



# Larry's Corner

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Do you have any likes or dislikes, stories, or helpful hints for dancing? If so, write it down and give to Larry Ablin or Barb Johnson. We will add it to one of the future News letters.

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If you would like to tell us how you became interested in dancing, write it down and give to Larry or Barb, we will add your picture with it and put it in one of the future Newsletters

## Swing Music and Timing

Standard terminology when discussing slows and quicks: All the dance teachers that I know of, everywhere in the world, including top swing teachers in the USA, agree that a slow = 2 beats and a quick = 1 beat. An "&" is 1/2 beat and steals time from the S or Q preceding it. The music used for tango has an accent pattern based on four beats:

"AND, One, Two, Three, Four." In fact, that's why "slow, AND slow" is the standard timing variation off "slow quick quick:" the "AND" is strong accent just before count 1. If you use slows and quicks to describe swing timing the correct description is QQ Q&Q Q&Q or QQ Q&Q QQ Q&Q (6 or 8 beats).

Exception: International style Samba is "1a2" or "SaS" In other words, in samba "slow" means one beat and "quick" means half a beat. The "a" in Samba "1a2" was 3/4 of a beat after the "1", or a dotted eighth note + sixteenth note sequence.

First a digression: In good dancing, one can say that the music leads the leader. Most people can tell a good swing when they hear it, but what exactly is this thing called swing music?

Swing music emphasizes the division of the beat a lot. That's the essence of the swing feel. Swing clearly divides in 2-beat units, and the music usually has strong backbeats that differentiate between the strong beat (downbeat) or the weak beat (backbeat). In 4/4 (common time), true swing is neither a triplet nor a dotted eight and sixteenth note pattern; it is somewhere in between. How much in between depends on the song and the people playing the song. A sixteenth pattern is counted 1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a. A triplet pattern is 1 la le 2 la le 3 la le 4 la le.

### Inside this issue:

Swing Music and Timing

1 e & a 2 sixteenths

1 . . . . . 2

1 la le 2 triplets

A swing is between the 1 a 2 a 3 a 4 a of the first example and the 1 le 2 le 3 le 4 le of the second. A hard swing approaches the dotted eight and sixteenth note feel. An easy swing is closer to triplets. Straight eighths are not swing but you can still dance a Swing dance to them.

Aside: All swing music is not written in 4/4 time; much of it is written in 2/2 time, sometimes 6/8 or 12/8.

Sometimes a particular song, especially faster ones, can be found in 4/4 time in one book and 2/2 time in another.

But let's ignore that for now. To make things ever fuzzier to the casual observer, most swing sheet music is notated as straight eighths with the instruction "with a swing feel" over the first measure of music. This was originally done to make the music copyist's job easier in the days when all music was hand written, and the tradition follows today even though music is usually typeset. A good musician turns that notation into the swing feel without thinking too much about it. Musicians do not learn to swing as beginners. Swing is an interpretation of music. It is the accents/legatos and staccatos/stringendos as well as how you slur and tie the notes that makes a particular tune swing the way it does.

Properly played,

- "Take the 'A' Train" swings,
- "Old Time Rock And Roll" (the song) doesn't,
- "All Shook Up" swings,
- "Pretty Woman" doesn't,
- "Night Train" swings,
- "The Hustle" doesn't
- "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" swings,

Latin American songs rarely do,

"In The Mood" swings, Polkas do not,

"Cab Driver" does, "Begin The Beguine" does not,

"Rock Around The Clock" does, Waltzes do not (with the exception of some Jazz Waltzes but you can't dance swing to a waltz),

"classical music doesn't swing, big band jazz often does. The Lindy is done to a fast swing (although some people choose to stretch its boundaries), the Triple Swing feels

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best to a rhythm that swings although teachers force it to straight eighths songs (like Old Time Rock and Roll) in order to dance it to contemporary music.

Still don't hear it? Try to distinguish between melody instruments (say the sax or guitar solo) and the drums. Swing is always found in the rhythm section, and sometimes (but not necessarily) in the melody or soloists which are allowed to take liberties with the rhythms. The swing thing is a whole rhythm section approach, though the high-hat and the ride cymbal often define the swing feel. Sometimes different instruments (all working together) additively make the swing rhythm. Also, the swing notes are not the only ones played, other notes are added that either compliment or contrast the swing feel.

For Duke Ellington, listen to Satin Doll, Perdido, Take The A Train, I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart, I'm Just A Lucky So And So, Love You Madly, etc. For Benny Goodman, listen to "Sing, Sing, Sing" For Glenn Miller, In The Mood (here the melody itself is a classic example of the swing thing), Tuxedo Junction, Chattanooga Choo-Choo For Bop, most Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie tunes swing: Conformation, Groovin. High, Ornithology, For the blues (not usually considered a swing rhythm but it often does swing) St. James Infirmary, Baby What You Want Me To Do, Kansas City, Night Train (here again, the melody itself is a classic example of the swing thing).

Confusing? To some. Some musicians have it, some don't. Some dancers have it, some don't. The good musicians and dancers seldom seem to have to over-analyze it, because they just feel it. Duke Ellington said "It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing" and he meant the feel, not the dance.

Many instructors teach all the "basic" rhythms (in WCS) as:

- 1 2 3 & 4 5 & 6
- 1 2 3 & 4 5 6 7 & 8

When learning how to Swing, dance students are busy counting to themselves to stay on time, trying to remember the foot positions, working very hard to hear the down-beats, etc., etc.,... and to count it any other way would only confuse them unnecessarily. While this is great for learning the figures and the foot placements, if you're very literal in following these instructions, you will look wooden or mechanical; when you are out dancing, you need to dance \*to the music\*!

In 4/4 musical time the "basic" rhythms are really (in WCS):

- 1 2 3 \* 4 5 \* 6
- 1 2 3 \* 4 5 6 7 \* 8

where the \* is either an "a", "le", "&" (or something in-between) according to which line in the following diagram best describes the music rhythm divisions you are dancing to: a hard swing, an easy swing, straight eighths, (or something in-between).

- 1 e & a 2

1 . . . . . 2

1 la le 2

The importance of being aware of the difference between divisions into sixteenth notes, eighth note triplets or straight eighth notes is to be able to dance differently when you hear the difference. As a dancer, once you get comfortable enough with Swing so that you can actually LISTEN to the music while dancing, as opposed to just trying to stay close to the beat, you don't need to worry about the numerical division, because you can just listen to the music and use the beat wherever it is. In advanced classes, WCS teachers should acknowledge these subdivisions. The other important thing to be aware of is that the last step of the triple is on the strongest musical "accent" (emphasis), so you should step most strongly or dramatically on it. In other words, dance "Trip-le STEP" instead of "TRIP-le step," and "Rock STEP" instead of "ROCK step."

When the music is a hard swing, dance to match that division. The dance usually feels and looks more staccato, sharp, punchy, (you hear a lot of brass or cymbal accents).

When the music is an easy swing, dance to match that division too. The dance then becomes more smooth, sometimes more elegant (you hear a lot of strings), sometimes more sexy (you hear a lot of saxes). It's more lazy, it may even be a slower tempo.

In fast tempo music, the divisions often approach straight eighths out of necessity. Listen to some famous fast jazz tunes, like Miles playing "Tune Up", or Coltrane playing "Giant Steps".

The point is that you should dance differently depending on the musical subdivision, and not that these subdivisions are meant to be mathematically precise. However, occasionally delaying to create one of the other rhythms adds rhythmic variety. Dancing one of the other rhythms all the time, though, usually looks contrived and, frankly, like your not dancing to the song being played.

The important thing is that the third step is a quarter note, and the first and second steps together comprise a quarter note, with the first step longer than the second. When teaching triple rhythm, put on a song with a slow, strong swing rhythm, like Caribbean Dream. Sound out the rhythm they should be hearing in the song, and explain the rhythm in terms of musical note durations. Sounding out the rhythm is really effective because surprisingly few people have any musical knowledge and the musical note duration breakdown is lost upon them.

In WCS/Swing/Jive, the rhythmic issues are the same. The most popular rhythm for west coast swing (or jive) is rock shuffle rhythm (1 le 2). If you listen carefully, almost all swing music (blues and such) is divided into thirds of the beat, and the vast majority of musicians would describe what they play as eighth-note-triplets. However, plenty of people dance west coast (or jive) to straight eighths rock rhythm (1 & 2). The existence of a pure jazz swing rhythm (1 a2) is a myth being promulgated by dance professionals who, because they dance by feel, have little analytical understanding of rhythm, and who therefore parrot back whatever they've heard from other dance pros.

Probably the best example of this is the ISTD Latin syllabus book, called The Revised Technique of Latin American Dancing. This book, the most recent edition of which was published in 1983, still lists the proper rhythm for jive music as 3/4-1/4-1, thirty some years after the beginning of the rock era and decades after the "British invasion." (1 a2) is VERY rare, although it can usually be found in hard shuffle songs performed by musicians with no soul, i.e., "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown", many versions of "Kansas City", etc.

Some instructors teach the breakdown of a beat into sixteenths, which explains the incredibly precise, sharp, snappy footwork. (Note: and it's always best when it looks like it really matters to the dancer whether he/she put his/her foot two inches to the left or right...) They say they dance on the "1--a" of a 1&a beat.

In dancing, non-musicians/non-dancers will often begin dancing with a straight 1 & 2 subdivision, regardless of what the music is doing. Perhaps this is a physical coordination thing. They may be thinking swing but their large leg muscles can only manage equal halves. Therefore, it is an extremely useful teaching technique to force students to count the four subdivisions and force them to place the weight change on the last sixteenth. Then, when they get out there and dance (and the music is usually much faster than they've been counting in class), what they end up doing is something more like triplets.

You run into trouble when you try to define a "beat" as a precise instant in time. Real percussionist are not drum machines and the duration between beats are not exactly even in time. Plus, the other musicians/singers will be interpreting their own parts in relation to the drummer differently.

The definition of a "step" is even more problematic. A dancers foot moves and his/her body moves. These movements cannot happen instantaneously due to the laws of physics; one must start to move a foot at some point in time, then place it on the floor and stop moving it at another point in time. However, dancing is really about moving the body, not just the feet. In some dances the foot moves first, then the body commences to move. In some dances the body commences to move first, then the foot. In some steps the body may even have a temporary movement counter to the foot movement, before going with the traveling foot. Some steps in some dances have one transferring weight onto a new standing foot. Some steps in some dances may have one transferring one's center of gravity through the perpendicular of the floor contact patch without ever stopping over it (body flight?). Add to this considerations of sway, swing, change in angular momentum, use of head weight, partner leverage, etc. and timing becomes a complex subject indeed.

Once you have more experience, you need to decide whether to dance ahead of the beat, on the beat, or behind the beat. For fast numbers one may choose to dance ahead of the beat to give the dance a sort of urgency and drive. In medium tempo tunes like faster west coast, you may choose to dance right on the beat, and in slower ones to lay back behind the beat to give it that slinky, lazy feeling. If you have a partner who feels the beat differently, it

can make the lead and follow harder.

The style of the song, the tempo, the instrumentation, and even the mode (major, minor, dorian, etc.) of the song can play a big part in the kind of expression/timing/moves the dancer chooses to display. Most dancers wouldn't want to dance the same way to "Sweet Georgia Brown" and "Mister Sandman", even though they are both usually performed in a swing rhythm and at the same tempo. Art can not be put into a formula. It is up to the individual.

Timing is usually judged with respect to the point in time that a dancer's body indicates the action. Looking at a dancer's feet, it is often the instant in time when they commit their weight to the foot. It is also indicated in the whole body of a good dancer -- the completion of some body motion accentuating the music, maybe the shoulders set or the head turns. An experienced observer can easily tell if a dancer is rushing or lagging to much finer degrees than beats of half beats. Sometimes top dancers have been marked down for "timing" even though they never got "off-beat" -- they were too far from the "feel" of the music in that barely tangible, sub-beat range. It's not how the music is notated and is not a pure mathematical thing, it's a feel. Contemporary WCS should have a "relaxed" look to it, no matter how fast the music is, perhaps a hair "late" relative to the exact instant the music accents. There is a feeling of "stretch" that varies throughout the dance. This stretch varies throughout a pattern. If you really lead and respond on exactly 1, you're early. The lead starts a bit before the 1, then hangs a bit "late" relative to the beat for the leader, and even later for the follower. But to mess things up, if the follower isn't committed to her 2 exactly on the beat, she's "slow" or late in the eyes of many judges. So much for any rule that says the follower is always a hair behind the beat. Go with the "feel" concept. Watch some videos of top dancers with the sound off and try to see the music in them. If you can feel the subtleties of the music with the sound off, their timing is good (so is their dancing!)

The Leader dictates where the beat is and the follower must accept that. As you know, not everyone has senses of rhythm and timing that conform to the rest of us or to what the musicians have laid down. When that happens in dance, the follower must accept the leader's interpretation. It is indeed possible to communicate timing through the connection that dancers have - so much so that one can even dance with a deaf partner! If, because of inattention, traffic, or a loss of balance, the leader gets off time, he expects his partner to follow and be equally off time until he can get back to the beat.

The rhythm, timing, and location of the beat are what the Leader says they are! If an experienced leader is slightly off the beat in places, he's likely to be 'shading' the music on purpose, and should just be followed. However, with an inexperienced leader, helping him stay on the beat when he begins to drift off of it can be very useful.

Basic timing must be learned so early in ballroom that everyone pretty much knows it; advanced timing is sometimes a matter of taste. At a foxtrot workshop, a top US pro once demonstrated dancing in strict time (quicks exactly twice as fast as slows) and this definitely looked less appealing than a more interpretive style where some quicks were faster or slower than others and some slows

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and quicks got evened out in duration. The amalgamation still fit the music and had that floating-on-air look. This is called "rubato timing": "a fluctuation of the dancer's speed within a musical phrase, against a rhythmically steady accompaniment." (from the Italian, literally meaning "robbed") A typical example would be the Feather & Three combination, where the advanced dancer robs some time is from the first two Quick's and adds it to the Slow which creates an illusion of a little extra floating or hovering during the rise on the end of the Feather and which provides a delicious "sliding down the hill" effect into the Three, commenced with an abbreviated "quick". The dancer varies the phase of their movement (body swing/sway, leg swing, foot placement, weight transfer, etc.) with respect to the strict tempo music. It looks like they're actually staying with the music, just interpreting the beat with different parts of their total motion, rather than just their feet.

When I follow, I concentrate on what the leader is doing. A very good follower can do this and meld the leader's timing and interpretation with their own musical interpretation. Often (when leading) I'm proud of myself for altering the timing of a group to match the musical phrasing, my partner will not only have missed the fact that we hit the phrasing, but will even be unaware that I changed the timing of the figures. She has other things to worry about (like, what the hell is he leading now?:).

Usually she notices when I change timings, but not always. In any case, women have to deal with men who are completely off time in social situations, an alternative like this won't disturb good female social dancers in the least

The "duration" of a step is defined as the time from the current step to the time of the next step. A dance "count" is determined by the length of time (the beat, or musical count) this WEIGHTED step is given. Thus Slow-Slow, Quick-Quick: two beats weighted, two beats weighted, one beat weighted, one beat weighted.

I was in a workshop where the instructor told us that the timing of the weight change within a 2-beat "Slow" depends on the character of the dance; that in Tango you are shooting for a weight change at the start of the 2-beat "Slow", while in Foxtrot or Quickstep, you are trying to get in as late as possible in the "Slows". I had another instructor say that in Waltz you should also try to delay your weight changes until the last possible instant in each beat.

In C&W Two-Step, placing the foot at the start of the slows is very definitely the characteristic style of the dance.

Music and dancing have both count and rhythm. Some dances have mostly rhythm, some have mostly count. WCS seems to be mostly a rhythm dance. However, to dance it very well, you must know both count and rhythm.

Beginners should always learn count first. As they progress in the dance and learn how to start 'PLAYING' with the music, they must then learn rhythm as well. People who only learn the rhythm, are only half as good as what

they could be and visa versa. So, we must learn both to do any dance well.

Followers should learn the rhythm, not the count. The count depends on what is being led, and a follower cannot know in advance what is being led. Followers need to "tune out" the count. If they did not, they would be leading.

What they should not tune out is the rhythm. Followers should learn to count. Period. If not, how will they learn syncopations? If not, how will they learn to do routines where not every single step of every single move is led?

Furthermore, especially in couples where the man is having a hard time hearing the beat or the rhythm, it CAN be helpful if the woman knows the count. I'm not saying they should do it all the time, but they should be able to.

As far as timing goes, freestyle partner dancing is pure lead/follow. It's a great way to hone following skills, and it's a refreshing change from being marched through all the latest patterns. Can freestyle partner dancing be taught? I've never seen anyone try. I'm surprised more leaders don't try freestyle. Anyone trained in the basic conventions of partnering (arm tone, etc.) should be able to "steer" a partner into some random, improvised, inspired steps and patterns. Isn't that really what many of us are working toward: knowing the conventions well enough to know when to go beyond them? Isn't that, in some sense, real dancing?

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If you want to see photos of Minneapolis, MN dancers, you can go to the Photo Gallery.

If you want to read dance stories they are under Headlines.

Larry L Ablin Email: [labin@frontiernet.net](mailto:labin@frontiernet.net)

Phone: 952-898-3513

Barb Johnson Email: [westcoast65@frontiernet.net](mailto:westcoast65@frontiernet.net)

Teach Beginners at Singles All Together dance class on Monday night, at Lenox center on Minnetonka Blvd in St Louis Park.

Teach at Singles All Together on Tuesday night 8pm at Medina.

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