

Help – I Need Dance Shoes!

Swing Dance Basics ♦ TC Swing

“I’m stuck to the floor! Why can’t I spin and slide with the best of them?” We frequently hear your cries of distress, and it’s true that your shoes will affect your dancing. But don’t worry – it’s not always necessary to go out and spend your life savings on cool shoes!

In general, any shoe with a smooth sole (like leather or suede) that allows for easy pivoting is best. Dance sneakers have rubber soles that are specifically designed for dancing and spinning, but the rubber soles on most athletic shoes are designed to grip the floor and may injure ankles or knees when dancing. At the very least, the heavy weight and deep tread of most athletic shoes make graceful spins very difficult.

Equally important is a comfortable shoe that fits well, and doesn’t slip and slide around on your foot. While a strapped, laced or closed shoe may not always be your first fashion choice, it can make a big difference in keeping dance shoes securely on your feet. A shoe that’s not secured on the foot may fall off when you’re practicing your slick moves, and constantly scrunching up your toes to keep your shoes on is painful and bad for your feet. When you can trust your footwear to be there for you, you can focus your attention on great style and technique instead of working hard to keep stylish but flimsy shoes from flying across the dance floor!

Personally, I prefer a snug fit in my dance shoes, usually a half-size smaller than street shoe size. Always try shoes on to find what feels the best for you. Ladies may want to consider heels versus flats. For me, flats are more comfortable and there are lots of really cute styles. If you’re more comfortable with heels that’s fine also, but keep in mind that a flat shoe is more in tune with the low, jazzy style of swing dance, and will also allow for faster and more balanced following through more intricate figures.

Fortunately there are a lot of great options out there. Most dancers have at least two pairs of shoes for the variety of floor surfaces they may come across, such as inexpensive shoes for street dances and outdoor festivals, and nicer shoes for great wood floors that won’t ruin the soles. Here are some good options ranked by price range.

ECONOMY Thrift stores like Goodwill, Value Village and Family Dollar are great! We have found lots of great men’s and women’s shoes at thrift and second hand stores, mostly priced well under \$10. The downside is that you may have to stop in a number of times before you find what you want.

Some dance shoe options come from surprising sources. Bowling shoes are great, as their smooth leather soles make it easy to spin and the rubber heels allow for quick stops. There are also inexpensive shoes / sneakers with cloth or other non-grippy soles (unlike typical athletic shoes) that can be found at very affordable prices. I love my \$5 sneakers from the Dollar General, as their soles don’t grip and have a really good texture for spinning. They have absolutely no arch support, so I wear them with \$20 insoles. ☺

MID-RANGE Depending on your needs, there are many styles available in mid-price ranges. The “dancer’s footwear” industry is well established, so there’s an implicit guarantee of good quality dance products. They know feet!

Dance Sneakers are flat shoes that are exactly what they sound like – athletic-styled shoes designed for dancers – that typically come in black, though there are also some super fun colors out there. They are great for practice, classes, rehearsals and social dancing, and even split-soled dance sneakers offer good arch support. My dance sneakers are my workhorses on busy teaching days when I’m on my feet for several hours. Prices range from \$40 – \$70.

Jazz Shoes come in a wide variety of styles, including an oxford flat shoe similar to men’s dress shoes. They have all the features needed for dancing, are available in men’s and women’s styles, and are usually black but also come in other colors. Affordably priced, they can be worn for classes, practice and social dancing. Different brands will have varying levels of support, styles, and type of soles. Note that some jazz shoes are quite lightweight and thin, and may not be suitable for dancing at outdoor festivals, concerts and events. Most jazz shoes retail at \$40 – \$80.

Character Shoes for women are the Mary-Jane style black shoes that you wore for your high school musical, a sleek little black pump with an ankle strap and smooth leather sole. If the sole is too slick, you can “rough it up” a little by rubbing it on a cement sidewalk or using a metal file. They come in a variety of heel heights (1” – 3”) and colors, with either leather or vinyl uppers. Pricing is in the \$35 – \$60 range.

Spectator Shoes traditionally are flat shoes that have two or more distinct colors (the most common being black and white), pinked edging and perforated details. These days any men’s or women’s two-toned shoes may be called spectators, whether or not they have the pinked edging and perforated detailing. Pricing is brand-driven and can be moderate to costly.

COSTLY Bit by the jitterbug? You may want to invest in shoes made specifically for swing and/or ballroom dancers. These shoes are typically of a higher quality, and are often more durable, comfortable and supportive for your hard-dancing feet. If you like authentic vintage shoes, check out shops such as Lula or Via's.

Aris Allen These shoes are designed to support your foot well while you easily pivot and slide in your dancing. The wide variety of colors and styles includes wedgies, Mary Janes, and dance sneakers for women, plus wingtips, captoes, loafers, and dance sneakers for men. Locally you can try on some of their more popular styles at Grand Jete, and they are happy to order what they don't have in stock. You can find their full selection online at www.dancestore.com. Pricing ranges from \$55 to \$85.

Ballroom Shoes Designed specifically for ballroom dancers, there are many brands and styles of ballroom shoes, and some work well for swing dancers. Depending on the brand, you can find attractive styles for both men and women in solid and two-toned colors. For women, there are also wide variety of heeled styles, from enclosed, lace-up spectator styles with low heels to exotic, colorful, sparkly spike-heeled shoes. Expect to pay \$80 – \$150.

WHERE CAN I GET THEM?

STOREFRONT If you want to try on a shoe, Grand Jete is a well-established distributor of dancewear and supplies, and is a great place to "try 'em on and see if you like 'em." They have a small but decent supply of Aris Allens that you can check out, and they are happy to order any style they don't have on hand. Mention the **TC Swing Coupon Rate** to get 10% off your order! **Grand Jete**, 975 Grand Ave, St Paul, 651-227-0331, www.grandjete.com.

ONLINE If you like the convenience of online shopping, there are so many options! And most are really flexible on their return policies. Sometimes I'll order an item in two sizes, keep the one that fits and return the other! Here are some good starting places:

Dancestore.com www.dancestore.com. Popular with Lindy Hoppers.

Discount Dance Supply www.discountdance.com. Terrific prices – lower than most – and a huge selection!

Bloch <https://us.blochworld.com>

Capezio www.capeziodance.com

eBay www.ebay.com Once you know your preferred style and size, you can get some great bargains here!

ANOTHER OPTION – CHROMING Some people prefer to use a pair of regular shoes that are really comfortable, then have the soles resurfaced with their favorite "dance floor material" such as suede, moleskin, chrome leather (a kind of "rough" suede) or hard leather. There's plenty of information online about how to chrome your own shoes, or you can take your shoes to a good shoe repair store and have them professionally re-soled. George's Shoe Repair is very popular with dancers who want a great job done on their shoes. The website for their Grand Avenue location in Saint Paul is <http://www.georgesshoerepair.com/>. Their Arden Hills location is: <https://www.georgesshoes.com/>. An inexpensive version of chroming is to duct tape the soles of your shoes.

FINAL NOTES As you get ready to go shopping, consider what's best for you. Where do you dance most often – on a wide variety of surfaces or only on really good wood floors? Do you need more support or less support? What are your style preferences? Some dancers like to have two or three pairs to choose from depending on where they are going dancing. An inexpensive shoe from a thrift store is great for grimy bars where customers spill beer on the icky tile or cement floor. A nicer pair can be kept just for the more well-kept wood floors, such as those found at 301 On Main Event Center and the Medina Ballroom.

In all cases, remember to keep your dance shoes clean and protected when you're not dancing in them. Even if your shoes have sturdier soles, it's best to keep them clean from the dirt and grime from city streets, so it's not tracked onto the dance floor. Especially in the winter, carry your dance shoes in a separate bag to and from classes, workshops, practice sessions and dance events. This not only keeps the shoes in better condition, it also protects wood dance floors from wear and tear, and protects *you* from slippery spots on the social dance floor!

No more excuses! Go find yourself a great pair of dance shoes!

