

Mastering the Timing Pattern for Social Foxtrot and Single Swing

By Kaye West and Larry Caves

Social dance instruction often begins with the Social Foxtrot rhythm which has the characteristic timing pattern Slow, Slow; Quick, Quick (SSQQ), so this is the first rhythm pattern to master. In this rhythm there are **four changes of weight** in each pattern or figure (one change of weight for *each word* in the “formula”). The Single Swing rhythm uses the same timing pattern.

One way to think of Slows and Quicks is to compare them to syllables: A Slow shows one word (one weight change taking two counts) which is like one word with two syllables; A Quick shows one word (one weight change taking one count) which is like one word with one syllable. A sentence with this pattern might be:

So-cial Fox-trot is fun (Four words, six syllables/underlines).

Since a Slow takes two counts and a Quick takes one, each pattern in Social Foxtrot and Single Swing requires **six counts**. One could therefore count *one through six* repeatedly, completing the same pattern each time or substituting another SSQQ pattern for each set of six counts.

This means that since these rhythms are danced to music with the most common timing pattern (four counts to a measure, known as 4/4 timing), each pattern requires a measure and a half, though social dancers need not be concerned with measures, since it makes no difference where in the music they begin patterns. Notice that, using basic math, two successive patterns of six counts equals twelve counts, which is equivalent to three measures of four counts each.

Sequence of “In-Between” Steps

Mastering this rhythm pattern is the first goal in dancing. A sequence for doing so, for those who have not had a lot of experience with rhythm, is listed below. Practice each step until it becomes second nature:

- **Step 1:** Count out loud one through six repeatedly (there should be the same interval of time between “six” and “one” as between the other numerals): “1-2-3-4-5-6-1-2-3-4-5-6-1-2-3-4-5-6, etc.” Use a moderate pace (not too fast, not too slow).

The pace with which one counts is known in music as the *tempo*. Also practice the tempo with a faster tempo (123456123456123456, etc.) and a slower tempo (1---2---3---4---5---6---1---2---3---4---5---6---1---2---3---4---5---6, etc.). Notice that the difference is the equivalent or regular amount of time *between the counts* in any tempo.

- **Step 2:** Count out loud one through six repeatedly as before *while clapping on each count* (the claps should occur simultaneously with the words). Do this with the three different tempos.

Notice that the *hands move* during the interval, and the hands clap at a **checkpoint** as the counts are named. The claps on *each count* represent Quicks.

- **Step 3:** Count aloud one through six repetitively, but clap *only* while chanting “one,” “three,” “five,” and “six.” This is the Slow, Slow, Quick, Quick (SSQQ) pattern. In other words, say all six words but

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do not clap on counts two and four because each Slow requires two counts (counts one and two constitute one Slow; counts three and four constitute the second Slow; counts five and six represent two Quicks). (Some may find it helpful to say counts two and four more softly.) Do this with the three different tempos.

Notice that on (after) a Quick the hands are *apart* in the interval *half-way between counts* and on a Slow the hands are apart on counts two and four, or *half-way through the Slow*.

- **Step 4:** Count as before, and on counts “one, three, five, six” simultaneously *march in place* each time one of the target four words is spoken (and clap if desired). This reinforces the idea that one changes weight at each of these four times. Notice that weight is taken on one foot on counts 1 and 5, and with the opposite foot on counts 3 and 6. Do this with three different tempos.

Note that the knee on the leg that is marching moves forward in space as it is elevated (even though the body is not moving forward) *half way during the interval from the last change of weight*. Even before the count of one the knee must be elevated, but it is not until the *sound* of the word (and/or clap) that the foot hits the floor. The *sound*, therefore, as an identifiable entity, indicates the beginning of a count of music.

- **Step 5:** Count (and clap if desired) as before and *walk forward* as each of the four target words is spoken. Do this with three different tempos.

Notice that the knee moves forward as the heel peels off the floor and it moves forward more as the legs straighten and the body moves forward to take a step. The heel should hit the floor as the target words are spoken.

Also notice that there is a split second (when weight is on the forward heel and the back toe) and at that point the *hip* associated with the moving leg has advanced, leaving the opposite hip back. (Some ladies may have been taught to minimize this hip movement so as to be less provocative as they walk, but it is more natural for the hips to move, and dancers should allow that natural movement.) Note that the hips change from being aligned with one vertical plane (at an angle with the direction of movement) while the shoulders are aligned with a different vertical plane (perpendicular with the direction of movement) during a walking step. The pivot point for the top and bottom part of the body to rotate in opposition to each other creates what is called “contra body” which means against the body. One may feel some torsion at the waist as this occurs.

- **Step 6:** Clap and walk as before, but instead of counting, substitute saying “Slow, Slow, Quick, Quick” as each of the four steps are taken. In round dancing, a forward step with a Slow count is sometimes called a Walk; and a forward step with a Quick count is sometimes called a Run. So, you could say alternate words such as “Walk, Walk, Run, Run.” Do this with three different tempos.

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Adjusting to Tempo and Music

The next step is listening to music and applying the SSQQ pattern. Consult the info related to Social Foxtrot and Single Swing for music selections portraying this rhythm. Note that even with the same SSQQ pattern there are differences in the music which make the body want to move in different ways (slow and “dreamy” vs. quick and “bouncy”). Such differences in the music create different *characteristics* (or character) of dance rhythms, since dancers attempt to visually depict the music with their bodies.

Listen to those music selections and move to the music. When comfortable with the timing patterns, the next step is applying the SSQQ rhythm to the dance patterns (figures) associated with it.

Also, in listening to any music with 4/4 timing, practice using the SSQQ rhythm. With just this one rhythm pattern one can enjoy dancing (even one basic pattern repeatedly) in a social dancing situation. After many repetitions (a thousand, perhaps?) one may tire of one pattern, so several different patterns in each rhythm are provided here for each rhythm to provide some variety. In fact, on the dance floor a Lead may interchange Social Foxtrot and Single Swing patterns since they all require the same timing pattern.

And, when Followers become sensitive to body movements of Leaders, they may expand their repertoire to even different rhythm patterns such as SS by itself, QQQQ, SQQ, or QQS. Such variety is partnership play on the dance floor which contributes to the joy of dancing.

Applying Timing to the Basic Social Foxtrot Pattern

A basic Social Foxtrot pattern could be described as follows: Walk two steps then step to the side and bring the other foot next to that foot and take weight. This “Side, Together” or “Side, Close” is a component of all the basic Social Foxtrot patterns. This basic pattern can be shortened for simplicity in numerous ways with different words, but both the meaning and the timing would remain essentially the same, such as the examples below which are all synonyms for the same pattern. A dancer may say such words as “internal dialog” while taking steps in learning new patterns. That processing assists short-term memory. With sufficient repetition, the patterns “become automatic” or “are committed to muscle memory.” The body does this without conscious effort. It is the natural learning process of transferring information to long-term memory.

Notice in the descriptions below that a comma separates one count from the next, so that the hyphen [-] indicates that the Walk step takes two counts. A semi-colon is used to mark that four counts, or one full measure, have occurred. These are conventions for describing dance in written words.

- Walk, -, Walk, -; Side, Close,
- Walk, -, Walk, -; Side, Together,
- Walk 2; Side, Close,
- Walk 2; Side, Together,

And indicating the *direction* of movement one could think:

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- Forward, -, Forward, -; Side, Close,
- Forward 2; Side, Close,
- Forward, -, Forward, -; Side, Together,
- Forward 2; Side, Together,

And *changing direction of movement in the opposite direction*, the pattern could be described:

- Back, -, Back, -; Side, Close,
- Back 2; Side, Close,
- Back, -, Back, -; Side, Together,
- Back 2; Side, Together,

Since this pattern has an *even number of steps*, starting the next pattern begins with the *same foot each time*. Also, since there is an even number of walking steps, the “Side” moves to the left if the Walks started with the left foot, and the “Side” moves to the right if the Walks started with the right foot.

Additionally, in this pattern, since changes of weight occur on counts 1, 3, 5, and 6, each time one has the count of “1” and “5” the same foot is used, and each time one has the count of “3” and “6” the opposite foot is used.

Internal Dialogue for Using This Pattern in Social Foxtrot

Because different people learn in different ways or have different “triggers” to help them remember a new pattern, some people might *count numbers*, some might *name the component*, some might *specify which foot is moving*, some might *name the timing* as Slows and Quicks. Note that adding a second syllable on a “slow” helps account for the second count which has no change of weight.

Therefore, sample chants of internal dialogue some might use to help them master timing for Social Foxtrot:

Count	1	2	3	4	5	6
Say to Yourself	One	(Two)	Three	(Four)	Five	Six
	Slow	-	Slow	-	Quick	Quick
	Slow	(step)	Slow	(step)	Quick	Quick
	“Sah”	(low)	“Sah”	(low)	Quick	Quick
	Left	(then)	Right	(then)	Left	Right
	Walk	-	Walk	-	Side	Close
Any of the other synonyms above for the same pattern, or whatever helps recall it!						

Do you recognize “Sah”-low as a drawn-out way to say Slow? Note that each count where *weight is taken* is written in bold type (counts 1, 3, 5, and 6) and the two counts (2 and 4) with *no weight changes* are written in plain text and in parentheses as reminders that no weight is taken on those counts.

This timing pattern applies to all of the initial Social Foxtrot patterns included here. Adjust internal dialog (for example, to reflect the components of each new pattern/figure) to master it.

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Applying Timing to the Basic Single Swing Pattern

Since Single Swing uses the same rhythm pattern (SSQQ), some of the above chants can also be used for patterns (figures) in this rhythm, though there would be some different words to describe how the feet move to describe Single Swing patterns/figures. Notice which are different in the chart below.

The basic pattern in Single Swing is that with a two-hand-hold position facing partner. Dancers step to one side on a Slow count then step to the other side on another Slow count. On the second part of each Slow (counts two and four) they lift their free foot by bending the knee of that leg. Then they step back on a Quick count, and then replace their weight back on the previous foot on another Quick count.

The component of “Back, Replace” in Single Swing replaces the component “Side, Together” in Social Foxtrot. In Single Swing patterns the Quick, Quick is done by stepping back while leaving the other foot approximately in place and then replacing or recovering weight back on the foot that had been left in place (still two changes of weight). When dancers are facing each other, the “back” step moves *away* from the partner and, when facing the same direction, the “back” step is truly *back* for both.

Count	1	2	3	4	5	6
Say to Yourself	One	(Two)	Three	(Four)	Five	Six
	Slow	-	Slow	-	Quick	Quick
	Slow	(step)	Slow	(step)	Quick	Quick
	“Sah”	(low)	“Sah”	(low)	Quick	Quick
	Left	(then)	Right	(then)	Left	Right
	Side	(lift)	Side	(lift)	Back	Replace
	Side	-	Side	-	Apart	Recover
Any of the other synonyms for the same pattern, or whatever helps recall it!						

This timing pattern applies to all of the initial Single Swing patterns included here. Adjust internal dialog (for example, to reflect the components of each new pattern/figure) to master it.

Other Helpful Ideas About Timing

Both the regularity in counting as well as the fact that the first count in many measures sounds a bit more pronounced allows listeners to identify that first count of a measure which is called the *downbeat*. In round dancing most patterns begin on the downbeat, but since social dancing is freestyle with each pair doing something different, it doesn't matter on which count patterns begin.

This SSQQ pattern of taking weight is used in these two rhythms. As dancers progress to other patterns, weight may be taken on the second count of a Slow instead of the first as it is here. And, how one's body is positioned in taking weight can also vary. These are some of the differences one learns in time with different rhythms and accounts for ways the *same foot patterns* are used to portray the *character of different dance rhythms*. The character of the dance rhythms, in turn, is dependent upon the various styles of *music* which elicit different *feelings* and therefore promote differences in how dancers move. Part of the joy in dancing comes with being able to respond to that music!

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When first learning to dance, Leads often use the same timing pattern throughout the entire piece of music. With experience, Follows are able to read and respond to the Lead's body movement, so Leads can incorporate different rhythm patterns to the 4/4 music (SS; QQQQ; SQQ; QQS). These patterns are heard in 4/4 music, since musicians use notes with a variety of counts (Slows and Quicks, which are heard as “beats”) in composing the tunes. Thus, the more dancers practice and listen to music, the more versatile they can be in their dancing.