

Lesson 12: Spotlight on Swing

By Kaye West

What Is Swing Dancing?

Swing is a broad category of dances which originated in the United States in response to the innovations of jazz music around the beginning of the twentieth century. Going beyond music such as the Foxtrot rhythm which uses four counts per measure (or “bar”) of music with a quarter note depicting one count, musicians began substituting two notes for various quarter notes, each half the length, to create eighth notes. With notes occurring more quickly, different dance steps were needed for this faster tempo.

One of the early forms of Swing dance was the Charleston. Go to YouTube and search for the Swingsationals dancing to “Sing Sing Sing” (Swinging at the Rennes) to see the variety of figures those seven gals used to physically depict the music. Tap dancing was another early influence of Swing dance.

Other music which suggests the faster tempo includes “Beat Me Daddy (Eight to the Bar)” and the “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” who, according to lyrics, played reveille “eight to the bar” each morning to awaken soldiers in World War II. Both of these tunes are available on YouTube.

Such music was being danced in Vaudeville acts and in some early movies, such as “Hellzapoppin” (See “Lindy Hop – Hellzapoppin – 1941” on YouTube). This form of swing, with acrobatic aerial lifts, was first named in 1927 in response to a newspaper reporter seeing it at a dance club and asking the name. The dancer, according to legend, recalled the newspaper headline depicting Lindberg’s famous flight across the Atlantic and called it the “Lindy Hop.”

Because of the catchy music which makes one want to “get up and dance,” attendees at these early venues attempted to recall what they saw so they could replicate the moves in their own clubs. Consequently, numerous versions of the dance emerged in different parts of the country. Buddy Schwiimmer, the “King of Swing,” claimed there were at least a dozen different Swing dance forms including (and likely not limited to) Charleston, Lindy Hop (Lindy), East Coast Swing (Triple Swing), Balboa, Collegiate Shag, Carolina Shag, Boogie Woogie, Jitterbug, West Coast Swing, Rock and Roll, Single Swing, Hustle, and Jive.

Jive is the version standardized by British ballroom instructors influenced by American GI’s in World War II, who interpreted figures in alignment with their notions of what created effective dancing. Jive is included as one of the five “Latin” dances in the International style of ballroom dance. East Coast Swing is included as one of the five “Rhythm” dances in the American style of ballroom dancing. Besides these two kinds of competitions, which often include additional rhythms such as West Coast Swing, there are various Swing Dance festivals and competitions which focus on different forms of Swing dancing such as Lindy Hop or Jitterbug.

Round Dancing, which is totally *noncompetitive*, originally called the entire category “Jive” which could include figures from any Swing style in a choreographed routine. More recently [Roundalab](#), the round dance teachers’ association, appropriated West Coast Swing and Single Swing as separate dance forms.

What Instruction Is Available?

Swing dance is taught in group classes and private lessons at dance studios, at venues featuring country dancing, and as part of round dance instruction (Find a round dance instructor at [Roundalab.org](#) > [Find a Class](#)) – this is the “Class Short List”; specific contact information is available under “Details” for that instructor). Most people like person-to-person instruction which includes interacting with others in the community with similar interests!

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There is also a great deal of information available online where readers can learn in the privacy of their own home. For example, lessons on this site begin with patterns in Single Swing (See Lessons #4 and #13) and also include information about Triple Swing (Lessons #13 and #14).

Additionally, there is information about Swing (Jive) dance in a book called ***Fancy Figures: Phase III Latins***, page 125-150. This book is available *free of charge* to download to all members of the [International choreographed Ballroom Dance Association](#). Dues are a modest \$15.00 per person per year as of this writing. From the member home page under the heading “How to Dance: Beginning Manuals,” this as well as other books are available which contain *footprints* for many of the basic figures. Years ago, dance legend Arthur Murray sold pamphlets with footprints via mail and many people learned to dance from them.

These books were written years ago when I was teaching round dancing and my students insisted that I put some of the information in writing so they could review the information between class sessions. It is often helpful to have written information to review what has been taught in a group class.

Roundalab also sells subscriptions to their manuals which contain information about how to do many unique figures in Jive (56 figures), Single Swing (16 figures), and West Coast Swing (34 figures). Freely available are the *names of the figures*, listed by Phase (progressive difficulty level), under the [Round Dance Rhythms Chart](#) at <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/rhythms.html>. Select the desired rhythm, and on the linked page select the link for the *figures and sources for how to do them*.

Also on the internet are many videos with information about how to dance. It is possible for anyone desiring to post a video of how they teach a specific figure to do so. Therefore, many different versions of how to dance various figures can be found. For members and subscribers, [Roundalab](#) provides videos for the figures as performed in Round Dancing. Also, Paul and Jean Zimmer have created a freely-accessible website at [Choreographed/Cued Ballroom Dance](#) which includes [a video library \(“Practice It”\)](#). This site includes hundreds of round dances being danced *and cued just ahead of when to dance the figures*. At the bottom of the spreadsheet is a list of various rhythms to proceed to a spreadsheet of dances only in that specific rhythm. Clicking on the name of the routine takes viewers to YouTube to view the dance. The “CS” at the extreme right on the spreadsheet links to a cue sheet, which is a written description of how to dance the routine. [Guidelines to write/read cue sheets](#) is readily available to anyone.

Start Dancing Triple Swing Immediately!

First learn the two *components* (a **Chassé** and a **Rock step**) which are combined in multiple ways in Triple Swing.

The first component, the **Chassé**, has three changes of weight. It involves stepping *two steps in one direction*, so the in-between-step takes weight just long enough to be able to change weight again. Most folks have seen that action when a marcher “shuffles” on one foot so that his steps match other marchers. The direction of the Chassé can be to the Side, or Forward, or Back. In any case, the foot that begins is the same foot as the third step. The “shuffle” step, made with the opposite foot, is made very close to the first step but *does not pass it* so steps one and three also continue in the same relative *position* (i.e., if the first foot was forward, the second step is behind the first, and the third step is forward). Step one is made on count one; step three is made on count two. That means that the in-between-step is at the very end of the first count and occurs very quickly.

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Typically there are two **Chassés** in a row, so when *facing partner* (beginning with **Lead's** left and **Follow's** right) one steps [*moving to the **Lead's** left*] Side/Close, Side, [*moving to the **Lead's** right*] Side/Close, Side. "Close" means to take weight right next to the other foot. The two Chassés take four counts of music using words "one-a, two, three-a, four" or "sounds" similar to "Da-ta, dah, da-ta, dah" (underlined words indicate the four counts). There is a feeling of the body swinging to one side and then the other, hence the term Swing dance! These two Chassés can be repeated again and again (practice first with counts, then throughout a piece of music). This is the first pattern or figure which dancers should master.

One can vary the dance *position* from facing partner to "hip to hip" (which sometimes is called "closed position" and in other contexts is labeled "Promenade" position or "Semi-Closed Position") by the **Lead** turning slightly left-face and placing his right hand on the **Follow's** back *after taking weight on count four*. In response, the **Follow** turns slightly right-face so both face approximately in the same direction and places her left hand on the **Lead's** upper arm. In this position, do a *Forward Chassé* and then a *Back Chassé*. The **Lead's** left foot and the **Follow's** right foot stay further advanced than their other foot throughout both Chassés. Timing is the same as when danced facing each other. With these two figures dancers can perform them alternately or as the **Lead** determines by remaining in the same position or changing positions to the opposite one.

The second component, the **Rock Step**, requires two additional counts (which can occur either before or after the two *chassés*) and involves a weight change on each new count. When in the hip-to-hip position, on the first count the **Lead** steps back with his left foot *and leaves his right foot in place* or lifts it slightly off the floor to make sure weight has transferred on the first count (the **Follow** steps back with her right foot *and leaves her left foot in place*). On the second count, they regain weight back on their other foot (this is called "replace" or "recover"). Note that two Chassés take four counts and the Rock-Recover takes two more counts, so this combination is the typical rhythm for many "six count" Swing figures.

To practice in hip-to-hip position the **Lead** can do a random number of Forward and Back Chassés and occasionally (surprising his partner when he chooses to do so) inserting a Rock-Recover. Each set of Chassés would be counted 1-a, 2, 3-a, 4 ("x" times). An inserted Rock-Recover adds counts "5, 6." Then begin another set of Chassés beginning the count 1-a, 2, 3-a, 4. Note that one could alternately begin counting with the Rock-Recover (1, 2) followed by two Chassés (3-a, 4, 5-a, 6). Whichever way one counts it, the important thing is that dancers have fun practicing the rhythm and leading or following. Try even to switch **Lead/Follow** roles for some additional variety and to develop empathy for the partner's role.

From the facing, or two-hand-hold, position, dancers can also add a **Rock, Recover**. Again, they each step **back**, so as they do, they Rock *Apart* from each other and then regain their weight on the other foot. The **Lead** keeps joined hands in place (in space) which, because all body parts are connected, sends a subtle message to the partner to likewise step apart. Once the third and fourth patterns have been practiced repeatedly, the **Lead** can intersperse all four randomly by altering their dance position as needed during the space between one pattern and the next to provide a great variety to begin Swing dancing:

- (In 2-hand hold position) Side Chassé, Side Chassé;
- (In 2-hand hold position) Rock (Apart)-Recover, Side Chassé, Side Chassé;
- (in hip-to-hip position) Forward Chassé, Back Chassé;
- (In hip-to hip position) Rock (Back)-Recover, Forward Chassé, Back Chassé.

Enjoy practicing! Keep your body active and mind learning by joining in the fun atmosphere of partnership dancing!