



# Dancing with the Stars

## An interview with Brian Jones

**Tania Kopytko catches up with dancer choreographer Brian Jones after the recent *Dancing With The Stars* (DWTS) series.**

Dancing With The Stars is the New Zealand version of the BBC Strictly Come Dancing format, a format and series that has been successfully bringing people back to social dance in the UK, Australia, America and now in New Zealand.

**We began by discussing the programme itself. The show is a mixture of scripted and ad lib work – how does this work?**

Brian: As with any show that has time restrictions, information that needs to be presented, cues for various people to make entrances, lighting and music cues and so on, means there has to be a basic script to work from. This is developed through the rehearsal period, personalised and of course through the show there will be some adlib to keep a natural flow. Allowances also have to be made for those unexpected things that can occur during the recording of a live show e.g. if you are running ahead of time or behind, or when there is a delay which needs to be covered. With so much involved in producing a show like this it would be difficult to coordinate if it was completely adlibbed.

**What impressed you the most about the show in general?**

Brian: The thing that impressed me most was the way the production team brought the show together. From the producer Debra Kelleher, down through the various areas of wardrobe, make-up, crew on the floor and behind the scenes, presenters, the band, there are so many people involved in making *Dancing With The Stars* happen. It always sounds corny but it is like being part of a family and that is what made that special moment happen every Sunday evening for 8 weeks.

**Who is it aimed at?**

The demographic for the show was basically those aged 25-54, but obviously encompassing those either side. I've had great response from people as young as 9 through to people in their 80's. One parent recorded the show every Sunday evening so her daughter could watch it in the morning before school.

**Do you think the show has had an effect on social dance in Auckland/NZ?**

From the response I have had from various people I have met during and after the show, I would say it has helped create an interest

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in social dance again whether it be ballroom, Salsa, Argentine Tango or Ceroc. I met one woman in Havelock North who told me that the show had encouraged her and her husband to go out dancing again, something they hadn't done in years.

**In DWTS you demonstrated your strength in choreography and a breadth that comes from beyond ballroom dance. What is your dance background, interests and dance passion?**

My first opportunity to dance came at the age of 13 when my sister's dance teacher, Pat Betley, offered me a free dance lesson in ballroom. After that I had a lesson every week, practising every day either by myself or with a partner. At the age of 17 I had the

opportunity to be in a Palmerston North Theatre Society show called Sweet Charity, directed and choreographed by Bruce Harris who had been a member of the original London cast. This led me into learning ballet, modern, even a little tap, with Val Bolter; while continuing to be involved with theatre. At a dance seminar I met Mary Evers, who had established the American Jazz syllabus in New Zealand and was invited by her to train in and teach Jazz dance.

One dance style I have a fascination for but have never learned is Flamenco. There is something about the rhythm, style and passion that drives this dance form that excites me.

To me dance is dance regardless of the style. It is about enjoyment, expression, energy, but above all it should be fun. When you look at the history of dance you begin to see how the various dance forms have developed through the influences of others, whilst creating something new or unique.

**In DWTS you are choreographing under pressure - what do you do to keep coming up with inspiration, what do you enjoy about choreography?**

Character and personality were especially important for what we did for DWTS as well as the entertainment factor. As the show progressed there came moments when ideas would be difficult to work, sometimes through tiredness, sometimes the idea itself would block you. Always I would come back to the music, the character of the dance and the strengths of the person I was working with. In this case with Beatrice it was personality, power and energy.

Something else that makes choreographing interesting is the medium you are working in. The first show I ever choreographed was a Christmas musical for the stage. Just a couple of years ago I choreographed for a short film

and in between created a variety of routines in different styles for degree students, kids, adult beginners, competitive dancers, teachers in schools, even body builders. Each presents its own unique challenge. Choreography gives me the opportunity to express myself whether it's emotionally or to tell a story.

#### Was it easy working with the live band?

It was great being able to work with a live band. You don't get the opportunity very often. There is a great vitality that comes from live music and Carl Doy put together a great band of musicians and singers for us to work with. The main thing for us was adjusting to the sound of the studio band after working to the original recordings we had to rehearse to during the week. Often you cue choreography to certain audio cues in the music. One great advantage with the band was being able to slow or quicken the music if necessary.

#### Are there trends in ballroom dance? Where is ballroom dance going now?

Ballroom like any other dance style develops organically and is influenced by other dance forms and trends. One example in the ballroom is the Tango, which over the last few years has had influences from Argentine Tango incorporated into the styling and choreography.

In the competitive Latin American you see influences coming from many places such as jazz and contemporary dance, as well as drawing on aspects from the traditional Latin dances where the International style originated from. But at the same time competitive Latin American stays within its own style and technique. In such dances as the Paso Doble you can see arm lines and body shapes taken from Flamenco dance and in demonstrations I have seen Flamenco footwork used as well. Advanced level dancers in this style need to develop a great deal of strength and flexibility to compete, as some new choreography uses balletic lines requiring great extension, as well as control. One of the top International couples has also included a contemporary routine as part of their demonstration work. It is great to see an opening up and appreciation of other dance forms.

The most obvious trend or development I have noticed in the Latin is a greater strengthening of the leg action, a very straight pulled up action. There is also a greater use and flexibility in the spine, developing expression along with emphasizing rhythm in the choreography.

#### How big is ballroom and Dancesport internationally and in New Zealand?

As a genre Dancesport, which includes ballroom and Latin American dance styles, has a big international following. China has institutes where you can study Dancesport. Back in 2002 we had a group of students visit AUT from JiLin and a Chinese couple made the semi final of the UK Latin American event earlier this year.

There is a strong Dancesport scene in New Zealand although its popularity has fluctuated over the years. New Zealand has also had some very successful competitors on the international scene, most notably Candy Lane, who has not only competed successfully in international finals but also judged events such as the World Amateur 10 Dance Championships and lectured at the prestigious British Congress. One of the couples that I trained made it into the top 10 rankings in England in their grade.

There have also been some other New Zealand connections with DWTS overseas. Brendon Cole, judge in the New Zealand series is a dance partner in the BBC series and won the first series with his partner. Erin Boag, a pupil of Candy's whom I also taught, has partnered celebrities on the BBC production of Strictly Come Dancing. In the USA series of DWTS Wendy Johnson has worked with celebrities and dancers. Wendy left New Zealand many years ago to compete and train overseas, then deciding she liked the American style she moved to the States, where she has become a very successful teacher. I've had the privilege of working with Wendy a couple of times when she has been back in NZ. She is an exciting and dynamic woman with that particular American style and flair.



Brian Jones and Beatrice Faumuina

#### Ballroom is called dancesport - is it a sport?

There has been a lot of debate over sport versus art. Due to its competitive nature and the training involved, it does fit into the category of a sport, much the same as ice dance. But there is a strong creative aspect to it as well, which overlaps into the performing arts. The show *Burn the Floor* is an example of where they have taken top international competitive couples to create a stage show.

#### Do you think dance could be used more for fitness?

Dance in its many forms is a great way to keep fit with styles that range from low impact social dance through to demanding high energy performance techniques. You're working out the whole body as well as getting a cardiovascular workout while being able to develop an appreciation of music and its

rhythms. What you get out of it all depends of course on the style and the level you choose to take it to.

One thing we often forget to mention about dancing is its social aspect. It has in the past been a way for people to meet and bring communities together. Have you ever thought that some of us may not be here if our parents hadn't met at the local dance?

#### Is there much scope for a career in commercial dance in your genre in NZ - what needs to happen for it to grow?

Ballroom dancing has predominantly been known as a social dance form and then as the competitive Dancesport. In 1999 we saw the world premiere of *Burn the Floor*. This truly brought the dance form into the area of commercial entertainment.

In New Zealand at the moment a dancer wishing to make a career in ballroom dancing other than teaching is limited unless they are versatile dancers and wish to combine teaching with performance. Having said that, with the success of DWTS, the opportunity is there for someone wishing to develop this area. Primarily all they need to keep in mind is that to be commercial it needs to be thought of as an entertainment. One company that has ventured into this area is the Candy Lane Dancers. Due to Candy's extensive background in dance, work in theatre, good sense and management she has been able to combine ballroom and Latin American dance with other dance styles to produce shows with variety that are entertaining. I often feel we need to give commercial dance more credit as it is out there at public events, corporate functions, product launches, keeping dance in the public eye.

#### What has happened since the show, have you and Beatrice been invited to perform?

Since the end of the show Beatrice and I have been approached to perform at a variety of events as well as make appearances. Just recently, along with some of the other celebrities and dancers from DWTS, we were invited to attend the NZ National Dancesport Championships in Auckland where we presented some of the awards. The response from the dancers and spectators towards Beatrice and myself was great, more than I had expected, and it has created a bit of a profile. You are aware of people looking at you thinking "is that Brian from Dancing With The Stars?" and some are a little braver and ask.

Other engagements coming up include appearances in the Auckland TEMPO Dance festival in Chance to Dance and on September 23rd Beatrice and I will be dancing at the "Feet with Heat Dance Extravaganza" at the Michael Fowler Centre, for the Wellington Dance your Socks Off Festival. I have also performed with Candy just recently at Epsom Normal Primary School fund-raiser, where it helped to create interest and bring people along. They managed to raise \$17,000 for the school with the Art auction.

The demands now are to create work and to use the profile from the show to help keep dance out there in the public eye.