



life of the city

by lynn mickelson

Not dancin' to the music

We Minnesotans can resist the beat like no one else

It was a classic Southwest scene: Lake Harriet bandshell all lit up on a warm summer night; jazz singer Vicki Victoria and her band on stage and swinging; the lake a perfect backdrop, deep and still.

Just like the audience ... deep and still. As in motionless. As in you'd never know we were listening to a rocking rendition of "Wild Women Don't Get the Blues."

"Let see if we can get some dancers up here," Victoria called and a couple hundred people froze in shock and horror. It was as if she had asked us to commit an act of mass insanity, to come up and drink the Purple Kool-Aid.

No one moved.

I'm from Minnesota. I shouldn't even be surprised. But still. ...

What is wrong with us? Are we the only place where hundreds of people can listen to great, live music, night after night, and just sit there, resisting all rhythm and primal instincts? I mean, it's a terrific location, summer is short, the music is free. So why aren't we dancing?

Okay, for the record, I sat there too. I told myself it was because the dog was with me and he had just gone swimming in Lake Harriet. If I got up and danced, he'd dive into the audience — and what could be worse than a wet, friendly retriever bounding through a crowd? Yet if I dragged him with me he'd cower because the music was too loud — and what could be more pathetic than a woman dancing with a deeply unhappy dog?

But I was rationalizing. What bound me to my bench was far more powerful than a wet retriever. According to Vicki Victoria, "the genetic make-up of many Minnesotans is such that it doesn't allow them to dance at concerts." Other musicians I interviewed agreed. DNA is a powerful thing, they said. Put that many Scandinavians and Germans together in one place and suddenly thousands of years of genetic conditioning converge and people literally can't move. It's as if the ancestors have shown up and are holding us down.

I'm from Scandinavian stock, so this theory rings true. (Note to readers: so don't even bother to write protest letters about Swedes who groove. These are my people and this is the country that gave the world Abba and their hit song "Dancing Queen." Case closed.)

But I believe there's more than genetics at play here. Ask people to get up and dance and it's as if an entire audience is transported back to high school. Suddenly, many people feel 15, which was usually not the best time of their lives. At a certain age, it helps to

realize that high school is indeed over and dancing is no longer about looking cool or being beautiful or having the right date.

Dancing is really about joy, surrender and embracing life; these are the gifts of childhood and of aging. Which is why children still dance with abandon and why the rest of us post-graduates should take it up again. Because we're finally developmentally ready. As columnist Dave Barry recently wrote, it took him until age 50 to learn this essential truth: "Nobody cares if you can't dance well. Just get up and dance."

Of course, Baby Boomers learned to dance during a time when rock and roll turned dancing into a solo form of personal expression. "So now it can be hard for shy Minnesotans to get up and dance," said Red Gallagher, a musician whose group plays rock and a variety of music at the band shell and other gigs, "because they think everyone is staring, watching them personally express themselves."

According to Gallagher, dancing might have been easier for an older generation. "I was watching the old Western, 'My Darling Clementine,' a couple nights ago," Gallagher said. "And there's this scene when Henry Fonda gets up in a bar and does a two-step number with his girl. And I did think how nice that Henry Fonda didn't have to stand up there all by himself and personally define himself with movement. He just did what he had been taught to do. And it was lovely."

And yet solo-style dancing does allow people to get up, with or without a partner, and surrender to the music. Which is what a three-year-old girl did earlier in Victoria's set. She danced wildly to a rumba-boogie and then blew the band a kiss at the end of the song. She wasn't being brave. She was being a toddler.

Later that night, as the frozen audience sat through "Wild Women Don't Get the Blues," a woman next to me suddenly stood up, left her mountain bike by the bench and motioned me to join her.

I pretended not to see her. I am often a fearless dancer. But that night, I felt too shy, too Minnesotan, too genetically Scandinavian. So I sat with the dog and the rest of the audience.

She danced all alone. She was at least 50. She wasn't beautiful or thin. She was wearing her bike helmet. I'd bet my life she was never one of the cool people in high school.

As I get older, I admire courage more than coolness. And there she was, in front of everyone, embracing the music and a perfect summer evening.

I've seen better dancers. But I haven't seen braver ones.