



Edinburgh University Swing Dance
Society notes on:



Cakewalk - fundamentals

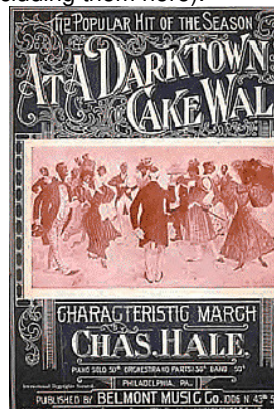
Please see <http://www.swingdoctors.org.uk> for updates.

Copyright © 2011, Jamie Davies and Katie Brooks. Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.3; with the Invariant Sections (which must not be modified or deleted) being the logos, header and URL above, and this entire copyright paragraph.

Introduction: The Cakewalk is *not* a swing dance: it pre-dates swing music by many decades and is danced to a syncopated 2/4 beat, but we occasionally teach workshops in it because it is an important ancestor to Charleston and to various types of Shag, and is therefore an indirect but influential ancestor to Lindy Hop, Balboa etc. Occasionally, we bring cakewalk steps into Lindy Hop (generally for comic effect).

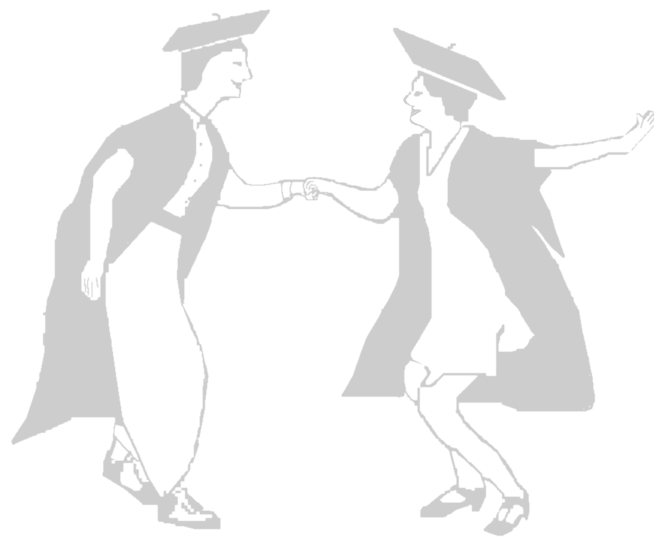
The Cakewalk arose among the African-American population in the plantations of the southern states. Its original form was danced only by men, and it pre-dated the American Civil War (and therefore stretches back into the time of slavery). Here is a description of a scene, from Estella Jones; *Cakewalkin' was a lot of fun durin' slavery time. Dey swep yards real clearn and set benches for de party. Banjos wuz used for music makin'. De womens wor long, ruffled dresses wid hoops in 'em and de mens had on high hats, long split-tailed coats, and some of em used walkin' sticks. De couple dat danced best got a prize. Sometimes de slave owners come to dese parties 'cause dey enjoyed watchin' de dance, and dey 'cided who danced de best. Most parties durin' slavery time, wuz give on Saturday night durin' work sessions, but durin' winter dey wuz give on most any night.* (J Social Hist (1981) 15: 208). (The prize was usually a cake, hence the name).

The actions of the cakewalk are based mainly on lampooning the 'society' habits of wealth European-American plantation owners; whether those European-Americans realized the extent to which they were being satirized is not clear. The actor Leigh Whipper recorded the following interview with an ex-slave in 1901: *Us slaves watched white folks' parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we'd do it too, but we used to mock 'em every step.* (p18 in Malone J (1996) *Steppin on the Blues*, Univ Illinois Press). The images below show period art based on the cakewalk, and period photographs (obviously, the values implicit in some of these images belong to another time and another place; I mean no offence to any reader by including them here).



(wikimedia commons)

PTO for steps



**Edinburgh University
Swing Dance Society**

Some cakewalk steps to get you started

Solo steps

(You can improvise pretty much anything: these are just some common variations)

Walks

Any sort of proud, strutting walk. See the notes on the side by side walk for style tips

Dusting down

Dust down your clothes, adjust your tie, hat etc.

Sweeping

Swapping roles to the servant one for a moment, 'sweep' the path ahead of the lady.

Acquiring the side by side hold from separate

(The usual side by side hold is for the lady to be to the right of the man. The man offers his arm (ie his elbow out sideways and his hand close to his body, so that his arm makes an open triangle shape) and the lady places her hand through it).

Bow

The man, ahead of the lady, bows low across her path and offers his hand. She takes it: as he straightens she puts her hand through his arm.

Side-by-side moves

Walk

Although many people ignore it altogether nowadays, the basic step of the cakewalk is just a very 'proud' walk, shoulders back, chest forward, head up (emphatically not in a Lindy hop get-down, though the legs may be bent a little). The couple promenade side-by-side; old pictures show no particular bias about who is to the left or right, but for compatibility with the other moves below, I advise that you have the lady on the right. Note that the two dancers generally go forward with the *same* foot, and do not dance in mirror image. The 'hold' is an arm-in-arm one, the gentleman offering the lady his crooked hand and she graciously putting her arm through it. This offer may be accompanied by a bow or any number of 'graceful' European habits (all exaggerated). If costumes permit, much hat-raising or business with walking canes and parasols accompanies the walk (look again at the images on the last page: the raised wine glass is a particularly inspired choice of prop). In our classes, we usually start with a step forward on the RIGHT leg. Put in whatever style you want, but remember to hold your head high and use the parasol/ cane if available. You are showing off your elevated position in life!

Bow and curtsy

Stop, and the man bows and the lady curtsies as if to another couple. Usually takes 8 beats.

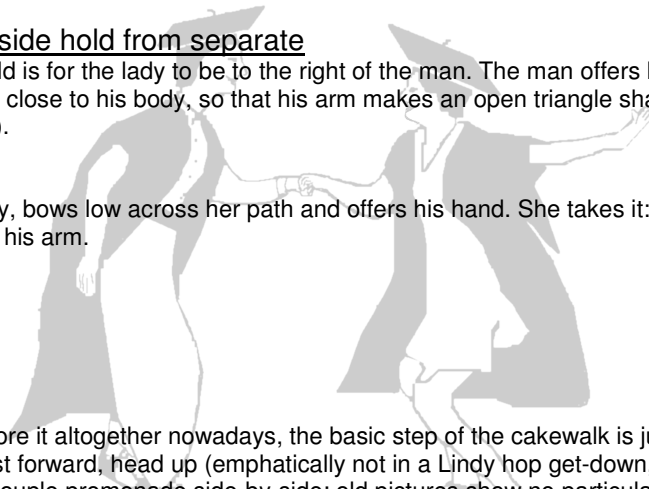
Walking horse

Probably based on the Tennessee walking horse. This stays in place or moves forward only slowly. Starting, say, with your weight on your left foot, step on to the right and, as you do, lift your left heel but keep the very front of the left shoe on the floor: this will cause your knee to bend and go up and forwards. As you lower this foot back to flat, the left heel lifts up (on the next beat) and so on. If you want this move to move, lift the toe of the raised foot slightly and you can put it down ahead of you. Generally, each step takes 2 beats.

Small trot (this is the 'basic' of the cakewalk as danced by many white folks from 1900 or so)

Drop on to your R foot and bend the leg (a bit of a sit). Let the left leg go out in front of you, straight, your foot skimming a little above the floor. For the next pair of beats, swap to the mirror image of that position, etc. (Again, usually each step takes 2 beats)

Large trot



As the small trot, but extend the high leg out further and higher (but still not horizontal, as that can look like goose-stepping!).

Large trot with back kicks

Kick each leg forwards as in large trot, but then lean forwards and kick both legs behind you. It does not matter if only one of you does this.

Crosses

These are usually done half-time as described here. 1-2- kick R forwards, exaggerating your lean back. 3-4 cross it over the L. 5-6, 7-8 rock step L-R, now leaning forward. Repeat in mirror image.

Riding

For this, have your hands out in front of you as if you are holding a pair of reins. On beat 1, step on your R foot and raise your right knee. On beat 3, extend your L foot forwards, pushing your arms forwards too; bring the foot back ready to put it down on 5. On 5, as your L foot goes down, raise your R knee to do the above in mirror image (arms still going forwards).

Moving out to facing.

The simplest way is to let go and use small trots to move round to facing. Bowing gestures etc are good for decoration. So might be taking your buttonhole out of your pocket and offering it to the lady...

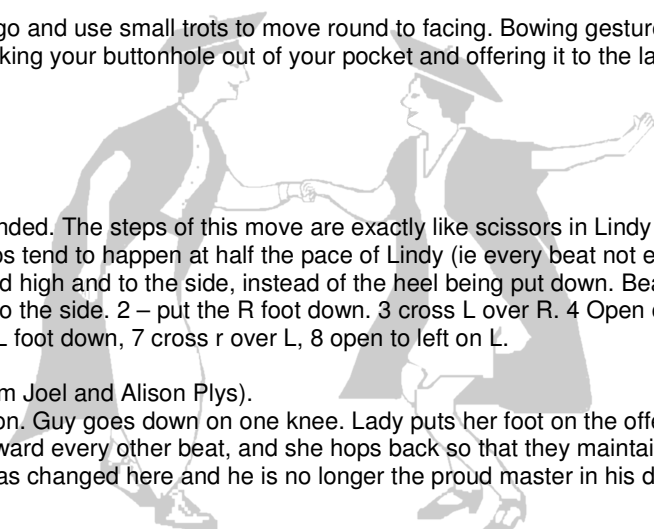
Facing moves

Puppet

This works well double-handed. The steps of this move are exactly like scissors in Lindy Hop, but the look is different. In particular, steps tend to happen at half the pace of Lindy (ie every beat not every half beat) and on 1 and 5 the knee is lifted high and to the side, instead of the heel being put down. Beat 1 – lift the right knee out horizontally and to the side. 2 – put the R foot down. 3 cross L over R. 4 Open out to right on R. 5 lift the left knee, 6 put the L foot down, 7 cross r over L, 8 open to left on L.

Shoe shine (borrowed from Joel and Alison Plys).

Begins facing no connection. Guy goes down on one knee. Lady puts her foot on the offered knee. He 'shines' it while edging forward every other beat, and she hops back so that they maintain this position. (Obviously, the dynamic has changed here and he is no longer the proud master in his demeanor).



Edinburgh University
To make suggestions or to request up-to-date copies, e-mail Cakewalk@swingdoctors.org.uk
Swing Dance Society

Date of last revision: 18th November 2009