill in. Four years later we are still doing it. We receive no payment whatsoever for what we do.

It is important to remember however that the dance is a 'club' dance.

VENUE

Our present venue has limited capacity with other drawbacks including restricted & confined dancing space, dance floor surface, seating & viewing location & configuration. Being on the outskirts of Sydney & semi rural in nature, Richmond is not centrally located & thus most of our dancers need to travel some distance to attend the dance.

Along with the negatives there are many positives. The dance is held in a club environment & full club services are available to all dancers. There are numerous catering & refreshment areas. Our dance is on from 7 to 10pm and for those wishing to stay on, there is a live band in the lounge area to provide free entertainment & music for dancing. Dancing is on a small dance floor. The band plays from 8.30pm to midnight.

COSTS

Our dance is one of the few venues not charging admittance fees for members or visitors to The Richmond Club. The cost of the venue (say \$300-\$400 per night usual function room hire fee) plus 9 x \$5 vouchers are provided gratis by The Richmond Club. All other costs of running the dance, providing music & sound equipment etc are paid for personally by Lynette & I.

DANCE ATTENDANCE

Over the last decade, many dance venues have closed due to declining or poor attendances, ageing of dancers and the inability of those venues to attract new dancers. Eighteen months ago, many of our elderly dancers no longer came to our dance & the majority of other dancers were away through illness or other commitments. Our dance came perilously close to closure. Thankfully our numbers increased sufficiently to save the dance. We then set about seeking new dancers through a variety of dance promotion activities. Our dancer base is a lot broader than it used to be yet we still have nights when attendances are disappointingly poor.

People leave the group for varying reasons & we fully understand dancers cannot come to the dance every week. This is the reason the dance group needs a continuous infusion of new dancers to ensure the groups future. Thank you to our dancers who have brought along their friends to be a part of the dance.

DANCE PROMOTION

We have produced & distributed leaflets at the Blacktown Workers Club dance. We continuously advertise in the free sections of the local papers, we arranged listing of the dance on the 'Hawkesbury Council' & 'The Hawkesbury Valley Tourist Information' websites. We have set up, manage & maintain the Richmond Dance website. Over the last 3 months his website has had over 2500 hits. We have had a feature article including a group photograph printed in the 'Hawkesbury Western Weekender'. (A copy of the article has been put on our website.) We have leaflets on the Service Desk in the foyer of the Club & we have made many requests for our dance to be included in the club's magazine. We also asked for the 'Dance Group' to be included as an inner club of The Richmond Club & for a link to be put on the Club's website to our website. We have approached all the local community radio stations for free coverage.

Through these initiatives, we have moved ahead. We have received a lot of feedback & enquiries in response to these promotions. Many of the enquiries were from non dancers in the local area wishing to learn how to dance. Our latest 'Learn to Dance' promotion is aimed to fill this need. We are hopeful that some of the 'Learners' will become a permanent part of our dance. (The most successful dances in Sydney all have dance lessons. This gives the teaching venue a permanent stream of new members.) People tire of continuous lessons therefore it is our aim to run 'Learn to Dance' lessons in blocks. Each block will run for approximately 6 weeks every three months. Current dancers can participate if they so choose. One of the best promotions any venue can have is recommendation by 'word of mouth'. Please spread the 'word'.

CHANGES TO FORMAT

To make our dance more appealing, we have shortened the break time between dance brackets, introduced freestyle dances in the breaks, introduced new dances to increase the variety of dances and altered each bracket to include only one of each dance thus doubling the number of dances covered every week. To encourage people to stay, most vouchers are given out near the end of the dance. We have therefore moved the Barn Dance to the end of the evening. We have reduced the Barn Dance from 5 sections to 3 sections. We have retained the 'Barn Dance' and 'The Valetta' primarily as a way to distribute the club vouchers. We have twice altered the starting & finishing times & we have reduced the dance duration to 3 hours. (The majority of commercial & non commercial city dances are now 3 hour dances.) For variety we hold regular 'Theme Nights'. Dress is always optional but each event is planned so that it is easy for dancers to prepare & participate for the occasion without too much effort on their part. The cost of decorations for the Theme Nights in the Bligh Room is again paid for by Lynette & me.

(The decision to have only one of each dance was made because people were forgetting dances due to a small number being covered each week. More dances were introduced because it was felt that our dance was falling behind other venues. The change to dance times was because most dancers were leaving early. We seemed to have now reached the happy medium.)

MUSIC

Lynette & I have purchased approximately 150 sequence dance cds costing between \$30 & \$40 each. Every Saturday we used to arrange a program for the dance & burnt it to cds for playing. Apart from being costly it was very time consuming. At times the club's cd player did not work as well as it should. To overcome these situations, we purchased a laptop computer especially for the dance to play the music & to put a stop to the 4-5 hours we spent on Saturdays preparing for

the dance. As the club's sound system inputs are under a protection cover installed on the amplifier, we have had to purchase our own sound system.

What is different about sequence cds? A good sequence track will have a 4 bar introduction & a definite start point for dancing. The music is usually arranged in 16 bar sequences & the tempo will be constant throughout. For a 16 bar dance, the music should have 5 or 6 16 bar sequences. The last note of the music should coincide with the final step in the dance. The music should be at a speed suitable & comfortable for the dancers to dance to. At times we use music with a short intro or with no definite start point or music with a couple of extra bars at the end. We know how frustrating this can be for a dancer. We use it because the music is inspiring or great to dance to otherwise. A live band has full control over how & what they play but with cds this is not the case.

Why so many cds? It is unusual to find more than one or two good tracks on a cd which are inspiring music. Often we purchase a cd to find no tracks are suitable for our needs. Most of the cds are by English artists & some are more suited to English Sequence rather than Australian New Vogue. We prefer to play music by Australian artists, especially for New Vogue dances, wherever possible. We choose to play mainly vocal music. We are always prepared to play cds brought in by dancers provided they are in sequence & fit the criteria set out above. We could play the type of music Kevin & Sylvia (S & K Music) use, heaven knows we have plenty of it.

OTHER VENUES

To attract dancers from a diminishing pool of dancers in the metropolitan area, we need to stay ahead or at least abreast of other dance venues. We need to identify the best elements of each of the venues & to then bring these elements to our own dance. We have been doing this for the past 18 months. Looking at Blacktown & Liverpool dances with declining numbers, it is evident that 'live music' alone is not enough to ensure the long term future of any dance. Being a small venue, our dancer base is always vulnerable to small changes & it needed to be expanded & somehow stabilised. We looked at other successful venues to see how they tackled & increased their membership. **Of the growing venues, none were depending upon dancers from other venues joining their ranks to boost numbers. They all tackled this issue by teaching non dancers how to dance.** Venues which have no 'dance promotion' and no 'Learn to Dance' classes are slowly but surely dying an agonising death as their numbers dwindle to dangerously low levels

S & K MUSIC (Sylvia & Kevin)

Sylvia & Kevin run commercial dances. They hire the venue, pay all costs associated with the dance including insurance etc. Admittance fees are charged at all their venues. If a venue makes a loss, Kevin & Sylvia usually close the dance quickly. In addition to dancing, they offer dancing bus trips away or dancing ocean cruises. From all accounts, these are very successful (read profitable) for them. Their dances are well run with 2 X 2 dance brackets with freestyle in the bracket breaks. Their music is of a David Last style of instrumental music. The venues they choose are usually big to cope with large attendances. Their dances are well patronised.

ROOTY HILL RSL (Heather Parsons)

Heather is paid by the RSL Club to DJ & to teach dancing. There is an admittance fee for members & a more expensive fee for non members. The 'dance club' is the largest inner club of the Rooty Hill RSL Club. Teaching is confined to Wednesday night & Saturday nights are for dancing only. The dance floor is always crowded. Dancing is non stop all night. They have one of each dance with a thirty to sixty seconds break to announce the next dance. The majority of the music is non sequence music, some with questionable tempos. They have the occasional 'Theme Nights' with people going overboard. A very successful dance by any measure.

BLACKTOWN WORKERS (Pat Walsh)

Pat Walsh is paid by the club to play for & to run the dance. This venue recently introduced admittance charges. Music is live organ music with excellent content & tempo. Even with live music, this dance is suffering a diminishing dancer base in a slow downward spiral. The introduction of admittance charges does not seem to have unduly affected attendances. The dance brackets are 2 X 2.

The only 'Theme Night' is the Christmas dance. We attend this dance venue on a regular basis.

PENRITH RSL

This is predominately an English Sequence dance (now called Modern Sequence). The dance club is subsidised by the Penrith RSL Club. The dance club holds weekly raffles to raise additional funds for special events & 'Theme Nights' such as dinner dances, black & white nights etc. The dance is run by a committee & each committee member takes a turn to make up & play a programme for the night of his/her liking. The club has a large repertoire and holds lessons in the form of workshops. These are held most weeks. The dance is a short dance with workshops held prior to the dance. The breaks are usually long with dance brackets mainly being 2 X 2.

At times there are only two or three couples on the floor dancing. The dance club has it's own cds. These are played in rotation with much of the music being uninspiring. The music volume is usually low & it is difficult for people with hearing impairments to hear. The dance floor area is large & of a good quality. Remarkably this club has held fast with membership numbers. The 'Old Guard' members are very loyal, some travel from Picton & Camden to attend. There is no admittance fee but each dancer pays an annual dance club membership of \$3. We are current members & I was a committee member of this club 5 years ago.

LIVERPOOL CATHOLIC CLUB

This is another live band club. Admittance is free. The Catholic Club only admits members & their guests. There are no casual or walk up visitors allowed. There is a 5 piece band & again the number of dancers is diminishing. In an effort to reverse this situation, they are reintroducing dancing lessons with a view to increasing patronage. Some years ago, Albert & Nancy held lessons in the breaks and attendances were healthy. When Albert & Nancy's services were 'dispensed with' by the club, attendances began to decline. Dance brackets are 4 X 1. Band breaks are long. Music content & music tempo is good.

NORTH RYDE RSL

Yet another club dance with live band music. Admission to this venue is free. The dancing is almost exclusively New Vogue. Dance floor area is small & thus crowded most weeks. The music is provided by a 3 piece band. The music includes many vocals. The dancing is non stop with a break between dance only to announce the next dance. Amazingly the Alpha, one of the best known New Vogue modern waltzes, is not done. Some of the music has no 4 bar introduction & therefore there is a scatty uneven start by dancers of these dances. This is short duration dance. We often attend this dance regularly.

PENRITH SENIOR CITIZENS

This club is subsidised by Federal, State & Local governments. There is an admittance charge of \$3 for the dance. The music cds are owned by the club. The club & dances are run by the committee. John Stephenson is the president of this club. A dance & dance lessons are held on Wednesdays. The lessons are taught by Charles Rowley. The lessons & dance seem to attract reasonable crowds.

The Saturday night dance is a long dance with 12-18 dancers attending. This number fluctuates up & down depending upon the night. The dance floor area is large. There are many 'Theme Nights' when dancer numbers can double or even treble with many of the dancers going to

extremes. Some months ago we attended a 'Theme Night' at this venue. Some dancers' costumes were 'tacky' to say the least. 5 years ago this dance was very well patronised but has lost the majority of it's dancers over recent years due to wrong decisions being made by the club. It will be extremely difficult to again attract sufficient Saturday dancers without a major rethink & overhaul. Curiously some odd dances have been introduced over the last years. Dance brackets are usually 2 X 2.

SPRINGWOOD SENIORS

This venue has had mixed fortunes in the last few years. There has been a continual upheaval in the committee & people running the dance over this time. The dance itself has always been well organised but has been dependant upon members of the dance club pulling their weight to set up & put away seating, making the afternoon teas, cleaning up etc. The music content has been very mixed. There has been another change of committee this week & with the incoming committee, the music could revert to very old music with older style musical arrangements. A wait & see attitude is needed here as there are many different possible outcomes that could affect the future of this club. The pretenders are waiting in the wings & the commercials are like crows waiting to pick at the remains should the dance club stumble.

SUMMARY

Our aim is to continue to put on a programme of the most popular dances in Australia. It is our aim to continue to play & to seek out good Australian sequence vocal music. It is our aim to continue to identify, introduce & use 'best practice' wherever we can. It is our aim to keep the traditional 'Richmond Dance' alive, adaptable and a leader in best practice..

It is never easy to analyse and clearly define the strengths and weaknesses of a dance. It has been our job to rebuild the Richmond dance to ensure it does become more vibrant & resilient to face future challenges. We want the dance to be strong & to remain strong into the future. We want the dance to be the benchmark for other dances. To make change is always difficult **but** not to make change would mean the eventual demise and closure of our dance. A long tradition & rich history would certainly be lost.

Given the size of our venue with it's inherent size limitations, our dance is going well & in many aspects we already lead the way. We have our own website which is one of the largest Old Time New Vogue dance sites on the internet. We have taken the dance in new directions with format changes & we have retained some of the traditional 'country feel' which has set our dance apart from others. We have led the way in promoting our dance and we lead the way in the style & type of music we offer our dancers. Part of the difficulty in attracting younger people to a dance has always been the very old tunes played at the dance.

Lynette & I have spent not only a lot of money but also have invested a tremendous amount of time on the dance, most of it unseen in the background. Only we know what it feels like to give up our time to run the dance to then find only a small number of dancers turn up. We are often invited to go elsewhere on Saturday nights but usually decline the offers in preference of the Richmond dance.

It is Lynette & I who have had to devise & implement all the dance promotions we now have in place. Despite our ongoing advertisements, promotions and website activity, our attendance numbers were once again on the decline. Clearly the writing was on the wall; clearly action to increase numbers became necessary.

Our 'Learn to Dance' classes give new dancers an introduction & exposure to our dance. When 'Learn to Dance' classes are held away from a dance venue, many learners never progress beyond to attend dances. However, when classes are held at a dance venue, most 'learners' move on to become dancers at that venue.

Thanks to Mike Watson, dance teacher at Richmond U3A, dance lessons are now a reality & going extremely well. We are on the way to a much brighter future. Where we go from here, depends upon the success & retention of the dancers in our 'learn to dance' classes.

In summary, our members should recognise how difficult it is to increase numbers from a diminishing pool of existing dancers. 'Learn to Dance' is the best & only way forward & **you** are urged to make 'learners' feel welcome & to encourage them to become part of our dance. It is in your interest we want to keep the dance strong & to be there into the future.

Peter & Lynette (Dance Coordinators)

1st October 2009