

# 18. Asking a man to dance

Tuesday, May 17, 2016 8:50 AM

This article published on [closebracetango.com](http://closebracetango.com)

For those of you who are just arriving at the party...or even if you've been dancing a while...or if you've come to the party from another dance, the question usually comes up, "How do you ask a man to dance in Tango?". In Ballroom, or Salsa, you just ask. Tango is another, seemingly, confusing ball of wax entirely! How do you? Well, that's what this guide is all about, a safe, and tango correct way of going about the process that offends no one, and furthermore actually helps you to dance more frequently!

Let's get a few things out of the way, almost immediately....

1.) There is nothing wrong with asking a man to dance, in the United States. Everywhere else, it's a little different. However, ladies you must understand that doing so anywhere will not get you the desired results that you're looking for. The reason is because so many of the leaders adhere to one of several codigos (codes of the dance). So for that reason, TRY NOT TO VERBALLY ASK A MAN TO DANCE (there is an exception to this rule)! Otherwise, I swear to sunny Jesus, you're going to sit all night long. You will be punished, and you will not dance again. I am not kidding. There are some men that take it upon themselves to be somewhat catty about your dancing future. At the same time, there are some men that actually appreciate a woman when she asks, however those are few and far between. So if in doubt, just don't! Again there is an exception! Me, personally I like it when a woman asks me, so go right ahead...however be prepared to be rejected, if I'm tired or not feeling the love right then.

2.) A woman's role in the dance has traditionally been to be the 'follower', and while I detest the use of this word... 'Submissive'. In any other dance, especially in the United States, she's trained to be an active participant—this is not so in tango. It wasn't until very recently, and we're talking up until about 20 years ago and even that's a stretch, that the dance has started to relax some of its codigos, but this one, unfortunately or fortunately (depending on your point of view) is not going away any time soon.

3.) Understand that while you are asking someone to dance, or wanting to dance with someone, they are NOT obligated to accept your dance. As a matter of fact, the better the lead, the less inclined he is to dance with you. And while you may not understand this now, you will later. The fact is that tango requires that the dancing pair be very skilled in a variety of areas, not the least of which is body kinesthetics, the vocabulary of the dance, the vocabulary of a particular style or 'flavor' of the dance, the music!!!!, and a host of other factors like for example, a deftness of touch that far exceeds what you believe possible, a level of kinesthetic movement that is far more subtle than you will ever experience in any other dance, and a level of technique and attention to detail that is absolutely insane on the surface. Having said that...the truth is that you are painful to dance with right now. It doesn't matter how pretty you are, and/or what you are wearing, and those nice 'tango' shoes that you just bought are virtually worthless! This is not to put you in your place, or to make you feel bad about yourself, or to elevate the leaders in the room to god like status, their egos are big enough as it is. Most followers, unless they've led, will not understand what it takes to lead, conversely most leaders do not understand what it means to follow. I do. I am socially trained to dance both parts, and do quite frequently! I'll give you an example of what I mean by 'painful':

Look, I am not a small man, but as a leader I know what it feels like to dance with a follower who is 'heavy' and I don't mean her weight, although that is a factor sometimes. By 'heavy' I mean that she is literally leaning on me, and supporting herself with her arms hanging on me, instead of either a shared axis where we support each other (apillado), or on her own over her own pads of her own feet (vertical)! Also by 'heavy', I mean that she is either lifting up her feet as she walks backwards, and/or having me literally push her around. As a leader, I know what it means to dance with a follower who has not mastered her walk, where she wobbles, is highly unstable because she's wearing heels and she hasn't learned how to walk in yet. As a leader, I know what it feels like to

have a follower who literally thumps when she walks, and uses me to hold her up! As a leader, I know what it means to have a follower literally hang on my left arm, and to use my right shoulder and neck in some cases, as a hitching post. As a follower, I know all of those things. I have learned to negate them, I have learned to negate my mass, I have learned how to walk and to walk well, I have learned how not to impinge on his lead in any way, shape or form. I frequently have leaders tell me that they are surprised that a.) I follow, b.) that I follow well, and c.) that I don't feel like I look! I have worked very hard on creating this level of deftness in my following abilities, and that's only because I know all too well what it feels like to be on the other side of that, and I don't ever want to feel like that. To dance with a follower who does all of those things I describe, that is 'painful'. I want my leader to feel as though it is effortless to dance with me! And that is what it should feel like when he dances with YOU. If that's not happening, then you need some private lessons, not group classes, to fix the issue!

Because of this way of dancing, dancing with you is not exactly an easy task. As a matter of historical fact, it's actually a chore. There's a reason that some followers get all the dances in the room, and it sometimes has nothing to do with the way she looks, it has everything to do with HOW SHE FEELS to dance with! So if you're sitting at a milonga and you're wondering why Mary SoAndSo is getting all the dances, ask a few leaders why they enjoy dancing with her. It may be how she dresses, but I am willing to bet it's because of how she feels, how she commits to the embrace and is VERY attentive! Don't blame her, don't shame her, applaud her for doing her homework!!!

Having said that, now on to HOW TO ASK A MAN TO DANCE and GET IT!

I advocate a 3 pronged "C" approach to the seemingly sticky wicket of 'asking a man to dance'. There are codigos to consider here, and they're all quite acceptable, and within the boundaries of the dance.

1.) Cabeceo. This is a socially acceptable way for a woman to ask a man to dance and no one need know that you're doing it! If you don't know what it is, in short, a Cabeceo is making direct and clear line of sight eye contact with an intended dancing partner while they are NOT dancing, and once contact is established, you indicate with a nod of your head or your eyebrows that you would like to dance with that person (note: walking up to someone and nodding your head, indicating you'd like a dance, is considered poor taste, this is better known as the "Stalker Cabeceo").

2.) Conversate. Walk around a bit, at a milonga. Put your shoes on and walk around and engage people in conversation, not just the men...but the women too. However if you spot a leader that you'd like a dance with, engage him in a conversation. Here's the trick, near the end of the conversation, employ the following line any way you'd like to word it: "At some point when you're free LATER, I'd like to dance the LAST SONG of a tanda with you if you're free!". What you're doing is indicating that you're open to a dance with him LATER! Secondly, you're also putting the onerous task of deciding WHEN that dance happens clearly in his lap. Notice you used the word "Later", not "Tonight". Later could mean a few weeks from now. The important part is that he's clearly deciding IF and WHEN that dance happens, not YOU. And lastly note that it's the LAST song of a tanda...not a full tanda! Why the last song? Because if he doesn't like dancing with you, he's not obligated to go any further. But more than likely he will! Also note the last word, "FREE". What you are doing is making it very clear that you are a last resort, when he thinks of it. Now here's the hard part. Finish the conversation AND WALK AWAY! Do not look back, do not go bother him again. Move on to other people. Talk it up, girl.

3.) Circulate. That means to place yourself where EVERY leader can see you, typically on the corners of the room and change placements once every 30 minutes. Do not hide, do not sit slumped or hunched over—sit upright in the damned chair, legs crossed (show'm if you've got'm), head up, and SMILING! No one wants to dance with a FROWN. When you do get up and move, be VERY obvious about it. That means that as you are changing your placement and going to a new spot, smile, make eye contact with everyone as you do...don't just look at the ground. This is work, girl, and it takes active work to do it well.

Now it goes without saying but I feel I must; you must do ALL of these things to have the desired affect you want...which is to dance consecutively all night long, preferably with the guys you want to dance with and not with the men that you don't want to do dance with. However, doing this once and then stopping is not going to have the desired effect. It is cumulative! It also goes without saying

that it helps to dress the part, meaning put on that slinky dress you've been dying to wear—you know the one that is skin tight in all the right areas...men do like curves...sadly, it's a sad truism. But it does work to a limited degree, but not with the better dancers in the room, they really don't care what you're wearing, they only care about one thing: DANCING WELL!!!

It also goes without saying that this is ONLY 1 approach to getting the dances that you want. You must, must, must, IMPROVE YOUR DANCING TECHNIQUE RELIGIOUSLY. And going to group classes once a week is all fine and good, however, that's not going to improve your abilities. What will improve them? Private lessons on YOUR WALK and YOUR EMBRACE! LOTS and LOTS and LOTS of PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE...AND MORE PRACTICE! I am NOT kidding. Every day. Not kidding. You must improve beyond just getting around the floor and not looking like an idiot! If you're there to socially chat up your friends that's one thing, and you should NOT expect to get the dances you're wanting and this guide is nearly useless to you. However, if you are actively improving your dance, by practicing, taking lessons religiously, and traveling to OTHER CITIES to dance with OTHER PEOPLE on a regular basis, this is one of the only ways that your skills will leap frog over everyone else in the room! If you don't practice, then you shouldn't complain that you're not getting the dances you want. If you don't put in the time to improve, then you shouldn't complain that soandso isn't dancing with you. There's a reason soandso isn't dancing with you, it's mostly and probably because you feel like a ton of bricks to dance with, and/or are highly unstable. As a side note, when I mirror back to my students what they feel like when they dance with me, their understanding of what they need to be doing goes right through the roof. My job as a teacher is show them wrong, and then show them how to improve it so that it's 'right'.

On the flip side, while the above may sound crass, and hard, and cold, the fact is that he's no better, dear. He pushes, pulls, pokes, prods, can't walk without wobbling, is unstable himself, teaches on a social dance floor, is sweaty, stinky, and more than likely has a vice grip of death for an embrace! Oh and my personal favorite, blames the follower for all of his screw ups, and what's worse is that you're complacent in his blame!

Also to be fair, even with private lessons, and getting your skill on right, does NOT mean that you're going to get the dances you seek. The simple fact is that you may have eroded your community trust level and will have to work very hard to undo the damage. It takes time and patience to do that! So for those women, this is not a 3 pronged approach but a 4 pronged approach. Which includes a strict regime of working on your technique...religiously and then going out and proving it!

Lastly, there is a cumulative effect here, you must do all 3 of these things with 10 or 15 guys in a night, and you'll almost NEVER sit at a milonga again! It takes time and concerted effort to do what I am suggesting, however, I've done this myself when I was out following socially ONLY, and I know many men and women use it, even on me, and it works. It takes time and dedication to get this to work, but it does work.

Now for a few addendum to this guide.

a.) Once you have the dance, and you're enjoying dancing with someone, you can always ask for another WHILE YOU ARE ON THE FLOOR! Again, it's his choice. There's nothing wrong with this, anywhere in the world.

b.) If you know a leader, really, really, really well, you've dance with him a 100+ times or thereabouts, there is nothing wrong with asking him outright. Again his choice. Familiarity has its perks.

c.) Regardless if he is busy or not, respect his space and his time.

That my dear ladies is HOW YOU ASK A MAN TO DANCE!

Good luck!

PS: There are some women that will radically agree with what I've written here, there are some who will vehemently disagree, and most, if not 90% of the men I know that dance socially as a leader only, will praise me for being so blunt and right on the money. One thing is clear, this is a hot topic, even in today's world. I'd like to be clear on something else here, this topic is open for review at all times...it's an ever changing perspective. Nothing in tango is a hard and fast rule...because tomorrow that rule may have changed based on current conditions!

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