

Swing Notes Vol 321: Interpretation, Improvisation, Interaction.

Lindy Hop, with its Afro-American origins, is rooted in the tradition of improvisation. Rather than adhering to rigid, pre-defined steps, like you might find for example in sequence dancing, we are encouraged to put our own style and creativity into the dance, which is why no two dancers will ever look alike. This is also why even after 40 years of dancing Swing, I can honestly say I've never once grown tired of it. This emphasis on spontaneity not only encourages individual expression but the split-second choices, responses, and decision-making required is part of the essential character of Lindy Hop.

In Swing dance improvising refers to the spontaneous creation of new movements or variations 'on the fly' while dancing. It allows dancers to break away from set patterns or choreography and respond to the music, their partner, and the energy of the moment. Improvisation is a key element of Swing dance because it reflects the playful, expressive nature of the dance style. Of course, as a beginner, you have to learn the vocabulary, structured moves and classic routines to get the basic ingredients for the dance, but as you become more experienced it's about your individual way of styling the dance, your personal flair in creativity and how you feel the music. As a dance teacher, I don't want to see a room full of 'Simon lookalikes' out there, I want the students to find themselves and be as individual as possible.

Simon Selmon - Dancer & Malcolm Earle Smith - Musician, in the studio preparing for a musicality workshop where the dancers and the musicians learn to listen & talk to each other.



What does improvisation involve in Swing dance:

1. Musical Interpretation

- Dancers listen closely to the rhythm, melody, and mood or feel of the music and adjust their movements accordingly. They might add pauses, syncopations, or different styling choices that match the music's dynamics.

2. Creativity

- Improvising gives dancers the freedom to express their individual style. They can add personal flair through embellishments, footwork variations, or unexpected turns, this makes the dance feel unique each time.

3. Partner Interaction

- Improvisation occurs between partners in a lead-and-follow dynamic. The lead or follow might throw in an unplanned move, and their partner interprets or enhances it in a responsive and creative way. Both dancers should contribute to the overall flow of the dance.

4. Connection to Jazz Roots

- Swing dance is deeply rooted in jazz, a musical genre known for improvisation. They grew up alongside each other. Improvising in Swing dance reflects this connection, where just like the musicians, dancers can play with the structure while maintaining rhythm and flow. Lindy Hop is part of the Jazz dance idiom and dancers like Al Minns and Norma Miller (key members of the famous Whitey's Lindy Hoppers) understood the its connection to Jazz Roots.

5. Adaptability

- Improvising allows dancers to adapt to their partner's style, the space they're in, or the vibe of the crowd. It's about being flexible and quick on your feet, adjusting your movements as the moment calls for.

In essence, improvisation in Swing dance makes every dance unique, and every dancer unique and it's where creativity and personality truly shine. It's one of the reasons why Swing is so fun and engaging for both the dancers and the audience! For me, it's the playful freedom of the dance that gives it its soul and long-lasting appeal; improvisation is the Holy Grail of Lindy Hop.

Whilst this is the primary reason why I dance, and apart from the pure joy that one gets from dancing, there are some welcome added benefits to dancing – particularly, it seems, improvised dancing: I have read many times how it can reverse or slow down the aging process of the brain as well as enhance cognitive function and neuroplasticity. Whilst I am not an academic, I enjoy reading popular science accounts of the art and benefits of dancing and below are some of the results of my research.

Cognitive Benefits:

1. **Neuroplasticity and Cognitive Function:** Studies show that improvisational dance enhances brain plasticity by requiring quick decision-making, coordination, and creative thinking. A 2017 study published in *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience* found that dancing—especially improvisational forms—improves cognitive function, memory, and spatial awareness in older adults. This is because it

engages multiple brain regions responsible for memory, planning, and motor skills.

2. **Prevention of Cognitive Decline:** A landmark study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (2003) showed that regular dancing significantly reduced the risk of dementia in older adults. Participants who danced frequently were 76% less likely to develop dementia compared to those who didn't dance.

Physical Benefits:

3. **Balance, Coordination, and Flexibility:** Improvisational dance enhances balance and coordination, which are crucial for preventing falls and maintaining mobility in older adults. A 2019 study published in *Gerontology* found that older adults who participated in creative dance showed greater improvements in balance and gait than older adults who engaged in stretching.
4. **Cardiovascular and Musculoskeletal Health:** Dance is an effective form of aerobic exercise, improving cardiovascular health, which plays a crucial role in healthy aging. The *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity* published research in 2009 demonstrating that dance not only helps maintain muscle strength and flexibility but also supports joint health.

Emotional and Psychological Benefits:

5. **Improvement in Mental Health:** Dance has been linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety and depression, improving emotional well-being. This is supported by a recent review study in *Journal of Dance Medicine & Science* (2023), which found that dancing contributes to maintaining and improving mental health in adults across the lifespan.
 6. For a more popular account of the benefits of dancing, see this article from Science News: [Dancing can reverse the signs of aging in the brain | ScienceDaily](#))
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SIMON'S Swing Notes

Swing Notes is a free blog I write every Sunday (well most),
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PS I would like to thank my editor, who patiently goes through all my articles and corrects my grammar (I knew I should have studied harder at school) and points out what doesn't quite make sense.
Thank you to my wonderful wife and partner Anna.

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For the more academic amongst you, here are the original articles mentioned:

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For me, I will leave my reading for now and hit the dance floor – for a more balanced, less stressful future!

Each man, each great dancer has their unique style and it separates them. Gregory Hines