



Kelly Casanova

West Coast Swing!

"It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" Part 1

For many years I have been commenting on what I believe to be a lack of swing content in Classic and Showcase routines on the West Coast Swing dance circuit. As a judge, I often make notations on my sheet and give verbal feedback regarding this trend. I feel like I am like the proverbial boiled frog who, when thrown in boiling water jumps out and saves itself, but put in cold water that slowly heats up to boiling constantly tries to adjust to the incremental changes until it boils to death. Well, this boiled frog has resurrected and has officially jumped out of the pot.

I started dancing West Coast Swing in 1980 when most of the dances I attended were band dances and most of the people attending were over 50. Several of the Bay Swingers told me at that time they thought their dance was going to die out until they saw a group of us from the UC Berkeley Swing Club attend their dances. At that time, David Anderson and I were teaching beginning lessons on campus and had hired our instructor, Tony Genero, to teach intermediate classes. Many of the people in those original classes, including Nick Lawrence, Art Snyder, Marla Bach (Saltzine), Alvin Low and many, many others formed a critical mass of younger people interested in the dance who later formed The Next Generation Swing Dance Club. We started dancing to live bands playing syncopated swing music; we also danced swing to the popular music of the time, disco or hustle music.

One of the really wonderful things about West Coast Swing is its ability to morph according to the popular music of the time, while still being completely relevant to its original music. Over time, however, I believe this evolutionary benefit has created a dilemma. As popular music evolved to include funk, rap, techno and the like, so much of the dance has changed that many of us don't recognize what we see on the dance floor as West Coast Swing. In the 90's many of us judges used a term called "Swustle" to describe what we were seeing on the competition dance floor in Showcase. These couples chose hustle music for their routine, used checks instead of anchors, and exchanged places with one another instead of using the traditional format of the leader staying in the middle of the slot allowing the follower to dance from end to end. We often penalized such couples for lack of swing content. As I recall, we never had this problem in the Classic division.

Over time, I personally felt a lot of pressure by contestants who were pushing the envelope

to have a creative edge over their competitors to accept "new" choreography as swing. Since I have always tried to expand my knowledge of the dance and remain current even when not competing, I made an effort to integrate much of the newer choreography into my definition of swing. At times, I have spoken out about what I have perceived as a lack of swing content in routines, but most of the time I was a minority voice and my scores as a result were out of line with many other judges. In an attempt to stay "current" and relevant as a judge I am guilty of going along with the pack and accepting many routines as swing that I felt really didn't capture the essence of the dance. This dichotomy has led to a great deal of angst and frustration over the past 5-10 years.

Since I fully accept responsibility for contributing to the problem, I feel compelled to make an effort to contribute to a solution. I feel like I have betrayed my dance in order to be accepted as relevant by many of the top competitors. I am not so egotistical to think that I'm a major source of the problem; I am just one of many, many cogs in the machine that has created the problem our community now faces. Some other contributing factors are that the Country & Western community included West Coast Swing as one of their competition dances and so a huge Country influence affected the West Coast community. In addition to the music changes, competitors have been rewarded for creativity and so each year they have pushed the envelope further to please the audience and judges. Promoters changed rules so that the Champion or Invitational dancers did not have the required swing content percentage that all the other divisions required because they wanted a "show"; the exact phrase they used to competitors was, "Anything goes."

The competitors found that entertaining the audience became more appreciated than good swing dancing, so they continued to push the envelope-many times crossing the line between good taste and good dancing into an area that I have found offensive on many levels. Personally, I find good swing dancing extremely entertaining. I would much rather watch great swing dancers (Mario Robau, Jack Carey, Annie Hirsch, Sharlot Bott, Randy & Lisa Clements, etc.) dance six count pass patterns, pushes, and basic eight count whips all night long rather than much of the sexually explicit/suggestive, acrobatic, crawling on the floor antics that I see so much of lately.

I cannot really blame the competitors as they are just responding to the positive feedback from the audience, and sometimes judging panel, for this type of behavior. In addition, television show like "So You Think You Can Dance", "Star Search", and "Dance Fever" encouraged competitors to push the envelope to the point where I can't tell if a couple is doing West Coast Swing or some kind of contemporary Ballroom-Latin dance.

This problem has been years in the making. Many of us, including myself, sold our souls to get on TV. I remember my partner (Bob Rogers) and I deliberately choose to have me spend 60 seconds of our 90 second "Dance Fever" routine in the air performing aerials, and ripping off our "swing clothes" (my poodle skirt and satin jackets) to reveal punk outfits so we could incorporate punk and new wave moves into our routine because we knew that would be appealing to the TV judges. The big difference was that we KNEW what we were doing was "Flash & Trash" and would never try to take that kind of garbage into a serious swing competition as at that time it would only be appropriate for exhibitions aimed at non swing dancing educated audiences.

So what is the solution? The Lindy community had a similar dilemma several years ago when "Groove" style (basically freestyle) became a major part of their competitive and social scene. The Lindy community was able (with much internal conflict) to knit their community back together and incorporate the groove style without losing their traditional dance. I think it is a little too late for the West Coast Swing community to do the same. Instead of trying to merge the two vastly different styles, perhaps it is time for a new dance to be identified. After all, at one time the Lindy community felt that some dancers were dancing a style so far from Lindy that those dancers should have their own dance, and West Coast Swing was born.

I have heard a several names used to describe this new form, "Contemporary Club" dancing, and "Contemporary West Coast" to name two. Our Swing competitions can keep traditional Classic, Showcase, Strictly Swing, and Jack & Jill divisions and simultaneously offer this new division to people who want to dance to contemporary music using creative non-Swing choreography. Keep in mind that most of the people that would opt to dance in the new division are phenomenal Swing dancers as well, and would be encouraged to compete in both the traditional as well as contemporary competitions. I think this type of division would best be offered at events where a precedent has already been set by offering Lindy, Salsa, and Hustle divisions along with the traditional West Coast Swing divisions. I would be happy to continue to judge the traditional West Coast Swing divisions and am more than willing to step aside so that others who are more educated in the newer form may set the standards for that particular division.

My biggest fear is that this new form is pushing out the traditional dance so that I have nowhere, and no one to dance with. Already I find myself at a loss when a leader asks me to dance "West Coast Swing" and then proceeds to run back and forth around me, leads no six or eight count patterns, encourages 2-12 beat extensions, and leaves me unable to dance using my basic understanding of the principles of West Coast Swing. So, perhaps we should encourage traditional dancers to keep their dance alive and celebrate the roots of West Coast Swing all the while encouraging others to develop their "Contemporary Club" dance, and those who want to do both feel welcomed in either group. My hope is that way we will all feel free to express ourselves in a manner that is comfortable to each of us. I just think it is time to acknowledge the fact that the Swing community is now dealing with two very different dances.