

# Talkabout

What's new in science, motoring, books, retail and technology.

- 110 **TAP DANCING** / THE BARCELONA BEAT
- 115 **BRISBANE** / CITY HALL MUSEUM
- 120 **ABOVE & BELOW** / OCEANS EXPOSED
- 125 **BRIGHT IDEAS** / THYLACINE REBORN
- 128 **MOST WANTED** / FEELING THE BLUES
- 132 **TECHNOLOGY** / SPORT WATCHES
- 135 **BOOKS** / CHAPTER & VERSE
- 137 **MOTORING** / VOLVO S60 POLESTAR

La Rambla,  
Barcelona



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

## TURN ON THE TAP

As those heading to this month's Tap On Barcelona festival know, there's no business like toe business.

WORDS **RUBY BOUKABOU**

**WHILE MANY TOURISTS** flock to Barcelona for the tapas, others wing in for the tap. The Catalan capital is the New York of Europe for tap dance, with studios dedicated to the American dance form, professional companies producing shows and regular jam sessions in the city's parks and bars. And this month (July 22-28) the city pulses to the beat of the annual Tap On Barcelona Festival.

Barcelona is an explosion of colour, its frenetic energy and salty, humid air reminiscent of Sydney, where city and sea similarly collide. The broad La Rambla is abuzz with skateboarders, street performers and women spruiking local paella restaurants. A haven of sorts lies a few blocks to the east in the Gothic Quarter, a labyrinth of narrow alleys, once Picasso's stomping ground and the birthplace of modernism.

Something woven deep in the fabric of Barcelona celebrates creativity and passion. The city has embraced tap dancing, with the festival and now the Jimmy Slyde Institute, named for the late American tap legend. Tap On Barcelona is directed by local Basilio González, who wants to share tap's diversity. "It's so much more than Fred and Ginger."

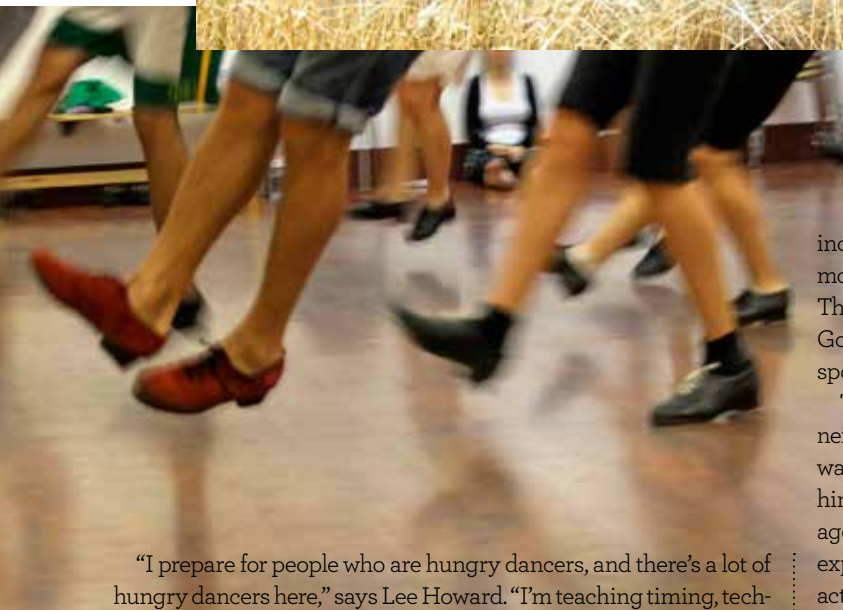
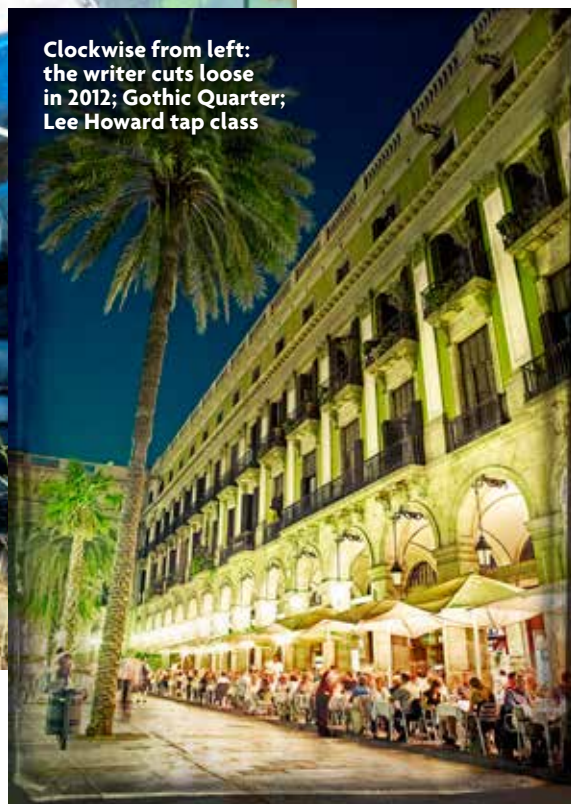
Dance films such as *White Nights* and *Tap*, both starring Gregory Hines, kept the genre alive through the 1980s and helped seed a huge mid-1990s revival with the Broadway revue *Bring In 'Da Noise, Bring In 'Da Funk*. Since then, tap has continued to develop, embracing new generations and styles including Australian Dein Perry's *Tap Dogs*.

Past participants at Tap On Barcelona have included American stars Jason Samuels Smith, Chloe and Maud Arnold and Jason Janas, German Sebastian Weber, French master Roxane "Butterfly" Semadeni and Spaniard Luis Melendez. Last year, the festival was in the centre of town at Luthier Dance Area, the new studios of local dancer Guillem Alonso. After training in New York in the mid-'90s tap boom, Alonso returned with the goal of teaching the technique he had learned there, creating a repertoire and starting regular tap jams with local musicians.

During the festival, tap classes run from 10am to 7pm, and beginners are welcome. Participants hail from as far afield as Norway, Israel and Australia, while past teachers have included "body percussionist" Thanos Daskalopoulos (Greece), Americans Sarah Reich, Cartier Williams and Lee Howard, and Jérémie Champagne (France). This year's festival features Michela Marino Lerman and Nico Rubio from the US. ➤



**Clockwise from left:  
the writer cuts loose  
in 2012; Gothic Quarter;  
Lee Howard tap class**



“I prepare for people who are hungry dancers, and there’s a lot of hungry dancers here,” says Lee Howard. “I’m teaching timing, technique, accents and musicality. It’s about understanding the music, dancing with the music. Tap is natural. It’s a language. You speak it.”

“You have to commit to the groove,” adds Cartier Williams, who learned tap at the age of four from his grandmother (a professional tap dancer) and performed at the White House just four years later in 1997. He danced with tap star Savion Glover, 16 years his senior, for 12 years before going solo.

“Stay in your bag, in your pocket; know yourself, your style, and you’ll pull through,” Williams advises competitors in the Thursday night cutting contest, where judges rate timing, skill and risk-taking.

“Tap dancers are musicians as well as dancers,” says Sarah Reich. “We have to understand the music we’re making with our feet.” It is not a shallow observation – in her music and improvisation class, students learn about syncopation and swing, and how to analyse the structure and phrasing of jazz and blues. Reich’s class is like a tap sauna with a delirious energy.

Every year, the evenings erupt with jam sessions; class participants and their teachers dance with local musicians in various bars,

including the Harlem Jazz Club. Improvisation in tap is both the most challenging and most liberating experience for many dancers. The festival closes with an explosive show by the tap teachers at the Goya Theatre. Walking home at 2am in the refreshing sea breeze, spontaneous dancing breaks out in narrow, graffiti-covered alleys.

The Jimmy Slyde Institute, housed in a small studio in the Raval neighbourhood, is run by Roxane Semadeni. The French tap master was christened “Butterfly” by Slyde himself, when she trained with him in the early 1990s in New York. Slyde hoofed his last in 2008, aged 80, dancing almost to the end. “As an artist, tap is the ultimate experience,” Semadeni says. “You don’t just do music, or dance, or act. You are all of it. You are the sound, the space and the time.”

Semadeni’s fusion style draws from the African-American tap masters, but also African and flamenco rhythms. However, as she explains, “there are no links between tap and flamenco other than the relationship of live dance and music, and the tradition of improvisation within the community.”

The Jimmy Slyde Intensive, six days of training in technique, musicality and repertoire, culminates in a stirring performance with Semadeni at the Palau de la Musica, the Carnegie Hall of Barcelona. But the magic also happens each evening, when students of the summer course congregate at the base of La Rambla or under the Peix, Frank Gehry’s headless golden fish at Barceloneta Beach. On the ferry dock, the beach walkway, a bridge on the waterfront, an empty stage on the roof of the museum – they rehearse and jam and are swept up in the rhythms, joining with the city soundscape.

“I love that there are no rules in tap,” says Cartier Williams, before departing for New York. “The possibilities are endless.”

✈ For afares and Barcelona holiday packages call Qantas Holidays on 1300 735 542 or visit [qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway](http://qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway)