

Three Aspects of Partnership Dancing: Social Dancing, Ballroom, and Round Dancing

By Kaye West and Larry Caves

While partnership dancing has been “a thing” for centuries, currently it is enjoying renewed public interest. Yet many have not been privileged to learn how to do partnership dancing and seasoned dancers may not realize the complexities and interdependence of the three aspects of this extremely valuable and healthy activity.

Partnership dancing, including many different rhythms and styles, evolved from **social dancing** or folk dancing in the cultures of many different countries around the world. It was introduced in the U.S. as what became known as **round dancing**, since the patterns were often danced in a circle with everyone dancing the same patterns at the same time. Round dancing was often paired with square dancing, with eight dancers to a set, which itself evolved from the European courts by early immigrants to the “New World.”

Teachers of dance, “Dance Masters,” both in Europe and the United States, who often were trained in ballet, appropriated and modified some dance forms they discovered in their travels and created others which evolved into what is known today as **ballroom dancing**. Over the years organizations developed for professional ballroom teachers and others formed for dancers (amateurs) with focus on *performances or competitions* in professional and amateur categories as well as a merged “pro-am” category where a professional dances with an amateur.

In further complexity, two major styles of **ballroom dancing** developed (International and American), each with their own organizations, syllabi, preferred rhythms, vocabulary, studios, and competitions. Additionally, two branches of American style evolved, with their roots traced to either Fred Astaire or Arthur Murray. The International style is practiced world-wide in their events; U.S. events feature both International and American styles as well as some of the “club” dances borrowed from **social dancing**.

Meanwhile, **round dancing** likewise evolved and, while it is often still paired with square dancing, it also branched off independently as a world-wide movement to promote *cued partnership dancing or choreographed ballroom dancing* where proponents share their ballroom choreography with everyone so dancers simultaneously dance the same choreography cued by a leader. They dance for the sake of enjoyment and community rather than competition. New patterns and routines continue to be developed, creating a focus on continued learning and sharing a love of dancing. Because their experiences derived from many different sources, **round dancing** includes elements from both International and American styles.

Round dance organizations such as Roundalab (roundalab.org), for teachers, the International Choreographed Ballroom Dance Association (icbda.com) for all dancers, and many state-wide and local clubs, such as the Shall We Round Dance Club in Leisure World (Mesa, AZ), promote this form of recreational dancing. Yet it remains “ballroom’s best-kept secret.” Many **round dance** teachers and some dancers take ballroom lessons to improve their technique and/or for critique of choreography they devise for a specific piece of music. Also, it should be noted that different **ballroom teachers** teach differently, or teach what they know, and they often adapt techniques to match the needs of their clients.

Round dancers can take their knowledge of patterns and apply them in **social dance** situations. **Social dancers** can vastly increase their knowledge of dancing via added rhythms and additional patterns (figures) in the sequenced instruction of **round dancing** (which is labeled by phase of difficulty so dancers can select the level of dancing they wish to do). In **round dancing** there is also a wide range of technique demonstrated by various dancers who dance the same figures simultaneously. Solo dancers can dance with a phantom partner. When **ballroom dancers** and teachers discover **round dancing**, and adapt to the cues used, they can enjoy dancing the vast variety of routines with other dancers.

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The following chart contrasts more specifically the three aspects of *partnership dancing* to clarify the differences and cite the contributions of each to the overall activity.

Social Dancing	Ballroom Dancing	Round Dancing (Cued/Choreographed Ballroom)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available in many venues (dance parties, weddings, aboard ships, night clubs, private clubs, any time two people want to dance, etc., and it is taught in studios and night clubs). • Ballroom rhythms and club dances are used. • Some venues focus on one style of dance such as West Coast Swing, Salsa/Bachata, or Country (which has versions from ballroom). • Venues often include live music. • Rhythms depend upon musicians' or DJ's selections. • Each Lead chooses dance patterns (so knowledge of Leads determines extent of variety; with limited knowledge, the dancing can be rather repetitious), and every dance pair does their own choreography on the floor. • Often group lessons do not provide continuity from one session/teacher to another. • Sometimes various patterns have different nicknames. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>International Ballroom</i> has 5 rhythms: (Slow) Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, (Slow) Foxtrot, Quickstep. <i>International Latin</i> has 5 rhythms: Samba, Cha Cha, Rumba, Paso Doble, Jive. (10 Rhythms total) • <i>American Smooth</i> has 4 rhythms: Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, Foxtrot. <i>American Rhythm</i> has 5 rhythms: Cha Cha, Rumba, East Coast Swing, Bolero, Mambo. (9 Rhythms total) • American competitions may also feature West Coast Swing, Salsa, Peabody, and/or other rhythms. • Numerous organizations exist, though WDSF (World Dance Sport Federation) is the authority for the Olympics; various organizations recognize different rhythms. • Levels of dancing are Bronze, Silver, Gold, though syllabi (including figure names) vary from one organization to the next. • Focus is mastering techniques and patterns and, if desired, learning one memorized routine in each rhythm selected for competition. • Pattern names are left to the discretion of the teacher. • Lessons, competitions, and attire can be very expensive and thus rather exclusive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many workshops, dances, and festivals occur in the U.S. and around the world (cues are always in English). • Dancers simultaneously do pre-choreographed routines to specific music which is cued a measure ahead by a leader. • Cue names are critical so dancers needn't memorize the routines; they can also dance new routines containing figures they know. • Within each rhythm, figures are grouped by Phases, which identifies the order to learn them. • Presently 18 rhythms are danced with thousands of dance routines, though recently-taught dances are usually programmed (attendees often vote for choices). • International and American styling are often intermingled; some ballroom vocabulary and some unique terms are used. • Many resources assist dancers and leaders to improve their dance knowledge; there are opportunities for new leaders to cue and/or teach. • This activity welcomes people from a wide range of demographics and socio-economic status. • It is much less expensive than ballroom.