TAPPING THE SOURCE:
Tap Dance Stories, Theory, and Practice

by brenda bufalino

Ed. Note: We are delighted to reprint two chapters from Brenda Bufalino’s new book. Described by Gregory Hines as “one of the greatest female tap dancers that ever lived,” Bufalino is also known as one of the finest tap educators in the world.

The Music of Tap Dance

We tap dancers call ourselves musicians because we play rhythms with our feet. But what does it mean to be a musician? What are the responsibilities of musicianship? What do musicians know that tap dancers should know?

Jazz musicians have memorized a library full of standards (songs in a standard format of 32 bars, or 12-bar blues).

The tap dancer should own two or three song books, learn hundreds of songs, and listen to vocalists to learn the lyrics to those songs and to study phrasing. It is important to know standards that musicians are familiar with in case there is no time for rehearsal or you are improvising at a tap jam. It is also important to know which standards best represent the groove or pocket you like to dance in. Singing silently the lyric of a tune while dancing helps to create a tap story.

Musicians know how to read and write music.

It is important for the tap dancer to know how to read enough to locate each eight-bar phrase in the tune. The better you can read, the better the communication between you and the musician.

Musicians enjoy playing with each other and understand the nature of the rhythm section (piano, bass, and drums).

I love improvising simultaneously with other dancers. Trading bars is fun, but is often competitive. Simultaneous improvisation is very free, but requires listening and communicating—not always soloing, but blending with the other dancers’ many rhythms to create a dynamic musical symmetry.

Musicians understand how to work together, how to support each other and give each other space.

I like dancing with one instrument at a time, leaving space, as in a conversation, or sometimes responding to a pattern I have just heard. It is easier for one musician to listen to me when just the two of us perform together.

Musicians elaborate on or participate in a soloist’s improvisation by comping [a very simple and subtle accompaniment of chord changes behind a soloist, resembling stop time but not as rigid] or accompanying.

When the pianist is taking a two-chorus solo, the drummer and bass player listen intently. The right boost and support helps the soloist relax and feel at home with the harmonies and structure of a tune, so he can be free with his creativity. If it is the bass player’s turn to solo, the pianist and drummer appreciate the delicate tone of the contrabass and play softly in the background so the bassist can hear himself and build confidently on a theme.
The musicians expect as much from the dancers. The dancer is a member of the ensemble, playing his instrument out in front because more space is needed.

So, then, what should tap dancers do when they get up to perform their set dances or improvise freely with the band?

**Call a tune and set the time.**

The best way to set the time in 4/4 is to call out single time and double time ... 1-2, 1-2-3-4. I do not ask the bandleader to remember the time we set in rehearsal. I might want to change it slightly when it comes time for my performance, or the band might have just played very fast for the last act and can't adjust to my tempo without me setting it firmly. I always feel the necessity to set the time, and the responsibility of dancing to the time I have set.

**If you have set the time too fast, do not ask the band to slow down.**

The band is comprised of separate musicians. They can't all slow down or speed up at the same time in the same way. It's almost impossible to get into a groove if you try to change the tempo in the middle of a tune. Learn how to call it out clearly and then deal with whatever you set. The dancer sets the tempo and, right or wrong, dances the result.

In my performance, if the tempo is too slow or too fast to dance my dance, I either improvise a new dance to suit the tempo or stop and start again. Perhaps I might dance a chorus to the tempo everyone is playing and then signal the band to layout. I can then dance a cappella for a while and reset the tempo. The aim is to do this seamlessly, so that I will still appear in control, and the audience and the band members do not feel uncomfortable.

Once you have called a tune, dance phrases that relate to the melody and harmonies as well as the time feel. Listen and respond to what each musician is playing.

The dancer does not just dance on and on, louder and louder, using the band as a drum machine that is keeping the pulse. The band is not your metronome.

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If you want a complicated arrangement, hire an instrumentalist before the gig, tell him what you want, ask for suggestions, and have him write out the arrangement for you.

It is unreasonable to ask the band to create a complicated arrangement for you on the spot.

If you have an arrangement, or even just a lead sheet with the melody and format written out, you should be able to explain your music to the band leader and, if necessary, to the other band members.

For instance, if the structure is three choruses, explain what is happening in each chorus: first chorus, melody; second chorus, stop time; third chorus, melody. If the band is not given any instructions, they will play the melody, which is often called the head, and then improvise the rest of the choruses around the melody.

There are words like *pianissimo* or *fortissimo* that can be put into your arrangement.

If you have a series of complicated figures, you might like the band to play *pianissimo* (softly). If you would like to have a big dramatic ending for the last eight bars of every chorus, your arrangement would say *fortissimo* (very loud). Remember, not making musical choices is a choice. If you want to dance full out for unlimited choruses, with everyone just blowing, you have made a choice to let things happen as they will. Don't complain when you come off stage that you didn't like what the band played.

I suggest to students that they learn a second instrument. I practice my reading skills, create arrangements, and write original music on the piano or my concertina. Once you begin to play with musicians, it's not about steps anymore; it's about phrasing and developing the melody, dancing on musical structures, and listening to each of the other instruments and yourself.

When rehearsing with the musicians, it is first important to know who the leader of the group is. I've made some very bad mistakes talking to each musician without talking to the leader first. If it's the pianist in a rhythm section, this makes the job fairly easy; if the leader is a bass player or a drummer, it is more difficult to discuss your arrangements. Nevertheless, it must be done this way.

Darrell Grant was the first pianist that fully aligned himself with my company. He was young and fresh from college. We learned from each other. His enthusiastic temperament gave me the freedom to experiment and to ask his advice when I got stuck on a musical choice, like a particular vamp in 2/4 that he could identify easier than I, even though I created it. He would get so excited during a performance he might scream out, "I love this stuff!"
Darrell was with us for three years and helped me write and create arrangements for “The American Landscape.” After our Joyce performances, he moved to Oregon.

We were desperate to find a new pianist for our touring season. Because our band consisted only of piano and bass, our pianist needed to be a soloist and had to play with the fullness of a whole orchestra at times. Barbara Duffy, the dance captain for my company, convinced Frank Kimbrough to join us, because he was just such a pianist. He had been playing solo piano at the Corner Bar on Bleeker and LaGuardia in New York City for quite a few years and was mentoring the great blind pianist Lance Hayward. We felt fortunate that Frank agreed to join us, because he also brought improvisational skills and versatility.

When we began rehearsal, Frank seemed rather surly to me, a little arrogant. He tried to read the charts that Darrell had left behind, but the scratchy charts and clatter of the taps frustrated him. I started singing the arrangement, and said, “Right here it goes “Shooab dee dow.” He looked down at his still fingers and replied, “Shooab dee dow don’t mean shit to me.” I was just about to show him the door when I looked at Barbara’s pained expression and unsaid plea, “Please be nice. Puh-lease work it out.” I calmed down and tried to describe our arrangement in musical language, instead of rhythmically scatting. Frank Kimbrough played brilliantly with us for the next eight years. This first encounter became an inside joke, illustrating the typical friction between dancer and musician. We dancers are often defensive about what we don’t know, but realizing that musicians have their own insecurities. The dancer can facilitate the communication process by learning the musicians’ language.

I really learned to appreciate the difficulties musicians have in playing with, or collaborating with, tap dancers when I accompanied the [American Tap Dance Orchestra] on the drums for an entire season. I had often wondered why musicians didn’t understand where my “one” was in the music or didn’t seem to be listening to my rhythms. I discovered it is not always possible to hear where the dancer is. I also discovered how important it is for the dancer’s rhythms to be clear. An occasional look or gesture to the band often helps to communicate the rhythms or where I want them to play soft or loud … or lay out. We can talk to them as we dance … with our gestures as well as our feet. We must learn how to conduct while we are performing and stay in contact with the band while reaching out to the audience, which is no small feat.

A wonderful performance is the result of a successful collaboration. When I leave the stage and feel as if my performance was effortless, it is usually because the musicians were so skillful and we succeeded in locking in a groove; we interpreted the tune in a mutually sympathetic way because we listened to each other. When it is right, I am filled with gratitude and think I could dance forever. I never forget to say thank you.

SUMMATION

It’s amazing, when someone asks me how long I’ve been tap dancing, that the answer is … 60 years. Every day of at least 25 of those years I have asked myself if I think I should continue. When I am tired I say, “I’m too tired to dance,” as I tie up my shoes. When I get a stupid, uninformed review I say, “I’ll show them. I’ll never dance again,” as I tie up my shoes. When I have run out of ideas and seem to be in a rut and say, “What’s the use? I’m all used up. I’ll never dance again,” I find myself tying up my shoes.

And they are everywhere, these oh-so-solid oxford shoes. They are under my bed, under my couch, under my kitchen table, in the trunk of my car, and in all of my closets. I hardly ever get rid of an old pair of tap shoes; their memories are sacred.

Sometimes it seems such a foolish thing for a mature adult to do. Funny really. This tapping sound from the feet created by lifting the leg and prancing … controlled by fast or slow changes of weight. Tapping while dancing, tapping out a rhythm, tapping out many rhythms … simply that, tapping out rhythms with the feet while rhythmically shifting weight. Feeling the rhythm connect to the heartbeat, like the tapping of a branch on my front door. Tapping sounds like rain on the window pane, sometimes blending with the sound of a brook, the rushing or drippings of a faucet. Tapping connected to a greater force, blending with other forces. A fugue of rhythms, building on each other, building to a crescendo … descending to a diminuendo. Tapping into the source, tapping with force into the beginnings, tapping with a whisper at the closing.

Excerpted from Tapping the Source: Tap Dance Stories, Theory and Practice (Codhill Press, 2004), Copyright © 2004 Brenda Bufalino

Ed. Note: To get a copy of Brenda Bufalino’s book, go to www.brendabufalino.com or ask your local bookstore.