The Character of Foxtrot

By Kaye West and Larry Caves

Timing – the First Characteristic of a Rhythm

• Foxtrot is characterized by *combining Slow (S) steps (taking two counts) with Quick (Q) steps (taking one count)* using 4/4 music timing, which is the most common music for dancing.

• Two *basic* timing patterns define two different Foxtrot Rhythms: **Social Foxtrot** and the "ordinary" **Foxtrot** which evolved into American and International styles which Round Dancing uses interchangeably.

Social Foxtrot, often the first dance learned in a ballroom setting, has a timing pattern of *Slow, Slow, Quick, Quick* (SSQQ) which means that there are *four* changes of weight requiring *six* counts of music (and since the music has four counts to a measure, each figure takes one and a half measures).

Because the basic figure is a variation of ordinary walking and each has an even number of steps with most ending with Side-Close, every subsequent figure begins with the same foot (**Leads** with the left foot and **Follows** with the right), reducing the complexity of learning. Read, watch, and implement Lessons 1-3 and the tutorial on SSQQ timing on this website to master this basic rhythm to begin dancing (with just Lesson #1).

Foxtrot (*aka* Slow Foxtrot or Slowfox) is the Rhythm used in ballroom and Round Dancing which has a basic timing pattern of *Slow, Quick, Quick* (SQQ), meaning that there are *three* weight changes which are contained within one measure of music. Since there is an odd number of steps, each subsequent measure begins with the opposite foot. Many of the initial figures contain *two* measures (SQQ; SQQ;), such as the Box, so that the entire pattern has an even number of changes of weight.

While SQQ timing is the most common one-measure pattern, others include QQQQ, SS, and SQ&Q when including a chassé. Two-measure figures exhibit even a different order of Slows and Quicks such as SQQ;QQS; and SQQ;QQQQ;. Since round dance routines are choreographed to mimic notes in the music, many timing patterns, some even different from the above, are possible. *Listening to the music as well as the cues* helps dancers know when they should take weight.

The large variety of timing patterns and figures (see the standard list of Foxtrot figures used in Round Dancing on this website) plus the accompanying possibilities available because of other characteristics of this Rhythm make it a perennial favorite among dancers.

Other Characteristics

Foxtrot, as one of four Rhythms in the American Smooth category and one of five Rhythms in the Standard -- *aka Ballroom* or *Modern* -- category of the International Style, have much in common with each other as well as with Waltz and Quickstep (known as "flight/swing" dances). The predominant difference in these styles is that in International styling dancers must maintain a Closed Position hold (so Banjo, Sidecar, and Promenade or Semi-Closed Position are acceptable), whereas in American style dancers may separate from each other, include underarm turns, and use positions where dancers are side-by-side or face the same direction.

Also, in American style competitions at the Bronze (beginning) level, dancers use figures which end with their feet together (legs closed). At the next level (Silver) they use similar figures but end them with passing steps (their legs open). The other very obvious difference in style relates to the sponsoring organization. Those associated with the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance (ISTD) tend to have dancers appearing stately and tall (two-dimensional dancing) in contrast to those competing under the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF) banner where dancers use dramatic, graceful sways of their upper bodies

creating a very large topline with sweeping changes of their head positions and an appearance of "three-dimensional" dancing.

In Round Dancing, a variety of skill levels are evident and encouraged; dancers may choose the style they desire to emulate in their dancing circles. Their dancing is noncompetitive and stresses fun, comradery, and continual learning. Another difference in Round Dancing is that the Line of Dance has rounded corners whereas in both styles of competitive ballroom dancing the lines are straight on each side of the hall with right-angle corners. Also in Round Dancing, since all are dancing the same cued figures simultaneously, the line of progression can move in the reverse direction, whereas in competitive and social dancing couples have their unique choreography and they do not progress to Reverse Line of Dance.

Similar Characteristics in the Flight/Swing Rhythms (Foxtrot, Waltz, and Quickstep)

For additional detail about the following similar characteristics, see the document **Similar Characteristics in the Flight/Swing Rhythms** on this website at https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/standards/flight-swing-char.pdf .

• **Progressive Partnership Dance –** As couples, dancers move counterclockwise around the dance floor.

• **Walking** – In Closed Position steps are taken on two tracks and legs move similarly to normal walking.

• **Flight –** Dancers move with long, gliding strides to progress decisively in their direction of movement.

• **Swing** – As dancers move, their body rotates and slants slightly (has sway) creating the feeling of swinging from one figure to the next.

• **Lines** — Figures where dancers have minimal foot changes but their body continues to move so that they are momentarily in specific poses (they are not statues) often called "picture figures."

• **Heel Turns** – To remain in Closed Position while making a larger turn, the dancer on the inside of the turn uses a "heel turn" while the partner on the outside of the turn takes a normal-sized step.

• **Common Figures** – Many figures in these Rhythms are the same (See the chart "**Similar Figures in Standard/Smooth Rhythms"** on this website at https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/standards/standard-smooth-figures.pdf).

The Distinguishing Characteristics of Foxtrot

Besides the timing pattern, there is a lazy, unhurried appearance in the Foxtrot characterized by creating *maximum horizontal distance* with smooth, sustained strides. Slow steps are made in a manner similar to slow-motion running; the Quick steps are made as if reaching across a puddle of water and landing on the ball of the foot rather than the heel to gain maximum distance. Consequently, Foxtrot has "rise and fall action" but it is much more shallow than in Waltz or Quickstep.

After an extended series of Quicks, the last one may have a slight rise to reduce forward momentum in order to lower, then the heel touches the floor in preparation for the next Slow.

Especially American style Foxtrot can have alternating shoulder rolls, snapping fingers, and other playful embellishments.

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Foxtrot Origins

Vernon Castle (born William Vernon Blyth in England, 1887-1918) said he first saw the Foxtrot danced to slower ragtime music in a Black club around 1900. Very likely, since elites were still dancing the Minuet (a side-by-side partner dance with both beginning with the right foot with SSQQ timing where dancers made geometric paths on the floor and often with Blacks performing their music) it is plausible that someone might have decided to dance minuet patterns facing the partner (as they had been doing in the Waltz for years), so the **Lead** changed footwork. Early Foxtrot figures did make geometric paths on the floor such as the Castle Walk, lending more credence to the likelihood of this connection.

In the first years of the twentieth century in vaudeville halls White performers experimented with many different kinds of dance moves, with many of them imitating animal behavior such as the Grizzly Bear, Turkey Trot, Monkey Glide, Horse Trot, Crab Step, Possem Trot, Bullfrog Hop, Fish Walk, Snake Dip, Eagle Rock, Chicken Scratch, Kangaroo Kant, Wiggle Worm, Duck Waddle, Squirrel, and one Vernon and his wife Irene (born Irene Foote in the U.S., 1893-1969) first called the Bunny Hug but wired notification prior to its publication in the December 1914 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* to change the name to Foxtrot. That publication marks the first known time the Rhythm Foxtrot was named.

Nick Enge (instructor and historian of dance at the University of Texas at Austin) at https://www.libraryofdance.org/dances/foxtrot-through-the-ages/ lists descriptions of various early figures which could be classed as Foxtrot figures published during the early twentieth century including by the Castles and seven other authors from 1914 through 1922. The common characteristic in the figures was "backing the partner in a series of steps" with a varied number of Slows and Quicks. Some of the early dances had elements borrowed from the Polka, Tango, and Waltz with embellishments such as flicks, hops, slides, and turns.

During this time the Castles were extremely popular and influential dancers; Irene is also credited for setting the trend for bobbed hair and clothing more comfortable for dancing. They performed in Europe and toured across the United States from 1914-16 featuring music produced by James Reese Europe's "Society Orchestra." Europe (born in Alabama, 1880-1919) was recently named the "Martin Luther King of Music" as an African American ragtime musician and one of the first Blacks to achieve mainstream recognition.

Meanwhile, the vaudeville performer Harry Fox (born Arthur Carringford in California, 1882-1957) popularized the Foxtrot in his routines and is often cited as the originator of the Rhythm, but there is no known primary evidence to substantiate the claim. Also in vaudeville from 1905-1932 Fred Astaire (born Frederick Austerlitz in Nebraska, 1899-1987) was dancing with his sister Adele (1896-1981). Fred is credited with using dances "perfected by Vernon and Irene Castle."

From 1922 to 1959 Arthur Murray (born Moses Teichman in Austria-Hungary, 1895-1991), who had studied and taught at Vernon and Irene Castle's dance school, published his correspondence courses which included footprints for dancing the figures as well as other books. It wasn't until the 1930s that figures recognizable today were described in print (The Three Step, Feather Step, Natural Turn, Reverse Turn, Reverse Wave, Closed Telemark, and Change of Direction). His work, including codifying the "Magic Step" (Walk, Walk, Side-Close and many variations) of the Social Foxtrot, which also spawned the Single Swing Rhythm using the same timing, along with the establishment of a chain of dance studios bearing his name helped shape the American style of dancing.

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Cited as the greatest dancer of all time, Fred Astaire continued dancing through most of his life, making movies including nine with his most famous partner Ginger Rogers (born Virginia Katherine McMath in Missouri, 1911-1995) including *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* in 1939 (which is available on YouTube and on which Irene collaborated, even complaining that Ginger did not sport her bobbed hairdo or the style of clothes she wore, and they cast a Caucasian instead of a Black as their servant). In 1947 Astaire opened a chain of dance studios that bore his name, becoming the second major influence in American style dancing.

From 1924-47, the British ISTD commissioned a committee led by Josephine Bradley (born in Dublin as Josephine Mary Catherine Wellesley-Smith, 1893-1985), known as the "First Lady of the Ballroom," to codify several rhythms of dance and to create a syllabus for each rhythm. Their work was transported throughout the British Empire, or essentially around the world, forming the basis for the International Style of Ballroom dancing.

More recently, WDSF was selected as the authority for world competitions and eventually the World Olympics, so likely their renditions (which they state are their "current iterations" of how to dance the figures, implying that likely there will be continued evolution) will likely become the dominant standard.