

Swing Dancing

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Street Swing

Also known as Bugg and 4-count Hustle

I am beginning with 4-count street swing because it's the easiest approach to swing dancing. The reason I start with street swing is that the timing is easy enough to let you concentrate on what's really important in swing: the swing moves, partnering, flexibility and creativity.

Once you are comfortable with dancing street swing, it's an easy next step to the more widely-known six-count swing, which is the same four steps done in a slow-slow-quick-quick timing. Then triple six-count swing completes the family.

Street swing is an American vernacular dance, meaning grass roots, from the people, instead of from professional dance masters. It's occasionally seen across the U.S. and Europe, although not as frequently as six-count swing. Today, Bugg is especially popular in Sweden.

The Footwork for Street Swing

Take two walking steps, either forward and back, or done in place, or traveling. Then finish with a "rock step" which is another two steps, first back, then forward, in place.

The timing for street swing is an even 1-2-3-4. Walk-walk-rock-step.

If you're doing the steps in place, the Lead's steps are:

- 1) Take a small step with the left foot to the left side.
- 2) Replace weight back on the right foot.
- 3) Take a small rock step straight back left.
- 4) Replace weight forward onto the right foot.

The Follow dances the mirror image to this, beginning with her right foot. In swing, the Lead always begins left foot; the Follow always begins right foot.

The rock step is a **small** step back, so that you don't step on anyone behind you. Most swing dancers step back on the ball of the foot, keeping the heel off the floor, to avoid stepping back on anyone.

Some people like to begin swing with the rock step. It's a valid alternative choice.

The swing figures are described on a separate doc.

Six-Count Swing

Often called East Coast Swing

Take the same four steps in a slow-slow-quick-quick timing.

- 1-2) Slow step on the Lead's left and Follow's right foot.
- 3-4) Slow step on the Lead's right and Follow's left foot.
- 5) Rock back.
- 6) Replace weight forward.

All of the four-count figures work in six-count timing.

Some dancers like to think of it as **three-part swing**. Part one is the beginning of a swing figure, taking one slow step. Part two finishes the swing move, taking the second slow step. Part three is the rock step, two quick steps in place.

Six-count swing often feels musically odd or wrong at first, because you're dancing a repeating six-count pattern against the eight counts of the music. Then it becomes more comfortable with practice.

It ideally takes about two seconds to go through a swing figure, which is the natural frequency of two human bodies tethered together with held hands. That works well for four-count swing danced at about 120 beats per minute. It takes the same two seconds when dancing six-count swing at about 90 bpm.

Triple-Step Swing

Triple Six-Count Swing, Triple East Coast Swing

When the music is slower, keep the same slow-slow-quick-quick (6-count) timing, but replace each slow step with a **Triple Step**.

- 1) Take a shorter side step on the same foot that you began with above.
- &) Close together taking weight.
- 2) Take a second short side step.
- 3) Take a short side step on your second foot.
- &) Close together taking weight.
- 4) Take a second short side step.
- 5) Rock back.
- 6) Replace weight forward.

Ideally each of the two side steps is half as long as the slow single step. Otherwise you'll travel too far, and end up too far away from your partner.

Don't expect triple step swing to have the same rebound "snap" as the first two kinds of swing. Instead, think of each swing move as a short journey. Slowly drift through each swing figure.

The other advantage of the triple step is that you can travel farther in three quick steps than you can in one slow step. This allows you to catch up with your partner when you need to, and it facilitates multiple turns as well.

Both single and triple versions are called "East Coast Swing" because they're both the same dance, simply with or without the triple step.

Doing triple steps is optional. If you choose to do slow single steps instead, you will keep up with your partner just fine, as long as it is in six counts, ending with the same rock step at the same time.

The Swing Bounce

Swing feels and looks better if you lightly bounce your body downward, as if dribbling a basketball. Lightly bounce downward on each of the six counts. If you're doing single six-count swing, each slow step has a double downward bounce.

Specifically, your weight drops down your back, into your haunches. It's not bobbing your head.

Swing is a happy bouncy dance. You just can't be in a bad mood when dancing swing.

The Morphed Step

Many American swing dancers do a step that is like a morph between a single and a triple step. It's like a lazy triple step, where you just barely take the second side step, morphed with a bouncy single step. It's not lazy—it's efficient. Why waste energy if you're going to be dancing all night?

In other words, swing is easygoing and nonchalant, so if you don't need to travel very far, you might as well take it easy and do a single step. Then when you have to move farther, the triple step is right there, ready to go.

And you don't need to match your partner's choice. As long as you keep the six-count timing, with a rock-step on every third phrase, it doesn't make much difference whether you do triple steps or slow single steps during the first two phrases.

Which Kind of Swing to Do?

One of these three choices of swing will work to **any** tempo of music. At some tempos, more than one style works.

Don't worry about choosing the wrong one. Just try one and see how well it works. If it seems too fast or too slow, pick another one. Your partner knows you're only beta testing your first choice.

Then beyond the tempo, your choice of swing style can be influenced by the music. Swingy big band music at 120 bpm indicates triple-step swing to most dancers. Techno or 4/4 pop music at the same tempo may indicate 4-count street swing.

Swing Stance and Style

Jump up in the air then land softly, staying in that landing stance. That's swing stance. Your knees are slightly flexed and your weight is slightly forward, on the balls of your feet. Common sense prevented you from landing on straight locked legs, heavily onto your heels. Instead, you cushioned your landing.

Dancing lightly on the balls of your feet, not back on your heels, is both more balanced and more agile. The flexed knees facilitate the bounce of swing, and also contribute to the look of swing.

To clarify, this is American-style swing, which is the original version. British-style swing ("Jive") tends to be much more vertical and prancy, with toes pointed downward. There is nothing wrong with British Jive. We're simply describing American-style swing in this book.

The other part of swing style is staying somewhat close to your partner when in swing-out position. When you face your partner holding on to a single hand, keep the hand fairly low, about waist level, with bent elbows. You want to avoid the full extension of arms because then you're literally at the end of your rope, resulting in an uncomfortable snap at the end of the line. Holding lower hands, with bent elbows, is like a bungee cord connection. There is more give if you need it.

Terminology

Swing dance terminology has never been standardized. Therefore different people use the terms in different ways, depending on local traditions.

The original name for swing, coined in 1928, was Lindy hop. Some people still use this term today for any kind of swing, while others reserve that name for an eight-count style of swing that developed the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem.

The term “swing” originally referred to the music, not the dance. But soon dancers were calling the dance “swing” and it stuck. The term “jitterbug” spun off from African American song lyrics, and soon became another nickname for swing dancing. Then “boogie-woogie” and “bop” joined the growing regional nicknames for swing dancing.

What is the difference between Lindy, swing and jitterbug? It depends on who you’re talking to. Some people hold a very firm definition about what one of these terms mean, while the next person has a different opinion. That’s what happens with vernacular dance traditions.

Some terms are held in more general agreement. Jive usually means British (International style) swing. West Coast Swing is also a specific kind of swing. Then when West Coast Swing developed, around 1980, someone decided that everything else must be “East Coast Swing.”

Swing dance terminology is messy, but we don’t mind. It’s a part of its charm.