

“Stealing”

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1 Introduction

This paper discusses steal jams, steal dances, stealing technique and general etiquette.

Stealing is the art of getting one partner out of an already dancing couple, without the one being stolen having to stop dancing. Stealing is usually done at social events. There are exceptions to this. Such as the steal dance show in Herrang 2003¹.

The first known partner changes on the dance floor during a song were called “cutting in”. It can be considered the forerunner of stealing nowadays. Cutting in worked as follows: The man wanting to cut in would walk up to the couple dancing, tap on the man’s shoulders, they would stop dancing and the new couple would then start dancing. This can be seen in various movies, e.g. Hellzapoppin². The polite version of cutting in would be to ask the couple “*May I cut in?*”, which was ok to be answered with a no, otherwise the new couple would start dancing. It was not common to have a woman cutting in. Frankie Manning states that cutting in was done on the social dance floor in the Savoy Ballroom.

2 Steal Jam

A Steal Jam is a jam session, but instead of switching whole couples just one of the dancing couple in the middle will get stolen. Usually the new partnership will stay in the middle. It might happen that two people steal at the same time, and there will be a “snowball”-effect, meaning, there will be more than one couple in the middle. If it happens that is ok. Usually, however, the one losing the partner goes out of the circle, to steal again later. As jam sessions always had fast music, steal jams still tend to be done to fast music today. This was because they didn’t want people to stay in the jam circle too long.

2.1 History

The history of steal jams is not quite clear. The first documented partner change in a jam session is in Part 2 of the documentation “The Spirit Moves”³, which are original shootings from the Savoy Ballroom in the 50’s. The partner change

¹<http://smoothsavoy.com/Videos/Herrang03.avi>

²1941, directed by H.C. Potter, writing credits: Nat Perrin, Warren Wilson

³1987, directed by Mura Dehn

is in “cutting in” style and not real stealing, though it features for the first time an active breaking of the connection between the dancing couple.

Nowadays there is no person you could identify as being the first one who “recreated” steal jams, as well as there isn’t any exact date for the first steal jam in the Swing revival. Steal jams evolved in many different scenes for different reasons, e.g. too many leaders as was the case in San Francisco in the late 90’s.

2.2 Birthday Jams

Birthday jams are probably the best known example for steal jams, even though they existed before stealing, they can gain more spice when adding the steal part. The difference from a common steal jam is that a birthday child is in the middle, only the birthday child gets stolen and there is no “snowball”-effect.

2.3 Special Etiquette

- When having birthday jam you want to show off the birthday child and not yourself.

3 Steal Dance

A steal dance is usually called by the DJ. It starts off with a few couples dancing and some people without a partner. There should be enough dancers without a partner so that stealing can actually happen. The non-dancing people will now start to steal. The ones losing their partners keep on stealing from other couples. It is important that the non-dancing ones don’t start dancing with other non-dancing ones, because it will get problematic if there are too few dancers stealing. The idea of a steal dance is to dance with a lot of different partners. This is a determining factor for the speed of the music, which is always slow to medium.

3.1 History

Steal dances are a fairly new development. According to Frankie Manning they did not exist in the 30’s. It is not known if steal dances are the creation of only Bill Borgida or if there were parallel developments. Bill Borgida claims the San Francisco Swing Scene for inspiration. *“I liked the dance idea more than the jam, since it becomes more of a mixer. And more people meet other people without feeling intimidated to join in.”* says Bill Borgida. Since the late 90’s, he has called steal dances when DJ-ing.

3.2 Special Etiquette

- It is ok to “ditch” your partner if no one steals after you’ve danced for awhile. As stated in the general stealing etiquette (see “5 General Stealing Etiquette”), a steal dance should allow you to dance with many different people.

4 Stealing Technique

Stealing is leading someone away from their current partner, so basically all leading technique should be considered to be also stealing technique. I'm not going to name all of them here, but try to write down only special techniques that come in addition.

- Dance the whole time, regardless of whether or not you have a partner! There is always music being played.
- Be close to the couple you want to steal from.
- Use small movements, so that you won't injure the people attempting to steal in. Be aware of the people around you.
- Avoid moves that make you or your partner lose control.
- Use the momentum of the move that the dancing couple is doing to create your steal. This will keep your stealing smooth.
- When you are being stolen from, watch out for opposing leaders and if you feel the need to let go to avoid someone getting hurt, then let go!
- You must lead (at least for a moment) no matter whether you want to be the leader or the follower in the new dance partnership.
- When someone comes to steal from you, don't just give your partner away, let him or her be stolen. But also recognize their dancing level and don't make it too difficult for them.
- Don't play keep away! Steal jams/dances are designed for stealing, so trying to protect your partner from getting stolen is inappropriate.
- Use good etiquette and don't steal when it is not appropriate. See "5 General Stealing Etiquette" for etiquette.

5 General Stealing Etiquette

Note: For special additions, check the subtopics of the particular type of stealing.

- If you steal outside of a steal jam/dance, than ask before stealing, no matter who it is!
Maybe they are having their best dance ever together. You never know and you don't want to go in and change that kind of amazing energy.
- Don't steal when it is not appropriate! It's not appropriate to steal, when
 - your best friend is dancing with Frankie Manning, Norma Miller...
 - just because 2 leaders/followers are dancing together. Even though you might think "*It is such a waste of leaders/followers.*"
 - outside a steal jam/dance without getting permission to steal.
- Try to be understanding of someone who doesn't obey the etiquette. Not everyone knows the etiquette and they are just excited and want to dance too.

6 Appendix

6.1 Thanks to ...

- ... Jenn Harry who taught my first stealing class, encourages and helps whenever I need help or advice!
- ... Andrew Sutton, who formulated most of the etiquette and technique and also for inspiration to this text.
- ... Frankie Manning, Bill Borgida and Kevin St. Laurent for providing information on history matters.
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