Becoming a Great Dancer in Five Easy Steps

by Ridge Kennedy

1. Listen to the Music

You heard some wonderful music at the dance. Now, listen to more at home or in the car or on your iPod, too. Traditional dance and music can't be separated. It's essential for dancers to hear the musical phrases that provide the foundation for the dances. The more you listen to dance music, the sooner you'll reach the time where your body "learns" the dance and your brain can just rest and relax and enjoy the experience.

2. Practice

Go to dances. Learning to do this kind of dancing is just like learning any other physical skill. It takes practice. You're probably exercising some new social skills, too, as you enter this world of traditional dance. That takes some practice, too. So at your next dance, remember: keep moving, smile and look around.

Did a friend who encouraged you to come to the dance? Did you come with a friend who is also a newcomer? Talk about the experience. How did you feel? What are your concerns? What was the most fun? When is the next dance?

On both the physical and the social sides, it takes a few repetitions to get familiar with the basics. Then, after a few more dances, you'll discover that you've become proficient. You know the ropes, what to expect and how to do things. And then—every time after that—it gets easier and more wonderful. You will be amazed!

3. Dance with Experienced Dancers

The best dancers will help you get where you need to be without your even realizing that they've done so. Other dancers will offer just the slightest visible hints—perhaps a small hand gesture or a nod of the head to indicate a direction. Dancers who are not quite as skilled may try to help you with a slight tug on your hand or a gentle hand in the middle of your back, steering you in the correct direction. Stay alert and be open to all these offers of help. When you meet someone who makes it easy for you to succeed, be sure to seek her or him out to be a partner.

It's likely that you will be asked to dance by experienced dancers. Many of the best dancers come with the intention of helping out newcomers, especially early in the evening. When someone asks you to dance, your first reaction might be to protest, "I'm new at this, I really don't know what I'm doing." You don't have to say that—they already know it. That's why they asked you to dance. After all, that's how we all learned to do this kind of dancing, through the kindness of strangers.

4. Think Smooth

No, actually, you want to think smoooooooth. If you dance with a lot of up and down motion it becomes more difficult to be in sync with other dancers. "Bouncy" dancing uses more energy and may make you tire more quickly. Most of the time in traditional dancing, the goal is to be relaxed and feel like you are gliding.

But...there are exceptions. Some dances call for skipping. Some steps and balances are done with a hop or a bounce. When the dance calls for a sashay or a gallop, that's a time when "smooth" flies out the window. Leaps of exuberance and all kinds of improvisation are enjoyable aspects of our dancing, but always safely under control and timed to fit into the cooperative whole of the dance.

And most of the time...you will want to keep your dancing smoooooooth.

5. Don't Panic

Remember the advice in The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, even when it seems like the world is coming to an end, don't panic. It's only a dance. Don't worry about going wrong. Everybody goes wrong at some time or other, usually a couple of times every night. Relax. Have fun! And if someone really needs the answer, just remind them that it's Footnote 42. *

* reference to "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

Ridge Kennedy is a dancer and dance caller who lives in New Jersey. He started dancing after spending ten years standing on the side, watching folks dance and feeling too shy to participate. This article, written for beginners, and other articles are posted on www.danceambassadors.googlepages.com; it is reprinted with permission.