



Larry's Corner

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Do you have any likes or dislikes, stories, or helpful hints for dancing? If so, write it down and give to Larry Ablin or Barb Johnson. We will add it to one of the future News letters.

If you would like to tell us how you became interested in dancing, write it down and give to Larry or Barb, we will add your picture with it and put it in one of the future Newsletters

Hitting the Breaks

All the top swing and C&W dancers always hit the breaks. If you're dancing for fun, hearing and dancing to the music will make it more fun. (It generally gets very appreciative responses from the ladies, too. My impression is that women as a group "hear the music" better than men do, but they're stuck with following whatever the guy is leading. When they get a partner who can hear the phrases and do something appropriate for many of them, they like it a whole lot.) If you want to be competitive, hearing and dancing to the music will, at the very least, give you an edge.

Many ballroom dancers do not keep to musical phrases. Most male ballroom dancers are too busy thinking of steps or dancing around the ones thinking of steps to worry about it. It can be done though - for example, since most non-classical waltz music is very predictable in structure, it is relatively easy to do a routine that fits the phrasing even with a limited repertoire of steps. Do eight measures of one thing and then start something different - particularly in social Viennese Waltz. One of the most difficult parts to leading is working out how many beats you've got to go before the break you know is coming, thinking of something cool to fill them and still hitting the break. This is not an easy task when you have to dance 10 different dances/musical styles. But with experience, one begins to really

dance. The steps become just the alphabet, not the language. Ballroom dancers learn patterns and partnering skills, ballet dancers do bar work, jazz and modern dancers each learn their canon of contortions. But the dancing doesn't reside in the vocabulary. Dancing is all about showing and exploring the music. A good dancer is like a musician doing an improvised solo, sometimes playing the melody, sometimes playing with rhythms and highlights, but always in tune with the song as a whole. Otherwise, what's the point? One can interpret the music by choosing figures that fit its phrasing or by reinterpreting figures depending on the music. Dancing done with the music looks better. In a lesson my partner and I had in Tango, I was told to alter the timing so that every sharp body action was on the strong 1 beat. From this I have now learned to change the quality of the action depending on where in the measure I wind up doing the action, thus allowing the timing to be very flexible. If you will dance a tango, quite deliberately missing all the strong beats and emphasizing weak ones: doing all the sharp actions on beat 3 and then again with the actions on beat 1. The dance will feel different even though it is the same song. (You can also show this by just offsetting the group by a bar: that would put strong actions on even bars) Then do the same Tango song dancing with the phrasing. It will feel the same to the follower, but what a difference to the observer! The phrased version looks sharper, clearer, and, well, just better. If the music were off, the two executions would have been the same, but with the music on, Dancing to the phrase looks powerful and in control, the other dancing to the beat is much weaker.

After you study musical interpretation a few months you will find that you can apply the principles a little at a time, and it will make dancing more fun (and your regular coaches happier).

You can dance a foxtrot during which you studi-

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ously try to perform every action 'correctly.' It will be on time, but unrhythmical. Then dance the same foxtrot and interpret each figure according to the music. From the point of view of phrasing, it means that you will do 8 different types of the same step depending on where in the phrase the figure falls. There are also lots of theories about dancing figures so that they form a rhythmic counterpoint to the music showing a bunch of closed promenades with very different interpretations. In retrospect, this was one of the most important lessons I have ever had. I started by just trying to remain conscious of odd and even measures while dancing, navigating, and doing all the other things we do. Within a few months, I actually started to get comments from judges I had never met before. I have since observed good dancers more closely, and I see this ability in the greats.

Partner dancing, and Swing in particular, has plenty of room for improvisation and expression. In fact, it's the whole point of the dance. All the steps just provide a framework to hang jewelry on. Over time, one does not have to concentrate all one's attention on the steps, and can free up the imagination and energy.

Once you become an accomplished dancer, when your mind and muscles have learned what, how, and when to do it, you have considerable freedom to express yourself whether you're Leading or Following. It's just as much fun to sit and watch at a Swing dance as it is to be on the floor. Everyone is doing the same thing, yet no one looks like anyone else. Why? Because each dancer is expressing the dance as an individual. When individuals change partners, the way the dance is presented can change so dramatically that you can hardly believe it's the same dancer you saw 3 minutes previously. The variety is limited to the total of dancers, partnerings, music, and magic. The rhythm of most music is NOT 1-2, 3&4, 5&6, or 1-2, 3&4, 5-6, 7&8. Even the "basic" 6 and 8-count patterns of WCS are a syncopation in that they vary rhythmically from the music. Part of the beauty of having the patterns shift position in relation to the phrasing in WCS is that you have the opportunity to accentuate different beats of the music. You have to admit, it would be incredibly boring to watch a routine made up entirely of 8-count patterns. In which case, the "natural" phrasing of WCS (assuming a 32-beat phrase) would be 4 6-counts and 1 8-count. Sure, there are all kinds of variations (2-count pop-outs from ham-

merlock, etc.), but the predominant count is still 6-count.

The fact that the music is 8 counts just means that on one move, you're accentuating "1", the next move "3", the next "5", etc. That's the beauty of the dance as far as I'm concerned.

In WCS, the more advanced you get, the more the dance becomes like communication and less like physical movement to music. In communication, phrasing affects meaning. If a 6-count move only takes you to count 30 of a 32-beat phrase in a song, advanced dancers (followers or leaders) are usually paying attention to the 2-beat deficit.

A 2-beat syncopation by either is then inserted and adds much to the physical expression of the music and the positive interaction of the couple. Breaks are a marvelous vehicle to break out of the mold and be creative. If you dance straight through them, you might as well be dancing to a drum machine!

Dancing to the ups and downs and ins and outs of the music is what it's all about. Dancing is the physical expression of the music that is playing, within the abilities of the dancers at the moment. Phrasing is only one aspect of the way the music feels, but it is one of the most measurable ones.

Some people seem to have a "natural" sense of phrasing. I don't think it's really innate, but more an ability to connect with the music at a level that requires no conscious effort. I see a lot of social dancers who are quite good at this, especially in social West Coast Swing. Obviously some have been trained to "hit the breaks" but some of them just seem to be with the music.

I find interpreting the music is easier if I sing along (internally of course). Counting to keep track of where one is in minor and major phrases is far too hard and ignores the individuality of a particular performance (or recording) of a song. I know so many competitors who can't tell you what song played as soon as they come off the floor because they never listened to it --- they just listened to the beat. I find my own dancing is less fun for me and my partner and that the movement looks very sterile if we're just counting.

Hitting the Breaks isn't done by memorizing long sequences of patterns (pre-arranged choreography) to go with particular songs, and it isn't done by memorizing (or writing down) the phrasing in

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the songs. After a while you should be able to listen to a blues number and, generally within one line of verse and certainly within two, tell you whether it's a 12- or 16-bar blues, and which line of the verse we're on. Listen to a lot of the music when you're off of the dance floor and not thinking about dancing, or try singing along with it. Try to be aware of the point/counterpoint, character, not just of the words of the verses, but also the lines of the melody. Once you feel where you are in the song, that will tell you, at some subconscious level, when the end of the verse will be. And that's all it takes. Let me give you an example of a related ability. Suppose I read to you the second line of a limerick -- almost any limerick. You'd likely know immediately that it was the second line. Why?

Well, from the words, it'll be clear that it's neither the beginning nor the end line; the number of syllables will tell you that it isn't the third or fourth; and the inflection with which these things are usually uttered will nail it down.

Now, quick: Do you know how many syllables there will be until the end? Not unless you stop and think about it.

But if I start telling you the limerick from the beginning, by the time you hear the second line, you'll have an idea of the rate at which I'm speaking; you'll likely have a good instinctive feel for when it will end. In fact I could mumble the rest of it, just saying

da-da-da-da-da-da da-da-da-da-da-da da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da

and you'd know when the end was imminent, just from the inflection. Note that you don't have to know the limerick in advance to be able to do this. The same sort of thing happens with music. And it similarly happens at a subconscious level. Most popular songs fall into one of about four different structures that are as standardized as are limericks -- the pieces of which are equally recognizable, even upon first hearing... if you know what to listen for.

Mastering this is a highly individual matter. Some people will take a long time to acquire this skill -- heck, some people take a long time to be able to know what the "beat" is, let alone hear it.

Most "breaks" happen at the ends of verses. If there was a break at the end of the first verse,

there will likely be one at the end of all the others, and almost certainly at the end of the last verse. Given that, then you can pull a pattern out of your bag of tricks that will allow you to hit the break

There are hundreds of swing tunes out there, but most of them are structurally similar with only minor differences.

The first thing you have to do is to be aware of the music: basic song structure, AABA vs. ABA-BAB and so on; twelve-bar blues vs. sixteen-bar everything else; etc. (a blues standard will generally have eight beats (two measures) with lyrics followed by eight beats with no lyrics. Repeat three times for a verse in twelve-bar blues.)

Listen to a LOT of music and really pay attention. (Playing it is even better, but if you don't already play an instrument you'd be taking quite a detour...) Study musical construction and soon you'll be hearing the breaks. A person who understands music construction and phrasing can hear a break coming, like a guy in a train station can hear a train coming down the tracks. If it's a 32-measure AABA song-form, do something different on the bridge. If it's a 32-measure bebop tune, be aware that there's probably going to be a two measure break at the end of the first head, and be ready for it! If it starts off in a shuffle groove and goes to a four chord at the fifth measure, you're dancing the blues and there may be a break at bar ten. You can't dance to the music till you know these and many similar things about swing music, and get them in your bones. Most "breaks" that you want to hit come at the ends of verses, chorus, or bridge, so you want to be aware of when these things are coming up. This isn't as hard as it may seem, because the phrasing in the lyrics and so on will often tell you. To hear when the breaks are coming, try listening closely to the bass lines. Think of each verse, (or bridge or chorus) in the song as a paragraph and the lines of each as sentences in the paragraph. You can tell, from inflection, etc., both in the words and in the instrumental section, when each "paragraph" is about to end. You can tell this even in a purely instrumental song, even if you come in the middle. The percussion will often build in certain ways leading up to a break. Part of the secret is that most songs are made up of repeated structures. Almost everything in American popular music (except 12-bar blues) is written in verses with four lines apiece; once you've heard the first

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verse, you know how long (in measures) all the rest of the verses will be. (In 12-bar blues, the verses are three lines long, and the second line is often a repeat of the first, though sung with different inflection.) Now, you don't have to count beats or even bars; you need only an approximate feel for how long a verse is, and then you can be aware of the cues (changes in the bass line, changes in the inflection on the vocals, etc.) that will tell you "last line of the verse coming up!" If the first verse is followed by a chorus, the second verse will be also; conversely, if the first verse isn't followed by a chorus, then the second verse will probably be followed by a bridge. And so on. Especially in swing music the breaks often fall into one of two types:

In the first four bars of each chorus (remember that a subsequent chorus can trip you up by not having a break, or having a slightly different one) or, in the turnaround (in which case there are a few possibilities and unless you know the song, you simply have to perk your ears in the first chorus to see where exactly the break, if any falls.)

Start doing this with songs that you've heard so many times that you've got them memorized. It helps if you can keep track of where you are in the music at the same time as you dance.

Since the 6 beat Swing basic doesn't always line up with the 4 beat/measure music, you need to identify a small number of patterns, already in your repertoire, that fit with various types of transitions in the music - patterns that can be stopped midstream in order to hit a break. Learn these for each basic move and you can hit all the breaks.

Start with just one or two and learn to lead them well. The "continuous whip" is a great step to use; when you hear the break coming up, keep pivoting until it happens - 8, 10, 12, 14 beats - whatever is needed - and break out of it into the dynamic "look at us" pose. A bit boring, but functional training wheels. Also try the basket into a hammerlock into basket into a hammerlock until the break arrives trick. Gear your movement to emphasize the downbeats (1,3,5,7). Learn how to stop each basic on the 5 count to hit a break. These, along with the body roll basic that can be done if the break happens on the count of 3, enable you to handle any break. Spinning your partner at climactic points in the music is also dramatic - just be careful not to start the spins too early.

For dances that do not line up with the music, like Country 2-step (a 6 count basic that is not as flexible as swing), try basic pivots during the vocals with a ladies turn at the end of a phrase if it lines up right, and a whip pattern with variations during the instrumental, maybe promenades with variations during the next vocal, and so on.

Now put the knowledge of song structure together with the knowledge of patterns, and....Ta Da - you are hitting the breaks! There are two basic families of dancing: phrased dances and pattern dances.

"Phrased" dances are dances like Waltz and Chacha (1 pattern takes two measures so you are always in phrase with the music) and "Pattern" dances which have basics that don't line up with the music (WCS, Country 2-step have 6 beat basics and are done to 4/4 music). Six-count dances do not divide neatly in the usual 32 beat phrases of pop or country music. Hence, build up phrases from 4 times a 6-count pattern plus one 8-count pattern. It isn't cheating to identify one or two songs that are played often at the studios, night clubs, whatever, where you dance frequently, and pre-plan some "moves". In fact this is probably a good way to get started. The work you put into hitting the breaks will make you much more aware of the music. Once you've learned how to actually dance to the music it will increase your appreciation of dance a hundredfold. There will be a lot of false stops and starts, but it's definitely worth doing.

After you learn to hit the breaks, you will start to appreciate and dance all sorts of musical phrasings. After a while it's as natural as breathing.

After you can hear the breaks, you have to decide what to do with them. One way of playing with it is to do nothing.

However, freezing is just the beginning. Anyone can freeze, but the WCS vocabulary is full of lots of wonderful things like syncopations, body waves, dips, and twists that can fill those four or eight beats much more creatively.

Freezing on the breaks quickly becomes a cliché, especially in songs that have lots of breaks, regular as clockwork, at the end of each verse and chorus. Too many people have apparently been taught that hitting a break always means a freeze. Hitting the break should be more correctly termed acknowledging the break. A good dance instructor once told me: a novice dancer

stops during a break in the music, but an advanced dancer acknowledges it. He or she plays the break. One can syncopate, strike a pose, kiss the partner or whatever the music or the mood fits. Just don't stop dead in the break. You want to express the fact that you recognize the break and are expressing yourself to it somehow. Here are some other means of expression:

Emphasize, with a tap, the last beat before the break.

End a dramatic movement, such as a spin, on the last beat before the break. Then use the break to regain composure.

Anticipate the break soon enough to get into a position for something dramatic to do during the break:

a syncopation,

a spin or a continuous series of turns

a lift

a body waves, flash movements, kicks, jumps... Take your hat off or some other type of hand motion. Do

something not in the typical for that dance style movement - execute a Latin or Cajun step in WCS for example.

End the movement before or when the break ends.

Use the break to set up a dramatic movement after the break.

In classes on "hitting the breaks" they mostly just teach you things to do on breaks, and maybe choreograph something to fit a certain piece of music. You can also learn a string of patterns ending in a break, all of different lengths, so that if you can work out how many beats you have, you can pick the right pattern and use it.

Going a bit further, it's also fun to change the character of the patterns I'm leading to match the mood of the song at the moment. For example, I often find that the beginning of an instrumental "bridge" is a good cue for a complex series of connected patterns. If a solo instrument picking individual notes, one per dance beat, is spotlighted (this often happens for two or sometimes two bars at the end of a bridge), a series

of "walking steps" seems to fit. And so on.

Remember, "hitting the breaks" is a long way from "musical interpretation". All the great dancers, swing or otherwise, agree that you need to become the music, not just dance to it. A deaf person should be able to look at you and understand the music, though they are not hearing it. In fact, if all you do is patterns, you're not considered a great dancer, no matter how wonderful your posture is, and no matter how complicated your patterns are. To be a great dancer, you have to be able to match your moves to the mood of the music, and above all else, **PLAY WITH YOUR PARTNER**

Swing music has an 'up' feel to it while blues has a 'down' feel to it. This is probably why swing dance took on an entirely different direction when people started dancing it to blues (WCS). The natural interpretation of swing music is to dance a little jumpily, while blues makes you feel like being a little slinky, with a few hip wiggles and stuff. As far as I know there isn't an exact science to it, but from things I've read there are a number of people out there who believe that different instruments and different rhythmic patterns make you feel like moving different parts of your body in different ways. Before the occurrence of "jump blues", swing music and blues music had an entirely different feel to it. With the popularity of jump blues, which retained enough of the structure of blues to still be called blues, I guess you could argue that people do sometimes like to interpret blues by dancing fast and jumpy. But it is really a different kind of blues.

If there is a conflict where one person is giving emphasis to phrasing and the other is giving emphasis to counting, whoever can adjust, should. Be advised that some leaders actually choreograph more than a couple of beats ahead.

What may seem like two beats to you on a minor phrase may have just set off the complete sequence the leader had in mind for hitting the major phrase you were entering.

Hitting the breaks also means not getting in every move / syncopation you know and hitting every phrase and break. Dancing in the music also means intentionally "ignoring" the third time you come on the same break and just acknowledging it.

On Leaders Learning To Follow And Vice-versa

Learning how to follow will enhance your ability to lead providing you properly digest and assimilate the "obtained data" from the experience. The same goes for followers who get a taste of leading. It manifests itself in better following. I took a teachers class where I learned to do both parts of each dance. Makes it much easier to lead and explain how to do the other parts and how to follow if you've done both yourself.

Knowing both parts is fun and can help you in many ways but I think its wiser to learn your own part well first.

Some dancers should know both parts. Teachers for example. Everyone who teaches should know both parts, not just know them, know them well enough to do them on a social dance floor.

I feel strongly that everyone should, at some point in their dancing (preferably after they have mastered their own part), learn the other side. I think it makes the leaders much more sensitive as a leader and also a better leader because they can feel what a lead should or shouldn't feel like from the followers side. The followers will learn (after they learn to lead) to cut the leaders a little more slack because they finally understand just how difficult it is to lead. They also will understand just how pleasant it is to dance with someone who truly follows and doesn't back lead, walk in or over syncopate.

I encourage my advanced students to come back through my courses as the opposite of what they normally do. I allow them to take the lower level classes for free if they want to do this. I can see a great improvement in their dancing.

It always amuses me when a leader who is learning to follow comes over and asks me to tell the leaders in class to stop holding on with their thumbs :-). (you must receive to believe)

I've had the good fortune to take lessons to learn the basics of both leading and following at the same time. And in part due to this approach, I felt I was learning much more rapidly than in any other type of dance I've been exposed to. Now it's possible that the somewhat different focus and character of Tango would cause this to work better than it would with, say, West Coast Swing, but it would at least be an interesting experiment to try with some open-minded novice dancers.

I think that it is best to learn both parts. It is very helpful for the man to know the woman's part and

for the woman to know the man's part for several reasons:

If a man teaches a woman (or if a woman teaches a man) he/she needs to know the other part in order to teach it.

If a man learns to follow (or the woman learns to lead), then each will have a better understanding of the other.

If a man learns to lead (or the woman learns to follow), then he/she develops a better understanding of how to lead/follow because he/she knows what it is like to be on the receiving/giving end of it.

Learning both parts increases the number of people with whom you are able to dance.

Learning both parts helps you to develop a better understanding of the "big picture". Your view is not as one sided. There are probably other benefits, but I think that the ones listed are enough to convince someone that is really dedicated to dance to learn the other part.

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We started a new Web site Bulletin Board, Photos and stories for Dancing.

If you have questions about dancing, learned a new dance step, have dance clothes or shoes you are not using and want to sell, or need you can use the Bulletin board.

If you want to see photos of Minneapolis, MN dancers, you can go to the Photo Gallery.

If you want to read dance stories they are under Headlines.

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Teach Beginners at Singles All Together dance class on Monday night, at Lenox center on Minnetonka Blvd in St Louis Park.

Teach at Singles All Together on Tuesday night 8pm at Medina.

Teach Ballroom at Jefferson Community Ed on Wednesday at 26th and Hennepin 612-668-2740

Lakeville Class Century Junior High 952-985-4610

Prior lake class Grainwood Elementary 952-440-2930
