

West Coast Swing Basics

Pre-requisite

None

(These are basic patterns)

Introduction

West Coast Swing (WCS) is a slotted or track dance with a slinky, creative look that allows ladies to play and men to enjoy leading & watching the ladies. Leaders and followers move back and forth with each other along an imaginary line referred to as the slot.

WCS started as an alternative for the servicemen on the west coast of the United States during World War II. They were eager to dance the Jitterbug and East Coast Swing, which was the rage at the time. However, hundreds of thousands of military were jammed into the immediate coastal areas of California in preparation for the assault on Japan. There was very little room, land was at a premium, and dance floors were tiny. Dancers began dancing back and forth in a straight line as opposed to the very open dancing of the East Coast Swing. That allowed them to get many more couples onto those postage stamp size dance floors.

Dancers started dancing the slotted dance to the sultry rhythm and blues, influenced by gospel music that was playing in the honky tonks and bars at the time. Teens began meeting and dancing the new dance to this music, and the West Coast Swing spread from there across the nation. West Coast Swing is slower than its East Coast brethren, but the dancers take the extra time to do fancy footwork: spins, quick turns, and improvised groovin'.

In this segment, we are going to discuss:

- The music – how to step to the beat and how determine if it is a West Coast Swing.
- Contact – how to hold your partner.
- The basic foot work.

The Music

Traditional West Coast Swing music is bluesy. However, a lot of different styles of music are great for dancing West Coast Swing. The rhythm is a mixture of slow walks and triple step beats.

Typical West Coast Swing is danced to songs like, "Black Satin", "Diddy-Wah-Diddy", "Fever", "Hot Red Sweater", "Johnny B. Goode", "Kansas City", "My Blue Heaven", and "Natural Woman" among many others.

The Count

Unlike most dances, the footwork and the count of West Coast Swing **DOES NOT REMAIN CONSTANT**. Instead, it is progressive, meaning that the count grows depending upon the pattern. The vast majority of WCS patterns fall into two counts called 6-count patterns and 8-count patterns. There are also 12-count patterns, 14-count patterns, etc. that are merely various combinations of 6 and 8 count patterns as well as some patterns that defy definition.

The basic 6-count pattern is simply a walk, walk, triple step, triple step; or one, two, three-and-four, five-and-six (1-2-3&4-5&6). For six counts, you are taking eight steps (the &s count as a step).

The basic 8-count pattern is a walk, walk, triple step, walk, walk, triple step; or one, two, three-and-four, five, six, seven-and-eight (1-2-3&4-5-6-7&8). For eight counts, you are taking ten steps.

The other counts are usually combinations of these two basics. For example, a twelve count is two 6-counts back to back. Rather than count to 6 twice, you count to 12 instead, because the dance pattern is not complete by the end of the first 6-count. A 14-count pattern would be a 6-count combined with an 8-count, and a 16-count would be two 8-counts back-to-back. Other counts are created by adding an infinite set of walk, walk, triples step or even merely a large number of walks.

Don't be intimidated with these variations. Beginning West Coast Swing always starts with 6-count patterns. After learning numerous of these, you are introduced to 8-count patterns and the rules for switching between 6 and 8-count. Soon, it will become second nature and you will become comfortable with learning more complex patterns with higher counts and switching among the counts at will.

What is a beat?

A beat in music is a heavy guitar strum, a drumbeat, or some other heavy sound in the music. It is the **natural** place you would snap your fingers or clap your hands if you were keeping time to the music.

The important thing to remember here is that in dance, you put your foot on the floor on the beat as opposed to picking it up. To practice, you can snap your fingers and stamp your feet as you listen to the music (guys use the left foot and ladies use the right.)

Is it a West Coast Swing?

Listen to the music. If you can comfortably say, “walk, walk, triple step, triple step” and stay in beat with the music, you can probably dance a West Coast Swing to what you hear.

However, remember that there are many dances that use this or similar beats. For example, East Coast Swing, the parent to West Coast Swing also moves to triple time music. Others are the polka, the Cha-cha, and the Rumba, etc.

The basic difference with West Coast Swing is that it is much slower and has a more bluesy sound.

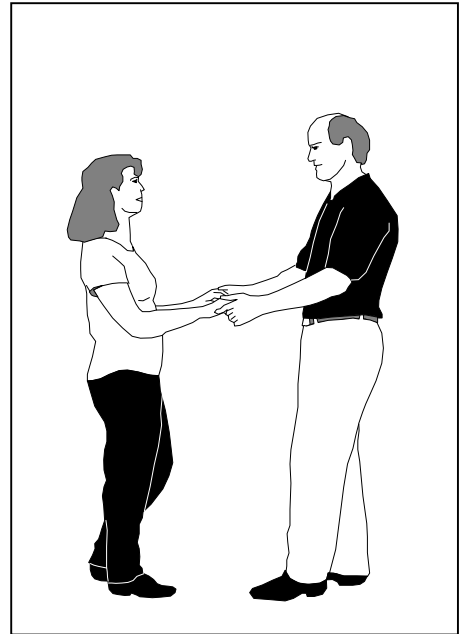
An alternative is to watch what other dancers are doing before you go out onto the floor. If they are generally dancing in a more or less stationary position, back and forth like in a slot with the gentleman remaining more or less stationary and the lady traveling, it is probably a West Coast Swing or a variation like Push Whip.

If you still cannot determine what it is, ask someone nearby. Most dancers are friendly and they will be glad to tell you.

Contact

Pick a spot in the center of the floor out of the way of the moving dancers around the outside. Face each other. You are standing on center of a track or a slot, which, by the way, belongs to the lady. The gentleman dances on the lady's track until he is an obstacle to her, and then he moves out of her way onto his own track that is perpendicular to hers to allow her to pass.

Dancers dance in an area the size of a door, or about 7 feet long and 4 feet wide.



Body Position

The most common body position of the dancers is the open position where the partners face each other connected at their hands. Closed positions do occur, but only in passing – sometimes at the beginning on the dance as in a starting step and sometimes briefly during the course of a pattern.

Hand Holds

Gentlemen – There are two common holds for the gentleman – “fence” and “pistol”. In the fence, the gentleman holds hands forward, thumbs up, palms facing each other and curls his fingers so they are pointing at each other. This provides a fence for the lady to rest her hands on. This is the most common hold. Do not grip.

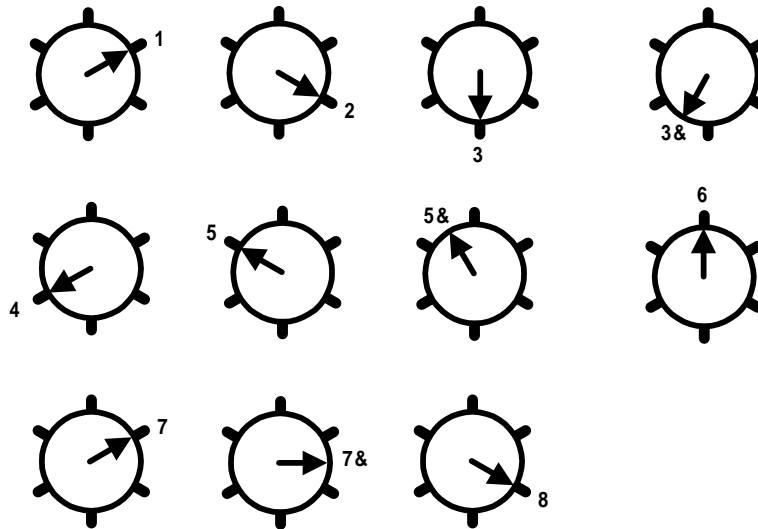
The pistol is a variation of the fence where the gentleman’s index finger remains pointing forward along the lady’s wrist. It forms a hand position like a pistol that kids often pretend to be holding while at play. This grip is preferred by many because it gives the gentleman a lot of control.

A third position, not so common, is the wrist where the gentleman’s hands grip the lady’s wrists from the outside. This position affords the gentleman the greatest amount of control and is often used by instructors with beginning ladies until they learn what is expected of them.

Ladies – With palms down and thumbs toward each other, drape your fingers over the gentleman’s offered fingers. Curl your fingers somewhat so that the fleshy part of your fingers is against the back of the gentleman’s fingers and tips of your fingers rest against his palms. DO NOT GRIP. He should be able to pull you along with your finger tips and direct you backward by pressing against your palms.

The WCS dance clock

(Illustrates both 6-count and 8-count patterns)



Unlike the regular clock, the WCS dance clock is divided into six segments to correspond to the beats of the basic music. Clocks for other dances will be different. The arrow on the clock face points to the count of the beat or step being discussed. The spaces between the marks around the outside of the clock are equally spaced to indicate equal timing of the beat.

You will notice that the arrow sometimes points to a regular division mark and sometimes points between the marks. When it points to a regular mark, it is directing a regular beat or step. When it is pointing between the regular marks, it is directing a quicker timing or step like would be found in the middle of a triple step.

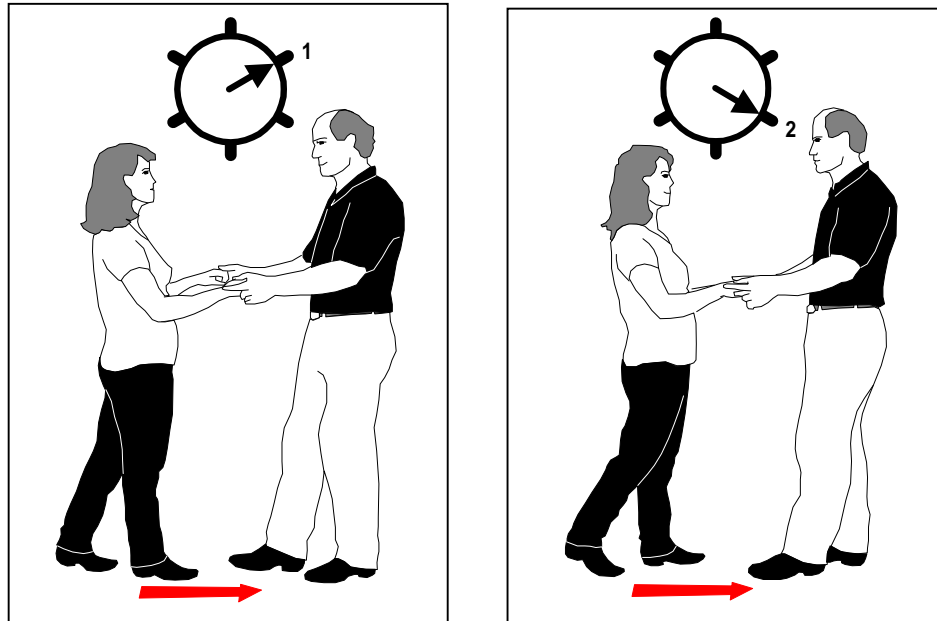
For your convenience, the steps or beats are also named. The named “&-counts” are preceded by the previous numbered step associated with it. For example, in the count “3-&-4”, the 3-count will be designated “3”, the 4-count will be designated “4”, but the &-count will be designated “3&” to clarify what is being discussed.

Count Timing

An important point to note is that the timing occurs after the step, not before it. Therefore, the timing for the first step occurs between point 1 and 2 in the diagram. The second step begins at point 2, the third step begins at point 3.

Basic Steps

The First Half



The basic is a 6-count pattern. The dancers begin on count one with the gentleman taking a step back with his left foot and the lady stepping forward with her right foot. On the second count, the gentleman steps back with his right foot and the lady steps forward with her left.

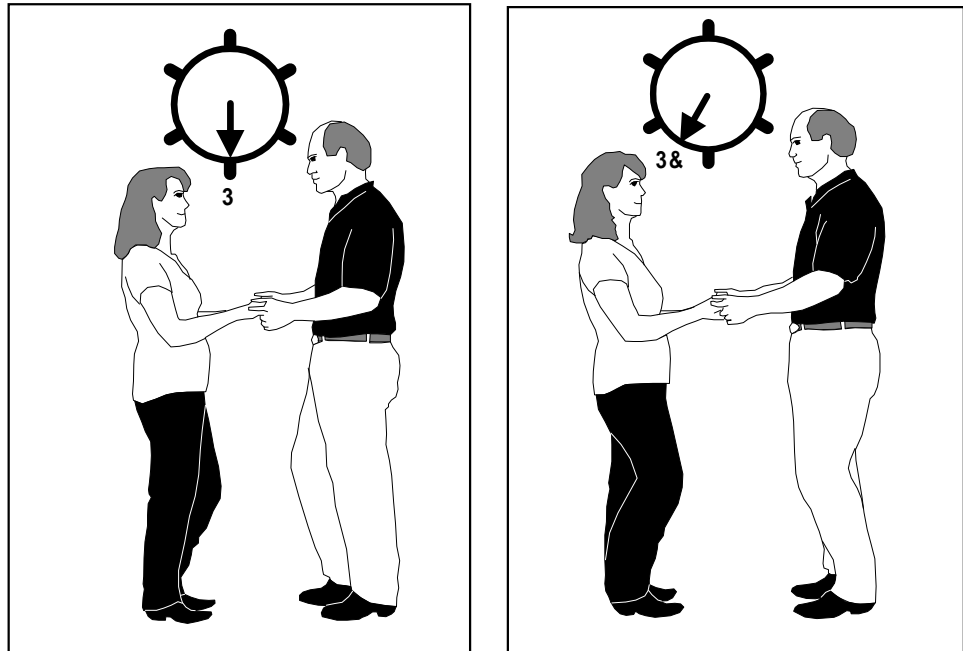
**“Inertia” and
“Rubber Band”**

Although it is not required for beginning dancers to perform the steps of WCS, this is a good time to introduce “Inertia” and “Rubber band” concepts. These two concepts create some of the exotic looks of the West Coast Swing.

Inertia means that a lady should remain at rest until compelled to move by the gentleman and then should remain in motion until compelled to slow or stop. This comes into effect in the starting steps – when the gentleman moves, there is a slight delay before the lady moves. Also, he is not compelling her to move constantly but only directs starts, stops, or changes in her motion. This will be discussed in more detail in a different segment.

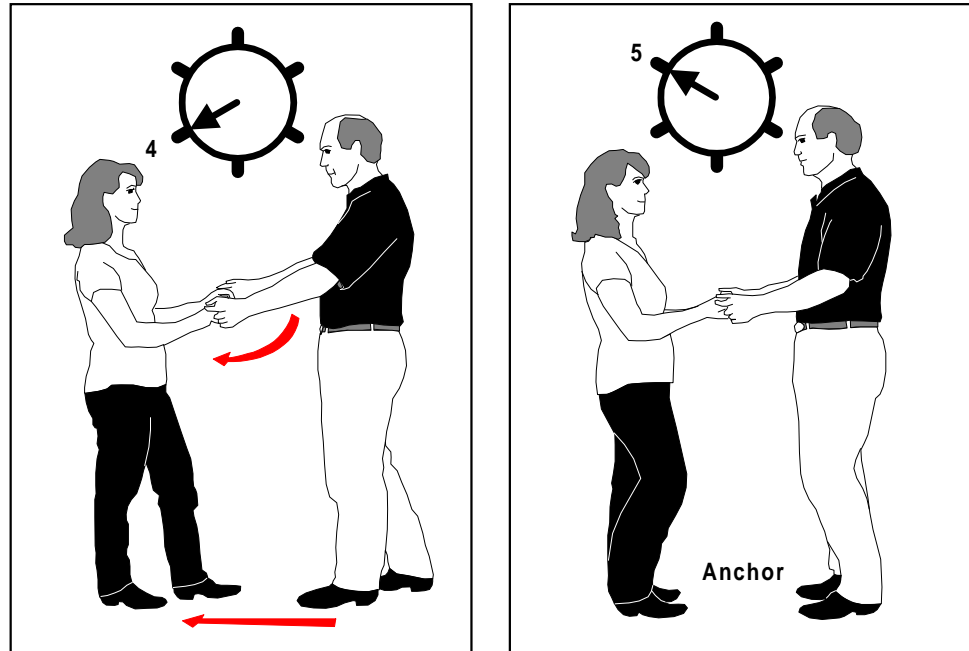
Rubber band is applied when the lady comes to a terminal end of her travel. There is compression and extension in her arms so that they respond like they are rubber bands. This means she does not move instantly but gains momentum if force is constantly applied. She also slows and changes directions as if the force is being applied at the ends of rubber bands. This concept will be discussed in more detail in a different segment.

Terminal Middle



The next two steps form the terminal end of the first set of dance steps (the middle of the basic). These are the first two steps of a set of triple steps. They are basically a shift in weight. The gentleman steps first on his left and shifts his weight to his right. The lady steps first on her right and then shifts to her left. Note the timing of the steps on the clock – these are quick steps.

Showcase and Anchor

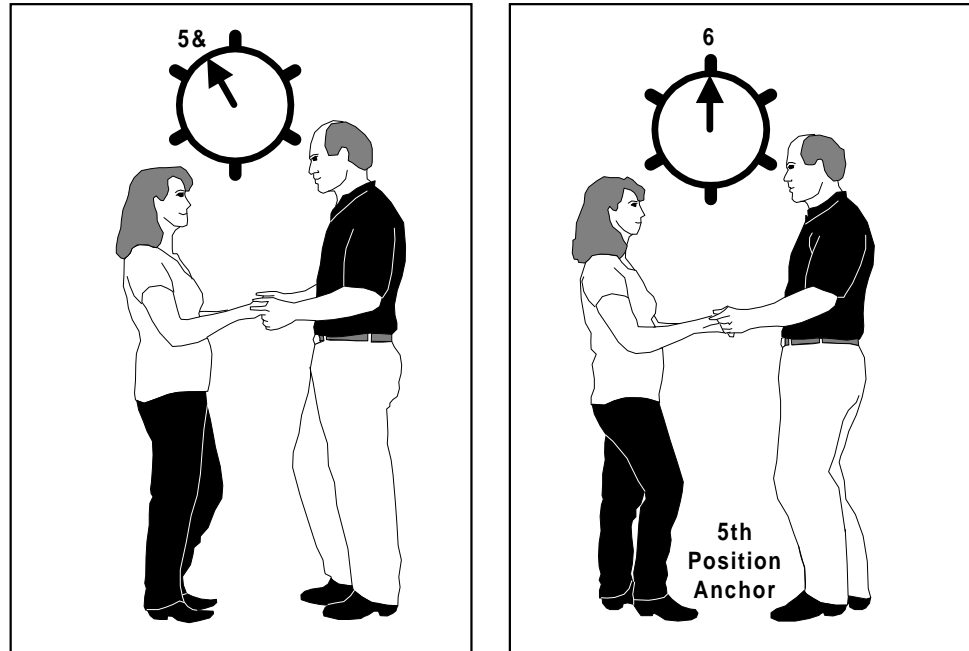


On the count of 4 (the last step of the triple step set), the gentleman uses the resistance in the lady's arms to compel her to take a large step back as he steps forward. We like to call this the showcase step, because the lady often drags this out in a delay that emphasizes the timing. The length of this step must be near the length of the combined first two steps of the pattern in order for the dancers to properly return to their starting position.

Step number 5 (lady with her left foot and gentleman with his right foot) is what is called the anchor step. It is the first step of the last triple step set and is the beginning of an anchor-in-place. The anchor-in-place establishes stability so that the gentleman can lead the count of one on the next basic and have the lady delay without getting off balance.

In reality, it is not so important here as it will be on the style of future patterns. However, it is important for the beginner to establish the habit and the advanced dancer to maintain the habit.

Anchor-in-Place



The last two steps of the second set of triple steps is a weight change for both dancers. On step 6, both dancers step back at a slight diagonal with instep to heel to form what is called the 5th position. (Other dance positions are discussed in other segments.) The gentleman's weight is on his right foot (ready to step out with his left), and the lady's weight is on her left foot (ready to step out with her right) on the count of one in the next basic.

Alternative Footwork

There are two sets of alternative footwork we need to cover – alternative for both dancers to the first triple step set and alternative for the lady's 5th position anchor.

The Touch Step

The cousin of West Coast Swing is the Texas Push Whip that is characterized by tight patterns, fast spins, double resistance, and the touch step. It uses similar patterns and footwork to WCS. We will only talk about the last of these characteristics – the touch step.

The current trend is for these two styles of swing to move toward each other and dancers of each style to shamelessly borrow from the other style of dance. One of the most common cross-overs is the touch step.

The touch step is simply stepping twice with the same foot. Rather than step a triple step set on 3-&-4, the dancers lightly touch the ball or toe of the foot to the floor on count 3 without committing, release the weight and step again with resolution on count 4. This is really a syncopation and is mentioned only briefly here.

- And One** The second alternative footwork is really just an assist for the lady to help her complete the delay before she steps forward on the count of one off the anchor-in-place onto the next basic. Some ladies find it very difficult to delay so their footwork looks sloppy.
- The And One technique overcomes this by asking the lady to end with her weight on her right foot. Then when the gentleman compels her forward for the count of one, she must quickly shift her weight to her left so that she can step out with her right foot. Shifting her weight creates the required delay for the desired look.
- Note that neither the touch step or the And One technique are required for beginners to learn WCS and are offered here only as introductory information for later discussion and development.
- Don't be Afraid** Every dancer out there has "paid their dues". They have struggled just like you. However, they are concentrating on their own efforts and not upon you. They do not care if you make a mistake, so go ahead and make them. You have just as much right to be on the dance floor as they do, so get out there and dance. It may be a struggle, but that is ok. Dance as if no one is watching you.
- Protect your Lady** As you are dancing, check often around you to be aware of the traffic that is happening nearby. Do not compel your lady to collide with another dancer and do not allow them to collide with her. Take smaller steps or maneuver her as necessary into an open spot. Even though the WCS is a stationary dance, you can maneuver on the floor somewhat. Avoid collisions with other dancers.
- Take the Blame** If a collision does occur, remember that it does no one any good to get upset – this is just recreation. The best policy is to apologize regardless if it is your fault or not.
- And last, but not least – if you do bump into someone and knock over their drink, offer to replace it, and try to be more careful.
- Conclusion** The material presented here is not all-inclusive, but only touches the high points. There are many other tips to help in your WCS technique. Some of these tips will be presented in the course of other dance segments, while others may have to be taught in conjunction with an instructor present.
- This concludes the segment on basic West Coast Swing.