

CHOREOGRAPHY BASICS

By: Max Perry

To choreograph an effective routine, a dancer will use several techniques to create a dance that will not only fit the music, but will feel good when danced. The tools we use as choreographers are knowledge of the dance components, a basic idea of phrasing music, and an idea of how the material is to be used (the dancers or organization or company, etc.).

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

1. "A body in motion tends to stay in motion". There is an initial force required to put the body in motion. Every time there is a change in the directional movement, there is additional force required to make the change. Too many abrupt changes in direction are not as comfortable as letting the body flow in the direction it wants to go, then gradually slow before changing directions. This does not mean you should slow down before every turn - I am referring to energy output only!
2. Choose music that has a wide audience appeal. You do not want a piece of music that sounds dated. The song should sound good every time it is played. If you want artists to take notice, or a national release, the rule is if you hear the song on the radio, it is too late. These songs were recorded months ago. Major established artists do not need a dance. Never go for the obvious - choose a cut from the album that may be released as a single or use a newer artist - possibly an independent artist.
3. Choose material that has a wide audience appeal. Creating a dance to be done by the locals is fine, but don't expect it to go over in other cities. Dancing is very regional. Use components that are universal, unless you plan to release a video of the experience.
4. You don't have to show off everything you know in one dance! I know you know how to do the splits, and perform acrobatics, but it doesn't necessarily have to be done in one dance. The dances that have been the most successful in terms of marketability, have been 32 counts or less, or can be taught in 20 minutes or less, including playing the music. KEEP IT SIMPLE AND TO THE POINT!

The above pointers are just suggestions. There will be exceptions to some of the ideas presented. You may be asked to choreograph to a song that just doesn't "grab" you, or may be asked to create a more difficult dance.

HOW TO CHOREOGRAPH A LINE DANCE

A. CHARTING THE SONG

After deciding on a song to use, choreographers write the beats on paper. This is known as "charting" the song. You will end up with a graphic representation of what the beat patterns look like and will know instantly how long to make the dance.

As dancers, we are used to counting in 8's. The reason for this is that 100 years ago, instructors discovered that it was easier and more effective for students to learn choreography in larger sections than 2 or 4 beats. Sections of 8 or 2 measures

became easier to remember. Most standard music is in a common or standard 4/4 timing (3/4 for Waltz), which means there are 4 beats per measure, with the quarter note getting one beat or count. Counting 8 beat sections will be easier to see the form the song will take. However, if you are choreographing certain dances like the Rumba, Cha-Cha, Mambo, etc. it is usually easier to count measures rather than individual beats, so instead of the 8 representing 8 beats, the 8 will represent 8x4 beats.

The ideal situation would be to have each section of music come out evenly in sections of 8 so that you would be able to create a dance that does not contain any tags or bridges. I like to chart like this:

8 8 8 8	A	8 8 8 8	B
8 8 8 8	A	8 8 8 8	B
8 8 8 8	B	8 8 8 8	A
8 8 8 8		8 8 8 8	

I use a sheet of lined paper and play the song. I start counting usually after the introduction to the song on the vocals. Every time I count 8 beats (if that is the end of the phrase of music) I write down an 8. The example above shows that the first section of music has 4 sets of 8. The "A" means that this is part of the verse of the song. The underline means that a new section has started. In my example, there is another verse, which I have labeled as another "A" because the words may be different, but the music sounds the same. The example shows that there are also 4 sets of 8 in the second verse or 32 counts.

When you have finished writing down all of the 8's and identified the sections of music, you then look at the total counts for each section.

8 8 8 8	A	32	8 8 8 8	B	32
8 8 8 8	A	32	8 8 8 8	B	32
8 8 8	A	32	8 8 8	B	32

Notice that each section has 32 counts. This tells me that I could choreograph a dance with 32 counts and it would fit the music exactly. If it was a very long song however, and I had say 10 or more sections of 32, I might elect to do a dance that is 64 counts simply because the dancers might get bored doing the same dance too many times, so you could double the 32 to 64 and this would also work out.

By the way, I write down the left side of the page and then add another column of numbers in a column to the right of the first one and read it in that direction.

What do you do if all of the numbers are not 8's?

8
8
8
8
4

8
8
8
8
4

In this example, there are 4 extra beats in one section. You would have a couple of options. You could ignore the extra counts, in which case your dance would not fit exactly with the music but would still be on time, or you could choreograph what is called a "tag" to make the dance fit exactly to the song.

Sometimes you will come across a piece of music you just have to choreograph to that has sections of uneven length.

Part "A" may have 40 counts and the chorus of the song (B) may be only 32 counts, but the sections are consistent throughout the song. You would then have to choreograph an "AB" type dance. This would have the dancers do two different sets of choreography or sometimes 3 sets depending on the structure of the song.

Some pieces of music have additional sections of music that would be labeled as "C" in the case of a musical bridge in the middle of the song that is not considered a verse or a chorus. Other situations would include using a "re-start" if one of the sections were un-even. You would dance the choreography from the beginning and then start over when the next section starts.

B. FINDING THE "HOOK"

After finding out the basic structure of the song you are interested in, you then need to start using dance patterns to create the dance itself. Many successful dances have one distinctive movement that dancers refer to as the "hook". This is some clever little pattern such as a kick that happens in a certain part of the song that fits to something that is going on in the song. For example the kick may always happen on a cymbal crash, or a hip movement may go with some other type of percussion or a clap that would fit to a clicking or clapping sound in the song.

When I first started doing my own choreography I watched the dance floor and tried to analyze what it was that made the dancers all run out onto the dance floor and do a particular dance. Was it the song? Was it a certain step? Just what was it that made one dance more popular than another. I determined that there were consistently 3 main elements

that were common to all of the successful dances these are:

1. The dance had some way to make noise (claps, stomps, snaps, etc.)
2. The dance had turns
3. The dance had a kick of some kind

I then applied this to all of the dances I was choreographing at the time – these were my “Hooks”.

C. NAMING THE DANCE

Finding a name for the dance is sometimes challenging. Different choreographers use different guidelines.

Some choreographers find clever words from the song they are using that are repeated enough times in the song that most people would recognize. Other choreographers name their dance after the title of the song (some choreographers object to this) the reason being is that dancers from countries where English is not the native language have a difficult time asking a DJ to play a certain dance, or it is too much to try to learn the English for a song title and a dance title. The only problem with this is that if the song becomes out dated or the dancers tire of it, there will be a problem in the future in trying to revive the dance or find another track for the dance. I try to avoid naming a dance after a person that nobody really knows because you will have trouble marketing the dance if not too many dancers know who the person is.

D. MARKETING THE DANCE – HOW DO YOU SELL IT?

The number of dances being done today and the short shelf life of many of them are a testament to the number of choreographers who are successfully marketing their dances. What needs to be done in order to have your dance make an impact on dancers, is to send it to as many sources as possible. Linedancer Magazine and Kick – it are 2 of the largest archives, but there are many other excellent web sites. Send the dance to friends who may teach and/or dance in other areas.

Networking is very important. If you are submitting a dance to a publication, the rule is "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."

This means that upon receiving your dance, it is put into a pile of other dances which sometimes causes yours to become buried. The more you submit your dance, the chances are better that it will stay in the forefront. An employee of Country Weekly magazine once gave me a fax number for the express purpose of submitting my dances. I couldn't figure out why I never heard from them, until I asked the main office for the number again and found out I had been sending my line dances to "Soap Opera Digest" instead of "Country Weekly"! No one ever said anything! I guess I'm saying to be persistent.

If you are teaching your dance at various dance events and classes, make sure you don't give up too easily. Many teachers, Myself included, sell themselves short by not devoting enough time to letting their dance start to become popular. If a dance doesn't become an instant "hit", they abandon it for another dance they just whipped up! Let the dance evolve – remember that it can take as long as 6 months or more before a dance will "catch on".

E. HOW TO WRITE A STEP DESCRIPTION

A well-written step description should contain as much information as possible about the dance and at the same time, should be short enough for publication. Keep in mind that a step description is designed to help you to re-create the choreography of the dance. The step sheet is a teaching tool and makes certain assumptions that the dancer has already learned

the fundamentals of dance and they are proficient enough to read the description and know for example, what a shuffle or a grapevine is. A step description for a beginner dance is not necessarily to be read by beginners – it is just to re-create a beginner dance. Certain basic movements do not have to be broken down, like shuffle steps or grapevines.

A step description should include the following:

1. Title of dance
2. Choreographer's name and contact information
3. Date of choreography
4. Number of counts, level of dance
5. Type of dance (line, mixer, pattern partner dance)
6. Bridges, Tags, or phrased (AB)
7. Song title – include artist, album title and exact version of the song (extended, radio mix, etc.) preferably at the top of the sheet to make all the information available at a glance
8. Use headings to give a listing of the components above each section of choreography
9. Whenever possible, have 1 column of numbers from 1-8 describing the count and a 2nd column listing numbers that run consecutively as in 1-32 which will make it easy to find a particular section if you get questions about your dance. If it is an easy enough dance this is not always necessary. You will have to use your own discretion to avoid too much clutter on the step description.
10. If possible, list

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