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The Lost Tribe of Disco

IN THE TIME OF THE BLACK DEATH, people across medieval Europe would break into ecstatic dances in churches and cemeteries during religious services. Unable to stop themselves when commanded to do so by priests and the bereaved, they were thought to be possessed by an infernal dance fever—a fever that lives to this day in dances deemed detestable by society but that small groups continue to perform.

The Hustle is such a dance. Like the scorpion pendant and the color “creme,” it is symbolic of a despised era. And yet, in a posh midtown studio called Stepping Out, five or six couples are taking the introductory Hustle lesson that precedes the studio’s regular Wednesday-night social dance. I sit at the juice bar and watch them. Popular dance often has a strong element of wishful pantomime about it, as when a high jump is performed in folk dancing to encourage the corn to grow. The Hustle is subtle in this respect. Unlike the *Kamasutric* enactment of the tango, its moves hint at something truant and dodgy—something unequivocally *street*.

Maria Torres, the diminutive instructor and driving force behind these Hustle nights, has, for reasons known only to herself, held an ice pack to her elbow for the last half hour. Running through a basic kick-ball-chain step for the *n*th time, she’s encouraging “more caressing” and “mutual display” among awkward pairs who appear to be made up largely of *Cosmo* girls and the men who love them. To soften a hammering in the footwork, she has directed the dancers to step only on the balls of their feet, with the result that the women all appear to be strutting to customer service.

Which seems to please her as a desired affect. Torres applauds and pushes “play” on a boombox. Following a series of missteps and contracted gropes, four couples successfully wind up a turn, then unravel in miraculous unison, free arms extended on either end. Simultaneously, eight crippling backhands stab the air with rectilinear index fingers. Torres smiles triumphantly.

Within minutes the social is in full swing. People of every race and sexual persuasion run through the 20-year-old moves—rattled beginners on one end and stars infusing elements of tango, saber dance and mambo swing on the other.

I head into the fray in the hope of picking up a few pointers. The Hustle is done on three beats within a 4:4 rhythm that George, a friendly computer programmer taking the class, spends the better part of an hour trying to teach me.

“Count with me,” he says. “One-two-three and one-two-three,” and then lapses into a natural rhythm to demonstrate, wiggling like a carp dropped in a pool so that a child might snare it in a net.

“Watch my feet,” he says. “One-two-three-and...”

I’m not getting it. In a fit of pique, George takes me aside to clap out the rhythm on my palm. I blink at the darkness and pretend to catch on. George, a patient man, understands this. He loosens his tie, readjusts his glasses and levels with me.

“We should start with a basic street hustle.”

I hunker down, eager to prove my competence.

“Look at me,” he says. “Now count: one-two-three-and-one-two-three...move on your balls not your heels.”

Around and around we stumble. George’s brush cut bristling anew with every misstep. In the end I am led to the water cooler in the hall where a grinning swinger in a finger splint and polo shirt of Estee Lauder blue shuffles over to me and winks.

“Never move on your ‘ones.’ At least not at this stage of the game,” he tells me. “It’s a one-two-three beat,” he says, adding in a conspiratorial tone, “the ‘and’ counts as a beat.”

No! Foxy! The soul of the Hustle lives—not in the beat, but in its interstice! It is a dance with a smuggled beat—a slip! Though a macho dance of gallant physicality and ostentation, proficiency at the Hustle has more to do with successfully hailing cabs and negotiating revolving doors than seducing Argentine assassins. I see!

My partner nods approvingly, accompanies me back to the floor and leads me directly into a perfectly executed turn. I’m surrounded by people twirling and mincing to the sly rhythm. Aerobic feats of every kind are being incorporated into the tricky beat. When I’m plunging to the floor—mid-air from a vertical lift to a horizontal body drop—I realize that there’s room for everything in that roguish slide. I have found my dance.

(Stepping Out, 1780 B’way, betw. 57th & 58th Sts., 245-5200.)

—STACEY SZEWCZYK

