



Kelly Casanova

West Coast Swing!

Give Me a Break!

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During the last couple of years it seems that “hitting the breaks” has become a bit of an obsession with intermediate level swing dancers. The questions I receive from students regarding this topic lead me to believe that many dancers see hitting the breaks as a black or white situation-either you hit them or you don’t; either you’re a good dancer or you’re not. Since life rarely is that simple, I thought I’d share my experience of learning to hit breaks. My personal evolution consisted of many phases, and continues to this day-several years after first penning this article! My hope is that by sharing my own somewhat pathetic journey, others will be encouraged with their own progress in musical interpretation. At the very least I’ll settle for smug amusement when readers see how much more sophisticated they are at whatever stage they are at than I was when I first started to dance.

On a scale of 0 to 10...

Zero.

I don’t even notice that there are breaks in the music, let alone accents, phrases, and heaven forbid-lyrics. I spend most of the dance counting and trying not to step all over my partner. Although I’m not even sure which beat to start on, I seem to have fun in spite of myself. Ignorance is bliss.

Minus One. (Yes I know the scale is 1 to 10, just poking fun at myself!)

I’ve discovered that there are breaks in the music and they irritate me. I think it is rude of the musicians to stop playing the music because it makes it hard for me to keep track of which count I’m on while I’m attempting to execute (proper choice of word!) a simple push break. The nerve of those pesky musicians!

One.

I notice that instead of being perturbed by the breaks, other dancers seem to enjoy them. They appear to be “interrupting” their dancing to pause when the music pauses. Although I can’t for the life of me figure out how they know when to stop and go, the concept begins to intrigue me. Are we amused yet?

Two.

A fellow dancer explains breaks to me and how dancers can learn to anticipate their frequency by subtle shifts in the music and lyrics. I actually start to listen to the music and find that I now realize I'm missing breaks only eight beats after they hit. Go me.

Three.

I discover that the more I listen to the lyrics the easier it is to anticipate the breaks. Although I still can't understand everything being said in the song, I now realize I'm missing the breaks as they happen. Cool.

Four.

I can now anticipate a break just before it hits. I still have absolutely no clue what to do, so I still miss it, but at least I knew I was going to miss it before I miss it, so hey, that's improvement, and I'll take it.

Five.

I can feel the break coming farther in advance. Although I still don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do about it, I do something anyway that doesn't really work because it has nothing to do with the music and I get off time. But since I'm eventually able to get back on time and I kinda-sorta hit the break, I'm thrilled.

Six.

I've learned how to "strike a pose" so I can now hit breaks and look pretty decent. Of course I still can't transition back into dancing so I look like I'm playing a solo game of "red-light, green-light," but at least I feel like I'm in the same sandbox as all the big kids.

Seven.

I can actually hit a break with a decent pose, and follow it with a body movement or footwork variation to resolve the break and "restart" my dancing without getting off time. Of course I hit the same pose every time, and do the same resolution every time, but hey, what do people expect after only four years of lessons?

Eight.

I can feel a break coming in time to set something up that acknowledges the break without feeling like I'm completely interrupting my dancing. I can transition from the break back into the next move, and I usually do something that fits with the music. I no longer repeat the exact same thing every time. Life is good.

Nine.

I can hit breaks even when dancing to songs I'm unfamiliar with. I sometimes choose to ignore a break in the music whenever I feel it's appropriate to do so. (Ever try to hit all the breaks in "I Ain't Drunk, I'm Just Drinking"?). I'm sooo cool I don't have to hit the breaks.

Ten.

While listening for the major breaks in the music I discover that there are "mini" breaks, or accents, in the music that are much more subtle than the major ones I've been trying to hit. I spend a lot of my energy listening for those subtle shifts and adapting my dancing to mesh with the music as a whole rather than just focusing on

hitting the major breaks. As a result, I almost always “hit the break” without trying so hard. I rock.

One.

I’m a more experienced dancer now so I switch parts to learn to lead. I find that I’m so busy trying to think about what to do next that I find it impossible to listen to that noise in the background-what is that called? Oh yeah, music. Breaks aren’t even in my vocabulary as yet. Only the best, most assertive followers are able to back lead me into hitting a break. I’m now a rank beginner AGAIN. I go back to Step One. I do not pass GO. I do not collect \$200. Oh well, at least I know I’m trainable...

In summary, being able to “hit the breaks” does not make or break a dancer. Although understanding and reflecting the music is important, a lot of other variables go into making someone a good dancer. Social skills, technique, teamwork, choreography, syncopations, body isolations, and all the other skills that make partner dancing simultaneously incredibly satisfying and incredibly frustrating are important too. If you can see an improvement in any area, no matter how small, celebrate it! Dancers will always set new goals and challenges, but as we achieve success in even just one area, our ability to enjoy dance will increase dramatically in other areas as well. If anyone reading this feels inadequate or discouraged because they feel they will never get to the level they want, just remember to take it one step at a time. The most important thing is to enjoy yourself, your partners, and the music. Focusing on that, we can’t but help improve our skills. So keep it positive, keep it fun!

Step ?

In 1997 when I first wrote this article I ended it at this point. Since then, I’ve realized that with regards to breaks what I really admire in great swing dancers is their ability to simply acknowledge a break without having to “go outside the dance” to do so. In other words, instead of “interrupting” their dance to pose and follow up with freestyle, many swing dancers today are able to maintain the integrity of their swing pattern (walk, walk, triple, triple for example) while dancing through the break. The way in which they do so demonstrates that they hear the break, and acknowledge it, but are able to continue to “swing” instead of go for the pose + freestyle method. I love dancing with these folks as they are constantly teaching me new ways to hear the music. In the past I thought some of these characters just didn’t hear the break at all. I guess that would have put me back at level Minus Two? J