

Counting Downbeats and 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.

The Drill:

Without a partner, 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,

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.

Be sure to practice to lots of types of music: contemporary club music, blues, R&B, acoustic, soul, and whatever else is on your WCS playlist. The greater variety of music you practice to, the easier it will be to recognize downbeats and upbeats in any song.

Once you have this exercise mastered, ratchet up the difficulty level by taking away your ability to simply follow the pattern of alternating downbeats and upbeats. Skip 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. Or, carry on a conversation with a friend while music is playing in the background, and re-identify which beats are which throughout the conversation. 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.