

Labanies and Griffichons, Let's Boogie!

DOGS HIT THE DANCE FLOOR by Andy Valentine

Moving to the rhythm of musical composition is as intrinsic to most as breathing. We humans just can't resist tapping our toes, drumming our fingers, flailing our arms and swaying our hips, and while we've all experienced moments of solitary dance that must remain exclusively behind closed doors, in public it still takes two to do-si-do. "Why not tango?" you ask. Well, some folks have partners that aren't quite capable of showcasing their gancho. These are the people that dance with dogs.

That's right. It's a real thing, and it's called "musical canine freestyle." Turns out dogs can actually become pretty adept at dancing, though balancing on the hind legs would cause any quadruped a few problems, and this means that there's unlikely to be any mid-routine ballroom lifts or fluid pirouettes taking place. Honestly, though, most of them are a little more rhythmically inclined than some of the white dudes that I've seen "krumping" unabashedly in public.

While it may look as though the dogs are simply wildin' out and trotting freely in circles around their leaders (who are *always* human, otherwise there'd be a lot of booty-sniffing), canine freestyle is actually a fastidiously choreographed exercise in obedience training: Every prompt is firm and deliberate, so that the pooch knows what to do — it's a cue system, and not surprisingly, the majority of commands are verbal.

"As freestylers we try and get all the behaviors in a routine on verbal cues," says Julie Flanery of Wonderdogs, a Philomath-based dog-training facility. "We want to keep our hands and arms free for musical interpretation, and it to look like the dog is doing it on its own."

Flanery has been involved with canine freestyle since her first competition in 2001. She began teaching a year later, and since 2003 she's been a regular judge on the freestyle circuit.

"I've competed in many, many dog sports," she continues, "and freestyle is, in my opinion, one of the most difficult to perform well in, but also the most fun."

And she's not kidding about it being difficult; choreographing a routine requires a great amount of discipline not only for the dogs, but for the

'I like to think we do everything that Ginger Rogers did — you know, in high heels and backwards — but with dogs.'

— **JULIE FLANERY,**
CANINE FREESTYLIST



JULIE FLANERY
DANCES WITH
KASHI

PHOTO BY DICK CAPELLO

humans, too. In a two-minute period, trainers can end up imparting anywhere between 75 and 85 cues upon their poochie partners, and this means that they're constantly talking to the dog. The volume of the music and softness of voice often help to cover this up, and this furthers the illusion that the dog is unaided.

"It's that engagement and relationship with the dog that I have not found in any other dog sport," Flanery says.

Wonderdogs does offer classes in other dog sports, but Flanery attempts to keep freestyle on the docket at least once a week:

"The amount of freestyle classes we offer varies," she says. "It depends on interest: last session I had two freestyle classes that were both full. Most of the classes are rally-free; they combine rally obedience with freestyle.

"We use clicker training so that the dogs understand to offer behaviors," she continues. "It's the dogs coming up with their own moves so it feels as though they really have input in the partnership."

Naturally, as with any training system, there's a learning curve. Partnerships that are just starting out tend to commence with four-paw tricks such as spins — turning in a circle next to the handler — circles — moving in physical circles *around* the handler — and weaves — threading themselves between the handler's legs. Once the novice level moves have been mastered, then the partnerships tend to advance toward perfecting those same techniques, only backwards. The hind-leg stuff, it seems, is for experts only.

"I like to think we do everything that Ginger Rogers did — you know, in high heels and backwards — but with dogs," Flanery says. "My favorite thing is engaging with my dog in a way that we are truly partners in the training process. And of course once you add music to anything it makes it more fun!"

So there you have it; hard to believe, I know, but dogs could actually be able to show us humans some new dance moves. Next time you throw on "Crocodile Rock" and start to boogie, keep an eye on your canines; they might just be achin' for a booty shakin' too.

EW

For more information on dog obedience classes, visit wonderdogsonline.com and for some dog dancing videos go to EW's blog.



AMAZON PARK

animal clinic

Taking Care of Your Four-Legged Family for Over 30 Years



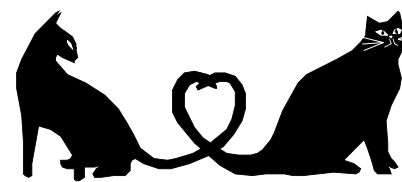
Full Service Clinic:

- Well Pet Care
- Orthopedic Surgery
- Cancer Management
- Behavior Consultations
- Dental Care

Cameron Jones, DVM
Barbara Maki, DVM
Cary Heyward, DVM

Appointments Available 8am-6pm Weekdays 9am-4pm Saturday
info@amazonparkvet.com • 541-485-0161 • 725 E. 25th Ave. Eugene

CatCare, Limited



1400 Willamette Street
Eugene, OR 97401
541-302-5824

FULL SERVICE INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

Wellness Care All Life Stages ♥ We love seniors!
Dentistry ♥ Surgery ♥ Behavior ♥ Nutrition ♥ Acupuncture

Hours:

8:30am - 5:30pm Weekdays
8:30am - 12:30pm 1st & 3rd Saturdays

Purr-sonalized, expert veterinary care in a cats-only, homelike setting since 1998!

Members: American Association of Feline Practitioners