

Using Music Effectively Presented by Jeff Priest

Music is surely one of the major tools in our tool box.

New Callers today have a great advantage over callers who started 50 – 40 – 30 or even 20 years ago, in that, their music options are many. Not just our Square Dance Labels. In years gone by we had Square Dance Music that was produced by Square Dance Callers for Square Dance Callers! Today we still have our Square Dance Music but we also have the option of public music or making our own music. Many newer callers have the skill to produce their own music electronically with computer programs.

The music you use will determine what type of program you present. To use your music effectively First: you must know your music extremely well. Second: you must make it fit what you are doing. Ie: using a piece of modern non-standard square dance music like Chaka Chaka for a first teach workshop, most likely will not have a positive result. On the other hand using a piece of music that is sedate with very little instrumentation, will not likely lift the floor with excitement for a party night.

To use music effectively it must talk to you in some fashion! The caller must be able to relate to the music somehow to be able to build the presentation, no matter what the occasion. If you have purchased a piece of music because you heard someone else do it and really enjoyed the experience but the music doesn't fit your personal style or speak to you in some manner, chances are you will have to work very very hard to make it yours or it just won't sound the same as when you fell in love with it. Sometime, it is best to just enjoy the experience of another caller performing that song instead of trying to put something in your program that just "isn't you".

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How to put your music together!

When you build your program the music needs to fit like the pieces of a puzzle. Generally, most callers start by building the singing call portion of the program and then fitting the hoedowns to the style of singing call.

With today's more modern music (non-standard tunes) used for hoedowns it is sometimes difficult to build a succinct program musically. You need to be careful that the hoedown music will fit "musically" with the singing call. If not there could be a disconnect in the tip. I find that with most of the non-standard music we use today, I try to follow with either a very rowdy singing call or I will take a minute or two to talk between the hoedown and singer and use something that is completely the opposite spectrum, hoedown vs singer. I.e: Chaka Chaka for hoedown and a quiet love song for the singer.

In order to use your music effectively you need to know what the music is doing and what it is doing to the dancer. Is it an uplifting piece that you need to be excited in your presentation or is it a love ballad that you need to be gentle and crooning – is it a heartbreak song that you need to show some emotion – is it a "goofy" song that requires some silly antics on your part?

As the caller, you need to know what message the music is offering and fit it to your program and style of presentation. One thing that I have found very helpful in my presentation, is to listen to the original song and see how the original artist did the performance. I then try to emulate or fit that to my presentation skills the best I can. Particularly if it is a popular tune and the dancers know it, I like to perform it the way they expect it to be. That is part and parcel of knowing your music.

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When Should a Caller use a new song?

When learning a new piece, I advise callers to know the music extremely well before they perform it for live dancers. That way, that tune can really be used effectively. If a caller plays a new tune through a couple of times just trying to fit the words to it but not really paying attention to the music, they could miss something valuable. There may be something there that could be a good musical attribute that could be highlighted to spice up the show. If the music hasn't been fully absorbed by the caller, they may miss musical chasers or special instrumentation pieces that become lost in words. That would be very unfortunate and has the potential to have a negative effect on the presentation.

Use Theme nights to enhance the dancers' experience!

There are many opportunities though our dance season that will allow a caller to create some really neat dances for their dancers. Valentines, St Patrick's, Spring themes, Summer themes, Fall themes, Halloween, Veteran's Day, and Christmas just to name a few. Each Caller should have suitable music in their collection to be able to create all these party dance situations.

It is possible and very likely, that not every caller will be comfortable calling all these types of music selections. This is where the very very hard work comes in, the caller must ensure that the dancers have a great time at these dances due to the music being used effectively. If a caller is not comfortable with the phrasing of the words to a song – let the music play. There are times when the caller should simply be quiet and let the music do the work. That is using the music effectively and can have a very positive effect!