

Master Programmers' Tips - Class for Texas Camp 2023

This is my best attempt to capture what was shared during this session for DJ's/Programmers of Folk Dance – both thoughts I shared and, as much as I was able to remember, ideas and suggestions from the participants. My apologies if I did not capture your good thoughts. Many great ideas were shared by a wealth of experienced DJ's. Thanks to all who attended and participated.

My notes here are distilled from facilitator notes for active workshops given in the past. If you were present at Texas Camp, these should all make sense to you. If you were not able to attend, these may seem 'incomplete'. Feel free to contact me for clarification.

The Role of DJ or Programmer for Folk Dance

Before we discuss your role as a Folk Dance music DJ or evening Programmer, consider the question:

Why do you dance?

Like to move Love the music For the social interactions/see my friends
Love the diversity of movement and music
It's Challenging Love it when it's right! Basically – it's **FUN!!!**

Never forget why your audience is there! Be sure you incorporate their needs into your programming! Otherwise, they won't come back!

Never underestimate the **influence that the DJ/Programmer has** on the comfort, happiness and inclusion (culture) of the room.

There are several different ways groups have historically programmed and run their dances.

- a) The pre-programmed event where all dances are decided and sequenced prior to the dance.
- b) The all-request program where the dances done that night are determined by the requests of the dancers present that evening.
- c) A Combination of pre-programmed and live requests.

Each of these three types of programming are good; all of them can work. But there are advantages and disadvantages to each style.

a) Pre-programmed

Positives: All the work is done for the DJ in advance; which makes for an easy night for the DJ.

Negatives: Participants don't have any say in what dances are done. If the DJ list is from last-week's participants, those folks may not be here now.

b) All dances are current requests

Positives: Dancers get to dance the dances they want NOW! There is no prework for the DJ.

Negatives: The DJ is very busy during the dance. This option depends on the participants to know the names of dances!

c) Combination of Live requests and preprogrammed dances – a middle ground.

Positives: Reduces the work of the DJ but also allows participants to do the dances they want now.

Negatives: The DJ is active throughout the dance (but can plan for down time).

This combination style is Joan's personal favorite for reasons that will become clear.

But let's consider the 4 separate KSA's (Knowledge, Skills, & Abilities) that a Programmer/DJ needs:

1. Knowledge of dance names, countries, type, history, etc.
2. Awareness of the participants' skills and preferences
3. Skill in using the media – computer, microphone, display of program, etc.
4. Organizational skills – including working with live music.

We'll concentrate on skill #4 here as it is both universal and critical to success.

But I want to touch on the others briefly.

#1 Make available & encourage the USE of DJ's NOTEBOOK (or have some method of archiving prior dance programs). It helps DJ's to have an EASILY accessible list of prior dance programs when trying to locate the name of *that* dance we did last week, for example.

We will address #2 a bit as we continue our tips session.

#3 Learn your specific tech/system!

Take a mentor who really understands the software, shortcuts, wiring needed, etc.

One suggestion is to have a training with your new DJ's somewhere OTHER than at a dance. Practicing in someone's home, for instance, takes the pressure and stress off. Or if you store your 'stuff' at the venue, practice using the technology at your site – but not during an actual dance.

Every group has their own software and library setup. Take a minute to understand their way of using their media.

But mostly let's take #4 **Organizational skills and creating content.**

You need to understand **why the DJ or Programmer is KEY** to a successful dance.

To me, the DJ/Programmer for the evening is the same as the HOST of a PARTY:

Your job is to ensure everyone there is having a good time

And as much as possible, is getting what they came for. (FUN!)

A Host:

1. Prepares for the Party - Has things set up BEFORE people arrive.

Get there early! Media, sign-in sheets, clean up the room as needed, fire up the computer, ready your predetermined program, make sure you know what happened at the last dance, what was taught recently, etc.

2. Welcomes the guests. *Unless you have a designated 'greeting committee'*

- a. *Welcomes new-comers; welcomes BACK newbies.*
- b. *Puts their coats away/where to stash purses/etc. (Restroom location!)*
- c. *Signs them in (if brand new.) LEARNS/remembers their name!*
- d. *First-timers: Waivers? Give them their Dance Notebook and pen? First time free?...*

3. Ensures they have a drink and introduces them around...

- a. *Ensures you have programmed some DANCES they can do (beginner)*
- b. *Introduces them to others so they have someone to talk to*
- c. *May share the 'rules' of the floor, leader location, follow behind the line; how to make requests...)*
- d. *Include them in announcements, refreshments, etc.*

4. Monitors the party as it unfolds
 - a. *Posts or announces the dances; gives time to assemble sets or partners*
 - b. *Plays dances for everyone – no one person/country/etc. monopolizes the floor; inclusive of all skill levels and preferences*
 - c. ***Keeps as many people dancing as possible*** – few ‘sitters’
 - d. *Keeps the energy up! Keep them dancing!*
 - i. *FAST music changes. Cue up next dance before this one finishes or let it run...*
 - ii. *Tries to include special requests whenever possible – if you don’t recognize a requested dance...ask someone & PLAY IT!*
 - iii. *Includes requests into a coherent program – that is, a mix of energetic/mellow; couple/mixer/line; etc.*

5. Concludes the evening – coffee is served; help folks get home safely
 - a. *Make the last dance a slow, cool-down dance*
 - b. *Thank folks for coming; encourage their return*
 - c. *Include newbies/visitors in afterparty plans*

Yes, we’re all volunteers with limited time to commit... but remember the Programmers’ influence? Influence comes with responsibility.

None of us enjoy going to a dance that is slow moving or unorganized.

It’s not fun to watch the DJ dash across the room after they have danced, to then decide what to play next; and start the next dance! The other dancers are BORED!!!

It’s never fun to watch someone struggle in their role as Programmer/DJ – it makes us all feel uneasy!

DJ’s goal #1:

NO DEAD AIR!!!

Slow music changes (and dim lighting) kill the energy in the room!

The more organized you are with your Programmer Preparations, the faster and easier it goes.

So here are some notes on how to **Prepare to DJ/Program**.

1. Know what dances have been **taught recently**. You will want to **ensure** that these are played at least once! Hopefully your group has a 'notebook' or running log of these that is easily accessible at the DJ desk.

2. Have some **(6-8?) dances in mind that folks** like that you might add to the Program to fill a specific need.
 - a. If you need diversity of type (mixer/partner/line/solo) or country of origin
 - b. If you need a slow or fast dance
 - c. If you need another beginner dance or easy mixer
 - d. If you need an 'easy on the body' dance to let folks catch their breath
 - e. If you need an aerobic dance to pick up the pace
 - f. If you need to get everyone back on the floor
 - g. Etc.

3. Plan your programming approach.

What type of program do you want?

I prefer the 'combination' style. I like to pre-program the first 15-30 minutes and switch to doing request dancing for the rest of the evening; but adapt your club's usual style.

If you have an assistant – what do you want them to do for you?

COMMUNICATE with them before you start! And remember to give them an ACTIVE role during the dance: Start the dance list? Collect requests? Run the tech? Etc.

Perhaps, ease your new DJ's into programming the night by having them create 'mini-sets' of 5 or 6 dances as part of your evening, rather than an entire night.

What dance(s) will be taught tonight?

(My personal preference is for the Programmer to pre-program 2-3 warm-up dances before Teaching takes place. This allows folks to warm up their muscles before learning – and gives the teacher a chance to see the skill level of those present for teaching.)

Will you run music for the Teacher? If so – what; at what speed; etc.?

While we're talking about working with the dance teacher:

One cheap device that I have used with great success (sometimes) to help learners remember the names of dances:

Give away/make available and encourage the use of pocket-sized notebooks for all participants. Encourage them to write down the Name of the dances they learn – and make some brief note about the dance to help them associate the name with the dance. It's a cheap and easy memory device.

Then, encourage folks to make requests – using their notebook... :)

It costs little, but the act of writing down the names helps cement them in memory. Research has shown that taking a picture with their phone (a Millennial preference) of the dance board/display does NOT involve memory! And you can't make notes on the photo about each dance.

Using the notebooks means that *ALL teachers* need to encourage and allow time for folks to get their notebooks out of their dance bag and make notes on each dance before moving to the next dance – whether that be another taught dance or into the program.

And that means that the DJ or Programmer needs to be on board with delaying the start of the program, if needed. It's a small price to pay for the reward of getting LOTS OF REQUESTS later.

So, are the notebooks (and pens) available and accessible?

Coordinate with the Band LEADER – Which dances are they prepared to play? Make sure you remove these from any pre-program you have created.

A few notes on working with Live music:

- Bands/musicians are notoriously SLOW in moving from dance to dance. There are very real reasons for this (instrument changes, etc.), but as Programmer, be aware!
- One way to keep the energy up is to MIX live and programmed music; 2 or 3 recorded tunes to 1 live tune; or a mini-live set between request dances. This gives the band time to change instruments, tunings, etc. without the dancers standing around waiting.
- Work with the band to play DANCE favorites – not just 'interesting' or fun music to play. It's a dance event – not a concert!
- Before and during the dance, COMMUNICATE with the band LEADER (only!). Others just cause confusion and slow down the evening.
- Share the GOAL of the evening with the Band. Make sure they are working toward the same goal(s) as the teacher and programmer.

4. Organize yourself so you can be a good Host.

Get to the dance **EARLY**. Set up everything!

- a. Power up the PC/media; patch wiring to speakers; whatever!
- b. Clean up the room. Set out chairs. Make the room inviting and friendly.
- c. Help the TEACHERs prepare by cueing up their dance(s) and programming the current teaching dances later in the evening.
- d. Then select Warm up dances (1-3) to play before teaching. (Prior taught dances are good. Other beginning dances are good. Remember – nothing too hard on the body yet!) Reference your list of possible dances...

While the Dance is in progress – your job does not end with a pre-programmed night! Here are some tips to help you organize and run a great program. The more organized you are, the more YOU can enjoy the dance.

1. Don't immediately program all the requests you get in the first 10 minutes. Save some space in the program for those that arrive later or are less assertive about putting up dances. It's okay to insert your requests, but don't make it ALL MY favorites.
2. Program in dances you don't much like or can live without doing tonight; one you DON'T dance! – and program these about every 3-5 dances. USE the time these dances are playing to select and prepare your next 4-6 dances in the program, if you are running an all-request program. If pre-programmed (or requests), use this time to monitor the room. That way, you can dance the ones you like! (Hint, this is a good use of dances that are unfamiliar to you.)
3. Beware of 'program hogs' – that fill the request list with their favorites...you want everyone to dance their specific dances. Program some of these – the ones you know others like. You are not required to play them all. (And if you don't play them all, they will have to come back next week... one sneaky way to get them to return!)
4. **Your goal is to keep everyone dancing.** This doesn't mean that you don't *occasionally* play a dance that only 4-5 people are dancing. Just be sure to follow that one up with a very popular dance that most folks like – so that you keep everyone present.
5. It is appropriate to solicit a request from someone – a visitor to the group; someone who has not been dancing the past 10 dances; someone with an injury that keeps them from dancing a lot of their favorites...
6. MONITOR the floor. Are people dancing? Or standing around? Watch a couple of 'choosy' dancers – have they danced lately?
7. Monitor the VOLUME for ALL dances. They are recorded differently – don't blast someone's ears – but dancers must hear it clearly. (Tech solutions now exist for this!)
8. Keep in mind a good 'closing' or 'last dance'. It should be a 'cool-down' dance so that people don't leave the hall sweaty – and catch cold.

And be aware of your face while you DJ! Our visible frustration when tech issues develop or something doesn't go as planned speaks VOLUMES to the others! No wonder they don't want to become a DJ!!! To reduce anxiety (yours and theirs), use humor...

SMILE! Have FUN! If you're having fun, chances are they will too!

AFTER the dance:

Take a moment to think about what went well, and what could have been better?

- Listen to feedback (including gripes) about the specific dances selected.
- Were there 'hiccups' in the technology? (and how might these be address going forward?)
- Were the same folks or groups sitting out too much?
- Were there too many requests that didn't get played? (and how might you address that in the future?)
- Etc.

LEARN something EVERYTIME you DJ!

Your GOAL for all this preparation and practice is to be SO PREPARED that you can:

Execute your program flawlessly!

AND **Observe and respond** to the needs of the participants.

AND **Make the experience FUN** and successful.

And if you can do all this, you are on your way to being a Master DJ/programmer!

And practice helps!

Thanks for your hard work, volunteer time and interest in improvement!

GO FORTH and Be the Best DJ/Programmer you can be!