

BY RACHEL CASSANDRA ([HTTP://SOCIALDANCECOMMUNITY.COM/AUTHOR/RACHEL/](http://socialdancecommunity.com/author/rachel/)) /  
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# WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH TAXI DANCERS?



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I don't think it was until I was attending kizomba festivals in Europe a few years ago that my current notion of what a taxi dancer is really took hold. While I had previously encountered some similar practices in many different dance scenes, they often had different names and particularities. Yet at this point it seems so normal to me that I'm surprised every time I speak with a long-time dancer who has no idea what the term "taxi dancer" means.

**What is a taxi dancer?**

The first time I set down my understanding of taxi dancers in writing was in a 2015 article here on LDC about [building your dance community](http://socialdancecommunity.com/7-ideas-for-building-your-dance-community/)(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/7-ideas-for-building-your-dance-community/>): “Taxi dancers are responsible for dancing with everyone – not only saying “yes” to everyone, but seeking out wallflowers and livening up the party. They are usually higher level dancers that receive a free pass or even some compensation for their role. [...] Taxi dancers may wear a special shirt, hat, button, or wristband to make them easy to find. Taxi dancers are more common in big cities or at large events, and they help fill in the gaps – whether by offsetting a gender/role imbalance, attracting other higher level dancers, or being where the organizers/teachers don’t have time to be.”

Historically, the term taxi dancers referred to women who would dance with men in the American dance-halls of a century ago, collecting paid tickets at a dime each in order to earn a commission from the venue. Also called hostesses, they kept the male patrons entertained while earning money based on the time they spent with each customer – much like a taxi driver does. You can get a pretty good picture from these two clips from the 1931 film “Ten Cents a Dance.”

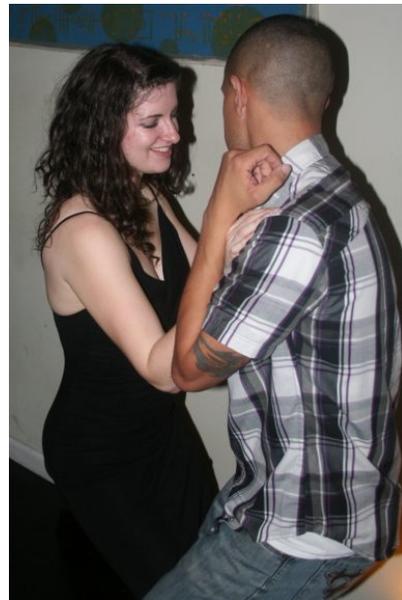
Ballroom dance schools picked up on the idea, and I think it was in fact at a local ballroom studio that I first encountered the idea of paying for a partner (a studio teacher) at a social. At lindy hop and blues events I realized after a while that some of the best or most popular dancers who weren’t teachers would sometimes attend an event for free, with the understanding that they would pull in more people to attend. Often great dancers were asked to come participate in the beginner class or balance the roles in a workshop. When I lived in Philadelphia back in 2012, they were calling them “cherubs.” Today lots of different dance scenes have a similar practice; I’ve also seen it in salsa, bachata, tango, West Coast swing and even Ceroc. An informal [Facebook survey](https://www.facebook.com/racheldreamsindance/posts/10101140714381107)(<https://www.facebook.com/racheldreamsindance/posts/10101140714381107>) I did turned up the terms “salsa ambassador,” “dance angel,” “party starter,” and “limo dancer” as alternatives to “taxi dancer.”

Whatever the name, taxi dancers seem to fall into three main categories: volunteers, a paid individual partner, and individuals or dedicated teams who receive passes or monetary compensation at festivals. At swing and blues socials, there are often designated volunteers who spend a certain period of time going around and dancing with newcomers and beginners, sometimes introducing them to other dancers to help them get going. Argentine tango is the most famous for having professionals for hire: you can contract with a taxi dancer for a night of social dancing, a festival weekend, or even for a multiple-night stay on your trip to Buenos Aires. It’s not uncommon outside tango, though; I have friends who hired ballroom and salsa

teachers for an evening and I heard about some popular guys who were being paid by individual kizomba dancers to attend a festival with them. I myself once agreed to go to a social with a student of mine; he paid for me to dance with him for a minimum of one hour over the course of the night.

### **What does it take to be a taxi dancer?**

The first requirement most people think of for taxi dancers is having a good level in your dance. There is no absolute standard, though; you simply must be good enough that your intended partner(s) enjoy dancing with you. The standard for volunteers will understandably be less stringent than for paid dancers. When people hire a taxi dancer as an individual, usually they are looking for someone who dances well, knows the local dance culture, and is reasonably genial. If you are a taxi dancer at a social or larger event, you should care most of all about getting everyone up and dancing. The number one criticism of taxi dancers (especially paid teams)



is that they sometimes fail to behave professionally, choosing to dance only with other high-level dancers, attractive people, or even “groupies” that follow their team to different festivals. As a taxi dancer you should also pay attention to and be sensitive to each partner, adapting your dancing to suit their skill level and comfort. Unfortunately some taxi dancers are known to treat each dance as an opportunity to show off, sometimes leaving partners feeling ignored or ill-used. A great taxi dancer will leave each partner feeling pleased and ready to find their next dance.

In theory anyone who invests in their dancing and their scene could become a taxi dancer, but realistically there are often some other factors that matter. You're less likely to be invited as a taxi dancer if you don't live in a major metropolitan area, no matter how good you are, and teams are usually formed in big cities. In terms of festival invitations, it makes a big difference who you know and how much you promote yourself. And it's pretty obvious that when it comes to Latin or kizomba festivals, being a young attractive man is a huge advantage.

### **Why bother with taxi dancers?**

You might never even think about hiring someone to dance with you if you're an amateur dancer; perhaps you just enjoy the social opportunity afforded by going out to dance with many different people. If you are eager to increase your level rapidly, though, having concentrated practice at a social with your teacher or another high-

level dancer could make for a helpful boost. For the shy or socially awkward, having a guaranteed partner can make you bolder in asking others to dance as well. When you're ready to invest in a trip to a far-off country to focus on your dancing for a weekend or more, the additional expense of a local taxi dancer could prove well worth it in terms of navigating the local scene, finding the best spots to dance, and having someone ready to show you off on the dance floor. There is one caution I would offer, though: be discreet. There can be some stigma attached to having hired a taxi dancer. It's wise to arrive separately, handle payment away from the venue, and endeavor to dance with other people as well.



As an organizer, there are some clear benefits to inviting or employing taxi dancers. If you want the regular attendance at your local social to grow, having volunteers who are focused on integrating beginners and newcomers will have a serious impact on your retention. Promising to have a team of taxi dancers at your festival has created a measurable boost in attendance for many larger events. Assuming the taxi dancers have done their job, you'll also have lots of satisfied dancers recommending your event to their friends.

However, you might want to think about what kind of oversight you will want to have over your taxi dancers in order to ensure your attendees are getting the full benefit of their presence. Check that the level of the taxi dancers is in fact appropriate; you don't want to join the ranks of organizers accused of taking just anyone in order to claim "WITH TAXI DANCERS!" on the flyer. Require your taxi dancers to be clearly identifiable. Taxi dancer team t-shirts are popular, but they're not always visible in a venue with low-lighting and they may soon be removed by less worthy taxi dancers. "I didn't want to make people dance with me in a sweaty shirt" may provide the perfect excuse to abandon their duties and choose their partners as they please. A popular alternative is using some kind of lit wearable like a glowing wristband, lapel pin, or shoe tie. Moreover, there should be consequences for taxi dancers failing to live up to the standard of their role, whether it's withholding future invitations or more publicly offering feedback on their services. You might also consider offering a bonus to the taxi dancers who are most present and active during the socials.

### **Sincere Appreciation for Taxi Dancers**

(<http://www.devonrowlandphotography.com/>). Taxi dancers can help dance communities and events to grow and flourish, offering memorable experiences to all attendees. There are so many wonderful people who fill this role today, inviting hesitant dancers onto the floor with a welcoming smile or pulling people off the couches at 2:30 AM to keep the party going strong. Thank you to all the taxi dancers who work hard to show us a good time!



Let me know in the comments about your own experience related to taxi dancers; give a shout-out, explain how it works in your scene, or just give your opinion!

*Featured image by [Devon Rowland](http://www.devonrowlandphotography.com/)*

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