



WEST COAST SWING

by Harold & Meredith Sears

Last month, we looked at some of the characteristic features of Jive. West Coast Swing is probably the next most popular of the swing-related rhythms. West Coast Swing evolved out of the early Lindy Hop in the 1930s. It tamed the wild Lindy moves and constrained the dancing to make it compatible with the popular and crowded dance floors of the time.

WEST COAST VS. JIVE—

Where Lindy was decidedly athletic, and Jive is active and busy even today, keeping us up on the balls of our feet, West Coast Swing is more stylish and sophisticated. Many steps are simple walking, with heel leads. It is a good bit slower, with tempos of 25-35 measures per minute, more easy-going, sometimes even lazy. The dancing is relaxed and smooth. It is an evocative dance—you have time to embellish the figures with whatever foot and body styling you might be moved to add. Jive is hot and full of a bouncy energy. West Coast is smooth and cool with a sort of elastic energy.

Jive is up and light. West Coast is down and more grounded. In West Coast, your upper bodies are upright, but your legs often extend forward, in front of you on a diagonal, forming a “V” with those of your partner. His weight is back a bit as he urges her toward him. Her weight is back a bit as she resists. You can think of this as the “water skiing look.” Both of you are down and into the floor, not skipping along above the floor.

We’ve noted that Swing, Jive, and Lindy are circular dances in which the man and woman travel around each other. West Coast Swing is a slot dance in which the woman dances up and down as though on a diving board, sometimes making 1/2 turns at the ends and other times moving back and forth facing the same direction. The man leads the woman forward. He steps out of her way, dances around her in various patterns, and then gets back into the slot again. Or he leads her forward, blocks her progress, and sends her back again.

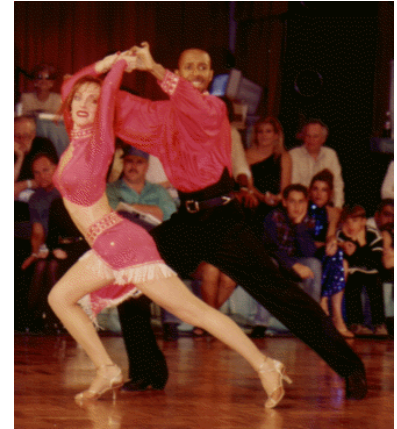
West Coast may be “slow...even lazy,” but it is not at all loose or sloppy. It is quite controlled. The woman begins to move only when led to do so by the man. Then she continues to move within her



slot—down her track—until she is stopped or turned by the man. Meanwhile, the man is carefully getting out of her way and then returning to the slot. All this implies quite a bit of control. Jive seems less controlled—wilder. The terms *Jive* and *Jitterbug* raise images of abandon, even flailing about, that we don't see in West Coast.

LEAD AND FOLLOW—

The woman's first step in West Coast is usually forward. In Jive, many figures start with a rock apart—the man rocks back, and he leads the woman to rock back as well. In essence, she is "mirroring" his step. If he stood before a mirror and stepped back, his image would step back, too. In West Coast, the woman doesn't often mirror the man. Instead, she truly "follows" him. He steps back and he draws her forward and toward him.



Keep your joined hands low. The woman's forearm should be horizontal, and your upper arms should be parallel to your torsos and tucked in. Your lead and follow will be sharper and clearer if the upper arm is more connected to the upper body and the force through the lower arm is directed toward the body's center. If your arms are flopping around, the lead will be delayed and less clear. If your hands are high, his lead will go toward her shoulder, and only her shoulder will move. If you have very different heights, you might choose to hold your forearms in line with each other and therefore at an angle to the floor, rather than to have the taller person's forearm angled and the shorter person's forearm horizontal. Again, the goal is to have a strong look, a strong connection, and a clear line of communication.

In leading, it is important not to rely on the hand and arm only. If the man wants to lead her forward, he must not pull her to him with his arm. Instead, both he and she must maintain toned arms. He steps back, not pulling, but drawing her toward him with his whole body. He "takes her with him." This is a much nicer image than one involving pulling, tugging, or jerking.

The tone in your arms must be firm but not stiff. Think about what happens when a train starts to move. The engine begins to roll. A bit later, the coupling with the next car grabs, and car #2 starts with a jerk. Then the next coupling grabs, and car #3 lurches forward. This is what stiffness does. We want an elastic tone, so that the man can draw the woman forward smoothly and *not* with a jerk.

A diesel engine at the head of a train—you might get an image of a very strong lead and an easy, passive follow. On the contrary, the man should not overdo his lead. Once you get her moving, let her dance the figure, moving down her slot. Try not to disturb her again until you must stop her or turn her within the slot. And following cannot be passive, because the man's and woman's steps are often so different from each other. More than in many rhythms, she needs to know the figures. She can't necessarily look at where the man is or at what he is doing and then adjust to match. Think of the Left Side Pass. His first step is back and her first step is forward. So far, so good, but then he steps side and back out of the slot, and her second step is again forward. There is no clear relationship between those two "second" steps. She has to know to stay in her slot (and not to follow him out of it).



SHAPING AND CONTRA POSITION—

We have the man leading the woman back and forth within a relatively confined slot. One way to make this relationship softer and less confrontational is to use contra body position and shaping toward your partner.

For instance, think of the Sugar Push. Men, you could step back and then back, drawing your partner directly toward you. This square and face-to-face orientation is somewhat blocky and blunt. We don't want that. We want to be more playful, flirtatious, coy. So instead, step back on the first step but then only slightly back and under the body on the second step. This will produce a right-face body rotation. If you were facing line at the start of the figure, you will take your tap step (third beat) facing line and wall. The woman might tap R behind L facing reverse and center. You can extend your lead foot a little, toe on the floor. You are turned a little away from your partner, but you are looking at her and sort of gesturing toward her with your lead foot. If you do the Sugar Push oriented squarely, it's a little like pushing against a stone wall. In an angled and shaped position, it is somehow more teasing and easy-going. If you are square to your partner, your body is constrained and limited. At an angle, you have more freedom to add hip movements and other styling. On the fourth count, the man steps forward, and you can square up somewhat with your anchor or coaster. You've had your playful moment, and now it is time to try something else.

LADIES, OWN YOUR SLOT

In West Coast Swing, the woman has the important responsibility to make her slot her own. Ladies, don't let your man turn you from your slot. He has set you moving. Now, one of only two things should happen. Either he stays in the slot and sends you back the way you came—think of the Sugar Push. Or he steps out of the slot and lets you pass—think of the Left Side Pass or Underarm Turn. If he does step aside, take advantage of that opportunity to escape and drive on past him. Your man and this rhythm have you caged and confined. If you see a chance to escape, take it—drive down the slot. It won't last long. He will stop you, turn you, and lead another figure, but dance your slot as far as you can.

In other rhythms, the dance frame rules the partnership—above all else, maintain the frame and the connection between partners. If the man dances the woman off the line of dance, she follows—she maintains the frame. In West Coast, the slot rules. Above all else, she dances her slot. So, ladies, don't be deflected from your slot. If he only steps partially out of your way, don't move to the side and dance around him. Dance right through him—knock him down if you have to. Well, don't really knock him over, but the woman dances around her partner in Jive, not in West Coast. (Of course there are exceptions—the Left Circle Pass is one—but it is a good rule most of the time.)

The slot is not very wide—only as wide as the woman's shoulders. So when we say that the man “gets out of her way,” we really don't want him to go very far. At a minimum, he needs to step just beyond

her shoulders and then turn a little to get his shoulders out of her way, and we do want him to do the minimum. Even though you are doing different things—she is dancing her slot, and he is dancing around her—you want to dance together. Stay as close as you can. Be aware of each other. Remain attached.

Good attachment helps you to make use of a visual lead, as well as the manual lead. On a Left Side Pass, she steps forward because you drew her toward you. As you step out of her way, she continues forward, because you haven't given any additional lead and she is dancing her slot. Then she begins to turn into her French Cross (side R/XLIF of R, back R). There can be two good reasons for this turn. First, she has "run out of arm" and your lead-arm connection is turning her. This is the manual lead. Second, you are close to one another, and she wants to keep her body centered on yours. This is the visual lead. It can be a strong lead if you stay connected as a couple.



West Coast Swing is similar to Jive in many ways. The music swings. The figures make use of triple-steps. The dance *is* a variety of Swing. So it is easy to fall into the habit of dancing West Coast Swing as a Jive. But don't do it. Try to keep the West Coast characteristics in mind:

- slot, not circular
- walking, not rocking
- smooth and shaped to partner, not loose
 - controlled and elastic, not bouncy

FIGURE PATTERNS

West Coast Swing Dancing is an intricate dance, requiring a great deal of coordination, good timing, and intelligent application. It is an American dance, which is danced to American music. It originated in California and is danced in competition nationally and internationally.

One way to categorize the wide variety of figure patterns that we find in West Coast Swing is to think about what the man may do. He has three choices. He can lead the woman forward but stay in her slot and so not allow her to pass. This lead produces the Sugar figures (e.g., Sugar Push, Sugar Tuck & Spin). Second, he can lead her forward but step out of the slot and allow her to dance past. If he dances to his left, he creates Right Passing figures like the Underarm Turn and Whip Turn. If he dances to his right, he leads Left Passing figures like the Left Side Pass and Man's Underarm Turn.

Another way to organize all these figures is to look at how many beats of music each uses, and this is the more common approach. Of course, round dancers extend their figures in all sorts of ways, but at a basic level, we have two- four- six- and eight-count figures.

TWO-COUNT FIGURES—

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In only two beats, we can't create a lot of variety. We can take one slow step or walk in two quicks. We can step forward, back, or side. We can kick, flick, or hop. But there are three different two-count figures that are especially important in West Coast Swing, in that they are often found within longer figures. These are the Anchor, the Coaster, and the French Cross. All three of these are syncopated figures with a count of 1&2 or quick/&, quick.

Anchor Step—

The Anchor is a common ending step of many West Coast figures. For both the man and the woman, it is a small step back and under the body with the trail foot, replace, replace, with a timing of quick/&, quick. There are really no steps. The feet don't move, but there is weight change and hip movement forward and back. Keep the upper body still. There is a rocking-back-and-forth feel to it—back/forward, back.

Like a nautical anchor, this step stops your movement. It gives you a moment to stabilize your partnership and adjust your position in preparation for the next figure. It serves as characteristic punctuation at the end of one figure and prior to the beginning of the next figure.

Coaster Step—

The Coaster Step is an alternate ending step that you can use. For the man, it is like a little sailor shuffle with the trail foot: cross right behind left/side L, side R. For the woman, it is like a little back hitch: back L/close R, forward L. West Coast Swing is unusually flexible in allowing individual expression, but these Coaster Steps are not really preferred. For one thing, the Coaster Step can shift the man a little to his left and so disturb his relationship to the woman, firmly placed in her slot. Second, as the woman steps back/close, she is likely to stick her backside out in an inelegant sort of way. Third, if she steps forward on the last step of her Coaster, she will find herself moving forward at the beginning of the next figure, and she really shouldn't begin to move forward until she is led to do so by her man. Another way to look at this last point is to see that her Coaster causes one figure to flow smoothly into the next. Jive is a rhythm that properly flows in this way, but West Coast Swing is more grounded, more segmented, even a little deliberate—but in a good way, a sensual way.

We can at least be aware of these two different “looks”—the looser, flowing look given by the Coaster Step, and the more punctuated look given by the Anchor Step—and we can try each one.

Now, there is one place where you definitely do want a Coaster Step, and that is within a figure where you want to smoothly change your direction of movement. Think of a Whip Turn. We do want the first part of the figure to flow into the second part. So, the Whip Turn begins for the woman with a forward R, forward L and turn 1/2 to the right, and then a modified Coaster Step: back/close, forward and turn

1/2 again to the right. She maybe began the figure moving toward reverse line-of-dance, and the Coaster smoothly got her moving toward line again. In the second measure, she steps back L, back R, and then punctuates with an Anchor Step.

For the woman, we can even distinguish between a Back Coaster (bk/cl, fwd,) and a Forward Coaster (fwd/cl, bk,). It is a Forward Coaster that changes the woman's progression in the middle of a Tummy Whip.

Ending Variations—

There are few two-count steps that stand alone as standard figures—maybe one Side Break or a Cheerleader—but we have been focusing on small components within or at the end of longer figures. Chris & Terri Cantrell have written about different ways to vary or modify the ending of standard figures. Here are a few West Coast figure endings that they have suggested, along with the count that would be used for each.

- anchor or coaster described above—1/&, 2, (or 3/&, 4; in an 8-count figure)
- overturn the anchor (turn away from partner on first step and back toward partner at end of second beat)—1/&, 2&,
- kick to the 4 & step (kick trail foot forward/place trail ankle to lead knee—the "4"—, step side on the trail foot)—1/&, 2,
- point step point—1/&, 2,
- step point step point step—&1/&, 2&,
- cross cross step (cross in front like cross swivels)—1/&, 2,
- out out in in (side L/side R, recover L/recover R)—&/1, &/ 2,

These sorts of variations may be used to dress up many of the standard West Coast figures.

French Cross—

The third, heavily used two-count figure is the French Cross. Like the woman's Coaster, it is used within six-count, eight-count, and longer figures to produce a smooth change of direction. The woman steps forward R turning 1/4 to the left, crosses left in front of right continuing to turn another 1/4, and steps back. You can sharpen the movement a little more by putting more of the turn into the first step—step forward R turning 1/2 to the left, cross left in front of right with no further turn, and step back. Either way, this is a nice alternative any time the woman might otherwise do a run/run past her partner, and then step and turn 1/2 to the left on the third step.

The French Cross has an elegant feel to it, a little like a Viennese Turn. It helps you to maintain connection with your partner. Maybe the most important thing it does is to keep you absolutely straight in your slot. In the Left Side Pass or the Underarm Turn, during the first triple, if you step forward R/fwd L, and then fwd R and turn 1/2 left, you have just pivoted your body on that right leg and so shifted your body to the side by a full body width. If you were moving down line, that turn on beat 4 would have shifted you out of your slot and closer to the wall. Now, you will rightly say that we're talking about only a couple of floor boards, and it will be easy to adjust and get back in line. But look at what the French Cross does. You turn on beat 3. That turn has the same potential to shift your body

sideways, but on the “&” count, you cross the left in front of the right, and that crossing step shifts your body back to the slot again. The back step on count “4” is squarely in the slot. It’s magic.

As usual, we have wandered a bit. What we have been trying to say is that West Coast Swing is a controlled slot dance. The Anchor is a two-count figure that effectively brings closure to a sequence of steps (the larger figure of which it is a part), and there are a number of ways we can use turns, kicks, points, and crosses to embellish or dress up our endings. The Coaster and French Cross produce not so much an ending as a transition from one state to another. The Coaster changes our direction of movement, and the French Cross changes our facing direction, and they do it smoothly, gracefully, and “in the slot.”

FOUR-COUNT FIGURES—



Four-count figures can be danced “quick, quick, quick, quick;” or “slow, -, slow, -;” They can be syncopated —“quick/&, quick/&, quick/&, quick/&.” There are walks forward and back, side steps, side breaks, kicks, swivels, crosses, toes, heels, rocks, and hops. The tempo is pretty slow, so I don’t think you’ll hear a cue like, “run four,” but the Throwout is a syncopated standard figure (1&2, 3&4), and it certainly has the character of a “run.” In those two triples, move her from right to left and turn her 1/2. He steps side/close, side turning left-face and leading her to do a French Cross. End with anchor steps.

Another straightforward standard figure is Side Breaks. In a facing position, lead feet free, step side left (woman sd R) with a pushing action/side R, close L/close R, sd L/sd R, cl L/cl R; Often the hands go out with the feet and back to the body as the feet come in. It’s a little difficult to keep this figure from becoming a pair of “jumping jacks.” We try not to move up and down, but keep the upper body still.

These are also known as “Quick Side Breaks.” Slow Side Breaks are danced &/slow, -, &/slow, -; and you have probably heard cued “Side Breaks, two slows and four quicks” (two measures total).

A more challenging four-count standard figure is the Cheerleader, a syncopated combination of a crossing step, a side step, and a heel tap. Roundalab tells us to cross the left foot in front of the R/step side R, tap L heel to the left/side L, cross right in front of L/ side L, tap R heel to the right; You can do a Cheerleader in almost any position, with either foot, and with same or opposite footwork.

Another interpretation by choreographers is to think of a Cheerleader as four actions in 1/2 measure – cross in front/side, touch heel/side, (cross/side, heel/side). You might begin with the left foot and then repeat with the right, in which case the full measure would count out 1a2a3a4a; and you’d end with left foot free again. A third view uses 1/2 measure but begins with a side step. Step side left leaving right foot extended with heel on floor, recover R/XLIF of R, (or side/heel, side/cross).

Here's yet another Cheerleader we have seen that uses syncopated slow counts — s, &/s; &/s, &/s; Cross right in front of left, -, slight RF turn small side L/tap R heel, -; back R/XLIF of R, -, slight LF turn small side R/tap L heel, -; back L/XRIF of L, -, slight RF turn small side L/tap R heel, -; and so on.

As we suggested above, the Cheerleader seems to be any sort of syncopated combination of a crossing step, a side step, and a heel tap. In the interests of full disclosure, let me say that Meredith and I can walk a Cheerleader, but when the music plays, we have NEVER been able to dance one. But we're still hoping.

SIX-COUNT FIGURES—



Among the six-count figures in West Coast, we find all of the Swing patterns in various combinations—that is, Single-Swing, Double-Swing, and Triple-Swing. In Jive, Single-Swing timing is rock, recover, step, step (q,q,s,-; s,-), four steps over the six beats of music. In essence, each triple chassé in Triple-Jive is replaced with a single slow step. Double-Swing uses six actions over the six beats: rock, recover, press, step; press, step, (q,q,q,q; q,q, but only four weight changes). Finally, Triple-Swing is our familiar step two and two triples (1, 2, 3/&, 4; 1/&, 2,) or (eight-count) step two and a triple; step two and a triple (1, 2, 3/&, 4; 1, 2, 3/&, 4;). We do all of this in West Coast Swing and then superimpose a variety of turns and spins on top of it all.

Among the six-count figures, there are a few relatively firm rules.

- On count 1, the man will move away from the woman, and the woman will move toward the man.
- On count 4, the man moves toward, and the woman moves away.
- On counts 5 & 6, the man and woman both dance in place.

One common timing pattern in West Coast might be called "sugar timing," after the Sugar Push, a characteristic and common figure in the rhythm. Sugar timing is 1, 2, touch, step; 1/&, 2, — that is, four quicks and a triple (note the double and the triple timing in this one figure).

The Sugar Push starts in left open facing position, often facing line of dance. The man steps back L, drawing the woman forward R. He steps back R, touches L to R and pushes into her, perhaps patting trail hands and even bringing faces together. On the touch, she might hook her right behind her left and turn a bit right-face. You probably can't kiss (get a little sugar) at this point without risking facial damage, but the goal is to look coy and snuggly. Then recover on the lead foot for your Anchor or Coaster (discussed last month).

What you choose to dance on beats 3 and 4 of the Sugar Push (or of most other figures) is really optional. Roundalab and URDC will give us specific choreography, just so there is a clear answer to the

question, “How do you dance a Sugar Push?” But in the wider world, West Coast Swing invites a lot of very free variation. At the end of that first measure, you can do a “touch, step,” a triple, or anything in between. Focusing on beat 3, we can recognize a continuum, in terms of power, from weak to strong, from subtle to big. You can—

- touch
- tap
- press
- flick or kick (he might flick LIF of R; she might flick RIB of L)
- hesitate/touch or hesitate/flick (3/&)
- press/recover (producing a subtle triple with beat 4)
- step/recover or step/XIB (producing a true triple with beat 4), or even consider a
- kick/step/recover (producing a kick-triple with beat 4)

In general, if you are moving (as in an Underarm Turn) or if you feel the need to adjust your position, then you might choose to dance a triple. If you are still (as in the Sugar Push), the stronger options might seem to be too much, but again, it is up to you. If you are feeling flamboyant, West Coast Swing allows you to let loose.

EIGHT-COUNT FIGURES—



Just as we have a few basic rules for the six-count figures, so are there a few for the eight-count figures.

- On count 1, the man will move away from the woman, and the woman will move toward the man.
- On count 4, the man moves toward, and the woman moves toward; they step together.
- On count 6, the man moves toward, and the woman moves away.
- On counts 7 & 8, the man and woman both dance in place.

The fundamental or “signature” eight-count West Coast figure is the Whip Turn. There are many different whip turns, such as the Wrapped Whip, Tummy Whip, Whip Inside Turn, Whip Outside Turn... We’ve seen in the Passing figures that the woman dances about the same steps, and the man does different things to make the different figures. In the Whip figures, the man dances about the same steps, and the woman varies her steps to make the different figures.

In the Whip Turn, the man steps back with his left foot on count 1 and leads the woman forward. On count 2, he steps forward R and a bit to his left to get out of the slot. She steps forward on her left and turns to the right 1/2. On counts 3 & 4, he dances a triple forward and to the outside of the circle. He passes through the slot and gets himself out of the slot again, on the other side. This can be thought of as a “paddle” step. He is paddling around the woman. Remember, in West Coast, the woman dances up and down in her slot, and the man dances *around* her. While he is doing this, he uses his trail hand on

her back to stop her progression and so lead her Coaster, which she dances pretty much in place. She steps back right/close left, and forward right turning 1/2 right-face again. At this point, both are facing reverse-line-of-dance, the man a little to her left on the outside of the circle. In the second measure, he hooks his right behind his left, and she steps back left. He steps side and forward left, and she steps back right. The man's forward component here is important to move the woman away from the man and regain the loose, open-facing position that we'll need for the next figure. Finally, on counts 7 & 8, both do their triples in place, an anchor or a coaster, or whatever the music tells you to do.

By now, you have maybe heard too many times about the importance of the slot in West Coast Swing, but the slot is a big part of what makes it West Coast, and one way to respect the slot is for the woman to make sharp turns. In a Whip Turn, if she turns a little on beat 2 and finishes that half-turn over the course of beats 3 & 4, she will end up looking circular and "jivey." Instead, try making the whole 1/2 turn, nice and sharp, on the "&" of count 2. The man is going around you, but you are going around nothing. You are sharp and in your slot. You are facing RLOD on count 2 and facing LOD on the "&" of count 2. Similarly, make the next half-turn sharply on the "&" of count 4. You are dancing a Coaster. Step back R/ close L on count 3. On count 4, step forward R, and on 4& turn sharply 1/2 right-face. You are squarely "in your slot."