

UNLOCKING THE MYSTERIES OF WEST COAST SWING

by H. Leon Raper

Here we will try to give a nuts and bolts look at the physical and musical structure of West Coast Swing in hopes that it will clear up some mysteries of the dance. The description of the "Basic Structure of West Coast Swing" is included first in this presentation so the reader can see the simplicity of the structure. However, to understand the terms used in the description, one will have to read the section on "Some Basic Swing Dance Terms" before really understanding what follows.

BASIC STRUCTURE OF WEST COAST SWING

The basic structure of West Coast Swing, at the basic level, is composed of only two general types of Rhythm Patterns. First, is one which Rhythm Patterns are 6 beats in length (3 Rhythm Units). Second, is one in which the Rhythm Patterns are 8 beats in length (4 Rhythm Units). Notice that each of the Rhythm Patterns (6 or 8 beat types) are composed of only Even or Odd Rhythm Units. Also, at the basic level, prior to starting either pattern, the man's left foot is free and the woman's right foot is free. This means that the first step taken for either pattern will start with the left foot for the man and the right foot for the woman. This leaves the man's left foot free and the woman's right foot free after the final step of each pattern -- so the dancer is back with the same foot free (at the end of the pattern) as was free prior to starting the pattern.

6 Beat Rhythm Patterns are composed of 3 Rhythm Units in the following order. Remember each Rhythm Unit is 2 beats of music. EVEN ODD ODD

8 Beat Rhythm Patterns are composed of 4 Rhythm Units in the following order. Remember each Rhythm Unit is 2 beats of music. EVEN ODD EVEN ODD

Before going further, let's review the new dance terms we have encountered thus far which are Weight Change (Step), Rhythm Units (Even or Odd) Rhythm Patterns (6 or 8 beat) and Verbal Calls. Let's also remember that Rhythm Patterns are made up by connecting Rhythm Units in a series, and that each Rhythm Unit will be either Even or Odd. Even Rhythm Units leave the Same Foot Free. Odd Rhythm Units leave the Opposite Foot Free. At a basic level, all Rhythm Patterns and Step Patterns are Even. That is, they leave the Same Foot Free.

SOME BASIC SWING DANCE TERMS

Weight Change (Step) is a transfer of weight from one foot to the other--commonly called a step, but may just be a weight shift from one foot to the other with both feet on the floor.

Rhythm Unit is composed of 2 beats of music and will indicate an "Even" or "Odd" number of weight changes.

Even Rhythm Unit will indicate an "Even" number of weight changes (0, 2, 4, etc.) -- zero (no weight change) is "Even." Even Rhythm Units leave the "same foot free." Any Even Rhythm Unit can conceptually be exchanged with any other type of Even Rhythm Unit.

Odd Rhythm Unit will indicate an "Odd" number of weight changes (1,3,5, etc.). Odd Rhythm Units leave the "opposite foot free." Any Odd Rhythm Unit can conceptually be exchanged with any other type of Odd Rhythm Unit.

Rhythm Pattern is composed of 2 or more Rhythm Units. Rhythm Units are connected together in a series to form Rhythm Patterns. All Rhythm Patterns, at the basic level, will leave the "same foot free" at the end of the Rhythm Pattern. That is, all Rhythm Patterns, at the basic level, are Even (think about it).

Step Pattern is a Rhythm Pattern which also includes Direction. All Step Patterns, at the basic level, will leave the "same foot free" at the end of the pattern. That is, all step patterns, at the basic level, are even (think about it).

Same Foot Free or Opposite Foot Free

Even Rhythm Units leave the Same Foot Free. That is, there are zero or an even number of weight changes (steps). Odd Rhythm Units leave the Opposite Foot Free. That is, there are an odd number of weight changes (steps). This can be a little confusing unless one knows exactly where the process starts and ends. To analyze this problem we must know which foot was free "before" and "after" executing any weight changes (steps) associated with the Rhythm Unit. First, think about a Rhythm Unit and which foot that is free before executing any weight change (step) indicated in that Rhythm Unit. Second, execute the weight changes (steps) indicated in the Rhythm Unit. Third, see which foot is free at the end of the Rhythm Unit. If the same foot is free that was free prior to executing the Rhythm Unit, then Rhythm Unit is even. If the opposite foot is free than the one that was free prior to executing the Rhythm Unit, then the Rhythm Unit is Odd.

Verbal Calls relative to Beats of Music

To understand the material discussed in this article, we must first define the current standard for verbalizing the weight changes (steps) relative to the beats of music. The most current teaching technique for verbal calls for 6 beat patterns are 1,2 3&4 5&6, and for 8 beat patterns are 1,2 3&4 5, 6 7&8. Each number is directly related to a beat of music. Another current teaching technique for verbal calls for 6 beat patterns is step, twice step, three, times step, three, times; and for 8 beat patterns is step, twice step, three, times step, twice step, three, times. These verbal calls are recognized throughout the world as being the most modern teaching techniques and are used by all of the top dance instructors on the international workshop/seminar teaching circuit. (Editor's Note: Oh, oh, that's debatable. Best you read the editorial on page 5.)

There are a few older (Editor's Note: Older is oftimes wiser) teaching techniques that we rarely see any more, but I will describe them briefly just in case the reader runs into them. One of the older style verbal calls for 6 beat patterns are 1&2 3&4 5,6 -- which adheres to a real beat count but does not start at the beginning of the pattern, which in this case would be 5, 6. Another of the older style verbal calls for six beat patterns which are 1, 2 1, 2, 3 1, 2, 3 or maybe 1, 2, 3 1, 2, 3 1, 2 -- which count steps, but which has no direct correlation to the beats of music.

TYPES OF EVEN AND ODD RHYTHM UNITS

"More terms, you gotta be kidding." Yeah, more terms -- ain't this a hoot? Now that you know the two basic forms of Rhythm Patterns, let's look at the different types of Odd and Even Rhythm Units. Remember, each Rhythm Unit is 2 beats of music. At the basic level, one only has to think about 3 different types of

Rhythm Units. That is, one type of Even Rhythm Unit and two types of Odd Rhythm Units. They are the Double Rhythm Unit (Even), Triple Rhythm Unit (Odd) and Delayed-Single Rhythm Unit (Odd). Two other types of Rhythm Units (Blank & Single) are defined, but won't be used in further discussions in this article.

Blank Rhythm Unit (Even) is a Unit in which there are no weight changes (steps) within the 2 beat Rhythm Unit. That is, there is a hold or something else done for 2 beats of music, but there are no weight changes. The count would be 1,2 or 3,4, etc! This Blank Rhythm Unit is defined here for future use, but is not used in further discussions in this article. This leaves the Same Foot Free.

Double Rhythm Unit (Even) is a Unit in which there are two weight changes (steps) within the 2 beat Rhythm Unit with the weight changes occurring on each beat. An example could be step, step. The count could be 1,2 or 3,4, etc. This leaves the Same Foot Free.

Single Rhythm Unit (Odd) is a Unit in which there is one weight change (step) only on the first beat of the 2 beat Rhythm Unit. An example could be step, hold - where one steps on the first beat and holds on the second beat. The count would be 1,2 or 3,4, etc. This Single Rhythm Unit is defined here for future use, but is not used in further discussions in this article. This leaves the Opposite Foot Free.

Delayed-Single Rhythm Unit (Odd) is a Unit in which there is one weight change (step) only on the second beat of the 2 beat Rhythm Unit. An example could be tap,step or a kick, step -- where one would tap or kick on the first beat and step on the second beat. The count would be 1,2 or 3,4, etc. This will leave the Opposite Foot Free.

Triple Rhythm Unit (odd) is a Unit in which there are three weight changes (steps) within the 2 beat Rhythm Unit with the weight changes occurring on each beat and on the "&" count between the beats. An example could be step, three, times. The count could be 1&2 or 3&4, etc. This will leave the Opposite Foot Free. Please note, the previously described Rhythm Units can be applied to all forms of dance, not just West Coast Swing. There is also a more detailed form of the Rhythm Unit that will be discussed later.

HOW DOES IT ALL FIT TOGETHER?

"Are we there yet?" Yeah, we are there! It all fits together very easily and the following indicates choices (in parenthesis) that are currently in use by West Coast Swing dancers all over the world. There can be a lot of fun doing a whole lot of dancing if one never uses Rhythm Patterns any more complicated than those indicated.

6 Beat Rhythm Patterns are composed of 3 Rhythm Units in the following order. Note that the complete Rhythm Pattern leaves the Same Foot Free.

EVEN	ODD	ODD
(Double)	(Triple)	(Triple)

8 Beat Rhythm Patterns are composed of 4 Rhythm Units in the following order. Note that the complete Rhythm Pattern leaves the same Foot Free.

EVEN	ODD	EVEN	ODD
(Double)	(Triple)	(Double)	(Triple)
(Double)	(Delayed-Single)	(Double)	(Triple)

IS ALL THIS NECESSARY? I JUST WANT TO DANCE!

It is only necessary if you want to learn how to dance West Coast Swing as quickly and correctly as possible. You can ignore what we have discussed thus far, but it will take you ten times as long to learn the dance. Or, when you finally do learn some West Coast Swing,

you may wonder why it takes you so long to learn more complicated Step Patterns -- and you never seem to get them quite right. West Coast Swing is an "educated dance." You have probably heard some ladies say "if the guy is a good leader, I can follow anything." I hate to burst anyone's bubble but that just "aint going to happen" with West Coast Swing. Dancers will have to receive some kind of instruction from somewhere. You may run into someone that says "I didn't need any instruction; I learned it on my own." Don't believe it! They may not have taken formal classes, but I can assure you someone showed them at least some basics.

HOW COMPLICATED CAN IT GET?

You are probably asking yourself "isn't this complicated enough? Does it really get more complicated than this?" Before telling you how complicated the dance can get, I would like to tell you what you can do if you do not learn any more than the basic nuts & bolts covered here applied to the Step Patterns you will be taught by a good dance instructor. You will be able to dance a great variety of swing, including many very complicated Step Patterns. In fact, most West Coast Swing dancers never go much beyond what we discussed here with the exception of maybe adding a few simple syncopated Rhythm Units and extensions to their Rhythm Patterns. Regarding how complicated the dance can get, it can get extremely complicated with advanced forms of syncopations, pauses, hesitations, styling and routines achieved only by advanced competition dancers.

Advanced competition dancers think not just in terms of 6 or 8 beat patterns. They also use extensions to those patterns and also think in terms of the more complete form of the Rhythm Unit which is &,a,1 &,a,2 or &,a,3 &,a,4, etc. Using this more complete definition of the Rhythm Unit, we are now able to give a good definition of a Syncopation. A Syncopation is performed by stepping before the Beat (on the "&" or the "a" count) and stepping again or doing something else (tap, kick, hold, etc.) on the actual Beat of the Music. Please note, a Triple Rhythm Unit is not a Syncopation.

DO I REALLY WANT TO DANCE WC SWING?

You will have to make the decision yourself. Just be aware that it is a social activity that will last you the rest of your life. It won't wear out like a car or TV. You will enter an atmosphere where you can meet new people and make new friends. Anyone who dances West Coast Swing will tell you it is the most exciting and fun of any of the social dances. Just observe closely when you see someone dancing West Coast Swing and note how much fun they are having and how exciting the dance looks. Also realize they were not born knowing how to dance. Just like everyone else, they had to put in the effort required to learn the dance. Most don't mind the learning process since the journey to becoming a good dancer will be an exciting one. That is, if you receive good instruction. Remember, it is much easier to learn something right the first time than try to correct mistakes. Therefore, I recommend you locate the best dance instructor you can find. From what you have learned from our discussion here, you should be able to tell if they are familiar with the latest teaching techniques. Also, forget the statement "practice makes perfect." Replace that with "perfect practice makes perfect." Well, it is time for me to close my big mouth and leave you with one final thought. I hope you become infected with the disease called West Coast Swing. It is incurable, but is the most fun disease I ever had. I hope they never find a cure.

Editor's Note: The previous opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the JITTERBUG publisher, nor many of the publisher's colleagues and other "top" dance instructors in the field.