Does It Make a Difference How You Walk?

By Kaye West

Most of us have been walking for decades, but likely haven't thought about how we do it. As toddlers we watched others walk and experimented by trial and error thousands of times, and with encouragement (and likely pointing toes out or in for a broader base) finally we were literally "up and running."

Some of us were fortunate to have someone correct our foot placement so that our toes pointed straight ahead so that our feet were aligned correctly with our knees to protect them from injury.

Refining how dancers walk improves the smoothness of their movement, facilitates depiction of the character of various rhythms, and even increases the ability to lead a partner well when combining that knowledge with the added information about timing.

Remembering How Time Is Counted

Especially those of us who are "55 or better" have experienced telling time via a circular clockface with twelve demarcations with "12" at the top which can differentiate the twelve hours in half a day. Those who grew up with digital clocks may not have had the same experience. When we first learned to tell time, we had to recognize that the hour *begins* when the longer *minute hand* points to the 12 and the shorter *hour hand* points to a particular number, such as "1." We call that *instant* one o'clock.

We also know that an hour can be divided into sixty minutes, each minute can be divided into sixty seconds, and with quartz crystal technology scientists are able to divide each *second* into 32,768 parts! In other words, when the clock "strikes one" that is the *beginning* of the time interval being measured. A chime (sound) is instantaneous, but there is additional *time* between that split second and the next time interval, such as the next hour.

An hour can be divided into four equal time periods, and each has names: such as **1:00** (or whatever hour), **1:15** (or "*a quarter past"* the hour or "*fifteen past"*), **1:30** (or "*half past"* the hour), and **1:45** (or "*three-quarters past*" the hour, "*a quarter till 2:00",* or "*fifteen till 2:00*"). Again, each *named moment* indicates the *beginning* of a time period, and there is more time until the beginning of the next quarter hour.

How Music Is Counted

Musical *timing* is counted similarly. In a musical score (written music providing a standard reference) the notes are organized into *units of time* called *measures*. One measure is separated from the next by a vertical line, called a "*bar*." The top number of a musical *signature* identifies how many parts the measure is divided into. Most dance music divides measures into four equal parts; Waltz music divides into three parts.

While the *tempo* or speed of dance music can vary, regardless of whether there are four or three parts in a measure, each of those parts is called a *count.* (We *count time*!) Each count can be divided equally into two or four parts. While counts can be further subdivided and other time signatures could be used, they are less common in dance music.

When one count is divided in *half*, the midpoint is called "and" and is often written "&." Then each of those halves have midpoints named "e" (pronounced "EE") in the first half and "a" (pronounced "UH") in the second. Thus, just as items can be counted by ones, fives, tens, etc., musical time can be counted by whole counts, half-counts, and quarter-counts. In the chart below one can read across repeatedly, for example, counting 1-2-3-4; 1-2-3-4; for whole counts in music with four counts to a measure or 1-2-3; 1-2-3; for Waltz music. Reading repeatedly across other lines reveals counting by half- or quarter-counts.

Note that a whole count starts at the *beginning* of a segment and there is *space* (time) following it which exists whether or not it is named. Movement occurs in the *spaces* between named counts.

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Counting a 4-Count Measure (Most Dance Music)																
Counting a 3-Count Measure (Waltz)																
	Count 1				Count 2				Count 3				Count 4			
By Whole Counts	1				2				3				4			
By Half-Counts	1		&		2		&		3		&		4		&	
By Quarter Counts	1	e	&	a	2	e	&	a	3	e	&	a	4	e	&	a

How Walking Interfaces with Counts of Music

Whether clapping hands, marching, or dancing, the *sound of the beat* is the instant which reaches everyone's ears simultaneously, and it indicates when the action or step ***begins*** *so that the* ***sound*** *and the* ***body action*** *match.* In order to synchronize movement with the music, dancers must realize that the checkpoint is when *the foot hits the floor*, though *how* the body is positioned can vary in different rhythms. In round dancing, the starting point for a figure is on count *one* of a measure, a stronger beat called the "*downbeat*."

That means that the legs and feet must move *prior to count one* in order to ***arrive*** at the designated place on time. Getting anywhere on time requires that one must predict how long it will take to get there, begin sufficiently ahead of the appointed time, and move at an appropriate speed in order to arrive right on time. In dancing that involves getting a sense for the *tempo* of the music, which is why dancers allow a short portion of music to go by prior to beginning to dance.

Timing is the most important concept for dancers to implement in dancing. When partners have different understandings of when the foot hits the floor, it becomes extremely difficult for the **Follower** since she gets conflicting signals from the music and her partner. When the signals don't match it can feel to her like scratching fingernails against a blackboard! *Someone* in a partnership should be attentive to the music to help them both dance to the same conductor (the music). Often the **Lead** has many other things to think about, so often the **Follower** assumes this responsibility.

Also, initially dancers have many things to consider and master as they are learning to dance. Therefore, walking how they normally do is perfectly acceptable. If and when they choose to *refine* their dancing, the following information is helpful. Just as learning to walk as a toddler required trial and error plus practice, learning to refine one's walking in dancing requires experimentation and practice. When choosing to learn, begin with the walking style for Social Foxtrot and consciously implement it, slowly and independently initially. If practiced sufficiently it will begin to feel normal on the dance floor! There are additional refinements to learn to use this walking style in steps beyond the first step in figures in the Waltz, Foxtrot, and Quickstep which are not addressed here.

If and when desired, refine walking in Cha Cha and Rumba. Again, practice repeatedly and independently thousands of times. There are many moving parts of the body, and the style of walking in these rhythms is different in several important ways from the more "normal" walking described for Social Foxtrot.

Walking in Social Foxtrot

Walking is done like regular walking with feet moving on two parallel tracks and toes pointed straight ahead (the direction of travel). Because the *heel* hits the floor first, and body weight moves forward over the *whole foot*, and ends above the *toe*, it is said that one "*rolls through the foot*." In the chart below, notice that Slow and Quick Walks are the same except the Slow takes twice as long. Accomplished dancers use similar walking steps whether the pace is slow or fast which gives steps a smooth, gliding appearance. The legs simply must move much more quickly for the *Quick* steps in the Slow – Slow – Quick – Quick (SSQQ) rhythm. Also note that just one complete cycle of a walk is shown. The process repeats with opposite sides of the body

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during a second walk. Legs and feet move during the *previous count* to arrive on time at a whole count! Note that the third picture below depicts an instant *just prior* to the whole count.

	First Walk (with Left Foot)	**A Quarter Through a Walk**	**Half-way Through a Walk**	**3-Quarters Through a Walk**	***Nearly* Second Walk (with Right Foot)**
Social Foxtrot Walks		***Both*** legs change position as right foot moves forward		***Both*** legs change position as right foot moves forward	
	Weight split w/half on forward left heel and half on back right toe	Left knee bends first then right knee bends forward to match it	Knees bent & right foot is next to left; full weight on left foot	Lower right leg extends forward with foot positioned to accept weight	Left knee straightens last to push foot against floor, moving body to split weight position with both legs straight
Quick	**Count One**	**e**	**&**	**a**	**Count Two**
Slow	**Count One**	**&**	**Count Two**	**&**	**Count Three**

Walking in Cha Cha and Rumba

Pictures below, starting with the right foot, show a dancer arriving on a full count with a straight leg. A bent leg is acceptable (it then straightens immediately). The process repeats with opposite sides of body during second walk. Toes pointed outward are a ***RESULT*** of walking on *one track* and keeping the trailing foot on the floor. Dancers ***NEITHER place toes out NOR walk on two tracks!***

	First Walk (with Right Foot)	**A Quarter Through a Walk**	**Half-way Through a Walk**	**3-Quarters Through a Walk**	**A Second Walk (with Left Foot)**
Walks in Cha Cha & Rumba		***Left*** leg, hip, and foot move forward		***Left*** leg, hip, and foot move forward	
	Right leg forward with toe pointed straight ahead and most body weight above it; left toe on floor making foot swivel (toe points left) & left hip back	Right hip moves forward first & rotates clockwise so left leg & foot can move forward (toe grazing floor)	Body weight above right leg, hips neutral, left foot next to right, and left knee bent	As left toe points straight ahead to land in front of right foot, left hip rotates forward (clockwise)	Most body weight arrives above left leg and right toe remains on floor making foot swivel (toe points right) and right hip remains back
Quick	**Count One**	**e**	**&**	**a**	**Count Two**