



West Coast Swing is a form of swing dancing, once called “sophisticated swing” or “Hollywood style swing.” It is usually danced to a slower tempo than Jive and is always danced in “the slot.” Being “in the slot” means that the Lady works in a straight line up and down line of dance, while the Man works in a slot across the Lady’s line of dance, as well as up and down line of dance. This is contrary to Jive, where the patterns are more circular.

This form of dance evolved on the West Coast in the 1930s for practical reasons. Although the exact origin of the dance is disputed, most sources credit the movie industry. Directors, concerned with camera angles when filming dance scenes, insisted that the actors dance in straight lines so that their profiles would always show rather than having their backs to the camera at any time.

In the 1930s, jitterbug and other forms of what now is called East Coast Swing (or lindy) had become so exuberant, those dancers had been banned from the main dance floors of the big ballrooms so as not to interfere with smooth dancers. To get back to the middle of the floor, they began adopting the Hollywood version of swing.

Yet another story credits the small dance floors of West Coast night clubs with the birth of West Coast Swing. If you wanted to dance, you had to squeeze together and work in a slot to have room.

Arthur Murray in his dance books in the 1940s incorporated steps from the new dance craze, instructing Ladies to walk forward 2 steps to begin a move. His manuals gave patterns for the anchor step, sugar push, whip and underarm pass. He called it “Western” Swing as opposed to the other forms of swing, which were being lumped together as “Eastern Swing.” He later changed the name to “Sophisticated Swing.”

MUSICAL TIMING

The basic music for West Coast Swing is the blues, but it can be danced to any music with 4/4 timing (four beats in each measure). While Jive is danced often at 40 measures a minute, West Coast Swing is danced comfortably at a slower tempo, usually around 32 measures a minute.

West Coast Swing primarily uses figures that take 6 counts of music (requiring a measure and a half to complete) or 8 counts of music (spanning two measures of music), similar to Jive.

Unlike Jive, which has evolved with a syllabus of technical rules for timing and footwork, West Coast Swing almost has no rules. It is considered an improvisational dance. In the general dance community, some dance it “down and dirty” with lots of bent knees and others want to keep it more upright with a smoother, linear look.

There isn’t even agreement on how to count the timing. In Jive, a six-count figure is counted: 12 3a4 5a6. Each Quick (Q) takes up one beat of music, except before an “a” count. The “a”

steals some time from the “Q” before it, so the timing of that “Q” has to change, thus you have this timing pattern in Jive:

Timing:	Q	Q	Q	a	Q	Q	a	Q
Beat value:	1	1	$\frac{3}{4}$	$\frac{1}{4}$	1	$\frac{3}{4}$	$\frac{1}{4}$	1

The quickness of the “a” count contributes to the bouncy action in Jive.

A six-count figure in West Coast Swing may be counted in Jive timing as above or as 123&4 5&6. Using 123&4 5&6 as the timing, the “&” count and the “Q” before it are danced in one beat of music with each step getting equal timing, thus:

Timing:	Q	Q	Q	&	Q	Q	&	Q
Beat value:	1	1	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	1	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	1

This results in a smoother type of action, less bouncy than Jive and more like walking.

In round dancing, you will encounter both timings. For example, the Roundalab manual uses 123a4 5a6 for West Coast Swing timing, and URDC in its technical manual uses 123&4 5&6.

DANCE POSITION

Like other dances in the Latin syllabus, partners are most often in open position, and occasionally in loose closed position. Open position requires a connection between the partners through the arms. Partners rely on a slight pressure through each other’s hand for the lead. The pressure sometimes feels like a “pull” away from each other to create a resistance.

Your dancing “slot” will fit in a rectangular box on the floor approximately 6 feet by 3 feet. Figures begin usually with Man facing line of dance (or reverse line), and he initiates movement with a step back. If he is doing a whip figure, he will then step to the side into his cross slot to get out of the way, so that his partner can dance past him on her slot. She continues moving until resistance through the Man’s arm causes her to stop or turn. If he intends to do a sugar type figure, he will stay in his slot and take two steps back then stop, which blocks her forward motion. Lady’s job is to get from one end of the slot to another (stylishly), or when the Man blocks her, to turn and go back to the end she came from.

FOOTWORK

Figures begin with a Man’s step back (and Lady’s step forward). Forget the “rock recover” you learned in Jive (except for modifications or intros).

Ladies always dance in the slot. While some figures (like the Whip) appear to go “around” the man, think straight-line movement, with the Man stepping into his cross-slot to get out of the Lady’s way. The underarm turn of Jive is elongated in West Coast Swing to become a passing run in the slot.

BASIC STEPS

West Coast Swing breaks down into three basic families of figures: *Passing figures* (including the right side pass, left side pass and underarm turn); *Sugar figures* (including the sugar push and sugar tuck & spin); and *Whips* (including basic whip, triple whip, whip with inside or outside turn and surprise whip). An anchor step concludes almost every figure for Man but can be replaced with a variety of options. Lady often has an extra spin that replaces the anchor step.

Basic Sugar Push: 1234 5&6

Think: “Walk, walk, touch, step, triple step”

Man: Facing line, step back L, back R, tap L, fwd L; back R just behind L with toe out/recover L in place, replace weight to R (anchor step).

Lady: Forward R, forward L, tap R behind L, back R; back L just behind R/recover R in place, replace weight to L (anchor step). Ends in the same place it began.

Underarm turn: 123&4 5&6

Think: “Walk, walk, triple step triple step”

Man: Facing line, step back L, forward & side R to Lady’s right side, swiveling $\frac{1}{4}$ RF to wall side L/recover R turning to reverse line, slightly forward L; anchor step.

Lady: Forward R, forward L, swiveling slight to face diag wall side R/ cross L in front of R, back R trng to face line; anchor step. (Lady’s “3&4” is sometimes called a French cross.)

Whip: 123&4 567&8

Man: Facing line, step back L, forward & side R to Lady’s right side, swiveling $\frac{1}{4}$ RF to wall side L/recover R turning to reverse line, slightly forward L; cross R behind L trng $\frac{1}{2}$ to face LOD, forward L, anchor step. .

Lady: Forward R, forward L trng $\frac{1}{2}$ RF, back R/cl L to R, forward R between Man’s feet; swiveling $\frac{1}{2}$ to face RLOD back L, back R, anchor step. A complete rotation ending in the same place it began.

Tuck & Spin: 1234 5&6

Man: Facing line, step back L, back R, tap L, fwd L; anchor step.

Lady: Forward R, forward L, tap R, swivel $\frac{1}{2}$ RF to face LOD forward R & spin $\frac{1}{2}$ to face RLOD; anchor step.

Anchor Step: 5&6

A kind of triple in place. This is used to “anchor” the end of the figure and to re-establish the connection between partners. A triple step is three weight changes. It can be done actually in place, but more often it is done with feet in third position (heel to instep).

It is the preferred ending for a West Coast Swing figure. The “coaster step” (back/close, forward in 5&6 timing) was considered an alternative ending at one time. It is discouraged now because it encourages Lady to start forward motion before the next figure starts. The coaster step survives mainly as Lady’s triple step in the middle of a whip turn.