



## **M.A.K. 3 DANCE CLUB/LOS ANGELES**

*Professionalism – Tradition – Commitment*

### *F.A.Q.'s about Chicago Style Stepping*

By Dave Maxx, Founder MaK3/Chicago

Smoothsteppers@yahoo.com

Website: [www.mak3danceclub.com](http://www.mak3danceclub.com)

[213] 226-1935

*Stepping is an African American social dance similar to Ballroom Dance with a Chicago-twist known as "Steppin". It is usually performed to a 6 or 8 count, and to a unique beat often referred to as 'Stepping' music. Smooth Steppers Network/Mak3 Los Angeles, emphasizes the delivery of quality instruction, the learning of Stepping fundamentals, fun, and personal instruction.*

**QUESTION:** How many classes should I take before I'm ready? I don't intend to become a competitive or fancy stepper – I just want to know enough to be a good social stepper.

**ANSWER:** It's difficult to pre-determine how many lessons an individual will need to get a working knowledge of Stepping. I've noticed that most students usually take 4-5 weeks just to get comfortable with the 'basic step', but often some need more time. 'Comfortable' from an instructors point of view means that the students movements should be flowing and have the appearance of being relaxed. The students' main period for learning occurs at the intermediate level where she/he learns to make adjustments with the basic step.

**QUESTION:** As I learn to Step, what's my responsibility as a female Stepper/partner within the dance? Is it to simply follow his lead? To do footwork while he dances? I'm not really clear on what my role as a follower is?

**ANSWER:** Yes, the female is following, but her central responsibility is also to keep the timing going by doing the footwork, *and* the basics to the music. Also she must be able to adhere to the signals the male partner gives which she should be prepared to do on command. Women should understand that they are *suppose to make each other look good as a couple* to on lookers. If, after Stepping to a song, a couple has people coming up to them and asking "how", and "where did they learn that", then they *know* that they did their jobs as dance partners.

**QUESTION:** Going over the 'basics' is boring to me. Why is so much emphasis paid to learning the so-called 'basic steps' of stepping?

**ANSWER:** The basic step is the format for every stepping and footwork move used in this dance. An advanced stepper will 'make plays' on the basic step, but must adhere to basics, although it may not always appear to be the case. The basic step is everything in stepping. And, as an instructor and veteran stepper, I still practice; even at the level I currently dance.

**QUESTION:** I've noticed there are more women than men in the Stepping classes I attend. What's my incentive for continuing to learn this dance, since there'll be fewer men to step with once I've finally learned?

**ANSWER:** Keep in mind most social partnered-dances face this challenge – not just Steppers. I understand that in cases such as this, those women are "smarter" than men in realizing that in order to learn something that you should be taught the proper way. But be encouraged, men will eventually follow suit as they see other men who are the desired dance partners getting all of the dances. They will also want to play that role. Would men play sports or wear cologne for that matter, if it didn't in some way attract the attention of women. New partners will get involved as they see progress. I've witnessed it personally to the degree that even here in Chicago, men in the classes presently outnumber the women.

**QUESTION:** The Stepping music I hear in class is different from the 'Top 40' played in the clubs I attend, which is to 'fast'. How do I get DJ's to play music I can step to?

**ANSWER:** Keep requesting it!!! And, if the DJ's continue to ignore your requests, let the manager know that you and all your drinking friends [non-alcoholic included] will go where you can hear preferred music. Clubs are in the business of serving drinks and keeping folk on the dance floor, not playing music. Talk to them in their language!

**QUESTION:** In seeing experienced Chicago Steppers, I notice there's a difference between the smooth flow of how they step, as opposed to the very robotic, and fundamental method that I'm learning in class. What part of my instruction deals with learning how to step with smoothness, and with that flow?

**ANSWER:** Smoothness and flow, comes with consistent practice and becoming more familiar with something. When you were a child and started walking it was probably quite awkward, but look at you now! If you play a sport, your technique gets better the more you do it. Experience dancers are the same way. They are able to test the limits of the format because they have practiced it over time. Stepping as with other dance art forms takes practice, and adherence to the standard format. And though it may not always look like it 'true steppers' always play out the basic step in their dance moves. Moreover, when you see more 'experienced steppers', it's good to note that their footwork comes from being able to build off of the basic step once they became extremely well versed with it to the point that they don't need to use the count anymore. They can then 'dance by the beat' they hear in the music and know automatically where their partner is at all times while she does her basic step.

**QUESTION:** My friends here in Los Angeles who once lived in Chicago say that what I'm learning is different from what they did when they lived and stepped in Chicago. Why is that, and what do they mean when they say 'it's different'?

**ANSWER:** Unfortunately, living in an area does not mean that you actually *know* how to perform a dance technique or tradition indigenous to the locale. For example, in Chicago, a great many people claim to know how to step, but really don't. And, rather than simply learning how to step properly, they became comfortable with doing what later became known as 'freestyle Stepping'. This involved turning and creating moves based upon whatever emotion 'told them' a move belonged. Unfortunately, its impossible to have that smooth and synchronized look with that type of dance. In its place you have a rather jerky, wide and often clumsy execution of movements. Also, which could be the case, involves a person actually knowing how to step. It's just that they simply did not have the benefit of learning, by using a charted program, but rather had to 'learn by trial and error' until they could figure it out. For many people that was the case. As a result, many people never learned the full-range of Chicago Stepping, because thought there were many good dancers who developed along these lines, they simply didn't know how to teach it to someone else. Whereas, these days, it is the 'norm' to take a Stepping class, along with using a structured format in learning how to step.

**QUESTION:** How long will it take me to learn how to step? My schedule and finances won't allow me to take these classes indefinitely?

**ANSWER:** Learning to step doesn't take forever. Some of my best students have become well recognized as great dancers in as little as a year. But, to learn how to be a functional stepper, who can go out and have fun, without worrying about looking silly is somewhere between 6-8 months, depending on how much work you put into learning to step.

**QUESTION:** Are Bopping and Stepping the same thing?

**ANSWER:** Bopping and Stepping are not the same thing. Bopping is a two-step dance that is more similar to Lindy Hop or Jitterbug. Stepping consists of 8-movements, counted 6 or 8 times, is performed in a semi-circular motion in slotted positions, and traditionally performed at a slower and much smoother pace than Bopping. If I were to compare them to music, I would call Bopping, Big Band Jazz...and, Stepping, a more versatile Smooth Jazz.

**QUESTION:** If the couple actually starts Stepping on '2', then why in our beginners class do we start the count with '5-6-1'?

**ANSWER:** Simply put, because you are a *beginner*. There is a formula at work. You won't always start at '5-6-1', but you *must* learn the format. Starting at '5-6-1' allows for certain measures to be followed, and allows for easier learning of more advance moves in the other levels. Trust the program, it works and is proven.

**QUESTION:** I've taken quite a few beginners classes, and feel that I'm "ready" for something more challenging. How do I know I'm "ready"?

**ANSWER:** A. When your moves are smooth. B. You are not bothered by changes in tempo, or by mistakes by others around you. C. You can dance and hold a conversation and still listen to the music. D. Someone touching you doesn't throw you off.

**QUESTION:** What skills should I have mastered before moving on to the Intermediate level?

**ANSWER:** I have provided the Lead Instructor[s] in your city with an outline of what my expectations would be for a student, in order for them to be adequately prepared for the Intermediate level. This stage is where most of the learning takes place, hence the reason why *soooo* much emphasis is placed on learning/knowing the Basic Step and building a solid foundation.

**QUESTION:** It seems that at least ½ hour after a good class, I begin forgetting what I learned in class! What tips do you have for daily practice between my step classes to retain what I've learned?

**ANSWER:** Not to sound like a salesman, but purchase the practice CD. It's great for working at home. Also, remember to take things *sloooooow*. Adding pressure to the mix of learning this dance fast actually makes it harder. Stepping is one of those things that you 'wake up' to and realize "hey, I'm good at this!".

**QUESTION:** My friend loaned me this video on Stepping that they purchased in Chicago. Isn't it possible for me to learn how to step from watching this video, just as much as from taking/paying for a weekly class, right?

**ANSWER:** Actually, this isn't the case. Nothing beats interactive learning. Most of the tapes out on Stepping don't cover the finer points, which keep you from making mistakes, or from developing bad habits. In addition, dancing at home in front of your TV doesn't tell you if you can do it in front of anyone, let alone with a partner. In addition, who will let you know if what you're doing looks like what you're watching, and are you actually learning a skill that you can chart, or, are you simply mimicking what you see without developing reference points as to why you're doing them.

**QUESTION:** Here in my city, I've not danced partners with someone in a loooooong time. It's going to take me a while getting use to being physically close to someone I don't know well. What are your thoughts on this? Also, I think I may have trouble with the man 'leading' me thru a dance. Any suggestions on how I can overcome this apprehension?"

**ANSWER:** Learning how to dance with a partner comes with the territory. If you're going to be a Stepper you must learn to get comfortable with the fact that another body is going to be involved. You will become more at ease over time. As a woman don't let anything occur that you're uncomfortable with, or feel is unprincipled. Try to be comfortable in the skin you're in, and get over the fact that they are being touched. Remember, Steppin' is *just* a dance. Try to remember to relax, and have fun!

***PRACTICE! PRACTICE! PRACTICE!***

## **10 Social Dancing Etiquette Tips for Men**

The bottom line is that most women who wish to dance are looking for a good overall dancer, a good lead, someone who is considerate and careful for their safety, as well as being well groomed and appealing.

**#1 Learn to Step.** Most women dancers prefer to dance with someone who is a good Stepper. You don't need to have years of experience or know a million moves. But know the dance well enough to lead your partner with confidence and clarity. Most important is to have gotten the dance posture and leading techniques down, through lessons and coaching to the point where a woman will "read" that you are confident and relaxed. Invest in an hour or two of private coaching and ask for feedback on your lead and posture. Then work to develop your skills.

**#2 Be a courteous dance partner.** Invite a woman to dance by extending your hand and asking if she would like to dance. Escort her to the floor and throughout the dance focus on not only leading the dance, but also connecting with your partner. Stepping is not about a lot of fancy moves. It is about connecting and moving to the music with your partner. A good stepper who never looks at or "clues in to" the woman he is dancing with is not one whom a woman will be excited to dance with. Even if your partner is not the best dancer, always be courteous. After the dance ends, escort your partner back to where she was when you invited her, or to the edge of the dance floor. Never just walk away or leave your partner in the middle of the dance floor.

**#3 Protect your partner.** A leader's job is to lead the dance and part of leading is preventing collisions or other situations that could injure his partner or himself. Many Steppers ignore this role and spin or lead their partners into others, step on other dancers, or otherwise put themselves or others in a position of getting hurt. A leader should stop dancing or do what it takes to make sure that the woman he is dancing with does not get injured on the floor. No woman wants to dance with a man who ignores safety and creates situations, which cause her injury or make her fear she will get hurt.

**#4 Seek to regularly improve your dancing.** Once you have mastered the basics of leading and a few moves, work to increase your repertoire. It gets boring to dance with someone whose moves are predictable and never change. This applies to seasoned as well as beginning leaders. Some strong dancers stop taking classes and once a woman has danced with them a few times, their entire repertoire is known. By periodically learning a few new moves or steps a leader will keep experienced dancers intrigued and interested.

**#5 Groom yourself.** A man should be clean, neat and appropriately dressed for a woman to want to dance with him. Body odor can be a real problem for some men. Make sure to use deodorant and to have clean hair, hands, fingernails and the like. Brush your teeth and use breath freshener. Alcoholic or smokers' breath is a turn-off for women who like to dance. Hair should be neatly combed and a man should shave or trim his facial hair before

dancing. After shave/cologne can be overpowering in a club/studio, so avoid it for dancing. A lot of greasy hair products can also be off-putting. Clothes should be clean, fit well and be neatly pressed. Shoes should be polished. Natural fibers absorb moisture better than synthetics and feel better to the touch. If you sweat a lot, take extra shirts and change into them as needed. It's not fun to dance with someone who is soaking wet with sweat. Flashy jewelry, tank tops, sneakers, t-shirts are not usually appropriate dance apparel.

**#6 Learn to talk and dance at the same time.** What a concept! Dancing is a social activity. If you are doing a dance that is slow enough to allow for some conversation, by all means talk to your partner. A running conversation may not be advisable while trying to dance with someone new, but introducing yourself and exchanging a few words--a compliment about dance ability, a question about where one likes to dance, etc., indicate that you have a personality. And if you see this person at a future time, it is that much easier to ask them to dance again. Women like good dancers but they like men with some personality too. The "silent dancer" who never speaks a word can be off-putting for many of us.

**#7 Smile. Dancing should be enjoyable.** Too many dancers **never** smile or indicate they are enjoying themselves. A partner can feel positive (and negative) energy from you! A bit of smiling indicates you are having a good time. On the other hand, a fixed smile or staring at someone with a confusing grin on your face can be a total turnoff. Smile when the feeling moves you, when you catch your partner's eye, as it feels natural.

**#8 Dance with different types of dancers.** Some men are extremely selective about whom they dance with. Others take pains to dance with many different women, of all sizes, shapes, ages and abilities. When women see a good, good stepper asking an older woman, or a less advanced dancer to dance, they think more highly of him than of one who will only dance with the hottest, sexiest woman on the floor and who looks right through other women.

**#9 Don't try to dance to a dance you don't know.** Some male steppers try to fudge what they do, by asking a woman to Step and then end up doing salsa or cha-cha moves. Women want to Step with someone who **knows the dance** and **can lead it**. It's very frustrating to Step with a man who has no clue how to Step. Either seek lessons in Chicago Stepping, or sit out the dance, but don't put a woman through the frustration of Stepping with you when you don't know what to do.

**#10 Do the asking.** Some male dancers can get lazy or overly selective. They wait for women to ask them to dance instead of asking the women. While there's nothing wrong with taking a break while dancing and having a woman ask you to dance occasionally, the general etiquette calls for men to ask women to dance. Don't make it more complicated by playing "hard to get" and making women guess if you want to dance or not. Either ask women to dance if you wish to dance, or stay off and away from the dance floor so women can tell you aren't interested in dancing.