

Well dressed, charming and boy could they dance! Dance Halls and the Americans in World War II

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This essay is an excerpt from Lisa's paper Foxtrots and Air Raids: The Role of Dance in WWII presented at the Talk About Town: Urban Lives and Oral Sources in 20th Century Australia Conference at Monash University in August 2009.

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The arrival of the American troops in WWII in Australia evoked many reactions within the general Australian population. These reactions ranged from gratitude to outright animosity and two related issues--- money and women, were the primary basis of the friction.

It is interesting however that when speaking to those who attended dance halls within World War II, the perceptions of the American presence both in the community and at the dances varied substantially. This variation related to the state where the dancers lived, gender, the amount and type of exposure the individuals had to the Americans and the motivation for attending the dances. While some Melbourne dancers described the Americans as dashing and friendly they also noted that the GI's posed a threat to the Australian troops in regard to "stealing the women". On occasion fights broke out when troops from Australians and Americans were in port simultaneously. The women's reaction to this display of proprietary interest was of absolute amusement. "Ooh, it was wonderful!" one woman enthused when describing one melee on Princes Bridge. Another recalled:

There were fights breaking out all over the place. The Australian soldiers hated them (the GI's) because we all wanted to go out with the Americans. Well, who wouldn't? They were so charming, they knew how to treat a woman and they looked so dashing. I mean their uniforms were smooth and the Australian uniform, well it was baggy and very scratchy.

While the Western Australian women unanimously recognized the contribution the Americans made in protecting them against attack from the Japanese they varied in the level of recognition. Some felt very strongly about the American contribution

We had been abandoned, there's no doubt about that. They (The government) used to move our troops up and down the coast trying to make out as if we had more men. But we knew better. Darwin and Broome had been bombed and we thought that we were next. All my girlfriends and I bought Lysol. We knew that after the Japs bombed they

moved in fast and we knew what happened then... to the women. So we all bought bottles of Lysol so that we were ready. The Americans, the Americans were our saviors. Without them we would have perished. I know some people thought they were forward, I didn't ever experience that. They saved us.

Others in WA perceived the Americans as well dressed, having lots of money and very confident. This confidence was not always appealing to some Australian women. These women spoke of the American's free spirit as partly due to being on leave with nothing to lose. Regardless, many acknowledged their dancing skills. The GI's it seemed used to transfer their exuberance on to the dance floor where they danced the Jitterbug in the centre of the room much to the ire of the dancers performing the more traditional Pride of Erin, Barn Dance or Modern Waltz around them. One woman who had been an exhibition dancer described it this way, "They stole our thunder. We'd be doing our Ballroom dances around the room and they'd jump into the middle and start Jitterbugging. Of course everyone would look at *them*".

Another gentleman who worked with the Americans and danced in England, Western Australia and Victoria was clear about his feelings when he said

They were nice enough but we pretty much kept to ourselves. The Rendezvous was set up because they kept pinching our women and that's why we went to the dances ...to get close to the women! The Americans had a lot more money because they were paid so much more, they bought the women gifts and they were better dressed! I mean their flies had zips and we had button-up! We looked like who knows what! They knew how to dance too.

Undoubtedly the dancing skills of the Americans and the dances that they brought to Australia certainly had impact. When referring to the Jitterbug, there was often a sense of awe as some people noted that they did not join in as they did not have the same skills. For one woman there was a sense of wistful envy, not in relation to the skills but rather the amount of uninhibited exuberance displayed within the Jitterbug. She watched the Jitterbug wishing that she had the nerve to participate. "Ooh I wanted to join in. It looked like so much fun but I was worried what others might think, I mean, people could see your underpants when your skirt went flying up". Another dancer who taught the Americans to dance our ballroom steps said that she did dance the Jitterbug, but didn't do the lifts. " Because.. well, people could see everything".

It is important to remember that while the dance halls were places of socializing it is clear that social mores still needed to be adhered to. As Patsy Adam-Smith notes in her book *Australian Women in the War*, it was a place that if a woman walked outside in the course of the evening there was no hope that anyone would dance with her again. When considering the impact of the Jitterbug I question why people want to participate so

much? In addition to the attraction of having fun, is it possible that this dance provided an irresistible opportunity for people to also transgress the social codes of the period? It is also valuable to contemplate whether such exhibitions of female freedom were also associated with a compromised loyalty to both the church and state.

Still, regardless of why people were drawn to the Americans dancing the Jitterbug, simply being in a dance hall when it was taking place seemed to be an exciting and memorable experience in itself.

Citations

Adam - Smith, Patsy. *Australian Women at War*, Thomas Nelson Australia, 1984.

This essay is an excerpt from Lisa Petty's paper *Foxtrots and Air Raids: The Role of Dance in WWII* presented at the Talk about Town conference in 2009

1. *Lysol is a disinfectant and was for a time used as a method of abortion in Australia.*

<http://www.history.unimelb.edu.au/overhere/well-dressed.html>