

Walter (Wally) Laird

The master. Considered a dance giant with a brilliant analytical mind. Simply put, he was a perfectionist. That is how his contemporaries refer to Walter Laird. Harry Smith-Hampshire called him "The spiritual father of the Latin American dance development, and his book *Technique of Latin Dancing*, is 'the bible' for every aspiring Latin dancer." It has been adopted by the 67 member countries of the *International DanceSport Federation*, and a vast majority of professional dance teacher associations throughout the world have adopted it as the study book for examinations.

Vita

July 26, 1920 – May 30, 2002

Birthplace
Leyton, England

Father
Walter William Laird

Mother
Lillian Sophia Laird

1936
won his first competition in the jitterbug

1960
started to partner with Lorraine Rohdin Reynolds

1961
first published *Technique of Latin Dancing*

He was a trusted coach and mentor to many dancers and competitors and his instructions were so clear, his pupils absolutely knew he was correct. He used to say, "In my time, in reference to dance and technique, I did it every possible wrong way there was. I know what worked!"

Walter was born in Leyton, England where he went to school and later studied elec-

tronic engineering at a technical college. As a schoolboy, he started dancing with his sister Joan, and they won a jitterbug competition in 1936. He met his first wife Andé Ashcroft Lyons when he started working at the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough.

For many years, Walter worked on top-secret jobs designing cockpit instruments during the war. Andé, a shorthand typist, took dictation from various scientists, and one day was sent to work for Walter. At the end of the dictation he asked her if she liked to dance and she said "Yes." They made a date and Walter, who was an established well-trained dancer by that time, started to teach her. She passed her examinations, and they became Walter Laird and Andé Lyons, the famous professional dance team. They entered competitions and danced shows during the war. Eventually they teamed up with Frank and Peggy Spencer, toured the country doing shows and appeared on TV with Victor Silvester at his *Dancing Club*. In their competitive career they became Britain's first Eight Dance champions, and by 1955 were three times English Professional champions over eight dances, which were the waltz, tango, slowfox and quickstep, rumba, samba, paso doble and jive.

In the late 1950s their marriage came to an end and by 1960 the next pre-eminent partnership was formed: "Laird and Lorraine" (*See also Lorraine Rohdin Reynolds*). They won three *World Championships*, three *Europeans*, four *British Opens*, three *Stars*, four *United Kingdoms*, and four *International Championships* in the 1960s and redefined the style in doing so.

Being a scientist, Walter was able to analyze the physics of body movements. He found where the centre of gravity was in all movements in order to find the perfect balance for the two "bodies" and to better "partner," also known as leading the lady, "because her speed is ultimately dependent on the man's ability to lead," he would say. "Unfortunately, the art of leading is a dead art except for a few, and they are the successful ones."

During Lorraine's protracted illness with tuberculosis, Walter wrote his thesis, which formed the basis of his book *Technique of Latin Dancing* that was first published in 1961. In the chronicle to his book he writes, "Monsieur Pierre pioneered the introduction of the Latin dances in Great Britain, named many of the basic figures and wrote a technique book for the purpose of teaching these dances to the general public."

Since the early 1940s Walter was fascinated by Latin dances and their music. He studied the rhythms of these dances and developed a technique based on the principles used by him and Lorraine and other top competitors. For the first time, basic principles, positions and figures that had become fundamental to these dances were given a name. In following editions of his book more figures were added, renamed, and further technical analysis was carried out on such topics as timing, beat splits and much more.

Leonard Morgan wrote in his foreword: "Dismayed by the absence of a definitive work on the subject, Walter set himself the daunting task of writing this book. He imposed upon himself an immense responsibility that was beyond the capabilities of most dancers. To abandon outmoded theories and present the technique in a new and inspired format required a love of the subject, dedication, vast experience, a scientific mind and the courage of a missionary."

Walter codified the *International Style* of Latin dance. Theory and dance merged in his coherent insight into the dynamics of this new **competitive** style. But authenticity was always critical to him; he insisted on the use of genuine music and he always believed that dancers should devote much more attention and application to the fundamental principles of the dances.





Dance is the only art of
which we ourselves are the
stuff of which it is made.

Ted Shawn

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Later, Walter met Julie Gibson; they married and he always gave her great credit for all the help and advice she gave him during the last 20 plus years of his research and lecturing. (See also *Julie Laird*) Due to his contribution to Latin dance, countless associations throughout the world bestowed honorary membership upon him. He received so many awards for his service to dancing, they could fill volumes (two *Carl-Alan Awards* alone). He was founding member and president of the *Ballroom Dancers Federation*, its honorary secretary and delegate to the *British Dance Council* from 1973 to 1993 and the last of the "triumvirate," Walter Laird, Sonny Binnick and Bob Burgess. He was fellow, examiner and became executive counsellor of the *International Dance Teachers Association* in 1981 and served on many council subcommittees.

One of his favorite pastimes, besides dancing, was fly-fishing for salmon, which he enjoyed with much dedication, as did his wife Julie. Until illness intervened, Walter and Julie travelled the world lecturing, teaching and coaching. Julie's love and devotion doubtless extended his life. "I simply adored this man of Latin," she says. It seemed almost fitting that he died on May 30, 2002, during the Blackpool *British Dance Festival*.