

KEEP LEARNING

What are you doing to improve your dancing? What are you doing to continue to learn?

In almost four years in the swing dance community, I've seen a lot of dancers get really good. The scene in general boasts a level of dancing that goes far beyond what I ever thought possible. I also have seen many dancers stay just about the same over the years, and I have even seen a few get worse. "How?" you might ask. Isn't just dancing a lot enough to get better?

Well, yes - sort of.

I am writing this to all those dancers who are a little like me. I love to dance—I love it more than I would have predicted possible when I started this crazy journey. However, I am not usually content to just do something. I enjoy getting better. I love to learn. With that in mind, I'd like to present some ideas on how to do just that.

In the beginning, simply dancing a lot, taking a few classes, and listening to swing music will help anyone improve. I cannot emphasize the words of Chad or Paul or Rob or Frankie enough: You gotta put in some miles.

Eventually, though, most of us do reach a plateau. Those who have been dancing awhile will know exactly what I'm talking about. It's the time when you no longer seem to learn something new every time you get on the dance floor—when you've mastered Charleston and can't seem to break out of your rut.

I don't know whether this happens more to leads as opposed to follows, but I have heard both talk about it. I get sad to see so many people settle. When good dancers get stuck in ruts that they never seem to break—swingouts that have no frame or that end up looking like circles, static upper bodies, or sloppy, attention-grabbing moves that inhibit them from getting better—they also hurt their ability to learn over time. So, how do you get out of this kind of rut? Following are few strategies. I have fallen into every plateau trap I just mentioned, and I am sure I have many more to encounter. I also have tried all the strategies below with varying success. Once you have found what works for you, it's in your hands to make your dancing grow.

First, the obvious:

DANCE WITH DIFFERENT PEOPLE

This was a hot topic on the sfswing email list some time ago. I didn't contribute anything then, so now you get to hear it here. When I started dancing, I did not have a partner. For over a year

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and a half, I went out, often by myself, and danced with whomever I found. This takes a certain amount of courage, granted, but then so does good dancing.

Having a partner is good (I have one now), but a partner alone will not make your dancing better. Only you can make your dancing better. Having a partner accelerates the learning curve and gives you someone with whom to practice choreography. But remember that topic of ruts? Well, nothing brings on a rut like dancing with the same person too much.

Follows should try to be able to follow anyone. And leads should try to always make their leads clear, no matter who they are dancing with.

Remember, leads, if the follow doesn't catch the lead, it's often the lead's fault.

TAKE MORE CLASSES AND WORKSHOPS

This seems incredibly obvious to me. However, I can't count the number of conversations I have had with people who hint that they are beyond taking classes. I don't believe that it's possible to be beyond classes. Even the world's best still take classes from Frankie Manning.

I think that intellectually, most people concede that there is always something new to learn, but it has to show up in practice to count. Some of the best teachers in the world hold workshops year-round. If cost is an issue, just talk to the teachers or the people running the workshop. If you really want to learn, I guarantee there is someone who will help you.

TAKE PRIVATE LESSONS

At some point, the only way you can improve is to get coaching. Imagine an athlete trying to make the Olympics without a coach! I can't think of a single dancer whom I respect who has not taken private lessons. First, take some privates from people you admire. Ultimately, it pays to take a few privates from a variety of teachers. There are a million ways to swing, and the more influences you absorb, the better able you will be to identify your own style.

TRY TO LEAD AND FOLLOW

Learn to do the opposite part. If you are used to leading, trying to follow is really challenging. Learning the other part will help you in more ways than you can count. One word of caution: just because you are good at one, don't assume you'll be good at the other. Approach it with an open mind and a willingness to look stupid.

MODEL GOOD DANCERS

Look at the dancers you admire. I mean really look closely. What do you see? A cool move? An interesting variation? Those are fine to notice—but look closer. Where is their hand on a tuck

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turn? How high are their elbows? How closely together do they hold their knees? How much do they move around the floor?

By looking at the details, you will begin to build a greater appreciation for where you can improve. Try to imitate exactly at first. I don't mean that you should steal unique moves. Rather, try to exactly imitate that dancer, in everything you do, down to the last detail. Out of that effort will come revelations about where you can grow.

PLAY "YOU GO, I GO"

This comes directly from Eddie and Eva of The Rhythm Hot Shots. They did a wonderful exercise in one of their fall '97 workshops. Do several swingouts in a row. On the first one, have the follow do a variation. For the next one, have the lead attempt to do the same variation. After a couple like that, switch so that the follow imitates the lead. This exercise is not only a ton of fun, but also very good for insight. If you are doing it right, it should feel pretty uncomfortable. That's good.

And finally—

VIDEOTAPE

There is nothing more brutal than videotape when you have a critical eye. I hate seeing myself on video. Still, it is one of the best ways to improve. Look for only a few things you want to improve each time you watch, and remember, this is all about having fun.

If you have other ideas or tips that have worked for you, send 'em on and I'll add them to my growing list (with credit going where credit is due, of course).

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