

## **The Whisk**

**By Jim and Barbara German**

We were asked how to execute the Whisk so that it does not look so open? Sounds like a simple question that should have a simple answer. Well, maybe the answer is not so simple. Let's look at some history and see what we can find.

When I was first introduced to the Whisk, during my preteen years, the concept for the figure's development came from a "mistake" when dancing the Arthur Murray box step. For the man the box step was forward, side, close; back, side, close. The concept was for the man to start the forward step then take a smaller right foot side step with his upper body continuing to move to the right. This was the "mistake". The man should have taken a stronger side keeping his weight more centered. But, since his weight was moving further to the right than his foot placement, he was out of balance and moved his left foot in back of his right foot to regain his balance (i.e. crossed left foot behind right foot). This action did two things: first, the man moved slightly backwards to cross his foot behind instead of side to close. Second, he turned his body left face. The lady was unable to cross her third step in front (in response to the man's slight backward action) since she was in closed dance position and not prepared to step forward outside of the man on his right side. However, she had to take a step since the man was still moving to his right. By crossing her right foot behind her left, she was going to be moving away from the man and would lose her closed position. So, the lady crossed her right foot behind her left and turned her body right face to create a better looking dance line with her partner. As the figure developed, the man, if commencing the Whisk from facing wall, would turn slightly toward DW because of the crossing of his foot on step three and the lady could turn up to facing LOD when she completed crossing her foot on step three. The man's left face turning action was checked and the lady's right face turning action was allowed to develop and she could turn up to LOD. A nice looking line for us little kids in the 1940's.

The world competition in 1959 saw International Latin dancers take the top spots. Walter Laird's International Latin style dancing became the textbook for winning Latin competitions. Also, Alex Moore's textbook on Ballroom Dancing received greater attention since the British held both top spots. Some ten years later, in the late 1960's, I was first exposed to International Ballroom instruction and dancing. What a difference! The Whisk, the same figure I had learned earlier, when approached from a different viewpoint felt like a different figure. For example, when the man stepped forward with his left foot, he actually moved his body forward by pushing from his right foot. This action provided the forward body momentum for the swinging action of step two. When applied to the first half of the box step, it was not possible to take step two to the side. The momentum created on step one forced step two to end side and slightly forward. In the 40's I did not have the strong momentum on step one and could take the side step on beat two. With momentum, while I may be thinking side step, my foot will actually end side and slightly forward. Also, with momentum, my footwork on step one was heel to toe and step two was toe of right foot. This is actually a "better" position to cross my left foot behind my right foot. Since I am up on the balls of both feet, I can easily move my left foot slightly behind my right foot and keep my body poised to the left. My weight was split; I retained more weight on the ball of my right foot and partial weight of the ball of my left foot. At the end of the measure, I lowered onto the whole of the left foot and released the right foot for the start of the next figure. In following the man's action, the lady will take step one right foot back with toe to heel footwork. Then as she feels the up position of the man and his sideways movement, she will rise to the toe of her right foot and complete step two back and slightly side on the toe of her left foot. The lady is now in an up position on the balls of both feet. Step three will have the lady's right foot move slightly back and then behind her left foot. To assist with the lady's lead and to prevent the lady from moving away from the man, the man can apply light pressure with this right hand on the lady's back causing her to turn right face as she crosses left foot behind right. The lady's turn can be up to LOD. The man's turn is minimal since he has kept his left poise and did not move his left foot back to cross further than behind his right foot. The ending position is very much the same as it was in the 40's with the exception of a very definite up look to the figure. It took several lessons before I could feel the development of body movement instead of foot movement to create a figure.

So, how do you answer the question? Do you want to think of the Whisk as a figure resulting from a "mistake" in the box step or do you want to think of the Whisk as figure resulting from momentum? In

either case, the man's left face movement is very little. He does not want to open up. He should keep his alignment toward the lady. The lady's right face movement is greater than the man's movement because her crossing has a feeling of moving away from the man body. And to keep the good body alignment with the man, the lady can rotate more and create a very nice looking dance line. The lady can embellish and create some added interest to the Whisk dance line by taking her head movement slightly more to her left than her body movement. This can really be an eye catcher if the lady delays her head just a little as she begins her body movement on the following step.

From Barbara's position, anytime we can embellish and create some interest in a dance figure we will try it and see if we like it. We then decide if we want to incorporate the action.

As an interesting aside to this article, Arthur Murray, who is considered a founder of American Style dance, received his dance training from Irene Castle in Long Island, New York. Irene Castle was a highly trained and talented British dancer who came to the US to teach. (Remember her trademark figure - the Castle Walk.) Mr. Murray was able to simplify his training from Irene Castle and bring many more people into the movement by developing foot pattern diagrams. His success in developing and teaching his foot pattern approach is well known to countless number of dancers.

Today, a half century later, a strong emphasis in dance is again given to identifying the body action and movement that will result in the proper placement of the foot when executing a figure. In one sense, dance has completed a "circle". Dance has moved from the body actions of Irene Castle to the foot patterns of Arthur Murray back to the body movement of today's top leaders. Both methodologies are important. To start a new dancer with body movement first is difficult. But, staying with foot patterns only forgets the exciting dynamic of the body action and movement in creating a dance figure.