

Musicality

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Musicality Introduction

West coast swing has a reputation for being an incredibly musical dance.

While other dances are danced to music, WCS provides the opportunity for both partners to *interpret* the music to a far greater degree than other dance styles.

This series will introduce you to the fundamentals of musicality!

If you don't have a background in music, this is a great place to start!

If you already know music theory, this series will help you work that knowledge into your dancing.

Like all skills, actively listening to music and musical interpretation require practice. If you don't already, start listening to music on a regular basis. Whether you listen while driving, exercising, doing the dishes, or working, make music a constant part of your life.

For now, feel free to listen to anything.

We'll identify specific elements of WCS music in the future, but for now the key is to get a lot of music running through your head.

How to Find the Beat in the Music?

Question: Should I count the music?

Answer: Always. *

No matter who you are, what your musical background is, or how skilled you are at feeling the music, counting always elevates your dance.

Dancers who move by feel only are unattached to their third partner, the music.

Counting gives a way for both partners to be simultaneously directed to the same thing.

Even if you are great at feeling the music, you will always be more precise if you are also focusing on the count.

How to hear the beat?

The first element to finding the beat is simply being able to hear the beat. For individuals without some past musical experience, this can be a tricky skill.

TAKE ACTION> [Watch our video on Counting the Music](#)

To learn this skill, put on a song with a very clear and consistent beat.

Good songs include:

- "[Goin' Down South](#)" by R.L. Burnside and
- "[Juke Joint](#)" by Johnnie Taylor.

Both of these songs have very solid beats without much distraction happening in the bass line.

As you listen, clap on the beat (which is the loud drum noise in these songs).

Keep practicing this skill until you can effortlessly clap along with the beat through the whole song!

How to practice counting while dancing.

With or without a partner, dance and focus on counting through the entire song.

Whether you count patterns, eights, or downbeats and upbeats is up to you: the key is to keep the count running through your head for the entire song.

This drill works great during social dancing as well as during solo or partnered practice, so give it a try the next time you head out social dancing.

If you struggle to dance and keep the count going at the same time, spend some time listening to WCS music and counting throughout the song.

As that becomes more comfortable, you can add in solo dancing WCS rhythms and finally WCS patterns.

If you are a dancer who moves by feel, this may take a while to become comfortable with counting and dancing. That's ok!

You are reprogramming the way you listen to music so that you can perform at a much higher level, and that's going to take some time.

Don't think you need to count?

Some people learn to dance without spending a lot of time counting music, and they tend to dance by feel.

If you are one of those people, you probably think that counting the music while you are dancing inhibits your ability to dance to the lyrics or the melody.

You're probably right.

But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't count. That means that you need to practice counting in order to be more comfortable thinking in musical terms.

Being able to count while you dance raises the ceiling on how precise your dancing can be; actually, counting in turn helps you tune in to the music at a higher level.

Is counting easy for you?

When you dance a part of the song lyrically, you need to be able to reattach to the beat once the lyric has finished.

If you are not rock solid at counting, there will be a slight jar as you catch the beat again.

By contrast, if your counting is rock solid, you can deviate from the beat and reattach seamlessly. So, if counting is easy for you....

Take your dancing to the next level...

Download this video > [The #1 Key to WCS Musicality](#)

A different way to 'count' music

There are some rare instances in which counting by numbers may impede your ability to feel something really awesome within the music.

In those instances, you may have more success if you "count" with sounds—making the mm-da-duh in your head as your "count."

You still want to do something to stay attached to the music, but it may not be numeric.

Be honest with yourself.

If counting numbers truly stops you from moving a specific way, that's one thing. But if you say that to yourself all the time, it might be that you need a stronger technical foundation in counting music and you're just covering up for it.

Great performers seek out weaknesses in their game and struggle to overcome them; mediocre performers hide (from) their weaknesses.

How to connect your steps to the music?

The essence of dancing is movement to music, so finding the beat in a song is extremely important.

Being able to move on the beat for any kind of dance requires skill, and this is particularly true for west coast swing because WCS music tends to feature breaks, syncopations, and other unique rhythms that make the beat less obvious.

The goal of this article is to develop the ability to find the beat and to keep moving on the beat even when thinking about other aspects of the dance.

Phase 1—Hearing the Beat:

The first element to finding the beat is simply being able to hear the beat. In the section above we covered how to hear the beat. I'll repeat it again in case you missed it. If you've got this part covered jump to "Phase 2-Moving to the Beat" below.

TAKE ACTION > [Watch our video on Counting the Music](#)

To learn this skill, put on a song with a very clear and consistent beat.

Good songs include:

- "[Goin' Down South](#)" by R.L. Burnside
- "[Juke Joint](#)" by Johnnie Taylor.

Both of these songs have very solid beats without much distraction happening in the bass line.

As you listen, clap on the beat (which is the loud drum noise in these songs).

Keep practicing this skill until you can effortlessly clap along with the beat through the whole song!

Phase 2—Moving to the Beat:

Put on a song with a clear and steady beat again.

This time, instead of clapping, take a step on each beat.

You should focus on putting your weight onto the new foot as the beat hits.

At first, you may stumble; this is probably because you didn't start moving your body until too late.

Continue working on stepping on the beat, and you will gradually learn when you need to start moving your body in order to land on the beat.

Phase 3—Downbeats and Upbeats:

Most music for dancing, with the exception of waltz music, has beats occur in pairs.

The first beat of each pair is the downbeat; the second beat is the upbeat. Being able to distinguish downbeats and upbeats is important because WCS begins each pattern on a downbeat.

In pop music, downbeats and upbeats are generally played with different instruments.

The downbeat is usually a drum or bass (a low pitch), while the upbeat is a cymbal or other higher pitched instrument. If you try say “boom-chick” along with the song, the boom is the downbeat and the chick is the upbeat.

For this part of the exercise, put on a song that clearly distinguishes between downbeats and upbeats.

- [“Juke Joint”](#) is a good song
- [Prince’s “The Word”](#) also has a clear distinction, especially during the chorus (the downbeat is more subdued during the verses, although the upbeat remains very clearly accented).

As this song is playing, you should do step-taps: step on the downbeat and tap your free foot on the upbeat.

This is a single rhythm unit, which means that you will change weight once every two beats.

Phase 4—Keeping the Beat Through Complications:

Now that you can dance on the beat throughout a song and can distinguish between downbeats and upbeats, the next challenge is to maintain the beat in your movement when the song isn't helping you.

One of the ways that music can be more interesting is by having the instruments or vocals do stuff that doesn't perfectly match the beat.

Although the beat of the song stays the same, the song itself isn't marking the beat for you.

Here are 2 different complications you may encounter:

#1 – A song with a break

You might have a song that just has a break; in this case, the music stops and you have to finish counting the phrase on your own and keep dancing to the beat when the song isn't marking the beat for you.

Examples of this kind of music include:

- [“Sweet Sixteen” by Junior Wells](#) (there is only a subtle instrument for the last four beats of each major phrase)
- [Buddy Guy’s “What Kind of Woman Is This?”](#) (which does the same thing without the instrumental cues)
- [“Man in the Mirror” by James Morrison](#) (which frequently has a sustained vocal note without background instrumentation at the end of mini-phrases).

#2 – A song with a syncopated rhythm

The second way that a song can obfuscate the rhythm is by having instrumentation that is syncopated against the beat

- [Robin Thicke’s “Cocaine”](#) is an extreme example; the syncopation is so strong that beginning dancers have an extraordinarily difficult time staying on beat.
- [“She’s Right Here” by Ne-Yo](#) (featuring Brandy) A more subdued example. The bass drum on the & before the 3 encourages a syncopated triple rather than a standard triple, which usually results in beginners rushing the upbeat and getting off time.

When practicing to these kinds of songs, try dancing both walks and triples. While doing triples, focus on delaying the triple as long as possible.

Struggling to stay on time to the music?

- Do you struggle to stay on time to the music?
- You know your patterns.
- You understand how to lead or follow.

- But when the music comes on your timing falls apart.

We've got your covered!

Learn to stay on time while dancing to music with this video...

DOWNLOAD THE VIDEO>> [4 Keys to better timing](#)

How to Stay on Time with The Music

The #1 struggle we hear from new west coast swing dancers is that they struggle to stay on time with the music.

While they might be ok when dancing just the basics, things tend to fall apart as they dance more complex moves. If you struggle to dance and keep the count going at the same time this article is for you!

TAKE ACTION>> Download our VIDEO - [4 Keys to Staying on Time](#)

1. Count the music

Some people learn to dance without spending a lot of time counting music, and they tend to dance by feel.

No matter who you are, or how skilled you are at feeling the music, counting always elevates your dance.

Counting gives a way for both partners to be simultaneously directed to the same thing. Even if you are great at feeling the music, you will always be more precise if you are also focusing on the count.

When your counting is rock solid, you'll be able to deviate from the beat and reattach seamlessly.

How do you improve your counting?

First, spend some time listening to WCS music and counting throughout the song. (I do it in the car)

As that becomes more comfortable, progress to dancing your basic patterns by yourself with no partner. (a partner will complicate things at this point)

Finally, give it a try while out while social dancing or while practicing with a partner.

Focus on counting through the entire song. No matter how you count, the key is to keep the count running through your head for the entire song.

If you are a dancer who moves by feel, this may take a while to become comfortable with counting and dancing. That's ok!

You are reprogramming the way you listen to music so that you can perform at a much higher level, and that's going to take some time.

One of the tips I use is to 'sing the counts' in my head which creates a more solid connection from the counts to the music.

2. Learn Downbeats vs Upbeats

Because west coast swing is a two-beat dance, recognizing the difference between downbeats and upbeats is an essential skill.

As patterns become more complex and as the dancers introduce more play in the middle of patterns, you need to immediately know which beat is which, in order to stay on the correct timing.

- **Downbeats** are the 1, 3, 5, or 7.
- **Upbeats** are the 2, 4, 6, or 8

Put on a song and start counting the music in downbeat-upbeat pairs. Listen to make sure you are starting on a downbeat of the music (the 1, 3, 5, or 7 of the set of 8) and count downbeat, upbeat, downbeat, upbeat, 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8

TAKE ACTION>> Watch our video - [4 keys to better timing in WCS](#)

The purpose of this exercise is to train yourself to instantly recognize whether you are on a downbeat or upbeat.

To get to the point of instinctive recognition, you need to practice well beyond the point of conscious understanding.

This drill will feel simplistic after a short while, and that's okay.

It's much easier to keep the rhythm of downbeats and upbeats in your head when you have no other distractions.

Your goal is to practice to the point where you can't lose track even if you are distracted.

Once you have this exercise mastered, practice by skipping your music player to the middle of the song and see how quickly you can correctly identify which beats are the downbeats and which are the upbeats.

This part of the exercise trains you to make the identification quickly when you haven't been following the music closely, which is similar to what will happen in the wild when you lose the beat of the song and need to quickly reset your internal metronome.

3. Understand WCS as a 2-beat dance

Although west coast swing is composed of six- and eight-count patterns, the actual dance itself is a two-beat dance.

Every movement in west coast swing goes through a downbeat-upbeat pair. Those pairs of downbeats and upbeats are then joined together into a full pattern, an extension, a chunk of play, or anything else within the dance.

Consider a basic side pass.

We normally count out the pattern as “walk walk, tri-ple step, tri-ple step.”

This language reveals the two-beat increments underlying the pattern: a walk walk, a triple, and another triple.

If we want to change the pattern, we will do it by changing a full two-beat rhythm.

For instance, we could replace the anchor triple with a delayed single like a drag-step. We can't just change one beat of the pattern since that would affect our footwork on the rest of the rhythm unit.

How do you make use of west coast's two-beat foundation?

First, every movement belongs to a downbeat-upbeat pair. If you are having problems with a move, break it down into each downbeat-upbeat pair to see where the problem lies.

Second, all of your footwork happens in two-beat increments. If you want to learn footwork syncopations or variations, you should practice the two-beat chunks: kick-ball change, tri-ple step, step-blank, etc. It's much easier to do footwork on the fly if you can pull from two-beat increments rather than trying to memorize full syncopation sequences.

Third, playing happens in two-beat increments. If the follower wants to do something on the downbeat, she also needs to fill the upbeat. If the leader wants to re-start the dance, he needs to do so on a downbeat rather than an upbeat.

How to Dance 6-Count Patterns to 8-Beat Music

There are two basic rhythms in WCS: the six count rhythm and the 8 count rhythm.

Six Count Rhythms: Once you are comfortable with triple steps, six count rhythms are easy.

The basic rhythm for six count patterns in WCS is double triple triple (also called walk-walk, triple step, triple step, and counted 1, 2, 3 & 4, 5 & 6).

In short: you step on the beat twice, then perform two triple steps.

Leaders start the rhythm by putting their weight on the left foot on 1, while followers first move onto the right foot on 1.

If you have a background in music, you'll notice that dancing 6-count rhythms to a song feels a little weird because WCS music is phrased in 8 beat segments, rather than 6 beat chunks.

This is a feature, not a bug; because WCS is an inherently off-phrase dance, the dancers have the opportunity to use their pattern selection to interpret the music in a way that's not possible in many other dance styles.

Having said that, you're right that your timing will be off from the song at first.

When you start learning about musicality, you'll learn how to reattach WCS rhythms to the phrasing of the music.

Our Video, [Counting Straight 8's](#) will explain

Eight Count Rhythms: The basic 8-count rhythm simply extends the 6-beat rhythm with two walking steps between the triples.

The rhythm is thus double triple double triple, or 1, 2, 3 & 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8. Again, leaders start on the left and followers on the right.

How to practice this?

Put on a slow to medium tempo song and practice doing nothing but six count rhythms. Your goal is to become comfortable alternating between the double rhythm and the triple rhythm so that you move fluidly through the entire six beats

As you gain proficiency in moving between double and triple rhythms, practice dancing to faster songs.

Initially, you should aim to dance up to 120 bpm, which should allow you to keep up with most songs played socially.

Eventually your goal will be higher (some social songs go up to 130 bpm), but getting to 120 bpm will give you plenty of music to dance to in an evening.

Once the six count rhythms are instinctive and comfortable, do the same thing with the eight count rhythms.

The final addition is to switch between six and eight count rhythms during the song.

The key here is to make sure that you finish your last triple before switching—if you try to switch after only 4 beats of a six-count pattern (or 4 or 6 beats of an eight count), you will be on the wrong foot and things will feel really awkward.

Musicality: Learning Major Phrases

Music is written in major phrases.

Many contemporary songs are written in 32-beat phrases, or 4 sets of 8 beats; blues music that follows the 12-bar blues progression occurs in 48-beat phrases, or 6 sets of 8 beats.

Each major phrase ends by resolving to the tonic.

The tonic is the key, or base, of the song.

When musicians play the tonic after doing a bunch of other stuff, the result is a harmonious sound that releases, or resolves, the tension that had been building up.

Because the resolve is a powerful moment in the song, as west coast dancers we want to be aware of when that resolve occurs so we can acknowledge it in our dancing.

The Drill: To learn how to listen for the tonic, you can practice a brief line dance.

The dance starts with your weight on your right foot.

Begin by taking slow walks for 16 beats: walk (hold 2) walk (hold 4), walk (hold 6) walk (hold 8), and repeat.

For the third set of 8, point out to the side on the odd beat and then bring the foot back in on the even beat.

So, you will point left 1, step your left next to your right on 2, point right 3, step your right next to your left 4, and so on for 8 beats.

The final 8 gets a little trickier.

Point forward with your left on 1. Hold beat 2.

On the & of beat 2, step your left next to your right and point your right forward for 3.

Again, hold beat 4.

On the & of 4, step your right together with your left, and point your left out for 5.

Now, keep moving every half beat: on the & of 5, step your left together, on 6 point your right forward, on & step your right together, on 7 point left forward, on & step left together, on 8 point right forward, and on & step right together.

This line dance, emphasizes all the main resolves in a 32-beat phrase. The busy-ness in the final 4 beats obviously resolves into the tonic on the 1 of the next phrase.

There are also changes after 16 beats (which is a minor resolve), and the dance builds energy through the entirety of the last 8 beats in order to really accent the resolve on the next 1.

We do an abbreviated version of this drill in our [Ultimate Guide to Musicality Video Course](#). The course included 17 videos all related to mastering musicality for WCS dancers.

When you are comfortable with the dance itself, try dancing beginning on the new phrase for a song that's perfectly phrased. (A great practice song is Heather Headley – Fallin' For You; start dancing at the “you” of “I’m falling for you.”)

Identifying Musical Phrases

When you learned WCS, you learned to distinguish downbeats and upbeats.

In musical terms, the downbeat and upbeat are quarter note rhythms: they take up a quarter of a measure, which is the division used in musical scores.

A single measure of music for WCS songs takes four beats: a downbeat, an upbeat, another downbeat, and another upbeat.

(There are exceptions to the previous sentence, but we'll set those aside for the moment.)

WCS music is generally phrased over two measures, or eight beats.

Each eight-beat phrase is the musical equivalent of a sentence.

Most verses, for instance, have a natural break every eight beats.

For instance, listen to Michael Jackson's [The Way You Make Me Feel](#)

(Sentence:) Hey pretty baby with the high heels on

(Sentence:) You give me fever like I've never, ever known

(Sentence:) You're just a product of loveliness

(Sentence:) I like the groove of your walk, your talk, your dress

You can hear the musical sentences continue throughout the song. Now it's time to count them.

How to practice this!

Listen to a song phrased in perfect eight-beat phrases, like *The Way You Make Me Feel*.

Count the eights: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, [repeat].

Your goal is to train yourself to hear and feel the beginning of a new set of eight.

If you don't have previous musical training, it will take a while to master this drill. That's ok!

Being able to quickly identify the 1 of a new phrase is extremely important for musical phrasing, so it's worth spending time on this skill.

Wasn't to learn all of this on video?

[You'll love our "Ultimate Guide to Musicality"](#)

The #1 Key to Musicality for WCS

There is a concept that you must understand before you can connect your patterns and dancing to the music.

It's called counting straight 8's

Learn counting straight 8's [with this video](#)

When you first learn west coast swing you typically will count your patterns.

Imagine dancing 2 sugar pushes... You would count 1,2,3&4,5&6 for the first sugar push then 1,2,3&4.5&6 for the second sugar push.

The music however will not stop at count 6. It will continue through 8 beats of music.

Counting straight 8's is counting the music, not just the beats in your pattern.

Counting your 2 sugar pushes in straight 8's would be counted like this.

1,2,3&4.5&6 for the first sugar push, 7,8,1&2,3&4 for the second.

You are not essentially counting the music while you dance, not just your patterns.

It's a tricky concept but it's the #1 thing you need to master to connect your patterns, styling and dancing to the music.

You can [download a video of us](#) demonstrating the concept here.

Dancing to the Lyrics

Many musicality drills focus on dancing to 8-beat phrases within the music.

However, dancers can also bring out the lyrics of the music.

Although some lyrical dancing requires actually knowing the song, it's possible to dance to lyrical phrases even if you've never heard the song before.

NOTE: If you do not understand the concept of "Counting Straight 8's" please [watch this video first](#).

Lyrics are generally written within musical phrases that last for eight beats.

Usually, the last word of the lyrical phrase has some kind of accent.

The accent can be a hard accent: da-da da-da da-da da-DIT.

Alternatively, the accent can be stretched out: da-da da-da da-da da-DEE.

Al Green's "So Tired of Being Alone" is a great example of a stretched out accents, which are also common in lyrical or acoustic pieces; contemporary, hip-hop, and club songs tend to have harder accents.

Because the ending of the lyrical phrase is usually a consistent kind of accent and usually occurs in a similar place in the 8-beat phrase, it's possible to dance to that accent as you are listening to the song for the first time.

The following drill will develop your ability to dance the lyrical phrases.

The Drill Part 1: In this first part of this drill, you will prepare some possible accents to dance within your basic patterns.

Pick a simple pattern like a push break and ask yourself what you could do to indicate a soft accent that began on the anchor.

You could drag or brush the foot, do a ronde, do a body roll into your anchor, etc.

Practice that variation until it feels comfortable.

Now go through each of the other two beat sections of the pattern.

If the drawn out note was on the walk walk, what could you do?

What about during the first triple?

If you're doing a whip, what could you do during the 5, 6? By the time you finish this part of the drill, you should have a way to show a drawn out accent during any part of the push break.

The Drill Part 2: The second part of the drill can be done alone or with a partner.

Put on a song with soft accents at the end of lyrical phrases. A song like "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" is a good choice because it has very consistent lyrical phrases: sitting on the dock of the bay, watching the tide flow away, etc.

Dance just push breaks to that song.

When the lyrical accent occurs, use the variation you practiced in order to highlight the drawn out syllable.

Musicality for Follower: Accenting the 1

For followers, accenting the 1 of the musical phrase is more challenging than for the leaders because you don't get to pick the pattern that is being led.

As a result, you need to have options to accent the 1 at any point within a pattern. In this article, we will help you!

The good news is that you don't have to do any math while you're dancing to figure out how long you have until the accent occurs; as long as you can identify the 1 of the music, you don't need to calculate how many beats away you are like the leaders do.

Need to find the '1' in the music? Watch this video on our website about counting the music. [Watch it here](#)

Here is how to practice this!

With or without a partner, practice dancing side passes to a song that has a clear accent on the 1, like Fill Me In, Pt. 2 by Craig David.

Begin by dancing the side pass starting with the 7 of the phrase and note where you are in the side pass (it should be count 3).

Pick some styling option that you like in order to accent that count.

As a “starter kit” for follower accents, try out the following options:

- Tilt your head
- Drop a shoulder
- Do a chest pop
- Isolate your ribcage to the side
- Push the free arm out
- Throw a hip to the side
- Syncopate your footwork to accent the downbeat
- Add a level change

After you dance the accent, reset for the next 7 of the music.

If you miss the 7 because you or your partner aren't in position, wait until the next 7 rather than rushing to catch up.

The point of this drill is to teach your subconscious how to style a side pass when you start on beat 7; practicing a different timing will negate the value of the exercise.

Once you find an option that is comfortable, watch in a mirror or video tape yourself to make sure that the movement looks good.

Keep practicing that movement until it becomes second nature when you are led in a side pass beginning on count 7.

Next Drill: Repeat this exercise but start the side pass on beats 1, 3, or 5 of the phrase.

The “start on 1” option is especially important because at that point your leader has missed the accent and can't set you up. If you can create something out of that situation, it will dramatically improve the musicality of your partnership.

Once you are comfortable with all the times that you could start a side pass, extend the drill to your other basics. Your eventual goal is to have the ability to accent any downbeat within any pattern.

Struggling to make your dancing musical?

- Do you feel 'stuck' in connecting your patterns and movements to the music?
- You hear the beats in the music very well.
- You're lead and follow is on point.
- But you still struggle being able to connect your movements to the music.

While there are many layers to west coast swing musicality...

There is one concept that 'unlocks' the connection between your patterns and the music.

It's something that all great WCS dancers use.

We've got you covered!

WATCH THE VIDEO >> [The #1 Key to Musicality for WCS](#)

Musicality for Leaders: Accenting the 1

Musicality in West Coast Swing for leaders comes down to this... Your ability to connect your patterns to the music.

Once you've learned to hear musical phrases, the next step is to start matching those phrases with the patterns you lead. This drill is designed to ingrain some simple accents into your dance memory.

Need to find the '1' in the music? >> [Watch this video "counting the music"](#)

How to practice this!

Put on a song with a clear, repetitive accent on the 1 of each musical phrase.

Fill Me In, Pt. 2 by Craig David works well for this exercise.

With or without a partner, stand in an anchored position and count until beat 6 of the phrase.

On beat 7, begin leading a sugar tuck; the accent on the 1 should naturally fall onto the compression of the tuck.

Immediately after leading the tuck, reset into an anchor position for the next beat 7.

If you or your partner don't get into position in time, skip that phrase and wait until the next beat 7.

The goal of this exercise is to teach your subconscious to select a tuck if you are starting a new pattern on a 7; the exercise loses its value if you don't start on the correct beat.

Bonus Variations: The tuck has a natural accent on the 3 of the pattern.

Practice doing the same thing with patterns that have natural accents on the 5 or 7 of the pattern.

Barrel rolls or inside rolls have natural accents on the 5, so you would start those patterns on the 5 of the previous phrase.

A side pass with the guy spinning on the anchor into a throwout works well to accent the 7, so you could practice leading those two moves beginning on the 3 of the music.

Eventually you will want to go through all of your patterns and identify where the natural accents are, so you have multiple options, from different starting hand connections, that orient towards the audience depending on what side you are. Whew!

For now, drill yourself to have at least one option when you start the pattern on the 3, 5, or 7 of the music.

Want to watch a version of this drill? [Check out this video](#)

Choosing Patterns to Hit Accents

In West Coast Swing, the leader has the primary responsibility for selecting the patterns, that will hit accents in the music. It's tricky stuff but we are going to try to help you here!

Because west coast patterns are typically six or eight counts, and the music we dance to is written in eight-beat phrases, WCS is an "off-phrase" dance. Unlike a waltz, WCS patterns don't always start on the downbeat of the music.

While this makes WCS seem confusing, it also creates the opportunity for dancers to be very musical and create awesome moments within the dance.

The drill below is written primarily from the perspective of the leader. However, the follower needs to understand this process as well, so that she can [add her own styling](#) and sell the accents the leader patterns to compliment the accents within the music.

Musicality is about teamwork and understanding what your partner is doing is an important element of the partnership.

Watch this video first >> [Counting Straight 8's](#) It's the #1 Key to WCS musicality.

Before working on this drill, you should be very comfortable counting straight 8's in the video above.

This drill is fairly complicated and puts together a lot of skills.

If you want to read more about musical phrases and finding the 1 in the music, this articles will help: [Musical phrases](#)

How to practice this!

Leaders, we're going to create a simple dance that puts the natural accents of patterns onto the accents of a typical musical phrase.

For this exercise, you can use any song that is perfectly phrased in 32 beats.

Start with a left side pass...

On the 1 of the musical paragraph, start by doing a left side pass. The left side pass will finish on beat 6, so the music is going to go 7, 8, 1, and on the one there will be a new set of 8. We want to hit that accent, so we need a pattern that has a natural accent three beats in. For now, let's pick a sugar tuck.

Add a sugar tuck...

If we keep counting the music, the sugar tuck will finish on beat 4 of the second set of 8. There will be another musical one in five beats (5, 6, 7, 8, and 1 is the accent), so we need a pattern that has a natural accent on count 5. We can use a whip and emphasize the send out on 5, so let's do that.

Now a whip....

The whip will finish on beat 4 of the third set of 8. We'll have another accent in another 5 beats, so we need another pattern that has an accent on count 5. Let's do a left side inside roll. Because the spin happens on counts 3&4, count 5 can either be quiet (the energy has dissipated from the spin), or it can be loud (we're pushing the energy from the spin into that

next step and then settling). In this case, we want count 5 to be loud, so we'll choose the second option.

Add a spin...

Our inside roll finishes on the music's beat 2 of the fourth set of eight, so we have six more counts left before the next musical paragraph. This time, we'll have the leader spin.

Do a left side pass, and instead of a normal anchor, the leader is going to spin to the left. If you are really new to spinning, just do a half turn: connect with your right hand to the follower's right (handshake) as you face down line, and then you will step forward on 1 (which is away from your follower) in a slingshot position. If you are more comfortable, you can do 1½ spins, either as a triple or on one leg. In any event, you should finish with a right-to-right handhold and be facing down the slot.

[Take another version of this drill on video](#)

Wash, rinse & repeat...

At this point, the music has come to a new major phrase, and you can repeat the sequence you had above. Since you finished in a slingshot position, just convert the first left side pass into a slingshot side pass and do a hand change to end up back in a left-to-right handhold.

To recap, your patterns and accents are:

- Left side pass / slingshot side pass with accent stepping down line on 1
- Sugar tuck with accent on the tucking action (count 3)
- Whip with accent on the send out (count 5)
- Inside roll with accent on the first beat after the spin (count 5)
- Left side pass with leader spinning on the anchor (spin sets up the accent on count 1 of the next pattern)

The real purpose of this drill is not to have a sequence of steps that you dance every time you hear a 32-beat song.

The goal is to start thinking about where the accents are within your patterns and to line those up with where you are in the musical phrase.

For instance, you could replace the sugar tuck with any six-count pattern that has an accent on the 3—any tuck, a side pass with the follower starting a spin on 3, an accelerated throw-out with a freeze on 3, etc.

As you become more comfortable with what your options are, you'll be able to choreograph to the accents on the fly.

Struggling to make your dancing musical?

- Do you feel 'stuck' in connecting your patterns and movements to the music?
- You hear the beats in the music very well.
- You're lead and follow is on point.
- But you still struggle being able to connect your movements to the music.

While there are many layers to west coast swing musicality...

There is one concept that 'unlocks' the connection between your patterns and the music.

It's something that all great WCS dancers use.

We've got you covered!

WATCH THE VIDEO>> [The #1 Key to Musicality for WCS](#)

Maybe you just need something to spice up your dancing?

If so checkout our [Styling Resource Page](#)

10 Practice Songs for WCS

Head over to our website to get [10 practice songs for west coast swing](#). You can play these songs through YouTube right from the webpage.