

Interview with Director Susan Glatzer on “Alive and Kicking”

Alex Kecskes April 4, 2017

Swing Dancing started in the streets of Harlem in the late 20s and early 30s during the depression. Louis Armstrong provided the sound, Count Basie provided the beat, and Duke Ellington advised, “it don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”

No matter what troubles they face in their lives, swing dancers are filled with joy, exhilaration, and even giddiness while they dance. Boiled down to its core, Swing Dancing is about the pursuit of happiness.



In this one-on-one interview, director Susan Glatzer offers some insights into why and how she decided to bring *Alive and Kicking* to the big screen.

What prompted you to create *Alive and Kicking*?

Susan Glatzer: Swing Dancing was always a passion of mine. As a film executive, I’ve also been a Lindy Hopper. I’d go to film festivals around the world and I’d find the local dance community. So I was in an event in New Orleans and it just hit me: somebody’s gotta make this movie!

Can you go into the historical perspective of Swing Dancing, including Frankie Manning and Norma Miller?

Susan: We were just so thrilled to have them be a part of this film. Lindy Hop started in Harlem. It evolved from some earlier jazz dances. Frankie Manning and Norma Miller were really there for the beginning, when Lindy Hop came into its own. To have them share their experience in all of that and talk about it in the film was such an honor.

It all started in Harlem during the depression, so the music and the dance were really about elevating oneself beyond one’s circumstances. Back then, people and the country were having a hard time, but you could go out for a few hours and not have to think about the hard times. You felt happy and connected to people. It just gave you those moments of relief that we all need. Swing continued to be popular through the war, and then the GIs spread the dance to different places around the world.



Norma Miller



Frankie Manning

Can you explain Swing Dancing's resurgence in the mid-90s and the events that led up to it?

Susan: There was the movie *Swing Kids*, and then *Swingers*, which showed people dancing in The Derby, a famous venue in Los Angeles. And then the Gap commercial really got people dancing. Also, in 1998, the SuperBowl halftime show was a swing dance. So hopefully, this movie will bring back a revival on top of a revival. I can tell you that the revival of swing dancing has lasted longer than the original craze.



from Alive and Kicking

Besides being a great workout, what are some other benefits of Swing Dancing?

Susan: One reason I think Swing Dancing is so needed right now is that it forces you to put down your smart phone, shut down your computer and physically join other people in another space. You meet up in person and you connect on a human level. You're touching people and being touched in acceptable ways. And we don't do that anymore. Cellphones are great but they can't give you a hug or swing you out. In this time, when we're becoming so distrustful of our neighbors, when there are so many things dividing us, Swing Dancing allows us to put our differences aside and get together on a human level.



from Alive and Kicking

Swing Dancing started in the black community in Harlem, so why aren't more black kids today Swing Dancing?

Susan: They're just kids and they don't really know about the dance. I'm hoping they see this movie and say, "hey, that's really cool." The other thing is that it's important for young black kids to know that this dance belongs to them, it's their heritage. Swing is not in their everyday sphere of influence. The great thing about Lindy Hop is that you can do it to any four-four beat, even to Rap music. In fact, the main Hip-Hop comes from Lindy Hop, which is very street oriented. There are a lot of moves in Hip Hop.



The DecaVita sisters

Why did you choose to include the DecaVita sisters in your film?

Susan: I saw them perform and I could not believe that Rebecca was flowing such air. She was throwing Emelie around as well as any guy I've ever seen. Then the whole sisterhood angle was interesting.

They were psychologists who legally adopted each other as sisters, which I thought was interesting, since they had something to say about what Swing Dancing does to your head as well as your body.

Susan: They feel that getting out of your head, getting together with somebody and relating to a person in a physical way was a far better way to make people happy.



from Alive and Kicking



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One of the biggest Lindy Hop organizations in the world is in South Korea. Why is that?

Susan: There was a Korean-American guy who learned Swing Dancing and Lindy Hop. He would go back to Korea all the time and show his friends, and it literally spread out from their friends. There was also YouTube and things going viral. But in general, when Korean, Asian, Scandinavian and other more button-down cultures discover this dance, it's like opening up a Pandora's Box and they go nuts. In fact, Sing Lim, who is in Singapore and in the movie, was telling me that she had to teach a class for Chinese people on how to be spontaneous. And they would ask her, "Is this where my hand is supposed to be when I'm being spontaneous?" Once you give them the freedom to express themselves in a socially acceptable way, look out, because they will be the most awesome bad-ass dancers.

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