



Jive and Swing

by Harold & Meredith Sears

A LITTLE HISTORY—

It's hard to nail down the beginnings of most social phenomena. They don't begin abruptly. Instead, they gradually emerge or develop out of earlier phenomena. But it is probably safe to suggest that the social upheaval of World War I and the musical revolution of jazz were major factors in the development of the swinging, jivey, jitterbuggy dancing of the early part of the twentieth century. In 1926, the Savoy Ballroom opened in Harlem, and swing dancing acquired all sorts of lifts, flips, throws, and slides. In 1927, Charles Lindbergh made his famous flight or "hop" across the Atlantic and so provided the perfect name for this acrobatic and aerial style of dance. One story is that it was named the Lindy Hop by a Harlem dancer named "Shorty George" Snowden. You can see some of these "aerials" in Steven Spielberg's 1979 movie, *1941*, and there is some of the real thing in Public Television's *History of Jazz*.

East Coast Swing, Jive, and Lindy are mostly triple rhythms. One figure pattern is 1, 2, 3/&, 4; 5/&, 6, over a measure and a half. You might rock and recover on the "1, 2" or walk two or "swivel, swivel." Then you might chassé, hitch, or "step/lock, step" through the two triples. Another common figure pattern is 1, 2, 3/&, 4; 1, 2, 3/&, 4; over two measures. This pattern is often called "whip timing" after the Whip Turn. You might rock, recover, chassé a triple; hook, unwind, and chassé a triple. Within these patterns and others, we turn, twirl, and spin in a variety of ways.

West Coast Swing came along a little later—it evolved out of Lindy in the 1930s. It is a slower, smoother rhythm. It is the official state dance of California, and it dances well to slow blues or beach music. Where East Coast, Jive, and Lindy are circular dances in which the man and woman travel around each other, West Coast is a slot dance in which the woman dances up and down within a 3 X 6 foot rectangle on the dance floor. The man might block her movement and send her back, or he might get out of her way, let her pass, and then get back in the slot. It works particularly well on a crowded dance floor. All of these rhythms are mostly non-progressive and so keep you in one spot on the floor.

A much more recent addition to the swing family is the Hustle, which had its roots in New York City in the early 1970s. It has been said that, in the '60s, the Twist all but destroyed ballroom dancing. No longer did the dancer need to learn steps or even have a partner. Then the Hustle came along and partner dancing was back. Dancers could touch. The Hustle was hugely popular. The word "hustle" makes this dance rhythm sound a lot faster and more frantic than it really is. The music is a pounding disco, but the tempo is slow—closer to West Coast Swing than to East Coast Swing or Jive. Hustle is light, smooth, and flat, a soft gliding back and forth in the slot, with the man moving gracefully out of the woman's way. There are a lot of changes of directions and turns and spins by both the woman and the man. She especially may get to feeling like a yo-yo, but a smooth and flowing yo-yo, not a jerky bouncy one. If you want to see what Hustle looks like, take a look at the movie, *Saturday Night Fever*.



LEAD & FOLLOW—

Leading and following in these swing rhythms comes much more through joined hands, rather than directly through the frame, as in the Smooth Rhythms. After all, you spend much less time in any kind of closed position and more time in an open facing position. However, a well-toned frame is still important. Keep your upper bodies relatively still, your shoulders

parallel and horizontal, your arms not stiff but firmly toned. In this way, your body movements will be transmitted down your arms and to your partner. The lead will come from your frame but indirectly through the arms and hands. So, if you want your partner to move toward you, don't bend your arm and pull on her. Instead, step back with a toned upper body and so draw her toward you. Keep your hand connection low. Her center of gravity is at hip level, so movement directed there will move her body most effectively. If you aim a lead at a shoulder, only her shoulders will respond, not the whole body. Don't raise your handhold unless you want her to turn under.

The characteristic swing handhold aids in this kind of lead and follow. The man holds his hand in front of his body with his palm toward himself, his thumb up, and his fingers pointing across his body (e.g., fingers of left hand pointing right). The woman holds her hand up so that her palm faces her partner. Her fingers are up and her thumb points across her body (e.g., her right thumb points to her left). She then curls her fingers over the ridge formed by his palm edge and forefinger, sort of like she's hanging onto a branch. As he steps back, his palm and fingers will pull on her fingers. As he steps forward, the back of his hand and fingers will push against her palm. His thumb will gently lie on the tops of her fingers and allow him to move her hand to the right or left. The lead flows from the leader's frame, through his arm and hand, into her hand, arm, and frame.

JIVE / SWING—

We may think more about Lindy, West Coast Swing, and Hustle at another time, but let's look at the more common rhythms now. In Round Dancing, we don't distinguish clearly between Swing and Jive. For the most part, we use International Jive figures, and we refer to the rhythm as "Jive," but we usually dance the figures to the slower Swing tempo (maybe 25– 35 measures per minute), rather than to the faster Jive tempo (35– 45 measures per minute). As we mentioned above, the dominant style is East Coast or triple swing. Many figures are written to span a measure and a half with a rock, recover, and two triples (1, 2, 3/&, 4; 1/&, 2, with the "&" taking 1/2 beat in Swing and more like 1/4 beat in Jive—more of an "a" than an "&"). The

Link Rock is a common example. Another group of figures spans two measures with a one, two, and a triple; one, two, and a second triple. The Lindy Catch is a good example of this kind of timing.



Within this rhythm, there are some interesting variations that are not common but are fun. Some of our Jives are written not as Triple Swing but as Single Swing. Here, each 6-count figure becomes, rock, recover, step, step (q,q,s,-; s,-), four steps over the six beats of music. In essence, each triple chasse is replaced with a single slow step. Less common is "Double Swing" with six steps or actions over the six beats: rock L, recover R, press or tap L, step L; press or tap R, step R, (q,q,q,q; q,q,) (of course, the woman begins with her right foot and mirrors or dances the "natural opposite"). Almost all of our round dances

are written as one rhythm, triple, double, or single, but it works perfectly well to use all three within one dance if the music tells you to do that. Once, we watched a dancer use some Double Swing in an otherwise normal Triple Jive. Moreover he replaced the "press" actions in the Double Swing with sharp, vertical kicks or points. He danced a rock, recover, kick, step; kick, step. More specifically, on beats 3 and 5, he raised the free knee, drawing that foot up along the supporting leg, and then kicked or stabbed straight down with a little recoil and even a slight bounce, all of that in just one beat (rock L, recover R, knee/stab L/recoil, step L; knee/stab R/recoil, step R). We haven't had the courage to actually try it, but it looked good. (We're referring to Tom Hicks and Betty Easterday dancing *Sugarfoot Stomp* at the Round A Rama Institute, August 2004, if you happen to have that video.)

Again, we tend not to draw a sharp distinction between Swing and Jive, but there are a few recognizable "Jive characteristics." If you are dancing a Jive to music that is faster than average, try these features to make it look more "jivey" rather than "swingy" and to get through the choreography without wearing yourself out quite as much.

1. The music is making you speed the dance up, so make your steps smaller. Where a Swing would chassé, side/close, side, a Jive should chassé, in place/step, side. Dance more under your body. Travel less. Be tidy, efficient.
2. Jive has more knee action than Swing has. Instead of dancing your triples 1/a, 2, 3/a, 4; insert another little "a" count in front of each chassé and in that moment, lift the free knee and point that foot straight down, parallel to the supporting leg. Your chassé becomes knee/step/step, side, or a/1/a, 2. You might get a little of the feel of peddling a bicycle—lift one knee and press with the other foot.
3. Jive has a slight but somewhat sharp vertical bounce that you don't see in Swing. The Jive bounce is in the knees, not in the feet or ankles, and definitely not in the upper body and arms. Don't thrash about. As you raise one knee, straighten the supporting knee a little. As you step, soften that knee. These actions/reactions become a springiness that translates into small hops or scoots on the side steps. You might think that a bounce would demand more work, but it actually comes out of a natural resonance that you would have to work to control if you didn't want it, so using the Jive bounce is actually less tiring.
4. Jive has jumps and kicks, as well as bounce and hops. Use your knee for the kicks, too. Raise the knee, stab with a pointed foot toward the floor out in front, on a diagonal, or off to the side, and then bring the leg back to a bent knee as if it were on a spring. You might count a/1, a/2,—knee/point, knee/close, or knee/kick, recoil/close.



5. Jive engages the hips and the rib cage more than Swing does. As you chassé to the left, stretch the left side just a little, and as you take that third step, shift your hips to the left and stretch the right side a little. The stretch is not so much that it creates real sway—it's more of a straightening of the leading

side and a little crunch to the trailing side. You'll feel something like a "step step side/hip/knee." Keep your shoulders and head still. Your frame should remain toned and steady, allowing your hips to shift within or under that frame.

6. The speed of Jive keeps you up on the balls of your feet and gives you a little more forward body poise. The authorities tell us that every step should be taken ball-flat, but the speed and the bounce don't really allow it, and it is primarily the first step of each chassé that is ball only. Dance "knee/ball/ball-flat, ball-flat, (a1a, 2,). You might think that the second "a" count is awfully short for a full "ball-flat" step, but if you just do a little scooting closing step, it can actually be ball-flat. All of this feels like a lot to remember. If you just think, put your heel down on every step except the first of each triple, then you only have to remember one thing.
7. During the "rock, recover" it looks nice and "jivey" to open the woman out a bit on the rock and then bring her back in on the recover. Maintain tone in the lead arms, and use just a little pressure out and in. Most of the lead in the Swing rhythms comes through the arms and hands.
8. Finally, the man leads the woman to open out, to rock, to swivel, but he does less of these actions than she does. For instance, during jive walks or swivel walks, she will open and close, swivel right and left. He will provide the firm foundation and the lead against which she will perform.

(These points were demonstrated by Bill & Carol Goss at the URDC Convention in 2001; again, you might have that video.)

