



Kelly Casanova

West Coast Swing!

"It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" Part 2- 10 years later!

"Can't we all just get along?" I remember Rodney King's question during the LA riots and that's what I'm thinking each time I log onto Facebook or receive mail from various swing bloggers. I find I can't even bring myself to read the current comments regarding swing content- not because I disagree with the content, but because the tone is so "Us versus Them" that I can't get past the negative tone of the writers to absorb what they are trying to say. I don't get it. "We" got our community to the point where it is at today, and if "we" don't like it, "we" should attempt to change it in a civil and respectful manner. Accusing and judging one another won't do anything but add fuel to an already ugly fire.

Almost a decade ago I wrote an article commenting on how I felt the essence of swing was being lost on the competition floor. Amusingly enough to me, it is now being more widely read today than when I wrote it, and people think I'm just now jumping on the bandwagon! Better late than never, I guess-but I wish people would realize that this has been an ongoing issue for many decades. Back then I wrote that the Jack & Jill divisions were looking more like Classic, the Classic divisions were looking more like Showcase, and the Showcase divisions were looking more like Cabaret. I believed then, as I still do, that the newer forms coming out of the then current swing competitions were exciting, interesting, creative, and definitely entertaining-but they weren't "swing". Boy did I get a lot of heat on that. Basically I was told that if I wanted to keep judging I should keep my mouth shut when it came to swing content and reserve my comments on my judge's sheets to referring to the degree of difficulty of the choreography or variety and contrast. I don't know if it is coincidence or not, but since I have continued to speak my mind the judging gigs have diminished over the years. 'Cest la vie. I can face myself in the mirror every morning because I know that I judge according to my conscience, not according to what I think will get me hired for the next year.

Let me be clear-I am definitely not claiming to be the first nor only person to raise this issue. I remember in 1988 when my partner, Dominic Yin, and I won the US Open Classic Division I had an "old timer" come up to me and say, "Your dance was very interesting, but it wasn't swing. You didn't even dance to swing music!" I was shocked, but interested. How could what we did not be considered "swing"? We had push breaks (although we called them sugar pushes), whips, left and right side passes, tuck and turns, and the vast majority of

our patterns were all 6 or 8 beats. Back then, being from the SF Bay Area and not being very well traveled, I didn't even know about bending, scrolling, and compactions like rock 'n' gos, let alone the European dances like Modern Jive (Franchised under the names of Ceroc, Smooth Jive, Leroc in Europe). But I did understand the comment about our music. Dominic and I picked a song that we liked (Peter Gunn), redone by a "new" group (the Art of Noise). It wasn't a typical R&B song, like the other contestants used. In fact, when we previewed it for all of our local pros and friends many people said they "hated" the music and thought our choreography was "weird". At that point we had to decide if we were going to the Open to win, or to show what we liked to do and what we could do. We chose the latter. No one was more surprised than me when we actually won. In retrospect, I think the judges were looking for something a little different and we happen to fit the bill. So here I am admitting that I am part of the problem. So what? Who cares which competitors pushed the envelope of creativity passed the tipping point to where the routines performed on the competition floor are no longer reflective of what the social dancers recognize as swing? It doesn't matter. As I said before, "we" got ourselves here, so "we" need to work together to make whatever adjustments are necessary. Same as when we dance with each other socially; each person does their best to adjust and compensate to show themselves and their partners in the best light and have the most fun.

It has always been the competitors' job to push the envelope of creativity; it has always been the judges' job to draw the line in the sand. Where did we go wrong? Here's a hint: I don't think it is the competitors' fault. The competitors have always done their job; in the 30 years I've been dancing I haven't yet gone to a competition where I haven't seen something new. I used to think it would eventually happen that I would come to feel jaded and that "I've seen it all"; but I'm now convinced that, blissfully, I will never cease to be amazed with new material by the competitors. I'm constantly seeing new ways of doing old moves, and seeing new moves I never thought could be done. It doesn't matter if the competitors are making the moves up themselves or stealing them from other dance forms-"it's all good". But is it all "swing"? That seems to be the real issue.

As far back as I can remember the swing community has always resisted efforts to standardize the dance. Each region of the country (back then WCS wasn't worldwide) had a unique way of interpreting the dance. The differences between the East Coast, Midwest, South (Texas), North and West Coast all had their own style, and not coincidentally, their own music. Within each of these areas, the styles were even more distinguishable down to a very local level. Not to leave out great pockets of swing dancers like in Phoenix or Seattle, I'll reserve my comments for areas I'm more familiar with. Back then, I could tell within a few seconds of dancing with someone if they were from Northern or Southern California, and if from Southern California if they took from Sonny Watson, Martin Parker, Bill Joslin, Phil Adams or Kenny Wetzel-just to name a few influential instructors. Many of us remember when there were only one or two conventions a year that we all attended. It was at these events that information on styles and idiosyncrasies and local nuances would be explored, shared, and discussed. It was great. Back then we all got along. Maybe some dancers left feeling "their" style of swing was superior, but I always felt that both my dancing and teaching benefited for having been exposed to some new ideas. I was very excited to bring back the new ideas and concepts I had learned to my students. It was truly a wonderful time to be a swing instructor.

So if it isn't the competitors fault, who are we left pointing fingers at? Well, instead of pointing fingers, let's just figure out where "we" went astray. Remember that comment from the old timer about my US Open win not being "swing"? I think it was really significant that he also commented on our choice of music. And here is where things get sticky. WCS is an ever changing dance because it is so versatile-that very versatility might be part of our challenge. Since we can dance WCS to anything in 4/4 time, standard or syncopated, we do. And if the "new", current, hip music isn't "swinging" then it is really hard to dance in a swingy way! If we look at the R&B music from the past, the structure is pretty clear: there's an intro, a verse or two, a chorus, bridge, or instrumental section, rinse and repeat. Oh, and throw in a couple of interesting breaks, accents, and tags. But even during the instrumental sections the percussion is still with us, allowing dancers to MOVE THEIR FEET to the music. In contrast, many contemporary songs have a different pattern: intro, verse, verse, chorus, (sometimes the chorus repeats), verse, verse, chorus (repeat chorus), and then---anywhere between 8 and 64 beats of lyrical music, and then back to the chorus to conclude the song. And guess what? Almost always in a standard 3:30 song, this formula puts the lyrical portion of the bridge at about 2:15 seconds into the song. I find this fascinating. Don't believe me? Check it out in the following songs yourself: Crush by Jennifer Paige (2:12), Love You Like a Love Song by Selena Gomez (2:15), Rollin' in the Deep by ADELE (2:46), Sentimental by Gareth Gates (1:58), Superstar by Jamelia (2:12). So what effect does the music have on dancers? It is tremendous.

In swing competitions, the DJs almost always play between one and a half to two minutes of music. So in J&J and SS competitions, the dancers are not usually challenged by the lyrical bridges of the music. Where they do get a chance to dance to the lyrical portion is in the couples routine divisions where the competitors themselves may choose to keep that part of the music in the final cut. And guess what? Competitors choose to do this quite frequently. Why? Because it is different; it is an interesting part of the music; and it provides contrast and variety-all element they are told judges are looking for. So think about it, we have DJs playing many songs with between 8 and 64 beats of lyrical music all day and all night for 4 days at a typical comp. The old time swing dancers who are most comfortable with footwork get lost when the lyrical bridges pop up. Some old timers choose not to go dancing anymore because they can't relate as well to a standard rhythm as they do to a syncopated "swing" rhythm and they don't know what to do with their feet during the lyrical portions of the songs being played. I feel their pain because I've been there. My solution was to learn from my daughter and others of her generation and copy what they do during those portions of the song. Although I admit I don't dance those sections as well as I'd like, at least I'm trying. In addition to attempting to adapt my own dance style to the newer music I've also tried to codify what I do and now I not only look forward to challenging myself during the parts of the music where it isn't as appropriate to move my feet as to retard my movements and use other parts of my body-I even teach it to my students! Why not? "It's all good". But, and here's the crux, I still prefer a good rendition of How Long Can a Fool Go Wrong over most anything contemporary. Why? Because the music seems more complex to me, and each time I dance to it I do something different with my feet. When I dance to contemporary music I tend to tire of the song quickly-within a few months. Those songs have a shorter shelf life for my personal style because they don't inspire footwork the way some of the R&B music does. But let me be clear, sometimes I just want to listen to the newer music because it is newer and challenging in other ways.

So am I blaming the DJs? Not on your life. I'm grateful for all the new, cool music they play for us as well as for all the "oldies" that they honor us with. My own personal formula as a DJ is to play one old time up tempo R&B, one contemporary, and then one slower something (Contemporary, Soul, Motown, Shag). That way I make sure I make everyone in the room equally unhappy. I'm not kidding. Most of us like to socialize at dances as well as dance. If I mix up the music, people can socialize and rest during the songs they can't relate to, and dance on the ones that move them. Like I said, "it's all good". I learned this lesson from the creator of Jack and Jill competitions, Jack Carey. About 10 years ago I was dancing with him to a rap song whose lyrics I couldn't understand, and when I complained he said, "Kelly, if I could swing dance for 10 years to disco music, you can figure out a way to dance to this one song." Boy did I feel schooled; and he was right. I don't get to see Jack that often anymore and I would be happy now to dance with him to ANYTHING, anytime, in my bare feet on sand.

So okay, if it isn't the competitors, and it isn't the DJs who are to blame, whose left? Well now you know why I keep saying "let's not point fingers", let's instead work together to adjust and compensate to keep our community happy and healthy. Only the judges and promoters are left, and I am guilty on both counts. I've always believed it is easier to effect a change working within a system than outside it. So, since I didn't agree with a lot of the rules I was being asked to enforce as a judge, I decided to run my own event with rules I thought were better. Most people don't remember a little convention I ran for two years called Swing Break back in '99 and 2000. I ran that event in order to affect a change in the swing community; a change I hoped would be for the better. Unfortunately I was a little ahead of my time and I got burned at the stake for my efforts. Although the convention had over 800 attendees the first year and a 1000 the second year, the changes I instituted were, at the time, considered too radical to maintain. I removed gender bias from all competitions and allowed all levels of Jack and Jill competitions to accept male followers and female leaders. Unfortunately I was pressured to change the name of my contests to Luck of the Draw so that I didn't insult the homophobic sensibilities of some members of the community. I also paid competitors to perform Classic and Showcase routines throughout the weekend instead of having comps in those divisions, and I also allowed juniors into my Invitational division; I received a lot of heat from people who thought a young man named Jordan Frisbee was too young to be given that honor. Interestingly enough he won 1st place in the Invitational J&J with Mary Ann Nunez proving my point that all generations of swing dancers could co-exist if we all worked together. In addition, since all my staff was invited to participate in the Invitational I had the contestants score themselves-giving their own performance last place. A novel idea at the time that worked until some of them figured out a way to game the system-a whole other article in and of it's own! So why didn't I keep it going? Too much work for one single mom who missed going to her daughter's basketball games combined with too much grief from traditionalists were just two of the many reasons. But some good things did result from my efforts. Jordan, Jessica, and Tatianna all got invited to Invitational competitions after that and many events began to allow same gender partners in their Strictly Swing divisions. More comps started having champions score themselves, and at least for awhile, they stopped complaining that the judges didn't know what they were looking at. Sometimes change takes place at a slower rate than some of us might like, but it does happen, but only if we think outside the box and take some risks.

So now let's get back to the judges. Since most judges are instructors and we all come from

different parts of the country and we can't agree on standardizing the dance (many of us don't even WANT it standardized), it is no wonder that any given judging panel isn't going to see eye to eye on swing content. I remember voicing the opinion 15 years ago that it was difficult to judge a Showcase routine on swing content when the competitors chose Hustle music; the solution at that time was for the CJ to tell me to just judge the performance and mark a "V" for "violation" under swing content. I wasn't supposed to lower the placement on swing content alone. If a majority of the judges gave a violation under swing content then the CJ would determine how many drops in placement would be assigned as a penalty. Well after a few years that system went out the window because so few judges wanted to mark a violation. Why? Because if they did violate a couple on swing content they then had to face a) the subsequent firestorm of anger and sometimes outright abuse from the competitors who were understandably emotional about their scores, and b) retaliation by upset promoters who would no longer hire the "troublemakers" their staff complained to them about. Currently some events tell judges to simply score the performance and if they think the competitors are in the wrong division (i.e. not doing swing in a swing competition) they can place them as low as they want. Other events assign a particular type of judge called a scurtineer to look for percentage of swing content, and if that individual thinks the couple's content falls below the require amount, a meeting is called between the scrutineer and a few other judges to decide if a violation has occurred and reach a consensus on the penalty. Not exactly a perfect system, but at least efforts are being made to address the concerns expressed by the competitors and attendees.

So what's the solution? Sorry to say, I don't have one. But what I do have are some ideas that might start a productive, respectful conversation that might eventually lead to some solutions. So here goes...

What about having three different divisions of routine Swing Competitions instead of two? Instead of Classic and Showcase, how about having a Classic Division where all the routines must be danced to syncopated R&B music and all patterns are 6 or 8 counts. In addition, competitors would be prohibited from scrolling, bending, compacting (sorry Texas), and extending their patterns, and the only rhythms allowed would be double (walk-walk), triple, or "&1&2" (step-kick-ball-change) after double spins (like me better Texas?). Lifts, aerials, and drops would not be allowed. Contestants would be allowed to perform any number of breakaways, slides, or weight support, or "leveraged" moves. Costumes would be of minimal importance. Focus would be on the chemistry between partners not with the competitors' relationship to the audience or judges. Swing Content would be 100%. My one subversive rule would be that there would be no gender restriction on lead and follow.

Now for our second division let us, at least for now, call it Social WCS. In this division we would allow for standard, syncopated, R&B or contemporary music. Competitors would be able to bend, scroll, compact, extend and use whatever rhythms they wanted. Competitors would not be expected to focus only on their partner, they could also choose to address the audience. They would be permitted to perform any number of lifts, drops, aerials, slides, breakaways, or whatever tricks they could come up with. Costumes would be mandatory, and again, no restriction on gender in the roles. This division would require 75% swing content.

For our third and final division, let's call it the Open division for now. Let's say the music

is "anything goes"- music doesn't even have to be in 4/4 time. No gender rules apply, any number of people can participate in the routine, costumes would be mandatory. And most importantly, swing content would be limited to 25%, with no mandatory swing content required.

Hey, didn't I just sort of describe Classic, Showcase, and Cabaret? Well then maybe we just need to redefine the rules for those divisions. I think it would be great. I don't know about you, but I can immediately think of 3 or 4 pro couples that might just go for a hat trick and try to take all three routine divisions in a single weekend. Wouldn't that be a hoot? If they also won a SS or J&J, then they could claim a legitimate title of top event champion having shown mastery in all forms of the dance plus expertise in "something else" (Cabaret). Such a division of competitions might just satisfy everyone. All the "old timers" might just come back to watch the Classic division while all the newer dancers would actually be able to recognize the dance they are learning on the competition floor. And, all the young competitive dancers would have a place to strut their stuff as well, and all the pros that want to push the envelope over the edge could do so to their heart's content.

Now for the really tricky part-remember the fable where all the mice agree that a bell should be tied to the cat so the mice would have warning when the cat approached? They all agreed it was a great idea until one mouse said, "So which one of us is going to bell the cat?" Silence. So now all of us mice have to ask, "Who is going to judge swing content?" We tried asking judges to do this and it obviously hasn't worked out so well. So maybe it is time to try something else. Why not try a panel of three novice competitors, three masters competitors all randomly chosen at each event (as in Jack and Jill partners), and add in the CJ to simply vote yea or nea on required swing content. The novice competitors are the future of the dance, the masters are the gatekeepers and the CJ represents the event's ideology. Votes would be tabulated without names attached and a simple majority would decide if each couple has met their obligation to the dance. Since the panel is random, chances are slim to none that the people on the panel would worry about deciding swing content based on if they were going to be re-hired, so at least we would be assured of an honest opinion. And the community as a whole would be taking responsibility for holding the competitors accountable. Yes, it would be hard on the competitors to get a pass at one event and fail at another, but that happens with judging panels now. Anyone have a better idea?

On a final note-to all of you who think this is a "new" controversy just talk to some of the Lindy dancers. They went through the same thing in their community on several occasions. Lindy Hoppers started splitting off into various forms of the dance and they found new names to describe the different styles: Hollywood, Savoy, etc. There was only one style they couldn't accommodate, and they told those dancers, "Hey what you are doing is really cool, but it's not Lindy, so go form your own dances and peace out!" Hence the West Coast Swing community was born. Later, they did the same thing to the Blues dancers, who now have their own events. The difference between the Lindy community and the West Coast Swing community is that the Lindy pros, DJs and promoters all got together and agreed on what type of music they wanted played at their Lindy events. They realized that the music drives the dancing. So since the West Coast Swing community has such a wide variety of musical tastes, our dance reflects that through the individual styles represented by the various competitors. So don't panic folks, don't judge and blame-let's all just get along and discuss this in a civil manner and maybe something really cool will result without us losing

our historical roots, our future, or our friends.