

THE EVOLUTION OF WEST COAST SWING Through the eyes of Skippy Blair© 6-3-2015

Let's start our journey with the first written record of teaching the Follower to "Walk Forward" instead of rocking back, when starting a new pattern . It was the early 1950's at Arthur Murray Studios. They were only teaching "**Eastern Swing**" at that time. Laure Haile, their Dance Director, was hired to codify the "Slot Swing" from California that would eventually become OUR "**West Coast Swing.**" I was teaching there myself in the early 1950's and **Western Swing** was the latest dance. (In Southern California, most of the top Swing dancers were either Arthur Murray teachers, former teachers, or those who danced socially with teachers). Hundreds of college students had gotten jobs with chain studios to teach while going to school. Personally, I was captivated by the creativity that was allowed for followers in this exciting dance. **Western Swing** became my specialty. I not only wanted to know everything about the dance, but actually wanted to change the way TEACHERS were being trained to teach this dance.

In those days, the basic step was "Step three times - Step three times - Rock step." The "Rock step" was on count "**5-6.**" That was ALSO the basic step for **Eastern** (now, **East Coast**) **Swing.** Unfortunately, that "count" required the lady to "**walk forward**" on count "**5-6.**" Changes were necessary in order to make this dance easier to teach. "**Skippy Blair Studios**" **opened in 1958, for the express purpose of training dance teachers in this new, slotted form of SWING!**

By 1958, we were teaching every pattern with a count of "1-2" as the Follower walked forward. It worked well, but would be **another 10 years** before most of the dance community started teaching this new count. **Today, starting on "1-2" is standard.** By 1963, **Golden State Dance Teachers Association** (GSDTA) had 35 teachers teaching West Coast Swing in colleges and recreation departments all over Southern California. Sunday afternoons, the S.B. Studio became an "open house" for many of the top Swing dancers in Southern California. They came to practice with each other, and exchange ideas.

In the early 1950's, Arthur Murray's was teaching a swivel action Triple Step called a "Coaster Step." When their Training Manual was updated, a critical, technical detail was omitted from the Coaster Step. It changed the action into a simple "Back-Together-Forward." This created a problem because new Followers would walk forward before the man had time to lead the pattern. That's when the "Anchor" was born. It has now become a standard of **West Coast Swing.**

In 1960, I was having lunch with Jim Bannister, editor of our local Downey Newspaper. He wanted me to renew my Ad for "Western Swing" Classes. I said "No way. The Ad did not get us one new student." We discussed the situation. He remarked that no one in Downey would be interested in "Cowboy" stuff." I explained that **Western** did not mean cowboys, but was simply referring to the **West Coast.** He responded, "**Then why don't you say that? The next Ad was for "West Coast Swing.** It worked!

In the 1960's, New terms like, "Starter Step" and "anchoring" became part of our language. The standard "Rhythm Pattern" became "Double-Triple-Triple" for all 6-Beat patterns. "Tap Steps" moved to the next level of learning. That practice endures today.

The 1960's also gave birth to the "Universal Unit System® - creating new terms for teaching: **Downbeats & Upbeats - Center point of Balance - Style variations - Dance Rhythms –**

Connection – Starter Step - Anchoring. Also at that time, these became key **Teaching Elements** in advancing the Science, as well as the Art of **West Coast Swing**. We also stopped teaching a “Tap Step” as a fundamental rhythm in West Coast Swing. It was easier to teach the Leaders and Followers the SAME Rhythms at the SAME time. The standard rhythm pattern became “Double - Triple - Triple” for all 6-beat patterns. “Tap steps” moved to the next level of learning. That practice continues today.

Into the 70’s, we became aware that formalized teachers training in the field of **West Coast Swing was of paramount importance**. Lindy and East Coast Swing (Jitterbug) had a natural rhythm that was easy to pick up, and with both partners rocking away from each other, they were easier to learn. **West Coast Swing** developed at a slower pace because it required specific training in order to understand the basics and all the elements required.

As we moved into the 1980’s, West Coast Swing was in “full swing” – (no pun intended). The **Golden State Dance Teachers Association** was sponsoring 15-week Teachers’ Training Series, which included 160 hours of Teachers Training in West Coast Swing. It was during this period that the textbook, “Disco to Tango and Back” was published. This included 13 patterns in West Coast Swing. (Long Beach State text book for past 10 years)

In 1984, the **United States Swing Dance Council** (USSDC) was founded, with Robert Bryant as President (deceased 2013). The USSDC provided a great forum for teachers. At each convention, teachers gathered to demonstrate and discuss their curriculums, in order to stay on the same page on what they were teaching. **Ultimately, the Council voted to adopt a fairly standard curriculum as the official standard for teaching West Coast Swing**. For nine years, I felt privileged to teach FREE “Teachers Sessions” at each National Swing convention.

In 1995 the current World Swing Dance Council made its debut. Annie Hirsch was named National Chairman and Skippy Blair, Secretary and Dance Education Coordinator. Other Board Members included Jim Tigges, Dani Canziani and Vic Damon.

On October 1, 1988, **West Coast Swing was designated by the California Legislature as the Official State Social Dance of California**. (Official document can be seen on the World Swing Dance Council (WSDC) website.)

Despite the numerous innovations which have occurred in the world of West Coast Swing, the underlying “essence” of the dance remains the same. Although styles change and patterns gain and lose favor, there are certain “constants.” For example, West Coast Swing is the only dance where the follower is encouraged to use her own musical interpretation, as long as she does not interfere with the leader’s dancing. Consequently, today’s West Coast Swing is truly a “50-50 dance.” Also, while the West Coast Swing slot has become elongated and broadened, it is still danced in one shared and controlled slot. Followers “walk forward” on count “1-2” at the start of each new pattern and end each fundamental pattern with an Anchor.

Through the years, certain dancers have captured our imagination as they infused **West Coast Swing** with their own particular style and personality. There were hundreds of fantastic dancers through the years that inspired us, entertained us, and made their mark in our world. (They’re all being included in the booklet, “The Dancing Stars Among Us.” In THIS article, I only mention a few who influenced major developments and the actual essence of West Coast Swing.

Throughout the **1980’s, Jack Carey and Annie Hirsch** were the epitome of West Coast Swing. Jack’s very smooth style and Basic Rhythms, coupled with Annie’s wide variety of syncopations,

actually captivated onlookers. Jack & Annie demonstrated variety and contrast within the framework of one partnership. Their exciting, individual musical interpretation was the envy of every dancer. An audience gathered wherever they danced. This blend of 2 styles became a major influence in the leader/follower relationship of Classic West Coast Swing.

In the **1990's Wayne and Sharlot Bott** were responsible for highlighting Contra-Body movement. Wayne's "Rim Whip" and Sharlot's "Cross Strut" were not only extremely innovative, but remain classic characteristics of the dance today.

In the era of 2000, probably the most innovative couple to influence change in West Coast Swing over the past decade is **Jordan Frisbee and Tatiana Mollmann**. Their claim to fame is their ability to incorporate unbelievable musical interpretation, without losing the flavor or the timing of the dance. Their teaching skills match their performance abilities and they have taught West Coast Swing, not only all over the United States, but all over the world.

1982 welcomed the first **US OPEN Swing Dance Championships at the Disneyland Hotel** in Anaheim, CA, hosted by Jack & Mary Ann Bridges. **Mary Ann Nunez, with partner, Lance Shermoen**, won the Showcase Division of that first US OPEN, and also won the 2nd year. Mary Ann has been an innovator of women's styling all through the years of the OPEN, and continued to compete in Jack & Jills (& frequently winning) until she retired from competition in 2014.

In 2009, the latest innovation being circulated world-wide, was "**West Coast 101.**" Competitions are being organized with coordinated curriculums. (This will be a first for West Coast Swing.) The WSDC has authorized 14 basic patterns that will be included as the foundation for "West Coast 101" competitions.

Needless to say, West Coast Swing is doing well all over the world in 2015. As happens from time to time, West Coast Swing at the present time is going through another "growing" phase. This happens periodically, as dancers incorporate OTHER dances – or other rhythms, that eventually work their way out.

The urgency of "West Coast 101" is to maintain a viable foundation that will keep the roots, the essence, and the integrity of classic West Coast Swing.

Respectfully submitted,
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