



Frank Perri of Local 802 (New York City) is pianist and arranger for the touring dance troupe Break the Floor, a job that requires a special blend of creativity, flexibility, and a fluency in "dance speak."

Frank Perri: Breaking Down Musical Barriers

Playwright George Bernard Shaw once said that England and America are two countries separated by a common language. The same can be said for musicians and dancers—both use music, movement, and an inner creativity to express themselves, but each approaches

the experience in his or her own unique way.

Frank Perri of Local 802 (New York City) knows a lot about the differences between "music speak" and "dance speak." As the pianist and arranger for the touring dance troupe Break the Floor, Perri has had his share of misunderstandings with choreographers who don't see the world through the same musician's lens he does. Still, he says, it's a challenge he welcomes, and the world of dance is one he greatly admires.

"The choreographers I work with are at the tops of their games," says Perri. "I have nothing but respect for them. It's almost surgical the way they work; they'll pick two notes out of a song and an entire routine will come out of that. They know their worlds. They're just speaking a different language than I am."

He explains, "Dancers count everything in eights. To a musician, that's two measures, but to a dancer, the term 'measure' is irrelevant. The music they use, the arrangements they're looking for, they all have to fit into this very rigid eight-beat count. It can be frustrating, but what I've learned is that you have to keep an open mind. As much as dancing and music are related, they're not."

Self-taught since the age of six, Perri came to Break the Floor from a career that spanned playing in wedding bands and teaching piano to performing with major label artists. He's acquired a wealth of skills along his journey, giving him the flexibility and creative vision necessary to make his work with the on-the-move dance troupe a success. Break the Floor tours for about seven or eight months each year, visiting between 21 and 24 cities with its unique blend of workshop and convention. The group is in each city for three days. On Fridays workshops are held, during which local participants are given an opportunity to train with professional choreographers. On Saturday, the team rehearses for Sunday's show.

"During the shows, sometimes the workshop participants perform, and sometimes the professionals perform. It all depends on the vision of the choreographers," says Perri. "So things change from one city to the next, and there is always something new to work on."

The process begins when a choreographer begins to envision a particular dance routine, and he or she comes to Perri to talk about the music. "Sometimes they have a song in mind already, but it just doesn't fit with their style of dance," he says. "It doesn't rock enough, or it needs to be more jazzy; maybe the bridge doesn't fit. Scrambling a song is

very common. A lot of the time we end up with two verses and a chorus."

Perri enjoys taking a song that is already well known and changing it up to meet the specific needs of the dancers. He'll add a unique element like an electric violin or flute part that gives the choreographer something extra to work with. Says Perri, " It's a creative and symbiotic experience. We feed off of each other."

Of course, there are still moments when that familiar language barrier between musicians and dancers puts itself front and center. " Sometimes the choreographers try to explain what they're looking for, and I just don't get it," he laughs. "They'll come to me and say, 'It's not dirty enough.' And I'm like, 'It's " Against All Odds" ! How do you make " Against All Odds" dirty?'"

Once the initial music is in place, dancers are introduced, and more changes are made. Though Perri is usually given plenty of time to work on a piece, it's not uncommon to be making small changes as late as two hours before show time. Once, he did an entire arrangement in only half a day. " I wouldn't recommend it," he says. " I think I lost two years off my life!"

With all of the traveling and time constraints, Perri has found his membership in AFM to be particularly useful. On more than one occasion, he has found himself short on musicians in an unfamiliar town, and the union has stepped up to help him out.

He recalls one trip to Utah, when his guitarist missed his flight and was unable to meet up with the Break the Floor group in time for their performance. " I was thinking, 'Where do I find a guitarist at 11 a.m., in Utah, where I don't know anyone?'" he says. He called the local convention center, which put him in touch with the AFM local. " They gave me a bunch of names and numbers, and within hours I had my guitarist."

On another trip, this time to Las Vegas, the director asked Perri to add five additional instruments to an arrangement. At the time, Perri was traveling with a very small band, and he didn't have the musicians he needed. One call to the local changed all of that.

" As far as I'm concerned, the union is an invaluable resource for me," says Perri. " Locals provide musicians, and musicians are what I need. It's good to know that these musicians are pros. They're able to do what I need them to do; they can sight read and pick up the music right away. And they show up on time! I know that sounds like such a simple thing, but you'd be amazed how many musicians just don't show up when they're supposed to.

That doesn't happen with AFM musicians."

Break the Floor has proven to be an ideal outlet for this versatile and energetic musician, and Perri feels right at home there.

" I'm a very creative person by nature," he explains. " I write little songs for everything I do; I walk around the house singing little songs and just making them up as I go. So this job is really perfect for me. There are so many elements, a whole new level of creativity for me to explore."

He gets a kick out of seeing things from the perspective of a dancer or choreographer, and says this outside-looking-in approach has helped him to be a better musician. " Coming at a piece of music from a choreographer's point of view gives me a whole new way to think about music," he says. " I try to associate myself with musicians who are versatile and who play a variety of instruments—musicians who are open to uncommon instrumentations. This is one of the few fields where you can be crazy and creative. The musicians I work with at Break the Floor, and the dancers as well, are the kind of people who feed on that creativity."