

# The Time Has Come

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I've listened to our heartbeat.

For years now I've listened. I listened to former champions. I listened to fellow champions. I listened to newcomers. I listened to non-competitors. I listened to novice, intermediate, advanced and all-star dancers. I listened to judges, to event directors and to studio owners. I listened to DJ's. I listened to photographers. I even listened to hotel staff and to non-dancers staying in the hotels at conventions. I listened, and listened, and listened. I listened to the audiences and I listened to my students and I listened to the conversations taking place in hallways and dinner buffets and clubs. I listened. And I heard a lot. I heard what was being told, what was being said, what was being danced, what was being judged, what was being seen and what was being thought. I watched too. I watched carefully. I watched the Jack and Jills, the social floor, the dancing during the breaks and the dancing during late night. I watched the routines, the workshops and the private lessons. I listened and heard and watched.

And by doing so, I ended up taking the pulse of our West Coast Swing community.

It's not good news. I learned that we are hurting. I learned that we are divided. I learned that we are in crisis. We are confused, damaged and torn. We are sad, angry and lost. I learned that we desperately need to see a doctor. It's time for a diagnosis. We need a prescription. We need to start healing and return to a state of joy, freedom and empowerment on the dance floor.

I can help. After absorbing, analyzing and assimilating all I had heard, seen and felt on the floor, I discovered The Big Picture. I know what's going on. And perhaps more importantly, I know how we got here.

So I created my SwingIN!s. A series of groundbreaking seminars, demonstrations and activities, I designed my SwingIN!s to equip dancers for today's WCS world. My first one was held in January of this year, where I first taught about how we got here. I introduced our history: The Gathering of Great Minds, The Renaissance, The Perfect Storm and The Setting Sun. The response was tremendous. The "ah ha!" moments were overwhelming. I'd started something big. After holding numerous encores, I held my newest SwingIN! on Easter Weekend. There I taught about my biggest discovery: Abstract Improvisation vs. Pure West Coast Swing. Five hours later the judges, promoters, instructors, competitors, newcomers and social dancers that attended stood up, eyes opened, and... danced their pants off that night! Then they spread the word.

So before social networking turns its worst "telephone" tortures upon my work, it's time to share the most groundbreaking and healing terminology with you. I would love to come to your local studio, event or community and share all of it with you in person, but for now, let's settle for this.

## RENAISSANCE ERA

*definition:*

A period of rebirth, a period of intellectual and artistic vigor

West Coast Swing experienced what I call its "Renaissance Era" in the years around 1991-1999. Its waves lapped our shores before 1991 and left amazing treasures after 1999, but in general, our Renaissance occurred in the 90's. Never was there such a surge of "intellectual and artistic vigor" in our art form. During those years we saw the Great Minds of WCS, Country, Shag, Hand Dancing, Hustle and even Ballroom and Salsa converge, talk, share, teach, challenge and grow the dance. It's the Era that produced tapes which non-dancers in lunchrooms across America (and my inner-city classroom, by the way) were glued to when we played them. It's the Era when our Great Minds made breakthroughs in dance knowledge, technique and terminology that was and still is unparalleled in any other dance form. It's the Era which allowed, in Southern California alone, 12 studios (not including clubs!) to be dedicated to WCS and its sister dances. Some studios had full WCS classes every night of the week. It's the Era we lost to the digital age. It's the Era when we understood how hard WCS was to do, and we attracted dancers who were willing to work that hard to do it. It took five to seven years to learn WCS back then, and it was during the Renaissance that dancers applied for job transfers across multiple states to gain more training in WCS. It was during the Renaissance that dancers who had reached their peak in other dance forms became attracted to WCS because of its depth, difficulty and challenge. People dancing for two years called themselves beginners. It's the Era when audiences gave standing ovations before a routine was even done, and an Era when routines inspired you to jump out of your seat and move your feet!

## PURE WEST COAST SWING

*Also known as:*

Renaissance Swing, True West Coast Swing or... West Coast Swing

Pure West Coast Swing is the dance I outline in "*Swing Essentials (How to Identify Swing Content)*." It has well over 35 elements. It takes years to learn. The lead is center to center. Foot positions, body positions, control, and

impeccable leading and following... they are of the utmost importance. Pure WCS requires Timing, Technique and Teamwork, all of which are extremely high-end skills and none of which are easy. The body is always over one foot. It is not split weight. It is lead and follow. It uses power points, body flight, triples, and subtleties that make you lean in and watch every second the better it is done. Pure WCS can be learned in a studio, has basic patterns and when a Novice learns it, they can dance with a Pure WCS Champion and feel like they've died and gone to heaven. It's slotted. It has anchors. It's upright, tall and framed, but it is also grounded, into the floor and into the heels. It's easy to see when there's a disconnect. Pure WCS does not look cookie-cutter. It brings out a dancer's individuality. It's very easy to tell the difference between a novice, and intermediate and an advanced Pure WCS dancer. In Pure WCS, the upper level dancers look completely unique. Each has their own style, their own strengths, their own creativity, their own syncopations and the magic created when a unique lead draws a unique follow is like no other.

## ABSTRACT IMPROVISATION

Abstract Improvisation is the other dance form we are seeing on the floor today. Because I have not written an article on it before, I will spend some more time outlining it here.

Abstract Improvisation's roots extend back 10 years ago. The roots grew slowly in the beginning, but now they've come into full bloom. I derived its name from a combination of two terms: Abstract (Art) and Contact Improvisation.

### Abstract / Abstract Art

*Definitions:*

- a period of art which followed the Renaissance
- a form of art with no rules, definition or boundaries
  - a removal from reality
  - difficult to understand
  - form and line

### Contact Improvisation

*definitions:*

- a form of dance improvisation that is part of the postmodern dance movement
- points of physical contact provide the starting point for exploration through movement improvisation
- "Contact Improvisation [is] a means to explore the physical forces imposed on the body by gravity, by the physics of momentum, falling and lifting. [It] is a complex but very open form with infinite possibilities and is a dance form that is made by the dancer in the moment of dancing."
  - *Touchdown Dance (2002)*
- does not have rhythms, a step pattern, or music requirements

Abstract Improvisation has only four elements. It relies heavily on Teamwork but not Timing or Technique. It can be learned within a week to a month and does not require classes. It can be learned on the floor or on YouTube. It is highly improvised, "made by the dancer in the moment of dancing," instead of being pattern based. Dancers who do 'Abstract' look very much alike. It is almost impossible to tell the difference between a novice or advanced Abstract dancer beyond their differences in attitude, confidence and attire. Abstract dancers' feet are almost always wide and flat footed. In pictures their legs look like they are straddling a pony. "Lines, shape and form" are created by straight, stretched arm leads and follows. Turns are led with rainbow arcs, high above the head, rather than halo turns, which leads to off balance following, which leads to arching backs and sways by the followers. The shoulders ride very high and the elbows are turned outside of the body, rather than tucked in towards the floor. As a result, the leads, or "suggestions" are all arm leads, not body or center leads.

The footwork is not the focus in Abstract. The upper body is where the action occurs. Your eyes are drawn towards the upper body area where spins are arching, hair is flying and arms look like they are holding giant beach balls. If you count to the music, then look down at the feet, you will find almost no relation. You will also notice how often single footed spins fall or gyrate off balance and the move is exited in an archway as a cover up. Abstract isn't danced over the heel, but over the ball or flat foot and the feet are rarely turned out. Feet are used for catching falls, for straddling, for hitting lyrics and melodies, for sliding... not for holding a rhythm pattern, moving the body or leading. As a result, Abstract Improv can be danced over any kind of music- a waltz, a samba, a nightclub two step or a hustle. This is part of the reason that when a hustle or nightclub two step is played, dancers are still dancing what they call 'swing' on the floor, but only Abstract Improvisation works over any song.

Abstract Improv requires four elements: strong knees, a flexible spine, quick reflexes and total confidence. This is why young and untrained dancers excel at Abstract Improv. Their muscles don't injure as easily and they don't have years of training telling them to keep rhythms, posture, to lead correctly or to connect fully. Abstract Improv instruction often uses the following terms: *momentum, movement, channeling, new school, flow, 3-D, free-styling*, etc. Common Abstract phrases include "*the anchor is obsolete*," "*stretch out as far as you can go*," "*no leading, only suggesting*," "*there are no rules*," "*disconnect*," "*dance behind the beat*," etc.

When danced on beat Abstract Improv is almost all single and double rhythm based and often the leader or follower can be seen standing in straddle position for well over four beats, while their upper half gyrates, sways or 'mime's the lyrics. The man does not post. The slot is often circular and free formed. The leader can move up and down the slot (or lack thereof), reverse positions with the follower and sometimes the follower is left in the middle while the leader dances around her. Couples dancing next to an Abstract couple will feel like they are being constantly confused and invaded by the Abstract couple's slot, when they, in fact, don't believe slots are valid anymore, which they aren't, in Abstract. Major phrases are hit by tricks, swoops and falls that are dramatic but most often messy as are they are done split weight and with loose high shoulders and lats. Abstract Improv often replaces the push break with a four beat push and pull, and an underarm turn most often becomes a two beat "snap" by both partners to opposite ends of the slot. Because of such quick movements, Abstract Improves seems much more big, bold and energetic than Pure WCS, and those dancers are put into finals instead of Pure WCS competitors, despite having a complete lack of timing, technique or swing.

Yes, I said swing. Abstract Improvisation looks, feels and reflects many of the attributes of Contact Improvisation, which is a postmodern contemporary dance form, rather than any partner or rhythm based dance with steps, rules, leading and following. Therefore I classify Abstract Improvisation as a rudimentary contemporary dance that's very similar to 'club' dancing, not a swing dance. I've heard many times that Abstract Improvisation is really WCS "evolved." However, the word "evolved" connotes a movement towards a higher level of skill or movement. The fact that Abstract Improvisational dancers cannot do a series of WCS basics with critical timing, posture, centering or any of the other incredibly difficult levels or patterns that Pure WCS demands, debates the idea of any "evolvment." An elimination of excellent leading, following, of centering, of foot positions, of syncopations, of timing, etc. only indicates a "devolvment" in my opinion, not an "evolvment," and we would be wise to see these claims for what they really are: an excuse to keep students, to protect their own "revolutionary" brand, to gloss over training they don't have and to protect a dance that only they understand and therefore only they earn money off of.

### **The Time Has Come**

As you've probably figured out by now, I've discovered that we as a community now have two separate dances on our hands. I understand that this has been hard to see, especially since a handful of our top pros are able to do both depending on what music they are given, the audience they are dancing for and person they are dancing with. But it is time to face reality. It is time to admit the truth. It is dangerous to deny it and stay on the path we are on. And I mean *dangerous*.

First, it's dangerous physically, emotionally and mentally to our dancers. When a Pure WCS trained follower draws an Abstract Improv leader, she gets physically hurt by the clash, is totally lost and feels "over her head." She is yanked off her anchor with no warning because it never occurs on the same beat or even on a beat. She is put into precarious positions where she's not quite sure what's expected of her and gets hit in the head when trying to go down the slot. When a Pure WCS trained leader draws an Abstract Improv follower, he can't figure out how to lead her, to connect with her, how to even get a push break out of her. She will be extremely light, to the point of complete disconnection or she will be extremely heavy and pull him off his anchor or timing. He will never ever get her on the foot he's trying to get her on, because she is not expecting him to lead her feet into positions. It's the same the other way around. I'm hearing stories nearly every week about how an Abstract Improv leader draws a Pure WCS follower and accuses her of deliberately fighting him or getting in his way, when she is simply assuming he's doing the same dance. My inbox is jammed packed with horror stories of the meeting of these two dances on the floor. They are stories ranging from physical harm, to emotional harm to mental harm... and dancers are falling out of love with the dance because they just don't understand that there are two completely different dances on the floor today. This brings me to my second point.

If we don't acknowledge that there are two dances, the future of the West Coast Swing industry is in jeopardy. It's already suffering. Highly trained WCS professionals feel pressured to teach poor technique. Novice and intermediate dancers are suddenly instructors. Event directors are hiring unskilled teachers and dancers because they are cheaper and seem to be the "hot ticket" instead of hiring highly trained real WCS instructors. Classes are shrinking across America. Because Abstract Improv is just that, improvisational, and requires almost none of the skills and training that Pure WCS does, it doesn't have to be learned in a studio. That doesn't mean there aren't people teaching Abstract Improv. There are. But people hear them say, about Pure WCS technique, "we don't do that anymore, we do this now," and the students feel like they have to start all over in the dance. But the reality is that Abstract Improv really doesn't take any training. I'm meeting more and more dancers at conventions who have never taken a single WCS lesson and are having a blast. In fact, Abstract Improv dancers, for reasons I've briefly touched on, make finals over Pure WCS dancers, which only promotes the idea to onlookers that classes, privates and lessons in general are not needed to be successful in the dance. Why spend money on Pure WCS, which absolutely has to be learned in a lesson setting and takes a long time to master, when you can learn Abstract Improv on YouTube for free? If we insist on calling Abstract Improvisation "Swing," we are contradicting every

single Pure WCS teacher out there and setting up all of their students for confusion, bitterness, failure and we will, ultimately, lose them. And then we will lose our instructors. **And then we will lose the dance.**

The fact of the matter is that when someone has been learning ballroom for three months and then dances with a ballroom pro, they feel like they are on top of the world and can do no wrong. It's like dancing with a dream. And they are inspired to keep going, keep learning, keep expanding their knowledge and enjoyment of the dance. But if a WCS dancer has been taking lessons for three months and then asks a higher level dancer to dance, they will be completely lost and feel defeated, not inspired. They don't realize it's another dance, never mind a lesser art form. And we should take a stand for them.

It is time, everybody.

People are done. People feel left behind. People feel ugly, misunderstood, confused, angry and they feel scared. We are hemorrhaging veteran dancers at an astronomical rate, we are allowing our most talented individuals to feel "old" and we are attracting a demographic of dancers who would rather not work at their dancing because it's not "fun," and allowing instructors into our community who have absolutely no problem giving watered down shortcuts to technique, slandering our most knowledgeable and respected legends and calling an extremely difficult and praiseworthy dance "out of touch." Non-dancers have a better eye than we do now. Lunchrooms don't watch our videos after 2002. But they can't get enough of our Renaissance Era.

It's time to put an end to the madness. It's time to equip our students, our fellow judges, our newcomers and our fellow dancers with the knowledge to walk into a studio, into a convention, into a workshop and say, "Okay, that's Abstract and that's Pure West Coast." And then they can make informed decisions. Then they can dance with freedom. Then they can understand what they're watching. Then they can understand what's going on...

### **And then we can heal.**

*If you are interested in hosting your own SwingIN!, if you are interested in rediscovering the joy of the dance, if you are interested in booking a workshop, a lesson, an intensive... I'm here. Email me at [wcskat@hotmail.com](mailto:wcskat@hotmail.com) or text me at 408.500.8480. I am dedicated to the people and to the dance. I am dedicated to the joy and freedom and power that swing has given me, and I am dedicated to empowering others to trust their own instincts. Book me up- I'm here for you. And if you have a story you'd like to share, feel free to send me that too. I will never stop listening.*

With Joy,  
Katherine Krok Eastvold

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