**Foxtrot**

**Summary**

The Foxtrot emerged circa 1914, most likely within African-American practices, as a variation on the older duple meter One Step popular with dancers since the early years of the twentieth century. The name Foxtrot suggests a relationship with earlier trotting animal dances such as the turkey trot or grizzly bear and led to claims that it was the ‘invention’ of the comic Harry Fox. While the One Step, at its simplest, consisted of an easy walking step corresponding to each beat of 2/4 meter syncopated up tempo music, Foxtrotters varied this duple meter walk through a combination of two slow and four quick steps danced over 4 beats of music. This combination, along with later variants such as two slow and two quick steps, proved to be extraordinarily versatile as dancers responded to popular music in a variety of tempi and corresponding emotional affects. The Foxtrot’s versatility and up-to-date modernity ensured a transatlantic popularity that extended well into the rock ’n roll era and remains central to current practices of professional and amateur ballroom dance and Dansport.

**The Foxtrot and Modernism**

Irving Berlin’s musical show *Watch Your Step*, which opened in late 1914 and featured popular dancers Irene and Vernon Castle playing versions of themselves, featured the foxtrot as one of its innovations. While helping bring the dance to mainstream attention, the Castles acknowledged that they had learned this One Step variation from their musical collaborator, the African-American bandleader James Reese Europe. Europe, in turn, gave credit to W. C. Handy whose ‘Memphis Blues’ provided musical inspiration. While their dance manual, *Modern Dancing* (1914) does not provide instructions for the dance, the Castles included the foxtrot as the third of ‘three new dances for winter’ offered to readers of the mainstream *Ladies Home Journal*. The double-spread instructions, illustrated with images of the fashionably dressed Castles demonstrating the steps, appeared in the December 1914 issue appropriately timed for the opening of *Watch Your Step*. In the accompanying text, Vernon Castle claimed that they had been exhibiting the foxtrot for months and recommended that the musical accompaniment be performed half the speed of typical ragtime played for the One Step. He offered additional variations—turns, drags and changes of direction—common to the One Step as well. In practice then, the Foxtrot provided a slower alternative to the fast-paced One Step and adding variety to the triple meter waltzes and hesitations.

In the postwar years, concert music composers in France and Germany turned to the foxtrot rhythm along with other popular music affects as a way to signal their postwar modernity through an embrace of the sounds of the New World and its popular culture. Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942) included a foxtrot, one step and maxixe in his *Fünf Pittoresken* (1919) for piano, German composer Paul Hindemith prominently referenced the foxtrot in his *Kammermusik No. 1* (1921), and Kurt Weill’s *Dreigroschenoper* (1928) utilized its rhythms in the ‘Kanonen-Song’. The foxtrot remained a staple of popular dance and music into the era of rock ’n roll; Buddy Holly’s ‘Everyday’ (1957) invites an easy foxtrot response. In the decades following its introduction, the pattern of two slow steps plus four quick ones expanded to include other combinations such as one slow and two quick and two slow and two quick steps. In the latter version, the three beat dance pattern disrupts the stresses of the four beats of music. It is this six-beat pattern that continues to be central to amateur and professional ballroom dancing whereas in the Slowfox, it calls for a flowing movement that suggests grace and elegance especially in contrast to the more energetic ‘Latin’ dances.

**Susan C. Cook**

**References and Further Reading**

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**Paratextual Material**

“Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle’s New Dances for This Winter, III. The Fox Trot,” *Ladies Home Journal*, December 1914.

Cover image: J. R. Europe and Ford T. Dabney, *The Castle Doggy Fox-Trot*, 1915.