

Learning to Play for the Dances

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The three of us have the privilege of serving alongside others as musicians for the Dances of Universal Peace and zikrs at the semi-annual Ozark Sufi Camps that have been going on now for 31 years. In the past several years, we have been teaching classes on Dance Musicianship at the camps, with the intent of assisting a new generation of musicians to step into the center of the circle to help support the Dances. In this article we address some of the key topics that we cover in the classes from our perspectives as a guitarist (Habib), a drummer (Amir), and a melodic instrumentalist (Mansur).

Accompanying the Dances as a Guitarist

Perhaps you've been playing guitar for years—old time rock n' roll, jazz, bluegrass, you name it—or maybe you just picked up a guitar for the first time a few months ago. Then you discovered the Dances, and you think, wouldn't it be cool to play guitar for them? You may think that you can play better than the guitarist in the middle of the circle, or maybe there is no guitarist there at all. How hard could it be, anyway?

To be a successful guitarist for the Dances, it is most helpful to have been a dancer in these circles for a year or more. Why? Being a dancer gives you familiarity with the Dance repertoire, at least in your community. Why is this important? For one thing, you will already know the melodies, the tempos at which the Dances are done, and the feelings that the Dances evoke in you as a dancer. Additionally, as a dancer, you will have become accustomed to listening to the Dance leaders' attunement to each particular Dance and to watching them for cues. This makes the transition toward becoming a Dance musician that much easier.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to support the Dance, Dance leader, and dancers. That is the Dance musician's *raison d'être*. Being a great lead guitarist in a band does not guarantee success as a Dance musician. To succeed as a Dance guitarist, one should know or quickly be able to learn the music for each Dance as it is presented by the leader; be able to figure out the chords or melody; and be able to provide a basic, steady rhythm and strum that is appropriate for the Dance at hand, in synchrony with the drummer, if there is one. A Dance guitarist should also have good facility in using the capo, especially when accompanying leaders who tend to lead Dances in unconventional keys. One needs to provide the proper tonal quality, pitch, volume and tempo, all while watching the leader, dancers, and any other musicians there may

be. Listening and watching skills are most vital for a successful Dance musician.

Every Dance circle is different. Some have no musicians at all, some have drums only, and others have a full range of instrumentation. Some circles get together to rehearse the Dances they plan to present at the next meeting. Such practice sessions often include the musicians, but sometimes the musicians may meet separately. At many Dance camps or Sufi retreats, the musicians may not know what Dance will be next until the next leader steps into the middle and introduces it. This requires a fast ear and a quick study. Where do you fit along this continuum?

Every Dance leader has a different vocal range. Some will always start in the key of D, regardless of the song; others go to C or elsewhere. It is always helpful for one, as a guitarist, to know each Dance leader's strengths and weaknesses and their vocal ranges, how they teach, their cadences, and more. This all requires a high degree of focus and attention to detail.

One guitar or two? Some guitarists like to use only open tuning or standard tuning for everything that they play. Some melodies sound better in standard than in open tuning, and vice-versa. Having the ability to play in both tunings enables the guitarist to do a better job of matching the accompaniment to the melody presented. Certain traditions sound better in one tuning than the other, but the choice really depends on the melody of the Dance and the tuning in which it can be learned the most quickly.

It is not necessary to be a virtuoso on the guitar. It is imperative, however, to have a good ear to determine pitch; a good sense of rhythm and tempo, so that the Dance does not speed up or slow down unless that is called for; and a steady, even strum that provides the tempo and a smooth rhythm.

Listening to music on the Internet or on CDs from Dance gatherings, and playing along with it, is an excellent method for developing your repertoire and your skills as a Dance musician. Playing in a variety of Dance venues can also help to improve your timing by exposing you to various leaders, but of course it is important to do a lot of practicing on your own before approaching leaders to ask to play in their circles.

Learning to Drum for the Dances

For a drummer accompanying the Dances of Universal Peace, the primary role is to entrain the feet of the dancers and the heart beats of the

musicians and dancers to the pulse of the Dance. A drummer could be considered the glue holding the dancing, instrumental music, and singing together or, like a bicycle chain, keeping several sprockets moving together. This is a weighty responsibility that requires the drummer to be grounded and present with what is happening in the Dance.

The most important thing a drummer can do is to watch the Dance leader. The leader's first step will show where the first beat of the Dance is, while the leader's consecutive steps will provide the pulse. In addition to watching the feet of the Dance leader, the drummer may also be conscious of visual cues or hand motions that the leader might give to adjust tempo, volume, or any other aspect of the music. The drummer can sometimes help to cue other musicians to changes that the leader is asking for—for example, slowing down at the end of a Dance. And sometimes the drummer can receive help from other musicians in the circle, by watching the guitarist's hands, for instance, or by making eye contact with other musicians.

A drummer should be able to determine the meter of a Dance—more specifically, how many subdivisions are within each Dance step. This can usually best be discovered by listening to the rhythm of the melody as it is being sung or, sometimes, to the rhythm of the guitar. For simplicity, let's think of meter in terms of duple and triple. Most Dances are in duple (or simple) meter, meaning that there are two, four, or eight subdivisions (beats) within each measure. Examples of classic Dances in duple meter would include "Kalama," "Ancestors, Sky People," and "Shabbat Shalom." Some Dances are in triple (or compound) meter, which means that there are three or six subdivisions to every measure. These could be quick waltzes, 6/8 feels, or swing. Some classic Dances in triple meter are "Peace Greeting Dance," "Zimbabwe Zikr," "Zikr Devotional Dance," and "Come, Come, Whoever You Are."

In order to provide an appropriate rhythm for a Dance, a drummer might consider several things: the pulse, the rhythmic subdivisions of the pulse, and the rhythm of the melody. In almost all cases, the beats that dancers are stepping to should be accented, either by a bass tone on the first beat and an open tone (or slap) on the second beat or by playing bass tones on all of the stepped beats. Emphasizing the beat or pulse is crucial, but it's not enough. The drummer helps by filling in between the basic beats so that one beat is heard leading to another. In the case of a fast waltz such as "Peace Greeting Dance," it is appropriate to fill in beats 2 – 3. In other Dances, such as "Shabbat Shalom," it is best to match the rhythm of the drum to the rhythm of the melody. Once the drummer has arrived at the repeated rhythm to play for the Dance, he or she can and should embellish on that rhythm tastefully. What 'tasteful' means will differ from

person to person and will change with the situation. A balance must be struck between giving the Dance life and forward motion, yet keeping the focus on the moving meditation that is taking place.

Playing for the Dances on a Melodic Instrument

DO know the Dances you are playing for, or develop the ability to learn them quickly. As noted above, it's often been suggested that musicians first get deep experience in participating in the Dances as dancers before they join the circle of musicians. As dancers, they'll learn to pay close attention to the leaders as the Dances are taught and led. That experience will serve them well as Dance musicians. It is really important to be sensitive to the tempo and volume level set by the leader and followed by the dancers.

It is also critical to know the Dance tune! As the player of a melodic instrument, you may be called upon to play the tune when the dancers go on the breath. If you are a regular in the circle of musicians, you may choose to stay in that circle even when a Dance is new, or new to you. In that case, you'll have to learn some tunes quickly. It might be wise to play along with the singers until you're pretty confident that you can reproduce the Dance tune without error. While the leader is teaching the Dance, your fingers can be walking through the sequence of notes on your instrument. Once the Dance begins, you might want to play along with the melody, softly, until you're pretty sure that you've got it. Then you can go on to try other things.

DO try to recognize the key that the Dance is in and the chords that the guitarist is playing to accompany it. Aside from being able to reproduce the melody, recognizing the key and the chords played for Dances provides sufficient material to last for a lifetime of improvisation. If you are just starting out as a Dance musician, it will be useful to play the root note of each chord that the guitarist is playing (for example, the G for a G Major chord and the D for a D Major chord). Just playing the root notes of the chords will allow you to accompany the Dances without worry. Even if you're not adding tonal or rhythmic complexity to the music, your instrument will provide a distinctive texture that makes a positive contribution to the experience of the dancers. If you're not sure what the chords are, ask the guitarist.

Once you've mastered the ability to recognize and play the root notes of the chords, try to play other notes in the chords—generally thirds or fifths, sometimes sixths (which are upside-down thirds), and occasionally sevenths. (These numbers refer to where the notes occur in the sequence of the scale, with the number one being assigned to the root note.)

These notes generally harmonize with the root notes (which is why they're in the chords in the first place). And they provide a basis for making up moving lines that are different from the Dance tune itself but will harmonize with the tune.

DON'T play as if you were a soloist. No matter how good you may be on your instrument, the role of a Dance musician is to support the Dances, and not to impress the listeners. A Dance musician needs to know how to blend—with the leader's intent, with the voices of the dancers, and with the other musicians.

DO try to vary the diet. Once you've become comfortable in the circle of musicians, there are any number of ways in which you can subtly enrich the music that is supporting the Dances. As noted above, you can play notes in the chords that the guitarist is playing and even make up "counter melodies" that blend with what the dancers are singing but have a melodic integrity on their own. You may want to experiment with varying the rhythms of what you're playing—not just playing long, sweeping notes, but setting up a rhythm with your notes (even on repeated notes) in the way that drummers often do to enrich the music that accompanies the Dances. You can also move around within your instrument's range, sometimes playing low notes and sometimes, high notes.

DON'T feel as if you need to play all the time. In fact, being quiet for a while is another way to vary what you do. Sometimes Dance leaders will signal all of the musicians to be silent so that the dancers can suddenly hear the divine sound of the blend of their unaccompanied voices. However, there is no need for a musician to wait for an invitation to stop playing. It can be very effective to alternate periods of playing with periods of silence. When there are several melodic instruments in the circle of musicians, it is also effective for the players to take turns, handing off the line from one player to another.

DO learn to surrender. Once you've overcome the self-consciousness that can plague new Dance musicians, allow yourself to listen to your inner voice, the one that transcends thought; it can often put notes directly into your fingers without your having to think about them. Go with the flow.

DON'T sweat "wrong notes." If you're like most of us, sometimes you'll play a note that doesn't blend well with the other music that's being made. That's a problem which is pretty easy to fix: stop playing the note, and keep changing it until you're back to blending. It's been said that if you start well and end well, nobody will remember what you've done in

between. Don't obsess over oddball notes. In the longer run, they may even enrich the sound of the ensemble.

DON'T worry, be happy. An open mind and open ears will be your greatest assets as a Dance musician. Playing with others, and having the opportunity to play in the midst of a circle of dancers, is great fun if you approach it with humility, in the spirit of service. Your musical skills and the level of service you provide will grow with experience. Enjoy the ride!