Swinging Out in Sweden: African American Vernacular Dance’s Global Revival and its Scandinavian Roots

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Abstract

In revival subcultures, dancers and musicians form tight bonds in the present by perpetually reconstructing the past through music and movement. This paper examines how Swedish social dance enthusiasts in the 1980s catalyzed the contemporary global revival of the lindy hop and other African American social dances. It chronicles these dancers' shift from focusing on literal reconstruction through studying film to embodying the creative, improvisatory spirit of social dance through collaboration with the dance’s original Harlem practitioners. Through the author’s experiences dancing at this revival’s current cultural center—the Herräng Dance Camp in rural Sweden—and through extensive interviews with the camp’s participants and organizers, the paper illustrates that through this tension between literal reconstruction and creative freedom, participants create a shared pool of embodied knowledge and construct a common history built from traces of film clips and the vivid personal accounts of aging African American dancers. Today, the camp’s Swedish organizers act as cultural brokers, constructing and nurturing a global network of dancers, from Rio de Janeiro to Beijing, to reinvigorate and advocate for this form of African American popular culture.

Like all subcultures, the global lindy hop revival has its fair share of insider knowledge, but from Beijing to Buenos Aires, there’s one thing everybody knows: if you really want to learn the lindy hop, you have to go to Sweden. Specifically, you need to visit Herräng, a town of only a few hundred residents 2.5 hours north of Stockholm at the northern tip of the Norrtälje municipality. Every July, dancers from around the world converge here for the annual Herräng Dance Camp, a five-week intensive workshop where participants gather to perfect their steps and to dance all night to the music of Chick Webb, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman. Put simply, they party like it’s 1939.

The Herräng Dance Camp began in 1982 as a retreat for twenty-five members of the Swedish Swing Society. As swing dancing grew in popularity throughout the 1980s and '90s, the camp began attracting dancers internationally. When the Neo-swing craze of the late 1990s catalyzed the lindy hop revival in the United States, Americans began flooding Herräng, and the camp’s popularity grew exponentially. Since then, the Herräng Dance Camp has been a crucial force in building a sustainable level of global interest in the lindy hop. Today, the lindy hop revival is a global subculture now growing most rapidly outside of the United States. Indeed, many would say the world’s most vibrant scenes are in Seoul, South Korea and Vilnius, Lithuania with emerging communities in Beijing, Sao Paolo, and Tel Aviv. As the largest and only multi-week swing dance event
in the world, the Herräng Dance Camp serves as the nexus of this movement. Dispersed around the world, lindy hoppers share styles and ideas and maintain friendships primarily through Facebook and by watching each other dance on YouTube. Yet every July, this globalized community becomes extremely local; in one small Swedish town, the lindy hop becomes the dominant cultural force, the core of the mainstream, and the principal source of shared knowledge.

I have been an active participant at Herräng since 2004 following my sophomore year of college, and in 2010 and 2011 I assumed the role of oral historian/participant-ethnographer and conducted substantive interviews with the camp’s leadership and participants. In this paper, I will show how early Swedish interest in swing dancing’s African American roots formed the cultural philosophy that currently drives community creation and cultural communication in Herräng. My observations will focus on the camp’s dual mission of inclusion and conservation, and I argue that these two seemingly contradictory aspects of Herräng—an ethic of universal inclusion and a conservative policing of historically informed dance aesthetics—actually feed into each other to create for participants a shared history, a shared sense of purpose, and a shared kinesthetic vocabulary.

Roughly around the time of the camp’s 1982 founding, two of the Swedish Swing Society’s members, Anders Lind and Lennart Westerlund, were discovering swing dancing’s African American roots through a copy of Marshall and Jean Stearns’ 1968 book *Jazz Dance*, which Lind came across at Stockholm’s *Dansmuseet*. The book led them to performances by Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers in films like the Marx Brothers’ 1937 classic *A Day at the Races* or the 1941 Olsen and Johnson feature *Hellzapoppin’*. The pair became obsessed with these sequences, and along with their new dance troupe “The Rhythm Hot Shots,” they learned to reproduce these routines through careful study and liberal use of their VCR’s slow motion function.¹

Yet film study proved insufficient; Westerlund and Lind wanted to learn these dances from living practitioners. They traveled to New York City in 1984 to find Al Minns, one of the dancers from the *Hellzapoppin’* sequence, and brought him to Sweden to teach workshops. For Minns, the Swedes’ interest in the dance was a refreshing change from the relative indifference he found in his home country.

The Swedish youth, their enthusiasm, is comparable to the enthusiasm we had in the ’40s and late ’30s. At the present time in the states, the dancing is mostly soul, Donna Summer and Richie James, you know, the video tape kind of stuff, maybe because we don’t have big dance halls anymore and the big orchestras are almost non-existent.²

More than simply teaching the Swedes new steps and movements, Minns began to radically alter their perspective on dancing and their pathways to kinesthetic engagement. During his time in Stockholm, Minns encouraged the dancers to disregard numbers, steps, and counts. Rather, he asked them to internalize the music’s rhythms, to feel their way through, and to improvise and experiment. In his own dancing, he demonstrated a more laid back, subtle, and social style than the acrobatic routines the Rhythm Hot Shots were extracting from films. Here is footage of Minns dancing in Stockholm at the Swedish Swing Society’s weekly practice.³ Through Minns, and their trips to New York,
these Swedish dancers were exposed to a more socially oriented dance culture that focused on improvisation and emphasized experience and interaction rather than presentation. When asked in Sweden where he found happiness in dancing, Minns replied, “I believe it’s the union of the body with the rhythm and the sound of the music. You know, a person doesn’t have to make big movements in order to look good dancing if they feel the music.”

When Minns died shortly after his 1984 visit to Sweden, Westerlund and Lind sought out Frankie Manning, another pioneering dancer, who first came to Herräng in 1989. Manning taught the Swedes “the difference between social dancing and stage dancing. It was only after we spent time on social dancing that I showed them the authentic way to do the air steps [aerial maneuvers], which they were very good at catching onto.” According to Westerlund, “Manning was the key person for the transition from the Swedish Jitterbug to the African American Lindy Hop.” Westerlund initially resisted learning a dance that looked virtually unrecognizable compared with the film clips he idolized, yet over the past thirty years he has come to not only understand social lindy hop as the dance’s heart and soul, but also to view it as a vital technical basis for the routines the Hot Shots continue to develop and perform. Manning, who taught at the camp nearly every year until his death in 2009 at the age of 94, would become the camp’s primary source of authenticity. He gave contemporary swing dancers a direct lineage to 1930s Harlem and a living reference point for their cultivation of a historically informed style. Manning’s dance style, worldview, and accounts of his experiences have become absolutely central to the camp’s cultural and aesthetic philosophy.

Manning’s desire to spread the lindy hop as far and wide as possible still drives the camp’s mission of global outreach. According to the organizers, Herräng should be a place that anyone can come and where everyone should participate. The camp plays a key role in global “scene building,” spreading the dance around the world by creating new hardcore enthusiasts who in turn bring the dance to their home cities. Toward that end, one of Herräng’s core missions over the past decade has been to expand the lindy hop’s reach beyond the United States and Western Europe. Around the year 2000, the Hot Shots began traveling to Russia to offer free classes and workshops and encouraged dancers to come to Herräng in hopes they would begin teaching and growing scenes at home. Dancers from Russia received the so-called “Russian discount” and attended classes for a substantially reduced price. This work led to the development of large and vibrant lindy hop scenes in Moscow and St. Petersburg and to a massive influx of Russians to Herräng every year. The camp expanded these efforts to other former soviet states and, most recently, to Beijing and Buenos Aires. Ultimately, the camp offered the discount to anyone from a country with a standard of living below that of Western Europe. The camp’s greatest success story in recent years has been Vilnius, Lithuania, where the dance scene has rapidly grown into one of the world’s most thriving lindy hop communities. When I started at Herräng, there were four or five Lithuanians, but now hundreds come every summer, and, in 2011, Herräng welcomed participants from emerging scenes in Rio de Janeiro and Istanbul.

The camp supports a spirit of innovation and creativity, yet also essential is the mission of protecting and preserving black vernacular dance styles—what some Folklorists have termed “Cultural Conservation.” For the camp’s organizers, experimentation is encouraged, but there is at some point a line in the sand beyond which too wide a range
of styles or musical preferences will dilute the dance beyond recognizability and weaken the community’s ties to history and to the aesthetics of Harlem dancers like Minns and Manning. This is an excerpt from my interview with Daniel Heedman, one of camp’s organizers. He articulates the camp’s attempt to encourage inclusiveness and diversity while protecting the purity of the lindy hop.

If you go to a smaller event in Spain or in Sweden or in UK you will find a typical way of dancing and they have the same style. Now, if you go to another place, a small local scene where they have a workshop for a week or something, you find those people dancing in another way. But in Herräng, all styles are represented and everybody’s dancing together with each other. So it’s the one place where everybody around the world can get together and share styles and impressions and ways of thinking and just learning more about the dance. So, I think that’s one thing, the diversity and the history. Then the third thing is, to direct people in the right direction when it comes to lindy hop, because I think a lot of people want to change the dance and develop it further and take it to “the next level” and after certain development cycles you’re kind of into a new dance and I think it’s Herräng’s mission to keep the dance where it belongs, which is: this is what it was in the ‘40s and this is what is lindy hop. Now, if you change it too much, you’re outside of those boundaries and you’re not really dancing lindy hop anymore.

While encouraging the creation of new steps and the cultivation of personal styles, the organizers advocate maintaining clear reference points for one’s movement choices, limiting creative explorations to those movements that would seem to be plausible choices for a dancer at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom in the ‘30s and ‘40s. So, if it is not something they did do, it is at least something they could have or might have done.

Nothing in Herräng is more rigorously policed than the music played for nightly dances. Around the world, lindy hoppers dance to a variety of musical genres, but in Herräng, DJs play jazz music from 1925-1945 nearly exclusively, and the camp invites only those live bands the organizers trust are committed to playing in that style. As Belgian tap dancer and Herräng co-owner Fatimah Teffahi put it, “for us, it’s important to have a reference, to say that we’ve been told that this is what was played in the Savoy Ballroom or Alhambra ballroom in the ’30s and ’40s.” Here is a response from Lennart Westerlund, to a camper inquiring about more democracy and stylistic flexibility at the camp.

When the personality of the camp was shaped in the ’90s especially, I mean, of course you have to say “what do we want the camp to look like?” You make some major decisions and my experience from that period of time when people in Sweden for instance danced jitterbug, or maybe sometimes they called it lindy hop, but they danced it to rock and roll, Beach Boys, sometimes rockabilly music. Then you have to put your foot down and say, “okay, I’m going to do something different from this, we’re gonna do swing music.” Then, it’s not about compromises or democracy.
anymore, it’s gonna be: if you like this track, you’re very welcome to join and do something within the track. If you like the other track, please go there, because it will suit you much better. So to me, it’s very important sometimes to say, “okay, this is what we stand for, and, if you don’t like it, maybe there is someone else producing something that you will be more attracted to.”

While as a scholar I understand the pitfalls and problems of rigorous fidelity to, and claims of authority over, an imagined historical other, as a dancer I have found Herräng’s conservatism artistically and socially generative. I think the best term to describe my experience at the camp is “immersion.” I have found that by molding our bodies to specific techniques and rhythms, participants create a shared pool of embodied knowledge and experience that is crucial to the formation of relationships in Herräng. On any given night, I can walk into the main ballroom, meet someone new, and instantly share a deep and intense physical experience with them, one that requires trust, sharing weight, and a mutual understanding and negotiation of style and convention. In Herräng, the “authentic” lindy hop becomes a kinesthetic language that everybody speaks.

The focus on dancing authentically and the immersion in old jazz music, vintage clothing, and in the imagined historical space of depression-era Harlem are key to community construction at the camp. In a sense, any barriers of cultural translation vanish as attendees construct not just a common culture, but also a common history built from traces of film clips and the vivid personal accounts of Manning and the other old African American dancers the camp invites every year as guests of honor. In his work on the temporary, portable communities of bluegrass festivals, Robert Owen Gardner argues that festival participants create tradition over time to become “communities of memory” much like fixed cities or towns. In Herräng, camp participants build their community of memory not only out of their own lived experiences, but also those of the dancers they idolize. They strengthen their shared sense of place by tying it to a mutually agreed upon—one might say constructed or imagined—sense of shared origins. Furthermore, the camp’s rhetoric of inclusion is itself historically informed as the camp’s organizers attempt to recapture the spirit of Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom, which was New York’s most prominent integrated venue for social dancing. Though historical accounts conflict, Manning always painted the ballroom as a non-raced haven for the joyous celebration of music and dance and as an escape from the troubles and frustrations of one’s daily life. Following Manning’s worldview, the camp offers a rhetoric of utopian inclusion, welcoming all-comers from all cultures, the only requirements being an open mind and an investment in the camp’s mission of conservation.

Having focused on the organizers’ goals and strategies, I will conclude with one useful model from the literature on folk festivals to theorize the way dancers experience the camp’s physical and temporal space. In her work on Australian folk festivals, Michelle Duffy attributes community building to a tripartite process of intensification, isolation, and dislocation. In the interest of time, I will focus here on the third element: dislocation. In Herräng, dislocation removes dancers from their disparate national identities, making all of us temporary citizens of an intentional community removed from the real world both spatially and temporally. Herräng can feel like an all-day, all-night immersion into a surrealist culture. To illustrate this, I’m going to play the camp’s
promotional video for 2011 which communicates the centrality of Frankie Manning and also shows a lot of dancing, both social and performance, and a number of bizarre happenings including the spontaneous construction of the first Swedish “Hooters” (an American chain restaurant) in a tent at 3am. As Heedman explained it,

> For me, Herräng is a place out of space, and it’s where you should see something you won’t see in reality, normal life. So, for me, the entertainment is important, it should be something special and surrealistic. … I see Herräng like a bubble. It’s a bubble, and a lot of people need this shared experience, and you see stuff that you won’t see anywhere else. That’s our ambition, I think.

Daniel described his vision for the camp as ultimately transcending dance and becoming a space for historical immersion that removes people completely from their real lives and identities.

While community building in Herräng relies on **dislocation**, it also relies on **location**, on the creation of a temporary physical space for a community otherwise defined by a fractured multiplicity of remote scenes; Herräng takes a global subculture that communicates through the virtual world and re-renders it as a small town. In a world where the internet and social media do so much to facilitate community across vast distances, why does the swing revival have this drive to congregate in a single, isolated geographic location? For me, it is about the immediacy and corporeality of the lindy hop as a partnered dance. Of course, we all need to meet in a physical place because to do what we do, we need to touch each other—to use our bodies cooperatively as instruments of communication, exploration, and conservation. When I went to Herräng in 2009, just after Frankie Manning had passed away, there was a heightened sense of urgency to the task of creating and communicating those traces of cultural memory his spirit and his style imprinted on the bodies of those who learned from him. I felt how deeply contemporary lindy hop dancers rely on transmitting shared embodied knowledge and producing memory through the body.

As the dance’s original practitioners continue to pass away, young enthusiasts lose access to the memorial archives their dancing bodies held. Indeed, in 2013, dancers enthralled by old lindy hop footage no longer travel to Harlem to learn from the old masters; they are more likely to make the trek to Sweden. Herräng, now an institution with its own long history and years of cultural memory, continues to anchor this revival in shared tradition while nurturing the lindy hop’s continuing growth as a living dance. Whether from Stockholm, Beijing, or North Carolina, dancers in Herräng form tight bonds in the present by perpetually reconstructing the past through music and movement.
Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks to the organizers and participants at the Herräng Dance Camp for agreeing to interviews for this project and for many years of dancing, friendship, and enthusiastic support.

Notes

1. Manning and Millman, 229.
5. Manning and Millman, 224.
7. Author’s paraphrasing from numerous public lectures and discussion forums at Herräng Dance Camp between 2004 and 2011 in which Westerlund expressed this sentiment.
10. Westerlund, forum with the organizers, 2011. Italic emphasis inferred from Westerlund’s inflection.
12. Duffy, 52.

Bibliography


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