



# Help – I Need Dance Shoes!

by Cindy Gardner

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

In general, any shoe with a smooth leather sole that allows for easy pivoting is best. Some rubber soles may work, but most (especially athletic shoes) grip the floor and may cause ankle or knee injuries. Make sure that any rubber-soled shoes that you find are specifically designed for dancing and spinning. At the very least, the heavy weight and deep tread of most athletic shoes will make graceful spins extremely difficult, not to mention painful. Some rubber soles are danceable once they’re worn down.

Some dance shoe options come from surprising sources. Bowling shoes are great, with smooth leather soles for spins and rubber heels that allow for quick stops. There are also some pretty inexpensive cloth-soled shoes available at many affordable stores.

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 easily, especially when executing slick dance maneuvers. 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 dance shoes, usually a half-size smaller than street shoe size. Always try shoes on to find what feels the best for you. Heels or flats? For me, flats are usually more comfortable and there are lots of really cute styles without deadly heels. 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 secure following on more intricate figures.

Fortunately there are a lot of great options out there. Most dancers have at least two choices of shoes for the variety of floor surfaces they may come across, such as inexpensive shoes for street dances and outdoor festivals on concrete, and nicer shoes for great wood floors that won’t ruin the soles. Below are some good options, ranked by price range (since that’s usually a determining factor!).

**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. Also check out vintage shops such as Lula or Via’s, though they’ll be more costly.

**MID-RANGE** Depending on your needs, there are many styles available in mid-price ranges. The “footwear for dancers” industry is well established, so there’s an implicit guarantee of good quality dance products. They know dancers 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 fun colors out there. They are great for practice, classes, rehearsals and social dancing. They are specifically designed for dancing, and some come with insoles for more comfort and support. Retail prices range from \$40 – \$60, but you can get most of these shoes through wholesale, mail-order catalogs or online shops for \$35 – \$50.

**Jazz Shoes** are oxford-style flat shoes similar to men’s dress shoes, have all the features needed for dancing, come 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. The major style difference is in the soles. Split soles have the more durable sole surface only on the ball of the foot and the heel, with the softer leather in between; a full sole features the more durable sole continuous from the toe to the heel. Most jazz shoes retail at \$30 – \$80. Catalogs sell them at \$20 – \$60.

**Giordano Swing-Jazz Shoe** is a cute black-and-white shoe that’s mostly available online. It’s a jazz shoe in an adorable black-and-white leather that fits the attitude of swing dancers and priced around \$50 – \$75. Some people absolutely love them and find them totally comfortable; others felt they didn’t offer enough support, so you might need insoles.

**Character Shoes** 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 them up” a little on a cement sidewalk. They come in a variety of heel heights (1” – 3”) and colors, with either leather or vinyl uppers. Pricing is in the \$25 – \$60 range.

**Spectator Shoes** traditionally have two or more distinct materials or 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 these are out of your price range, you can often find attractive, comfortable shoes that aren't as expensive and still work great for you.

**Aris Allen** The soles on these shoes are designed to let you pivot and slide easily 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 find them at Grand Jete. They are also available online at [www.dancestore.com](http://www.dancestore.com). Pricing is from \$40 to \$80 per pair.

**Ballroom Shoes** Designed and styled specifically for ballroom dancers, there are a number of available brands of ballroom shoes, and several are quite suitable for swing dancers. Depending on the brand, you can find attractive flat 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 \$70 – \$150 for ballroom shoes.

**WHERE CAN I GET THEM???** Okay, so I keep mentioning “retail” and “mail-order” pricing. Yep, they're both available! There are a number of places to find all these great shoes. Some people feel that they really want or need to try a shoe on before they purchase them. Others really like the ease, convenience and anonymity of mail-order shopping. (In fact, most mail-order houses today are really flexible on their return policies, because they know that customers rely on the ability to return what doesn't work out for them. Sometimes I'll order an item in two sizes, keep the one that fits and return the other!) Here are some options:

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 try on for size. 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](http://www.grandjete.com).

### **Mail Order Websites**

**Capezio** [www.capeziodance.com](http://www.capeziodance.com)

**Dancestore.com** [www.dancestore.com](http://www.dancestore.com). Very popular with Lindy Hoppers.

**Discount Dance Supply** 800-328-7107, [www.discountdance.com](http://www.discountdance.com). Terrific prices – lower than most – and a huge selection!

**eBay** [www.ebay.com](http://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 or buy a pair of regular shoes that are really comfortable, then have the soles resurfaced with their favorite “dance floor material” such as suede, chrome leather (a kind of “rough” suede) or hard leather. A cheap version of this is to duct tape the soles, though this can peel and stick to the floor if it's not done very carefully. There's plenty of information online about how to chrome your own shoes, or you can take your shoes to a good shoe repair place and have them professionally re-soled.

**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-on-cement floor. A nicer pair can be kept just for the better 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!