

Bigger Than the Hula Hoop

If you still think a hustle is something Fast Eddie is likely to pull off in a pool-room, if you think the bus stop is the place you study your ARA timetable, all is not well with your social barometer. For virtually any kid, in any secondary school in the country, could tell you these things are features of a great movement, a cultural, commercial and psychological condition called Disco.

Disco, taken narrowly, can refer to the style of record currently on your radio, an incessant, bass oriented derivative of soul. But the social symptoms are far broader than a vogue in pop music. Disco, the thing, takes in dancing, dating, social codes, clothes.

And it has hit New Zealand. Massively. In the past year, literally thousands of New Zealanders have formally learnt disco dancing through dance studios. Several schools enter teams in disco competitions, the team members taking status second only to the first XV. *Saturday Night Fever*, the great disco icon, has sold more than 140,000 copies here.

Disco, of course, is not a miraculous and sudden creation. Discotheques were fre-



quent structures in the landscape of the 60s pop world. The modern disco fad originated in New York three or four years ago as an inner city, black oriented craze. It spread through New York's outer boroughs and was adopted by the city's Latin immigrants, Italians, Puerto Ricans. Along the way the dancing picked up Latin American features and was smoothed out. The fashions became more sophisticated, the emphasis less tridentally urban. In its latter form the movement was beamed out to young white America, and in its wake, to New Zealand.

Saturday Night Fever carried the message. John Young, whose Auckland ballroom dance studio picked up on disco tuition early, dates the boom back to March of this year. It was then promotion for the film and record hit.

Young's studio is one of the most tangible symptoms of disco impact. The owner estimates that some 9,000 people have had lessons with him since March. He employs eight part time teachers and twelve teacher's assistants. He says his wage bill is the largest he has paid out in his life. That presumably means he is also making more money than ever before. Those 9,000 people, ranging in age from seven to sixty, all paid \$25. In six one and a half hour lessons they were taken through a basic course, learning ten separate routines, most of which are variations on a rudimentary hustle and a basic busstop.

At four dollars a lesson studio tuition may seem an expensive indulgence (Limbs, the modern dance company, take their public 1½ hour lessons at \$1.50 a head). However Greg McBurney, head teacher for John Young, says that almost everyone comes through the course happy. And many enrol in

the subsequent advanced course.

Sitting in on one of McBurney's classes is quite something. In a small subsidiary studio in Victoria Street, little bigger than two cricket pitches laid side to side, thirty five students are practising the Brooklyn Hustle. The initial sequences learnt are group or chorus dances. Earnest looks of concentration occupy the faces of all bar the demonstrating assistants dotted about the room. In the middle a perplexed housewife, two steps behind, watches the feet of her nearest colleague. As the entire class turns in unison she whirls in the opposite direction just avoiding collision with three people. Further over, a very small man determinedly sticks his chest out, flaps his elbows and wiggles hips with a tacit assertion that he's got it right at last.

From the expression the hustlers assume, there seems to be unique fascination in synchronised movement. Maybe disco has appealed to that character trait of New Zealanders which loves marching girls and pipebands. At least, it's the numbers becoming involved as much as the fad itself which attracts new practitioners. Disco dancing is fast becoming a social grace, something to be done with others in an orgy of common understanding. Much like Saturday drinking or watching telethon. How else can you explain John Young's record class of 92 dancers, all learning to hustle in his big Khyber Pass Road studio?

This fraternal sentiment is strongest where disco has really taken hold. Amongst teenagers in the suburbs. The disco thing is only touched upon by media stories of disco-kids who come into town each weekend. There are vast reserves of disco freaks who don't venture into the city but still practice disco as a participating sport. Schools, community centres, even churches provide venues. A few coloured lights, a flashing yellow traffic warning, and a nice loud sound system are all that are needed. A contract disco operator brings the lot himself.

The kids provide their own atmosphere. For years community centre dances have been affairs where a few crazies hurl themselves around the dance floor while the majority skulk in shadowy verges. In past months the trend has been completely reversed. Everyone is dancing, the peacocks displaying their finery.

Disco has halted the long standing fashion to dress down. Sixteen year old boys wearing white three-piece suits aren't uncommon. The urge to imitate the beautiful people who inhabit the 2001 disco palace in *Saturday Night Fever* is strong. Almost as strong as the compulsion to imitate the dances.

But the dance maintains first place. Lots of kids whose musical tastes go far beyond disco will lap a solid evening of the stuff just to dance. All around a hall small groups will be spontaneously forming to synchronise a step. And when "Night Fever" or "Stayin' Alive" is put on, an entire hall will break into the Brooklyn Hustle. Two hundred teenagers in long lines dancing in unison, turning, clapping exactly together is an awesome sight. Beyond the studios there must exist vast networks of pass-it-on learning.

It's during the competition part of a disco evening the finer points come out. Some competitions are formalised, but the most intriguing are loose freestyle contests in which judges circulate to pick out the half dozen best individuals. These are then left to fight it out between each other while the remainder look on. A politics of cool operates. The caesars of the dance floor do their stuff with totally deadpan faces and apparent indifference. They go through the motions eyeing one another for the right moment to show off a piece of flashy technique. Suddenly one of them drops into a splits, springs back, twisting 180 degrees before going into another split then back into his standard shuffle

Disco has gone beyond the point where you could even call it a trend — it's now a phenomenon. When over 20 million copies of *Saturday Night Fever* are sold world-wide, when as many as 140,000 of those are sold locally, and when 9,000 New Zealanders learn how to bump and hustle at just one Auckland dance studio — from all that you'd have to say something is happening, even if you don't know what it is.

So, extricating our heads from the sand, we dispatched several of our writers to examine this phenomenon face-to-face (or perhaps that should be eyeball to hipbone), and they filed the following reports —



without breaking the rhythm. Shortly, another contestant breaks into a high stepping, hip wriggling frenzy. And so it continues. The crowd applauds whatever takes its fancy and sooner or later a winner is chosen. He or she accepts the prize with studied nonchalance.

This is not the disco of the funtime studio class, but a more serious business. Across the street from Young's downtown studio

you can see Chido Kan karate students practicing lethal kicks. Sometimes they appear to do so in perfect time with the record playing.

It's been called a fad, hysteria, product of the computer age. But perhaps disco with its regimented movement, dedicated followers and inscrutable masters is nothing less than man's latest and greatest martial art.

Bruce Belsham



Rick Dees — "Disco Duck". At the time I thought this had to be the death of disco, I was wrong. But it certainly shows up its inanity — Harry Lyon (of Hello Sailor).

Wild Cherry — "Play That Funky Music". Because it gives me happy feet — Ken Williams.

George McRae — "Rock Your Baby". I invariably get a kick and a turn out KC and the Sunshine Band's singles but the beautiful KC/George McRae collaboration, "Rock Your Baby", is a favourite. It's something to do with personality overcoming the formula — Terence Hogan.

Bee Gees — "Nights on Broadway". A compelling number from the days when the Bee Gees' comeback still seemed brave and slightly romantic — Bruce Belsham.

Alastair Riddell — "Smile". A great song and not as bland as the usual American shit — Greg Clark (of Citizen Band).

Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes — "Bad Luck". A great Gamble-Huff production, a nifty tune and the amazing voice of Theodore Pendergrass. Oh, yeah... you can dance to it too — Alastair Dougal.

KC and the Sunshine Band — "That's the Way I Like It". Because KC and the Sunshine Band are the prime exponents of the creative repetition that is disco — Roger Jarrett.

