

Learn More About the Music We Dance to

What is the difference between Blues music, Indigo music, and Fusion music?

Note: This is for dancers, not academics.

As dancers, we are musically way ahead of the academics. Long before the academics knew enough to either condemn or condone Blues or Jazz, musicians had developed a culture around parties, speakeasies, juke joints... A culture that had its own codes of behavior and slang. Dancers, like musicians, have always rebelled against the intellectualized “norm”; those folks who sifted through their culture and categorized, labeled and interpreted their culture to the rest of the world.

How do you define music or a dance when it has no pedigree?

This question can be answered in a few ways and the first thing that is important to understand is that definitions change over time as musicians or dancers – and the general public – grow used to “what is” – and get used to the process of evolution towards “what will be.”

As an example, let’s take blues music since it is the oldest of the Blues/Indigo/Fusion continuum. We can all agree that blues music exists but we must remember that there was a time when it didn’t. Obviously we can observe that blues music has also evolved over time. If you could go back in time with a recording of any of the great Chicago blues musicians of the late 1940s or later and play that recording to a young Duke Ellington, do you think he would say it was “Blues”? *Of course not; Blues has evolved since then.*

With blues, as with all things that evolve over time, there was a time when an old-timer listening to what a new musician played would say “that’s not music, it’s just noise”. This process has undoubtedly repeated itself for centuries and across every culture. The old timer probably further chided the new musician saying “if that’s music, **what do you call it?**” This is a classic logic trap:

1. If the new musician names it, the old timer responds: “Says who? Who else is calling that?”
2. If the new musician relates it to something else that he does, the old timer responds: “No. It’s not that.”

These same issues concerning different music and dance styles still plague us today. I assert that as DJs (or just music lovers) we need to:

1. Use names – sometimes multiple names.
2. Understand that the names and meanings will change over time. New names and new meaning will emerge. “Swing” does not mean today what it meant in 1935.
3. Understand that part of the development process is disagreement and that disagreement isn’t reason to fold up and go home -or to yell louder. Instead, it is reason to speak and listen with

patience.

Final note: I'm interested in definitions which help us to better understand how to DJ and dance. These definitions are not always tied to musical definitions. For example, music definitions for Lindy Hop, Balboa, Charleston, and East Coast Swing don't exist as such, but those dances are all danced to "Swing music". Conversely, telling a DJ to play some "Swing music" when you want to do Balboa *may* work, but don't count on it! For the same reason, understanding the difference between "Fusion Dance Music" and "Fusion Music" is important (see below).

Defining Blues, Indigo and Fusion music for DJs:

BLUES: Blues is over 100 years old and has been defined and redefined. As dancers, we want authentic blues to be just that: authentic. That means it's blues. **Not** "bluesy, makes me feel like blues, kinda blues, bluesable, could be blues" or any of the assortment of other terms floating around in dance lingo. If you're not sure, then there's a good chance it's not authentic blues. To be sure, there is a lot of music that is crossed with blues: urban blues with funk for instance. Or jump blues with rock and roll, trad jazz with early New Orleans blues. For more specific categorizations of blues music, see [What is Blues?](#)

INDIGO: We prefer this term to "alt.blues" because it avoids the necessity of remaining attached to Blues music that alt.blues implies. Some people also like the term "Turquoise". Indigo refers to music that might share elements or feel like Blues music, *but isn't authentic Blues music*. Think of it as music that is a step away from authentic Blues music – whether rock, indie, pop, folk, Latin, etc.

Although we consider "Indigo" its own category, we can also agree with some people that Indigo music may be considered a genre of "Fusion music" because it musically fuses elements of Blues with other types of music. While this is irrelevant to most of the world, Fusion dancers often start with Blues Dancing as a main crossover/fusion dance style, so understanding what this music is -and isn't- is important to us. Indigo music should have similar elements to blues music, but perhaps it is missing elements like chord structure, phrase structure, melodic structure or musical instrumentation. Non-blues artists interpreting Blues music can have a similar feel to blues music, but it's not the same as the authentic blues version. Some music used by other dances like West Coast Swing or Tango may have similar feeling or even possibly be legitimate crossover songs.

Why is it not blues?

Something obviously different about Indigo music would be sound manipulation: artificial reverb or echo, synthesized horns or other keyboard sounds -especially sounds that are not traditional blues instruments. Other differences to look for...

Rhythm: There are some recognizable blues rhythms that we can expect to hear in blues music. These rhythms pop up in several different songs; probably the best known is the "I'm a man riff" as heard in ["I'm a Man"](#), ["Hoochie Coochie Man"](#), and ["Frisco Blues"](#).

Sometimes a focus on just one rhythm in the music mix can change the genre: for example, "arena

rock” rhythms may have their foundation in Blues music, but when they become the driving force of music, these same rhythms can take away from feeling authentically “blues” (the roots of arena rock are bands like The Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin which both borrowed heavily from the Blues).

Instrumentation: Often the arrangement of a band or the emphasis of specific instruments alters the genre of the music. The way that a musician approaches his instrument can also change how the music is perceived. For example, having a jazz or a rock musician playing an instrument can change whether or not the music is authentic blues music.

Listen to these different versions:

[“Come on in my kitchen” by Robert Johnson](#)

[“Come on in my kitchen” by Crooked Still](#)

This is very creative use of cello, counter-rhythms along with elements of blues and bluegrass and country music.

Phrasing: Most blues is structured as “12-bar blues”. This means that the structure is made up of (6) 8-beat musical lines – as opposed to standard phrasing (most swing, pop, or rock music), which is made up as (4) 8-beat musical lines. Many people define “Blues” as following 12 bar blues structure, but that’s not the whole picture...

A classic example of “blues” phrasing in a “swing” song: [“Swingin’ the blues” by Count Basie](#)

A classic example of “swing” phrasing in a “blues” song: [“St. James infirmary” by Snooks Eaglin](#)

How does a song sound like blues without being authentic blues?

A borderline Indigo/blues song, [“Home” by Marc Boussard](#) captures the rawness of blues, especially if you ignore the drums/percussion. The instrumentation is using standard instruments you’d find in many blues bands: guitar/slide guitar, organ, bass. The background keyboard is a classic blues-style riff. When the guitar takes over the riff, the keyboard plays urban blues fills. Some of the slide is Delta blues-reminiscent. There is a country flavor here provided by the lead guitar – not Country Western but modern electric country blues. The vocal is in the realm of country/modern Texas blues singers in style and timbre.

[“Overland Blues” by The Yoshida Brothers](#) has definite elements of blues music with pop. The melody line of the basic theme played on the traditional Japanese Shamisen (along with an acoustic guitar) gives this a down-home blues feel even though this is not a traditional blues music melody. The rhythm is less “blues” and more syncopated and ‘pop’. The drums in particular along with the feeling of ‘stomping’ could be an anthem-rock beat.

FUSION: Fusion music for our purposes refers to music that fusion dancers will enjoy dancing to. It specifically does *not* refer to the musical term or genre of “fusion music” (which refers to any stylistic fusion but usually jazz-rock fusion).

Because “Fusion dancing” can refer to both fusing different elements of specific dances and also to dancing based more on spontaneous creative movement, defining what “Fusion music” is can get

tricky. In other words, music for fusion dancing can mean a cross-over song to some, but for others it also means music that is not necessarily related to traditional partner dancing. These categories are not mutually exclusive.

For this reason, our Fusion music should be looked at as a vessel capable of holding a lot of different dancing. The parameters of this vessel are same parameters we use for any dance. And, like any dance, it's about optimizing a combination of tempo, pulse, accents between odd and even beats, melody and phrasing.

Between different musical styles we can find songs that have similar elements and complementing these elements will probably make for the most satisfying dance experience for the most number of people.

Songs that crossover from one musical or dance genre to the another:

["I've got to see you again" by Nora Jones](#) – Alt Tango and "Lyrical" slow dancing

["Sometimes" by B-tribe](#) – West coast swing and Lyrical Latin dancing

If we look at Fusion music less as simply 'music styles' and more as music to dance to with a partner, then we see that the best "fusion" music naturally does what the best partner dance music does:

1. Has a pulse beyond just the beat. Beat keeps time through repetition. Pulse gives drive and energy through repetition.
2. Provides drive and direction. We've all heard music that is catchy but doesn't "go anywhere"... this is DJ heartbreak: you edit a 6 minute song to make it more interesting and end up with something a little over a minute long.
3. Contrasts odd and even beats; in swing and blues music this often leads us to the even beat (that's why "square people clap on the ones"). In blues dancing this sometimes creates both a 'down' pulse (most often on odd beats) and an 'up' pulse (often on the even beats).
4. Has a catchy melody or a rhythm that grabs you. This is subjective and can be something that you can hum and get stuck in your head or something visceral that makes your body react and move.
5. Structure that takes you through different parts of a song whether a simple verse and chorus, intense double-time in dub step, or differing vocal and instrumental parts. Structure can contrast or complement. Phrasing often creates strong highlights or breaks in the music.

"Fusion music" can be categorized in a number of ways, but the labels are not the exciting thing about fusion: the music and dancing is. Finding the best songs from genres of music as diverse as Hip Hop, Latin, Electronica, 'Indigo', Trance, Tango Nuevo, World, House, etc. is the trick to growing the dance and the scene, both of which will naturally evolve over time (remember: it took a long time for Lindy Hop, Tango, Blues Dancing and every other dance to develop -and then be given a name).

Here is some music that is 'outside the box' for partner dancing along with some thoughts about how you might approach this with a partner:

["Lights go down" by Basement Jaxx](#)

There are 3 rhythmic elements to this song: the percussion/clap tracks which provide steady beat and

pulse; the background synthesizers which provide stretchy, lyrical background drive; and the vocals which dance in and around these two other musical forces to create tension and release within the song. Keyboards and other instrumental parts support the vocals to create more accents and highlights. With a song like this, you can approach dancing by contrasting quicker movement if you relate to the percussion or it can inspire slow, languid lyrical motion if you relate to the background synthesizers.

[“Secret” by Maroon 5](#)

This is anything but a rock and roll song, but the guitar in the beginning follows a rock chord riff. The drums and bass lead to the even beats (1 a2 3 and 4). The vocals (which start at 1:35) are longing, stretchy; precise but seemingly vague. The mood is dark, mysterious, brooding and longing. The straight pulse of the drums is offset by the variety of the vocals. There is contrast is the sharp staccato vocals before the chorus (1:56, 2:59) which definitively change the style of stretchy movement that the rest of the song suggests.

[“You won’t be mine” by Matchbox 20](#)

Although this song has nothing to do with blues, the quiet intensity and dark tones lend themselves to the feelings invoked by blues music: longing, melancholy, need. The pulse of the music is steady, but it also leads your energy to the even beats (1, 2, a3, 4; snare drum on 2, 4). While the song maintains a quiet, late-night tone throughout, it builds by adding instrumental background and highlights from the beginning to the end (slowly to about 1:23, then dropping down a bit and adding more as the song hits a higher plateau at 2:44 – this process repeats itself). While the flavor of dancing may not change that much, the dynamics could change quite a bit.

What about dub-step music?

Dub-step is more rhythmically jagged or energetic, and can create an edgy flavor on the dance floor. Most people would agree the dub-step has its roots in dub, which has its roots in reggae that has been altered with added effects. As dub-step has developed, it has gotten more electronic and doesn’t always show its reggae roots anymore. The rhythmic pulse is manipulated to be syncopated in a way that feels a bit more harsh or rougher sounding. There can be sections of intense synthesized pitch with nearly inhuman “scrunching up” of the rhythm to create a strong rhythmic highlight which contrasts the basic (comparatively ‘soft’) pulse of the rest of the song.

Two other elements that stick out are that the “percussion” is often made up of “sounds” rather than instruments, and that a “wobble” that is added to long bass notes (which are often manipulated in way to make them sound less/not at all like a bass anyway).

Dubstep is typically in the 135-145bpm range, a bit fast for people used to Blues (and with syncopation that is odd for other dances). However, the bass, drums, and space between sounds can create a half-time feel with a perfect tempo for dancing. Dub-step is tricky in your sets: it can add great variety and spice, but pay attention to the tempo, syncopation, and danceable elements in each song.

[“Ascension” by David Keogh](#)

To many of us, the original version of this song quintessentially defines Fusion Music. It has emotional

content ranging from dark moodiness to, well, ‘ascension’. There is a powerful sense of drive and movement, it is hypnotically intriguing and exotic, and has both pulse and lyrical stretch. The second version posted below is the ‘dubstep’ version. To understand what that “scrunched-up sound” is that I mentioned above, check out the differences in these two versions “Ascension”:

[Original version](#)

[Dubstep version](#) (listen from 1:56 – 2:34)

[“Cloudflight” by Eskmo](#)

This song uses the dub-step technique throughout. The rhythmic pulse is in the electronic sounds and instruments rather than “drums”. Rhythm is created with “sounds” rather than “instruments”. The vocal track creates consistent melody over a shifting cacophony of rhythms.

This performance by Wren LaFeet and Kelly Howard explains visually how dubstep can work with dancing: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqhct5iluL8>