

Going to the Palais: A Social and Cultural History of Dancing and Dance Halls in Britain, 1918-1960

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The 1950 feature film *Dance Hall* is one of Ealing Studios lesser-known releases. Crafted around the lives of four working-class women – played by Natasha Perry, Petula Clark, Jane Hylton and Diana Dors – the narrative shifts between the spaces of factory work, domestic life and commercial leisure. The most significance location is, however, the Chiswick Palais de Danse. Throughout the film dancing is embedded in everyday and community life. The dance hall itself provides a forum within which contemporaneous themes are addressed: Americanisation, consumerism and relationships between men and women are amongst the most notable. The dance hall also acts as an arena within which young women's post-war dreams can be voiced and pursued. Seen through the eyes of the film's key protagonists, the Palais de danse has significance beyond its primary function.

The importance of dance hall culture to the lives of many millions of people right across the middle years of the 20th century has long been clear, not least because memories of the dance hall loom so large in oral and life histories that reflect on the period. Stories of social dancing form a backdrop to accounts of leisure, of courtship and of youth. The dance hall features particularly often in accounts of Second World War Britain, providing a powerful motif for the mixing of service and civilian peoples of different backgrounds and nationalities. And yet until the publication of James Nott's meticulously researched monograph, *Going to the Palais*, there has been no single dedicated history that has focused on the dance hall in its own right. This book is therefore a particularly welcome contribution to modern British studies and one that will undoubtedly be widely read beyond the field of history.

Going to the Palais tackles the history of dancing through a number of sub-disciplinary approaches, providing an economic history alongside social and cultural histories of the phenomenon. These different perspectives are supported by a structure which organises the book's ten substantive chapters into three parts: Part one deals with 'Dancing, the dance hall industry, and its audience'; part two with 'Dancing and British society, 1918–60' and part three with 'Conflicts and control: moral panic and the dance hall, 1918–60'. Whilst there is occasional necessary overlap within this structure, the overall effect is to provide an incrementally deepening understanding of the significance and meaning of dancing as it became a form of mass entertainment. The book provides a thorough-going account of the development of the dance hall, and

seeks to analyse both its popularity and its castigation at different moments, in different geographical locations and amongst different sections of society. In its conclusion the book grapples with broader questions of culture and democracy. Nott suggests, for example that the dance hall ‘both reflected and helped create the emergence of a Britain where the working class were at the centre of daily life, whether it be socially, culturally or politically’ (p. 306). He also asserts that – despite some important caveats – ‘there was very clearly a ‘national’ British dance culture evident in the period 1920–1960 and it was important in strengthening Britishness’ (p. 306).

The source base upon which the analysis is built is extensive and diverse, illuminating multiple perspectives and experiences. Licensing committee minutes, Home Office records and an impressive range of newspapers, magazines and journals are used alongside oral history material conducted specifically for this project in Dundee, Glasgow, Liverpool and Cheshire. Existing oral history interviews, such as those generated by the North West Sound Archive and the BBC People’s War Archive are placed alongside contemporaneously generated material from the Mass Observation Archive. The latter includes social investigative work in Bolton and London, reports on morale in the early years of war – specifically on the significance of dancing in maintaining morale – and responses by the volunteer panel of writers to questions on dancing, jazz and music posed immediately prior to the outbreak of war. In January 1939, for example, Mass Observers were asked, ‘Do you go to dances, and if so, on what occasions? From your memory, or from any dance that you are going to in the next few weeks, describe what happens at some dances, what you talk about and think about, and whether you look forward to a dance with pleasure or fear’.

The history of the dance hall itself is dispatched with skill: the book provides a clear and well-written account of dancing as a commercial enterprise. Close attention is paid, for example, to the precise reasons why the industry experienced boom at key moments and momentary decline at others. What Nott rightly describes as ‘a revolution in popular dancing’ was founded upon the conjunction of a number of factors: increased access to time and money; a transnational currency in dancing and musical styles; and a growing interest in dancing on the part of big business. The opening of the Hammersmith Palais in 1919 marked the beginning of the boom; by 1953 it was estimated that dancing attracted an annual audience of 200 million. This is not, however, a story of untroubled linear progress and the book maps the complexity of dance hall development well. The 1920s was a decade of mixed fortune for dancing in the face of competition from other leisure forms and the economic instability of the time. By the 1930s dancing was established – alongside film-going – as the pre-eminent leisure activity of the age.

People loved to dance across the mid-century. A study of Slough in 1938 found that 45 dances a month served a population of 55,000. Dancing also expanded within the countryside, much aided by a programme of village hall building. In fact people seemed to establish dances wherever they possibly could, in halls, workplaces and even the ostensibly unpromising venue of the swimming pool. In this case the pool was covered with wooden boards to effect a transformation that could be quite remarkable. In Glossop, the municipal baths was re-imagined in impressive ways. ‘The decoration of silk Chinese lanterns, dimmed to create atmosphere, the use of plants and the distinctive dancing, seating, and balcony areas were a direct copy of those found in permanent dance halls’ (p. 35).

Dancing became an entrenched part of the social lives of working- and lower-middle-class people across Britain, and further grew in popularity across the wartime years, despite the challenges that both the industry and its patrons experienced between 1939 to 1945. The tendency of women, the young and the working class to be particularly enthusiastic dancers was further exacerbated by wartime circumstance, 'If the wireless is put on ... there are general shouts and shrieks of delight as women ... prance round to the music' (p. 64) noted Mass Observation of one Birmingham factory. The war years were followed by the dance hall's 'golden age', supported by full employment and rising affluence. At Butlins Filey, the Regency and Viennese ballrooms catered for 3,000 dancers each, in addition to another 2,000 sitting at the sides. And yet by the end of the 1960s, the Palais was in decline. This is not to say that people no longer danced but they did so in different ways and in much altered venues. While the book draws to a close at this point, it provides a convincing framework for understanding why this shift occurred.

This is a book that tells the story of the spaces used for dancing but it is also a history of the experience of dancing. So, in chapter four Nott explains the varied ways in which people learned how to dance and explores changing dance fashions – including a rather lovely 'Old Time Dancing' craze that spread from the north to the south between 1945 and 1947. In his careful attention to geographical specificity Nott is able to describe 'a series of overlapping dance cultures, all drawing on a common stock of dances, but executed in different ways'; a finding which reinforces the agency of dancers in a developing dance culture. 'You cannot control people's dance steps any more than you can control dress fashions' observed a dance teacher in 1928 (p. 127). The link between social dancing and identity is clear throughout, whether in the interplay between youth culture and the dance hall, in the expression of ideas about 'race' and dancing, or in the creation of distinct female public spaces and the development of female identity. The discussion of identity in the second section of the book makes helpful links to the trajectory mapped out in the first part. For example, an apparent 'Equal Rights' campaign, proposing that women choose their own dance hall partners, turns out to have been a marketing ploy by the Mecca chain of dance halls. Nonetheless women themselves frequently subverted the ritualised gender dynamics of the dance hall, finding ways of making their own selections, and in so doing exercising real agency.

The dancehall had a powerful impact on the lives of individuals but it also fed into, and contributed to, existing and newly emerging tensions, social cleavages and prejudices. As might be expected *Going to the Palais* has important things to say about the links between the dance hall and broader debates about gender, 'race' and youth. Here the ways in which attention to the dance hall can enhance wider understandings of mid-century Britain is particularly apparent. The introduction of foreign – particularly American – dance forms, could stimulate hostility; and 'racial mixing' in the dance hall could be a focus for racist comment or sometimes even violence. Colour bars operated in some British dance halls even before the US Army tried to implement Jim Crow on British soil during the Second World War.

Class distinctions underpinned debates about the respectability of particular dance halls, fuelling the association of dance with sexual immorality. In the 1920s and again in the 1950s drug use amongst dancers was highlighted in the popular press suggesting continuities with the dance scene of the late 20th century. Dance itself was frequently castigated for throwing human bodies together in close proximity: some dances were denounced as 'hugging to music', others as a possible source of embarrassment 'for the shy man' (p. 221). Attempts by professional dance teachers to tame dances such as the Jitterbug and Charleston were designed to assuage critics and stamp out 'freakiness'. Debates about morality inevitably showcased the 'good time girl'. Indeed problem women dancers were identified across the mid-century – in 1950 the *Daily Mirror* focused on the 'Palais Pearl', a reinvention of the gold-digger for the post war world: 'Do you think she would prefer a tea cloth to a Tango? Or care to swap the Palais crooner for an ironing board?' the Mirror writer asked. 'For five years home has been the place between her office and the dance floor; the place where she put on her war paint and refused to help with the dishes. Is that likely to change? She'd never care for a quiet night in by the fire, or a walk on the heath. To her, the countryside is merely the space between dance halls' (p. 236). However, as Nott makes clear, the dancing man was not immune to criticism, not least because of claims that dancing was inherently feminising. While men continued to dance – and sometimes

danced with each other: – the dance hall undoubtedly operated as a cypher for wider anxieties about gender as well as sexuality. It was also a focus for concerns about young people’s apparent predilection for addiction, self indulgence, violence and tendency to pursue ‘the wrong kind of leisure’ (p. 282). Strategies to deal with youthful hooliganism were diverse. The Mecca chain encouraged young female usherettes to intervene with troublemakers and employed older married women as ‘hostesses’ to patrol the halls.

Even in an account as comprehensive as *Going to the Palais* there are bound to be areas not covered. Those seeking a history of ballroom dancing will not find it here. Rather the focus upon ‘social dancing’ and ‘social dancers’. The ‘dance hall’ itself is broadly defined to include ‘all of the major venues where dancing took place, whether this was a permanent commercially run venue or a temporary public venue utilized regularly for dancing’ (p. 3). What the book does do beautifully is to explain exactly why dancing was so loved across this mid-century moment, what this popularity actually meant and the varied uses to which the dance hall was put. It also provides a careful historical account of the development of the industry. It is a history that successfully marries structure and experience. It is also a pleasure to read.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further. He was delighted that the reviewer enjoyed it so much.

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