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Y E S T E R D A Y S

JOHNNY'S DANCING SCHOOL

BY ALISON MASTERS

"All boys in the alcove please!" . . . Does this command mean anything to you? Reading this, does some Remuera doctor or Queen Street accountant stop dead in their tracks when they recognise this no-nonsense instruction barked out by a deep voice? Does the memory rush you back 30 or more years? Join me in a little nostalgia . . .



Civic Ball group, 1954. The ball was held to celebrate 100 years of parliamentary government in New Zealand.

Sheepishly they slunk ... all shapes and sizes, weeds and gawks, nearly all with pimples, all in navy-blue suits and shiny shoes. All there to please mother.



Mrs and Mrs Jock Hutchinson ... "to elevate the art of dancing and to foster a true English style".

I had not consciously remembered "Johnny's" for years. True, there had been occasions when some mischievous disc jockey had for kicks placed a Victor Sylvester on his turntable and my kids had fallen about laughing, or when Smith and Caugheys had be-decked their main window with a mass of filmy tulle and ball-gowns fifties style, and then a flicker of memory had crossed my mind when I saw it, but until today I had not properly remembered.

I was standing at the corner of Queen and Customs Streets where Armishaws had once had their dress shop when a woman passed. She was smartly dressed in a fur coat with the collar upturned against a mean winter breeze when that same breeze caught hold of the perfume clinging to her, wafting it in my direction. Maybe there was something in the air, perhaps my mood was ripe for sentiment, but instantly my head swam with the excitement that had accompanied a 15-year-old along Omaha Road in Remuera on her way to Saturday night dancing classes — to "Johnny's" — making her heart jump and her stomach sick with nerves.

How powerful is our sense of smell. This woman's flower scent was so familiar. That very same frivolous, tantalising perfume engendered by the talc and behind the ears dabs of a crush of teenage girls crowded into a small dressing room. Girls from Dio, Epsom Grammar and St Cuths. Girls standing on one foot to squeeze into silver sandals, straightening stocking seams, smoothing wide-spread skirts with starched petticoats beneath.

"All boys into the alcove please!" boomed Jock Hutchinson and sheepishly they slunk to the side area, all

shapes and sizes, weeds and gawks, nearly all with pimples, all in navy-blue suits and shiny shoes. All there to please mother.

Mrs Hutchinson then dealt with the girls. She was thin, eyes periwinkle blue, hair swept upwards in an elegant roll and pea-stick legs teetering on slender high heels. Very, very English.

"Follow me, gels, now ... slow, quick quick, slow slow, slow slow, quick quick ..."

Falteringly we emulated her movements, uncomfortably aware of the boys watching. With hindsight I would suspect that they were not watching but discussing the rugby match of the day. Soccer had not arrived then.

"Boys take your partners please," called Jock. Then came the scramble ... the uncivilised part of the entire business.

From the direction of the alcove there would be a general stampede as blue suits pushed and squeezed between the moire taffetas, the violes and the laces. Boys ended up with the nearest available girl, thankfully retiring with her to the edge of the ballroom, waiting for the next instruction. Vic the pianist would then take over, his gentle rhythm wooing the bashful self-conscious dancers on to the floor under the watchful eyes of the Hutchinsons.

Why "Johnny's"? For many years the dancing school had operated under a Miss Johnson, but later Jock Hutchinson and his wife took over in the 1940s.

To go to "Johnny's" was the thing to do. If your parents had not had the foresight to enrol you, you were nobody. Everybody was terrifically posh. Cer-

tainly nobody chewed gum, smoked, or said damn, and pot was something mummy used at the bach at Whangaparaoa in the holidays to cook the pipis. Parents were mummy and daddy and nobody did awful things like wearing stockings with ladders, or not living in Epsom, Remuera, or out Mission Bay way.

As my nostrils twitched with the spicy essence of memory I recalled how once the initial nervousness had passed I had come to enjoy the dancing classes. Some of us went on to Friday and then Monday night classes where we learned more complicated steps like the whisk and whing, overcame the pivot turn and mastered the long backwards glide of the slow foxtrot. By then the crush and scramble of the juvenile Saturday night behaviour had given way to space and sophistication, for only those who truly wanted to be there remained.

Every October, at the close of the season, an annual ball and prize-giving was held, with fond parents, aunts, uncles and interested neighbours watching lovingly from the balconies. Mr and Mrs Hutchinson would demonstrate to the accompaniment of oohs and aahs of admiration from the gallery.

Jock was a stickler for correct behaviour — not only on the dance floor. We respected him as we twirled and curtsied the year of the coronation to the strains of the *Queen Elizabeth Waltze*. The mirrors around the dance floor kept us in line in more ways than one.

Under the auspices of Jock at "New Zealand's Leading Cultural and Dance Centre" — as printed on his brochure — we learned formation dancing, giving displays, wearing uniform gowns in pristine white, glorious mauve, or delicate blue, while our partners wore tails,

with white carnations in their button-holes. Our elbow length gloves were demure and spotless — as demure as we were ourselves.

Victoria League Balls, the Coronation Ball, and a very special Civic Ball held in 1954 to celebrate one hundred years of parliamentary government in New Zealand — we were there in all our glory, along with the Prime Minister, Mr Holland and Mrs Holland; Mr Walter Nash and other dignitaries.

We practised months for this event. It had to be spot on. No mistakes, but without flaw. Quite perfect. Twelve couples, we made our entrance to the strains of *Land of Hope and Glory*, formed the letters "NZ" and then while the band played *God Defend New Zealand* we made the figure "100", and then gracefully swung into the *Queen Elizabeth Waltze*. Amazing! That must be the reason I still give an involuntary jerk on the fourth boom leading up to the crowning moments of Elgar's masterpiece.

But Jock was astute enough to read the writing on the wall. Although he had built a new ballroom in Remuera, the Dorchester, the kids of the sixties were a different breed from their counterparts in the fifties. The aims of the school had been "to elevate the art of dancing and to foster a true English style, to create a natural and friendly atmosphere between girls and boys, to cover the essentials of ballroom etiquette, and to appreciate the value of good deportment", and they were rapidly becoming outdated.

Loyal to the last, the Hutchinsons departed for England strongly denying that they were disappointed in the youth of the day.

The old green tin shed in Omaha Road has long gone, making way for elegant home units.

Whatever happened to Chook, David, Bev and Barry ...?

The thoughts broke off. The perfume had dispersed and Sarah was crossing the road from Downtown towards me. She had on high fur-trimmed boots and her hair had been pink streaked since I last saw her. Holes were in the knees of her jeans.

What would Mrs Hutchinson have thought of Sarah?

The idea was too awful to contemplate. Sadly I moved to meet my daughter. □

Alison Masters is a Rotorua freelance writer. This is her first piece for Metro.

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