

Hepsters on the money

DANCE
Claire O'Rourke

If a Sydney swing fanatic calls you "hip", it's time to worry. As swing dancers and musicians will tell you, "hepster" means you are street smart and cool, but "hipster" says you just don't cut it.

And the hepsters are swinging out in Sydney, where a couple of thousand people cruise to venues across the city each week to spend evenings sweating it out on the dance floor.

Swing dance hit Sydney about five years ago, after the jazz music style resurfaced with retro fashions on the United States West Coast in the early '90s. The US scene emerged from the underground and migrated to the East Coast, where the musical *Swing!* is playing on Broadway.

And Sydney dance schools say interest is yet to peak.

Eleni Mitakos, the principal at Trocadero Dance, says East Coast swing is taught for slow romantic numbers and West Coast swing for the bluesy tracks. Jitterbug and

Lindy hop are fast-paced and physical.

Known as Miss Eleni to students, Mitakos describes the form as a freestyle street dance. "As a partner dance it doesn't have the restrictive techniques that ballroom does."

When it comes to being street-wise, Australian "kats" and "kittens" know the meaning of phrases like "it's the money" and "wall-to-wall cash", and have difficulty translating them to the un-hep.

They also draw aesthetic inspiration from films such as the 1996 hit *Swingers*, *The Mask* (1994) and *Dick Tracy* (1990), which have sharp, slick fashions and plenty of strong colour. The look stretches from the '30s, through World War II to '50s rock 'n' roll.

Serious swing guys on a night out wear dark or pinstriped suits, waistcoats and loud ties, cufflinks, tiepins and two-toned shoes. Hair is slicked back, and a heavy chain (which would be the swing chain) hangs from the hip. Girls wear black or red-collared vintage dresses that button down to a below-the-knee hem, and do

Kats and kittens ... going through the motions at Trocadero. Photo: Narelle Audio



their hair in 1940s victory rolls, or a French twist with a gardenia.

As Jaime Gibson, a saxophonist with the neo-swing band Radium Club Hepsters, says, contemporary swing music is inspired by US groups like the Brian Setzer Orchestra and Royal Crown Revue.

Jump-jivin' Jaime, Wise-Guy Mackay, Luscious Lady-K and the

rest of the seven-member outfit play covers of Cab Calloway's *Minnie the Moocher* and Big Bad Woodo Daddy's *Go Daddy-O* as well as their own tunes.

Sarah Young, 23, began dancing 18 months ago after the film *Swing Kids* (1993) sparked her interest.

"I've always loved jazz and

swing and it just showed me there were these amazing dance moves that went with it."

She describes a night out dancing as "revitalising" and says the moves are less showy than ballroom or salsa styles.

"It's just like going back in time; everybody puts so much effort into it."

FACT FILE

A style of jazz music, swing surfaced in the US about 1930 as New Orleans jazz declined. Big Goodman, Artie Shaw and Count Basie. As the swing grew, phrases like "getting off" were used to describe a night "in the groove". When asked Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller reportedly said: "I know what it is, don't mess with it."