



Belly Dance Conversations Episode 4- To Zill or Not To Zill Video Transcription

Hi, my name is Sahira, and today I invite you to join me for a slightly less physical and more cerebral side of Belly Dance. So, grab your favorite hot beverage, and let's sit and chat a while. Welcome to Belly Dance Conversations.

(music)

Hey folks, welcome to another episode of Belly Dance Conversations. Today we are talking zills! Those of you who know me, know zills are some of my favoritest things in the whole wide world, and today in honor of Zill Awareness Month (February is Zill Awareness Month, in case you weren't aware), we are going to be talking about zills and why, or why don't, we play them.

So zills are an incredibly ancient instrument. They have found zills dating back over 5,000 years in tombs in the Middle East. So, I have to assume that these are pretty important things that people are being buried with them, right? And then historically, as part of our dance, they have definitely been a part throughout history in different areas of the world. The Ghawazee of Egypt are very famous for their zill playing (or their zagat playing), and then here in the American Cabaret scene, especially if you're talking back in the 60s and 70s (when it was first getting started here in the US) zills were a gigantic part of the practice. And even when I began in the early 2000s, zills were part of the very first choreography that I ever learned. It was just expected that you were to play them.

Back in the 60s and 70s, dancers (when they weren't performing) were playing zills on stage with the band. Or perhaps a drum! They were required to be musicians as well as dancers. And I honestly feel that that connection and that study of the music really leads people to become better, stronger, more musical dancers.

So zills have a huge lineage within this dance form. And also can impact our dance in very positive ways. So the question then is, why do some dancers choose not to play them?

First thing, I want to say this-- I am passing no judgment on anyone who has chosen not to play zills. My hope, my role, my dream, is to encourage those who have not yet tackled them, or have tackled them and given them up, to try them again and to give you the reasons why and the resources to do so.

So I am not here to say anything negative about people who do not play the zills. I for one feel like they are a *gorgeous* part of the dance, but I understand that they're not really for everyone,

depending on how you've been introduced to them. So follow me along on this journey, let's talk, and let's see (if you are not currently a zills fan) if we can make a zills fan out of you!

So in the last 20 years that I've been dancing, I've definitely seen a change in how much zills are being used, both in the classroom and on-stage. Like I mentioned, back in 2000 when I first started dancing, zills were just sort of like a required deal. It was like an issued instrument, it was given to you in the first couple of weeks of class. The very first choreography that I ever learned had zills and veil at the same time, actually, which now that I think about it, that's kinda hard! But we did it! And I didn't know any better; I didn't know any different. I thought, 'this is just how it is done'. And so nowadays, the stylization has changed quite a bit.

Back in 2000, we had some Egyptian style here in Houston. A lot of Greek influence. And actually, one of the Greek restaurants that I danced at for years and years *required* their dancers to play finger cymbals. It was a non-option. If you walked in there without your finger cymbals, the band would absolutely ask you where they were. It was expected, it was part of the dance.

Now, we have a lot of Egyptian, we have some Turkish, we have some Tribal, we have some fusion... we've got everything here in Houston and it's awesome! And some of these dance styles are definitely known for using the zills more than others.

So all of this leads me to ask the question, why are fewer people playing zills? And that's what I would like to explore today.

So I have two basic theories as to why zill playing may have fallen out of vogue for a while. Theory #1-- it's really challenging! Playing the zills is not an easy thing! Especially if you're trying to play them while dancing, which most of us dancers are trying to do. So I get it-- it is a huge challenge. I've been teaching zill work for the last 17 years, and I see how people struggle with it. It is definitely hard to get going with the zills.

But, I really feel like anything in life that is worth doing, is going to be a challenge. And I've always told my daughter, don't let the fact that something is hard to do, stop you from doing it. If it's something that you want to do, if it is something that is important to do, if it is something that is going to enhance your dance, don't choose not to do it, just because it's hard.

So this is usually sort of the quick and dirty answer I usually get when I ask people, 'so hey, I notice that you don't really like the zills... why is that?' And people usually say, 'oh God, they're so hard to play! I just can't coordinate my hands and my feet, and the rhythms, it's just too much.' And I get it, you're right. It is hard.

But I'm here to encourage you to think about it as a challenge and an opportunity.

You're not going to come to the dance able to do it. Most likely, playing an instrument, and walking and dancing at the same time, is not something you were born doing. Now, if you're a

marching band nerd, like I am, you might have a little bit of a leg up on the whole making music while moving thing. But really, otherwise, it's a very unique skill that most people don't come to dance having. And if you remember what it was like to learn your first triplet shimmy, you might remember immense levels of frustration. But you thought it was important so you kept doing it.

And I would love for us to apply the same theory to the finger cymbals. Because it's important, because it's part of the history and the legacy of our dance, whether or not you choose to use them in a performance or in any of your performances, I really feel like they're an important skill to have under your proverbial hip belt.

The other theory as to why people just aren't playing the zills quite as much is that their teachers are not teaching them to play the zills. I find that as the Belly Dance scene has exploded over the last 20 or 30 years, we have more and more dancers becoming teachers, more and more teachers out there teaching, and because everyone's kind of looking for a fast track to dance-- we're excited, we wanna get out there, we wanna get our costume on, and we want to perform-- I think sometimes zills are sort of glossed over.

To get into zills in a class takes a little bit more effort, takes a little bit more planning, and definitely takes a lot more time to get students proficient. And if students are coming in the door, and they wanna shake it like Shakira, and they wanna get out there and dance for their friends, learning the finger cymbals might slow them down.

And so I feel like teachers may be choosing not to teach the zills potentially for two different reasons. One, because it's not what their students are looking for. Maybe it frustrates their students, it slows down their class plan, and it's not what people walk in the door wanting to do, it's not what people walk in the door thinking about perhaps when they think about Belly Dance... so maybe it is us as teachers catering to our students.

I've definitely found myself in this spot in the past, where I used to not introduce finger cymbals to my beginner students because it was hard enough as it is! I was teaching them all these new isolations, people were challenged, and I wanted people to have fun. I still want people to have fun! It's supposed to be fun-- people are coming to it for a workout, to do something creative, to express themselves, and I don't want them to go home frustrated.

But.

I do want them to go home challenged. And I do want them to see the huge amount of beautiful history that there is in our dance and all the variations that exist within. And of course because I'm a gigantic zill nerd, we now start using them from practically day one. Because I feel (and this is an important caveat, and actually something that I think many dancers are having issue with), if you don't start your dance with the zills, and you become proficient in your dancing, if you try to add them at a later date, it can be really challenging and very frustrating, as an intermediate dancer, to feel like you've gone back to square one.

So perhaps this is another reason why dancers just don't want to try to play the zills, if they've already gotten to a place where they're feeling pretty comfortable with their dance, and here's an element they can add that will take them back to what feels like square one... I can see how it would be easy to want to just kind of push it under the carpet and pretend that it's not there.

So I feel like, for you teachers out there, if you have students coming in the door and you get those finger cymbals on their fingers pretty quickly, they'll never know the difference, right?

So, if teachers have not learned to play the zills because they've come through either this fast-track learning or they've learned from a teacher who didn't particularly like zills and so didn't pass the legacy along, they certainly aren't going to most likely teach zills to their students. So I feel like a lot of people who come to me seeking zill instruction tell me, 'you know what, my teacher just doesn't teach them,' or 'my teacher doesn't teach them effectively. I don't feel I can learn them well from my teacher,' and so they're looking for other outside influence.

And so, if you as an instructor never learned them, I could see how it might be difficult to pass them along to your students, and then we end up with another generation of dancers who don't play the zills, not for lack of desire, but just for lack of instruction. Which I could see becoming a bigger and bigger issue as time goes on.

I'm sure there are a lot of other reasons why dancers may choose not to use the finger cymbals. And this is where I reach out to you. This is where I ask you to please let your voice be heard, and be part of this conversation.

This is what I want to know. So, get back to me, post below, and tell me:

Do you play the zills?

And if the answer is 'yes,' Bravo! Yay! I'm thrilled, and if the answer is 'yes,' I want you to congratulate yourself, and pat yourself on the back for not letting the hard stuff die. And then I want you to let me know-- how were you introduced to them? Was this something that came to you in your first beginner Belly Dance class? Is it something that you sought out later down the road once you were more of an established dancer? How was it introduced to you? Because I want to know how you succeeded in becoming a zill playing Belly Dancer.

Now, if you don't play the zills, I want to know why not? Let me know! Is it because you were never given instruction so you didn't learn how? Is it because you tried and failed and got frustrated and didn't want to touch it anymore? Is it because you're allergic to the finger cymbals? What is the reason? I am curious, I want to hear from you, this is super important to me.

I feel like in my effort to make the whole world fan of finger cymbals, I need to understand why some people choose not to play them.

I respect your choice, I respect your history. What I want to know is-- is it something that might be changed? Is it something, with the right instruction, with the right breakdown, with the right hand held leading through this beautiful finger cymbal art, is it something that might be able to change for you?

I feel like as our tastes change with time, for say everything from food to clothing styles, what we look for in the dance may change over time, too.

While maybe when we first get going with the dance we really just want to shake it like Shakira, and put on our hip belt, and get out there, and do something awesome, as you continue down the road, the dance deepens and enriches for you.

What I am looking for now in the dance 20 years into it, is not what I was looking for in the dance 2 years into it.

And so perhaps now may be the magical moment, when finger cymbals are exactly what will bring you a deepening joy and understanding of the dance.

So those are my thoughts! Once again, I feel like the finger cymbals have such a rich history, in music and in our dance form, and it is something that I choose to honor as a Belly Dancer and I choose to bring with me and pass along to my students.

I'm curious what your feelings about the finger cymbals are, and I definitely want to know:

Do you play?

If you do, how did you get started?

If you don't play, why don't you play?

And do you think you ever might want to learn?

Because if you do... I may just have a few resources for you!

So thank you so much for joining me for this Belly Dance Conversation! I desperately want to hear from you! Post below, send me an email at sahira@sahirabellydances.com, and tell me about your zill story.

Maybe working together, we can create a stronger, more zillicious world for everyone to experience!

If you enjoyed this video, please give it a thumbs up and remember to subscribe so that I can send you fantastic Belly Dance content on a regular basis. I really appreciate your joining me here. If you would like to dive deeper into the world of zills and get to be the zill star that I

know that you can be, I invite you to check out my free jumpstart course at: sahirabellydances.com/zillstar.

Or you can also get onto my Teachable Studio, sahirabellydances.teachable.com and find a number of fantastic zill packages there that will allow you to dive deeper into the fabulous world of finger cymbals.