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West Coast Swing!

Dance Jam Etiquette

Although dance jams can be run by appointed individuals, I think they are most fun and exciting when the jammers themselves spontaneously run the jam. When dancers lose the ability to non-verbally negotiate dance jams, DJs and emcees step in and orchestrate the activity. When the jammers organize themselves, the non-verbal communication between the dancers can be almost as entertaining to watch as the dancing itself. To that end here are a few tips for both dance jam observers and participants.

Observers' Responsibilities

1. People first to form the circle regulate the circle size so that everyone who wishes to observe can have a reasonable view. The circle should be formed with people standing shoulder to shoulder, and it should be big enough to encircle a dancing couple with adequate room for movement, without being so big as to make the couple feel disconnected from the observers.
2. Height determines where observers stand. So that the maximum number of people have a view of the circle, tall observers usually position themselves behind the shorter observers. Sometimes avid observers will even sit on the floor at the inside of the circle so as not to miss seeing the jammers' footwork.
3. Observers verbally encourage dancers as they enter, perform, and exit the center, but take care not to distract or embarrass performers into making mistakes.
4. Observers politely make way for dancers behind them who wish to perform.
5. Observers usually clap on the upbeats (even beats) in time to the music. This adds energy and helps the jammers stay connected to the observers.
6. Observers at the inside of the perimeter show their appreciation to exiting jammers by helping the couple find space to observe when they are done performing.
7. Although observers often encourage individuals to perform, they always respect the wishes of those who indicate a sincere desire to simply observe.
8. Since many jams are recorded, observers avoid blocking the view of any camera and monitor their language and behavior accordingly.
9. Observers verbally express their appreciation to the dancers performing in the jam as everyone loves a compliment, especially all the dance hams who jam.

Participants' Responsibilities

1. Dancers wanting to join a jam should watch at least one entire dance jam before attempting to participate. Understanding how the dancers queue up in line to dance is an essential part of the equation, as well as knowing how long to stay, and how to make a graceful entrance and exit.
2. Eager participants signal their readiness to participate by standing in closed dance position. This is a signal to others in the circle that a couple wants to enter the jam.
3. If the emcee is calling couples out, couples wait to be invited before entering the jam.
4. If the jam is regulated by the dancers, jammers catch the eyes of the other dancers who have indicated a wish to dance in order to determine the order of dance.
5. Couples who wish to enter a jam from the outside perimeter of the circle need to be especially considerate of the people they are trying to get around. A gentle tap on the shoulder and a polite "Please excuse us" indicates a couple wishes to pass observers to prepare to dance.
6. When in doubt about which couple has the right of way, considerate jammers give way to the other couple. Ideally, the right of way goes to the couple who has been waiting the longest, is in a position slightly inside the circle, and has clearly indicated they believe they are next in queue. Sometimes such a couple will give way to a couple who is clearly more talented and a crowd favorite. If a couple isn't sure if they are next up, they should wait. Sometimes a couple uneducated in the etiquette of jams jumps in ahead of everyone in the queue. When that happens, the knowledgeable couples give up their place in line consoling themselves by giving each other knowing looks that indicate they are in control of the jam and are politely accommodating those that don't yet know the rules. These dancers know that the crowd won't disperse until all the good dancers have had a turn, so they can afford to be polite.
7. When a couple is ready to exit a jam they leave the circle opposite to where the next couple is entering so as to not interfere with their entrance. As a result, the circle is never empty, and couples never collide.
8. Once a couple is in the circle, it is helpful to keep the dancing centered. This is especially important if the couple plans to execute lifts and aerials!
9. Dancers stay in the circle for a short period of time. Jamming for longer than 20 seconds is considered rude unless the dancer is a featured dancer (it's their birthday jam, or they are a visiting instructor). Usually such dancers know exactly when to exit-leaving the crowd wanting to see more of them. If a couple is being replaced before they have had a chance to get their best moves in, they exit anyway and then remember to perform their best tricks sooner the next time they participate in a jam. (If a couple is truly entertaining, the crowd will encourage the couple entering to wait and insist that the couple in the center stay a little longer.)
10. Although leaders may exit whenever they feel their time is up, sometimes a leader may overstay the couples' welcome to the dismay of their partner. Followers who feel they have extended their time in the spotlight may tell their leaders they want to leave. If the leader does not exit, followers may initiate an exit by dancing out of the circle on their own at the next available opportunity (i.e. free spinning to the edge). At that point, the follower-less leader will be obliged to make room for another couple.
11. Considerate jammers usually enter the jam only once if there are many dancers who wish to participate. If there are relatively few dancers who are performing, it may be appropriate to go out more than once. In that case, returning dancers should enter the jam with a new partner so the audience can see a variety of dancers. If a dancer goes out a third time they usually use that opportunity to demonstrate a different dance.
12. Savvy parents allow their children to jam only once. Juniors should be careful not to monopolize the jam unless they've been invited to be showcased. As in general social dancing, any adult showcasing a junior should be especially cognitive of the age difference and adjust all choreography to be age appropriate.
13. Once a couple is finished performing, they should attempt to insert themselves into the perimeter of the circle in a manner that is least likely to block the view of those who were already positioned to observe.
14. If the music stops at any time during a couples' performance, even if they have just begun to dance, experienced jammers immediately stop dancing and back out of the circle. It's better to have the

emcee/crowd invite dancers to stay and dance to a new song then to find out that the crowd is disintegrating into general dancing during the middle of their "performance".

Hope these explanations help clarify a few things regarding dance jams, and make your social dance jam experience a little more fun and interesting!