

# West Coast Swing

By Chris & Terri Cantrell

*(Technique & styling are always evolving and may differ depending on many factors. The information below is based on information we have gleaned from a variety of sources. Your experience may differ.)*

West Coast Swing (WCS) is a laidback, improvisational, smooth, and often sultry or down & dirty member of the swing family. It is danced to a wide variety of either slow or fast music tempo music, including but not limited to blues, country, disco, jazz, pop, rhythm & blues, and swing. The majority of the Round Dances choreographed to-date have used the slower, sultrier type music. Tempo range is typically 28-32 measures per minute.

WCS is characterized by the use of 'slots' and 'rails'. The woman travels forward and backward along a narrow straight line, the 'slot'. The man moves off of and onto her line between two imaginary rails that are on either side of the slot. The man can either lead her down the slot by stepping out of her way or he can block her path, forcing her to go back the direction she came.

The information provided below would probably horrify most true older west coast swingers as most of them feel that, like for the Argentine Tango, the WCS is something you have to feel and should be completely improvisational and not standardized.

## Balance & Poise

As with all other dance rhythms, balance is the most important aspect. To achieve balance in WCS, the trick is to get your supporting leg/foot under your center of gravity (center) at the end of each step. The center of gravity for men is approximately his belly button for swing (slightly higher for smooth dancing due to the change in poise), while for women it is their hips.

Lower into your knees and lean slightly away from your partner until you a comfortable balance point, the 'down & dirty' feel. Movement begins by moving your body's center forward or backward using your supporting leg/foot to initiate the movement. Bring your free foot into place under your center to complete that step. Men, leading therefore becomes much easier as you are indicating to your partner which direction to go with the initial movement of your body by using your center to lead (talk to) the woman's center. The picture at the right shows several of the points above, bent knees, bent elbows, slight backwards poise, and he is beginning to move his center away from her to entice her to move forward.



## Hold



Imagine the picture of Kilroy looking over a fence, okay, you don't have to imagine it as it is to the left of this paragraph. Now ignore the head, eyes, & nose and focus in on the fence and the fingers. The man's hand & fingers are the fence, the woman's hands & fingers are Kilroy's. To achieve this, men rotate your wrist inward so that the inside of your hand essentially faces you with your fingers pointing towards your opposite side, e.g. the man's left hand's fingers point towards his right side. This hand orientation gives the woman a very nice ledge to gently place her fingers over, between his four fingers and his thumb. Both his & her thumbs gently fold over their partner's fingers. This method has also been referred to as a 'bird perch' with the man's hand as the perch and the woman's hand as the bird sitting on the perch.

To aid in maintaining your connection, men aim the joined hand(s) towards the woman's center (hips). Holding the hands too high can result in the woman having no idea which direction you want her to move or might pull or push her off balance. It is much easier to move a thing at its heaviest, most centralized spot, than from around the edges (chest, shoulder, or head) – basic physics.

## Connection

There are three types of connection in dancing: with your partner, with the floor, and with the music. The connection with the floor occurs when your center is well over your supporting leg/foot and your knees are bent, the 'down & dirty' feeling described above. The connection with the music is different for each person and is developed over time with increased exposure to the music. The connection with your partner is achieved via a variety of actions and reactions. He does something that indicates (action) to the woman for her to do something (reaction). A connection allows both people to be sensitive and play off each others movement.

The hold described above allows for an easier 'connection' between the couple. When the man needs to lead (indicate) the woman forward (pull) she feels the resistance in her fingers. When the man wants to lead the woman back (push) she feels the resistance on her palm.

Elbows also play an important roll in the connection principle. Keep your elbows close to your side and very slightly in front of your body. This allows for greater freedom of space between the man & the woman for figure execution & styling, while still retaining 'connection'. Visualize that a broomstick is attached to the back of your elbows in front of your body that will not allow your elbows to slip behind your body line.

Slight pressure/resistance should be maintained at all times to keep the connection active. Unless you go for verbally telling your partner what to do, 'SPIN!'. A person's first impulse to gain the needed arm tension is to tighten the biceps and triceps muscles; these are the muscles that are used to bend and straighten the elbow. Instead, try to lightly tighten the Lattisimus Dorsi muscles, the muscle that lifts and lowers the arm, and the Upper Pectoral muscles, muscles that move the arms/shoulders forward and backward, while keeping the rest of the arm, forearm, and hand relaxed, pliable, and responsive (toned). The connection does not need to always be in the hands, it can be on applied to other body parts as the choreography or mood moves you.

Try to avoid the notorious:

1. 'Spaghetti arms' also called 'jelly arms' - no bones or resistance, floppy
2. 'Rigamortus arms' - too stiff
3. 'Bird wings' - flapping the arms randomly for no apparent reason
4. 'Pumping' - moving your arms and down, changing the distance from the floor of your arms/hands in time with the music when not using them for leading

Good connection feels more like a spring or a rubber band, expanding or contracting when needed and then snapping back into the starting arm & body pose position. Maintain an equal amount of pressure against each other during all parts of the figures. This allows for increased sensitivity to one another, making it easier for the man to guide the woman, and the woman to feel where & what he is doing.



The stretching, spring or rubber band like movement allows for greater energy for spins and adds to the sensuality of the rhythm. WCS is a dance of the man trying to make a pass at a woman, but the woman is resisting his advances by moving back and forth in the slot between each close encounter.

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*Next Month WCS figure Discussion and Syncopations*