

LIFE

# How to do the Stagecoach Shuffle

Rosalie Murphy The Desert Sun

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Country-western fans square-dance in the Stagecoach Honkytonk on Friday evening. *Rosalie Murphy / The Desert Sun*

The swirling colored lights in the Stagecoach Honkytonk dim as a square dance draws to a close. Women of all ages, hands already anchored to their petticoats from the last few minutes of swirling, curtsy deeply to their partners; men bow. They retreat to the edges of the polished wood dance floor that last weekend underlay Coachella's Yuma tent.

DJ Staci Nichols leans into the microphone and announces it's time to learn a brand-new line dance, choreographed especially for this year's festival. Cowboy boots clomp as their owners stride confidently (and some a little sloppily) to the center of the dance floor. Yellow lights brighten the room again.

Anne Marie Dunn steps to the center of the stage and begins to call out directions for the dance she's created. "Griiiiind, back-step-step. Left! Griiiiind, back-step-step," she yells out energizing the festival-goers in her impromptu dance class. The motions spread from the front of the floor backward, since the stage is only about two feet from the ground.

Dunn masterfully layers the next set of steps on the previous one, frequently starting from the top so dancers revisit earlier moves. Before she teaches the final measure of the 32-count dance, she takes a mic in her hand and faces the crowd -- a stereotypical, but genuine, sea of cowboy hats, primary-colored tees and raised plastic cups of beer. "Do you love this country life?!" she cries out.

The crowd's answer is inaudible in a sea of cheers, but I assume it's yes.



Festivalgoers do the Watermelon Crawl, a well-known line dance, in the Stagecoach Honkytonk on Friday. *Rosalie Murphy / The Desert Sun*

Dunn, a Rancho Cucamonga-based choreographer, has created about 15 line dances. She teaches line dancing along with swing, ballroom and Latin dance.

DJs Dave Byrd, who has anchored country dance nights at the Branding Iron in San Bernadino for 23 years, and Staci Nichols, who learned to dance at Byrd's bar and now DJs country weddings, asked Dunn months ago to create a dance specific to Stagecoach.



But, "I choreographed it just a few weeks ago," Dunn said. "I was waiting for the right song. I felt like there was a specific song (I wanted), about unity, life, everyone coming together."

The song she settled on was "I Love This Life" by LoCash Cowboys, a young country band.

"I was like, 'this is it.' It has this overall feeling of, we're alive, we're here, having fun," Dunn said.

Line dancers know that once a dance is choreographed, it can be performed to just about any song that has the right number of counts -- the right number of lines in each verse and chorus -- and a good tempo. Dunn and the DJs hope that malleability will carry the Stagecoach Shuffle outside the festival and into bars around California, maybe beyond.

But they also have high hopes for the Honkytonk stage. It debuted last year, after sister Goldenvoice festival Coachella constructed the Yuma stage, an air-conditioned, slick-wood-floored tent meant for DJs and dancing.

"The role of DJs has really been elevated," said Karen Rappaport-McHugh, who was tapped by Goldenvoice in 2007 to create Stagecoach's expansive kids' area. When the Yuma stage appeared, she suggested turning it into the Honkytonk. "When you see how electronic music first elevated them, we thought, 'there's no reason why country couldn't have that.'"

It was important to Rappaport-McHugh, however, that the Honkytonk not just be a line-dancing bar. She admires the way Stagecoach, now in its ninth year, has spanned generations within country-western music. The Honkytonk offers square dancing, two-stepping, partner dancing, clogging and even a live act every evening.

"The special thing is, you can see square dancers here in their 50s, 60s, 70s, dancing with these 'sexy cowboys' and young women. That's what I think

Goldenvoice has been brilliant at, mixing old and young, mixing different genres together," Rappaport-McHugh said.

Byrd and Nichols, the DJs, get to sport shoe-leather-brown artist wristbands all weekend. Nichols calls Byrd her "DJ hero." They also get to play together and with others on the Southern California circuit they admire, including DJ Tommy, who used to host the morning show on Riverside's KFROG, and DJ Mike Bendavid, who was featured in Toby Keith's video for "I Love This Bar."

Rappaport-McHugh said, by 8 p.m. Friday, around 1,700 people had spent at least a little time inside the Honkytonk.

"It's become a go-to spot. With this spot right by the entrance, we have people coming directly here, checking in," Byrd said. "We recognize a lot of faces."

"Once they come in, they will spend the rest of the day inside," Nichols added.

To learn the Stagecoach Shuffle, visit the Stagecoach Honkytonk on Saturday at 1:45 p.m. or on Sunday at 12:20 p.m. There's also a tutorial on Dunn's Youtube channel.

Byrd and Nichols will DJ the dance floor together on Saturday from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.