

Routines 101

By Katherine Krok Eastvold © 2011



"Dancing can reveal all the mystery that music conceals." - Charles Baudelaire

I rarely enjoy anything as much as I enjoy choreographing. Besides the people, it is the thing I miss most about my studio. It was life changing, empowering and incredibly satisfying to choreograph all day long for ballroom, salsa, swing... everything! Then love, marriage and life happened. Now I'm traveling and primarily choreographing and coaching for the WCS community again. It's fantastic, but a little shocking. I'm discovering that many widely known benefits and expectations of putting a routine together have been lost over the years. Questions about choreography and routines are pouring in from dancers everywhere I go. So if you or someone you know is interested in doing a West Coast Swing routine (or any routine, for that matter), and you want to get the most out of it that you can, here are some things to be aware of:

1. The Universal Goal- Whether you're starting on this journey to be seen, to get better, to make your partner happy, to make your coach happy... you really only have one goal: to put YOUR best foot forward. The audience will only see YOU. And nobody else can be you. Nobody! And that's a GREAT thing! West Coast Swing is a stunning dance in it's ability to showcase your individuality within it's strict parameters. So the main goal of your routine should be to showcase *your* strengths, *your* stylings, *your* lines, *your* footwork, *your own* personality. I have choreographed routines for students with movements that look *terrible* on me, but look ridiculously fantastic on my student. I've choreographed routines to music that doesn't move me, but it moves my students, so I wrap the choreography around their passion for it so that the audience can see *their* hearts on the floor. If you are going to invest the money, the time, the training, the practicing... make sure you keep one goal in mind: to be yourselves. Never underestimate an audience. They know if you are pretending to be somebody else. And never underestimate the power of your "true self." It will fight you every step of the way if you try to be something you're not. You'll reduce your hours of investment, practice and coaching while increasing your enjoyment and benefits of the routine by taking the steps to ensure that it reflects YOU and nobody else.

2. Your Music- This may sound obvious, but at the core you are doing a DANCE routine. Whether or not you're competing or simply showcasing your routine, never forget that you're doing a *dance* competition or a *dance* exhibition. So pick a song that makes you want to do just that: DANCE. Trust me, whatever song or combination of songs you pick, you will end up hearing it a million-ba-jillion times before you ever perform it. You'll hear it at slow speeds, at fast speeds, in your head while you take a shower and in your head while trying to go to bed. If it inspires you to *dance*, and dance *now*, you'll enjoy the entire routine process and every performance a lot more than if not. When I'm at a floor trial at 6 am with three hours of sleep, I never have to worry. I know that the moment my song comes on, I'm going to want to dance no matter what. Help yourself out, and take the time to pick the right song ahead of time. It's worth the investment.

3. Your Partner- I'm not going to lie. Partnerships are not easy. They are like marriages. They take mutual work, conviction, love, honor, respect and humor to run smoothly. (I think I've seen it... twice.) I learned very early on that for every two minutes we see of a partnership on the convention floor, there are hundreds to thousands of hours that we aren't seeing of that partnership. So here's the deal. Everyone's different. Some people need a 50/50 partnership. Some can handle 90/10 partnerships. So decide what you can handle and grab a partner that fits. Be aware that most partnerships break up before they every make it to the floor. There's no shame in that at all. Have pride for trying because you will have learned a lot no matter how far into the process you made it. It's worth the risk. But no matter who you choose or what you hear, height, hair color and body types aren't the thing to look for. There is only one thing to watch for: abuse. Verbal abuse, emotional abuse, mental abuse... these are the greatest pitfalls of routines. Learn how recognize the signs, how to protect yourself and when to walk away. If you have a partner that respects and honors you, no matter what their level, you can get an incredibly satisfying routine experience.

4. The Choreography- Three things: A) If you plan on hiring a choreographer, remember that you don't have to pick one. Some couples have two, three, even four choreographers work on their routine. But whoever you work with, be aware that it's easy to be intimidated and accept changes, choreography or music out of fear (submission) rather than trust (joy). Fear will slow you down, cost you more and paralyze you. A good coach and choreographer will make you feel empowered and excited about getting on the floor. Remember, this is *your* routine. Nobody else's. B) Don't be afraid to ask. 9 out of 10 couples I've seen in the last three years have had their choreography done by one pro and then partially or completely re-choreographed by another pro in order to "fix" it. This isn't cheap. But this expensive practice is perpetuated by a confusing trend: couples give their original choreographer credit and label the other choreographers as "coaches." I constantly see couples hit with surprise at the routine they've received, simply because the choreography that inspired them in others was actually done by a completely different pro. So when you ask a couple where they got their routine, find out exactly what pro choreographed your favorite parts. It'll save you a lot of money in the long run. Then pay it forward. Give credit where credit is due. C) And finally, don't be afraid to make your own changes. You can keep yourself in check by taping yourself. You'll learn what to keep and what to toss and, depending on your eye, save yourself a lot of money in coaching and choreography.

5. The Magic Bean- When I was studying at UCLA I was hired as one of their fitness instructors. During training, they pounded one big lesson into our heads again and again: choreograph to the major phrase. I had already learned about phrasing through swing, but was surprised to find it so underlined in a fitness program. Yet the staff would literally fire instructors who didn't phrase their fitness choreography. Why? Because whether you're educated or not in musical phrasing, your body knows a major phrase when it hears one. The UCLA staff considered it a "protective measure" against injuries to start a new set of choreography or a change in direction on the major phrase because of the studies that had been done on the subject. Just because phrasing is being neglected in routines today doesn't mean it isn't a powerful and easy tool that will make your routine look better, more professional and more exciting to your friends, family and audiences. So whether you are choreographing your own routine or bringing it to someone else, try to phrase out your music or hire someone else to phrase it out before even touching it with choreography, and then make sure you start a new pattern in closed or at the end of a slot on the "1" of each major phrase.

So. Doing a routine is not a small task. I didn't even touch on costumes! Or timing, technique and teamwork! But it's worth it. Anything worth doing is hard. I'm keenly aware that a routine is more likely to be watched and studied than the average Jack & Jill or Strictly, and that one routine can impact every level of dancer, no matter what division or what place the judges give you. I'm not a fan of routines that are clearly unrehearsed, uncomfortable or uncontrolled. C.S. Lewis once said, "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally - and often far more - worth reading at the age of fifty and beyond." I believe it's the same with choreography. If a routine I put on the floor doesn't make kids and kings want to dance, then I've wasted my time. As the nature of Jack & Jill's change, as more and more people are injured, and as more and more people feel sidelined in the dance, routines stand as a beacon of hope. You can love, live and grow through routines... visibly expand and shine... if you take the right steps. **But most of all, more than anything, I wish you the strength and courage to be yourselves out there, and no one else.**

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