

Playing Swing Jazz for Dancers

Some guidelines for jazz bands

The guidelines below are in descending order of importance. You may not follow the ones at the bottom of the list but you'd best be following the ones at the top!

- Play straight ahead swing feels in 4/4. (and stick to swing – no straight eighths feels!).
Why? Dancers want to coincide their movements with the groove. When the groove is clearly and more simply stated they can do this.
- Keep your tune short.
Why? Dancers get tired! Also it gives dancers a chance to dance with someone new more often.
- Keep your tempos within certain ranges.
Why? Certain dances can only be danced at certain tempos. If the dancers want to dance Lindy Hop you want to keep it at around 120-160bpm. Other dances are faster, others slower. Ask the dancers what sorts of tempos they are used to.
- Keep your tempos varied (while staying within the range!).
Why? Its more fun to dance a range of different dances, each of which is danced at a different tempo range. Play your set like a DJ, with ebb and flow in the tempo range.
- Play standards with clear phrasing in 2 or 4 bar phrases. (ie *In a Mellow Tone* rather than *Dolphin Dance*)
Why? The dance steps typically mirror this kind of phrasing. Predictable phrasing allows the dancer to coincide their moves with the phrases and with the cadence points of each section.
- Vary the swing feel of different tunes to suggest different dances.
For example, Balboa is best danced to a bouncing 4-on-the-floor feel while Lindy Hop has a more gliding, circular feel to its phrasing.
- Watch the dance floor and react to the way the room or individual dancers move.
Why? Swing dance is an improvised dance. Like jazz, it has its structures (licks or patterns for the musician) that practitioners learn but the way they are expressed is improvised in the moment. Is the dancefloor pumping? Throw in another chorus and maintain the energy. Is a particular dancer/s reacting to your solo? Watch their rhythms and energy and copy or respond to it.