

# THE BIG APPLE

An original 1937 version

Richard Powers reconstruction

The Big Apple became a huge American dance craze in 1937-1938. It was essentially a Swing Era version of traditional Appalachian Big Circle dances, which were like square dances, with a caller and square dance figures, but were done in a circle of couples. They were popular in the Appalachian Valley, including South Carolina, at that time.



Columbia, South Carolina was a mixed-race city, where a vacated synagogue became reincarnated as an African American dance hall called The Big Apple Night Club, where they danced Shag, Charleston and jazz steps in a circle, with a caller. To quote an early 1937 description of the Big Apple, "It is often spoken of as a round square dance," which is exactly what Big Circle dances were. Many Big Apple figures were the same as in Appalachian Big Circle dances. (Note: Those who prefer a more African heritage for the dance claim that the Big Apple came from the West African Ring Shout, but that presumes that Columbia teenagers would have had knowledge of African tribal dances, and it doesn't explain the inclusion of the Appalachian Big Circle figures in the Big Apple. Either theory is possible, and perhaps a mix of both.)

Some white college students in Columbia liked to go to this dance hall to watch from the balcony, and soon they began dancing it themselves back on campus, naming it the Big Apple after the club. Some of them took it to New York City in 1937, and at the same time, Arthur Murray sent his Charlotte, N.C. dance instructor to Columbia to observe the dancers at the Big Apple Night Club, and bring it to him to teach at his New York City dance studios. Incidentally, New York City got its "Big Apple" nickname from this dance, not vice versa.

The Big Apple was not one set pattern; in fact, no two descriptions were alike. There were many regional versions, and even within one group, the caller would prompt it differently each time. Therefore, this reconstruction is typical but not definitive (no description can be definitive), gathered from four decades of interviews I've made with former dancers, from films, and from written descriptions in dance manuals, magazines and newspapers. A bibliography and filmography are at the end of this doc.

Disambiguation: The original 1937 Big Apple is different from the 1939 version that Frankie Manning choreographed, from a description sent to him while he was performing in Hollywood. Manning's Big Apple is preserved in the 1939 film *Keep Punching* and has been revived by Lindy hoppers today.

MUSIC for this reconstruction: Jazz It Blues, a 20-bar jug band blues, to capture the original Southern sound.

INTRODUCTION: 8 measures. Dancers gather into a circle of couples, Follows at the right of the Leads. Some groups took hands in a circle; while others did the following figures without taking hands.

## I. RIGHT FOOT IN

1-4 **Right Foot In** is called on counts 1, 2. Tap R toe forward 3 times without weight (cts 3,4,5); step back R (ct 6); tap L back (ct 7); replace L foot forward (ct 8). Styling is very loose and casual, nonchalant.

5-6 **Swing It Low**: Kick R forward low, somewhat diagonally crossed over L (ct 1); step R back (ct 2); tap L back behind R (ct 3); step L forward (ct 4). Similar to a Charleston step but w/o the swivel.

7-8 **Swing It High**: Kick R forward high, diagonally crossed over L (ct 1); step R back (ct 2); tap L back (ct 3); step L forward (ct 4).

9-12 Repeat **Swing It Low** and **Swing It High**.

13-18 **Let Roosevelt Knock at the White House Do'**: Stamp R forward 3 times, each time an inch further forward, ending with weight on R (ct 1,&,2); step L back (ct 3); rock step R back (ct 4); replace forward onto L (ct &). Repeat twice more, three times total.

19-20 **Kill the Spider**: Stamp R forward (ct 1); swivel R foot back and forth on the ball of the foot ("as if crushing out a cigarette"), in time with music (ct &,2,&,3,&,4).

## II. TRUCKIN'

**Truckin' Step**: Step forward onto the R foot, slightly turned inward pigeon-toed (ct 1); sink onto the R while twisting that foot outward to the right and flicking the L heel back, (ct &). Repeat with L. Raise finger to eye level with wagging action, both elbows slightly elevated, L hand on L hip, or possibly with L fingers touching R elbow. Some descriptions said to have weight on the heel, swiveling out on the heel. Jane Murray Heimlich (Arthur Murray's daughter) showed me her version which swiveled on the ball of the foot.

1-4 **Circle Left**: All turn L to face against LOD. Do Truckin' step individually in single-file, with the Lead ahead of the Follow, for 8 steps, beginning R. (Note: If this dance had arisen from a ballroom tradition, the circle would have been to LOD, but the Big Apple has country dance roots, with the ancient circle-L tradition.)

5-8 **Girls Turn Back**: Continuing Truckin, Follows cast inward toward the center and turn back, traveling LOD in an inside circle; all leads continuing RLOD. 8 steps for all.

9-12 **About Face**: All turn right to reverse directions in their respective circles, Truckin' 8 steps.

13-16 **When The Merry Go 'Round Broke Down**: If you can spot another couple you want to do this with, offer left hands to opposite partner to do Truckin' around in a Left-Hand Star, 8 steps, wagging free R finger. (If not paired off as 2 cpls, offer L to own partner instead, to turn by the L hand. i.e., the large circle will be comprised of some Left-Hand Stars and some single couples.)

17-20 **Swing Partners** (Swingeroo): Face partner to turn in place by hooked R elbows, Truckin' 8 steps (L finger in air).

## III. SHININ'

1-20 One couple enters the circle to show off with freestyle Shag, Charleston, swing, tap dance, clogging, or other flamboyant steps.

Or instead of Shinin', everyone can dance Shag variations for these 20 bars.

## IV. FORWARD AND SUZIE-Q (Susie Q)

1-4 **Girls Forward**: Follows walk 3 steps forward then kick forward. Walk 3 steps back then tap back.

5-8 **Boys Forward**: Leads walk 3 steps forward then kick forward. Walk 3 steps back then tap back.

9-12 **All Forward**: All walk 3 steps forward then kick forward. Walk 3 steps back then tap back.

13-14 **Suzy-Q to the left:**

*Quick* ct.1) Cross R over in front of L with weight on the R heel and hips twisted toward the left, as clasped hands held at waist level are rotated over to the right side with a torso rotation, in opposition to crossing feet.

*Quick* ct.&) Rotate the supporting R foot to the right.

*Quick* ct.2) Step L as small step to the left side as clasped hands are rotated to the left side. Two of these quick counts take the time of one walking step.

Repeat twice more. The 4th time, cross R over in front of L then kick the free L foot out to the left side.

15-16 **Suzy-Q to the right:** Do the same pattern to the other side.

17-20 **Long 8-ct Suzy-Q to the left.**

## V. POSIN'

1-12 Individuals strike a pose and hold as a statue for 4 slow counts. Repeat with a different pose. Variation: Couples strikes a combined pose.

12-16 Same every 2 slow counts

17-20 Walk or Truck to partners for finale.

## VI. FINALE

1-2 **Polka Shag** (unique to Big Apple): Dancers raise both arms forward, holding partner with palm contact. Leads step L to left side (ct 1); close R to L (ct &); step L to left side (ct 2); hop L kicking R crossed behind L (ct &). Repeat to the right (ct 3,&,4,&). Follows dance opposite.

3-4 **Long Double Shag** (8-count Shag): Lead steps L, hop L kicking R back, step R, hop R kicking L back, then 4 quick steps in place kicking the free foot back each time. Follows opposite. S-S-QQQQ.

5-8 Repeat both **Polka Shag** and **Long Double Shag**.

9-16 **Kick The Mule:** All take hands in one circle, facing the center. Walk forward 3 steps (ct 1,2,3); kick forward (ct 4); walk back 3 steps and tap back (cts 5-8). Repeat.

17-20 **Praise Allah:** All drop hands and Truck forward 4 steps, crouching low to shake spread hands close to the floor while advancing (ct 1,2,3,4). Truck forward 4 more steps, rising and raising hands fwd to the sky. (Other local traditions then backed up to placed, fluttering the hands back down again.)

There were many other Big Apple figures not included here, like Peckin', London Bridge, Organ Grinder, Shoot Crap, Little Sister, Joe Louis, Eagle Eye, Frankenstein, Camel Walk, Gertie Swing, Flea Hop, At Ease, The Drag, Duster/Sissy Britches, Slow Motion, Fall Off the Log, Sailor Boy, Paul Revere, Pocahontis Step, The Bumps, Old Man of the Mountain, Elephants Trail, Wring the Dish Rag, Red Robin, and many more.

### Big Apple sources

I interviewed many former Big Apple dancers, gathering steps and stories, beginning in 1978, which was closer to the time of the Big Apple than to today. Some were still in their mid-fifties back then, and could still remember and perform the steps. My mother danced it in 1938 and was even the caller for her Big Apple team.

"It's 'Big Apple' Time at Myrtle Beach" - Myrtle Beach News, Jul. 22, 1937

"Big Apple, a New Dance, Sweeps Southern States" - The New York Times, Jul. 26, 1937

"Big Apple Dance Is Making Sweep in Dixie" - Charlotte News, Aug. 1, 1937

"Not A Fruit" - The New York Times, Aug. 18, 1937

"Now Whole Country's Raising 'Big Apple' Crop" - The Columbus (Nebraska) Telegram, Aug. 21, 1937

"Big Apple Hits Atlanta; Here's How to Do It" - Atlanta American, Aug. 29, 1937

"Swing Hi, Swing Low, Do That Big Apple" - St. Petersburg Times, Sep. 26, 1937

"The Big Apple" - Dance Digest Magazine, Oct. 1937

"New York Letter" by Russell Rhodes, reporting on the Big Apple - Dancing Times Magazine, Oct. 1937

"1937 Closes with Big Apple" - Life Magazine, Nov. 1, 1937

"From the Turkey Trot to the Big Apple," Bosley Crowther - New York Times Magazine, Nov. 7, 1937

"Praise Allah! for the Big Apple" - Aurora Democrat newspaper, Nov. 26, 1937

The Big Apple, description by Helon Powell Poole - The American Dancer, Nov. 1937

The "Big Apple" by Russell Rhodes - Dancing Times Magazine, Nov. 1937

"Peel that Apple" by Kyle Crichton - Collier's Magazine, Dec. 4, 1937

"Anything Goes, Says Local Big Apple Exponent" - Schenectady Gazette, Dec. 7, 1937

"Big Apple to Roll into White House" - The New York Times, Dec. 18, 1937

The Big Apple, 5-page typed description by Helon Powell Poole, 1937

The Big Apple, description in LET'S SWING IT, Arthur Murray, 1937

The Shag, Truckin' and Suzy-Q, in LET'S DANCE, Arthur Murray, 1937

THE BIG APPLE - published by Duquesne Brewing Company, 1937

"New from Educational Pictures" - 4 pages of notes promoting the film *The Big Apple, with The Arthur Murray Shag Dancers*, 1937

"The Big Apple" - Big Apple Song Hits Magazine, Feb. 1938

"How to Dance the Big Apple" by Eleanor Powell - Liberty Magazine, Feb. 1938

"The Big Apple - A Round Dance for the Ballroom" by Ruby Peeler - Dancing Times Mag, Feb. 1938

The Big Apple, description in HOW TO BECOME A GOOD DANCER, by Arthur Murray, 1938

The Big Apple, description in ARTHUR MURRAY'S DANCE BOOK, by Arthur Murray, 1938

HOW TO DANCE THE BIG APPLE, by Norma Goldman, 1938

THE BIG APPLE, by Dexter & Anita Wright, 1938

The Big Apple, description in SUCCESSFUL DANCE PARTIES, by Lucile Marsh, 1938

The Big Apple, Shag, descriptions in POPULAR BALLROOM DANCES, by Thomas Parson, 1938

The Big Apple, description in IMPROVE YOUR DANCING, by Joe Bonomo, 1938

The Big Apple, description in ALL ABOUT PARTIES, by Nina Kaye, 1938

The Big Apple, description in TEACH YOURSELF THE LATEST STEPS, by Lawrence Hostetler, 1938

The Shag, Truckin' and Suzy-Q, in TEACH YOURSELF THE LATEST STEPS, Lawrence Hostetler, 1938

Shag, Susie Q, Trucking and more in COME ON AND DANCE, Elizabeth Woodward, 1938

The Big Apple (La Grosse Pomme), description in TOUTES LES DANSES MODERNES, D. Charles, 1939

How To Do The Big Apple, description in IT'S FUN DANCING THE LATEST STEPS, Johnson, 1940

The Big Apple, description in IMPROVE YOUR DANCING STEP-BY-STEP, by Joe Bonomo, 1956

#### Films:

Danced in the film *The Big Apple, with The Arthur Murray Shag Dancers* - 1937

*Big Apple Dance; A Tarheel Stomp Agitates Country* - Universal Newsreel, 1937, with Helon Powell-Poole

Danced in the film *From the Minuet to the Big Apple* - 1937

Danced in the film *Two Shadows*, performed by "Jean and Her Big Apple Dancers" - 1938

Danced in the film *Start Cheering* - 1938

Danced in the film *Penrod's Double Trouble* - 1938

Danced in the film *I am the Law* - 1938

Danced in the film *Spirit of Youth* - 1938

Danced in the film *Judge Hardy's Children* - 1938

Danced in the film *Los Milliones de Chaflan* - 1938

Danced in the film *Delinquent Parents* - 1938

Danced in the film *Keep Punching* (Frankie Manning's version) - 1939

Danced in the documentary *The Spirit Moves* - 1950

Al Minns and Leon James demonstrating Big Apple steps for Marshall Stearns - 1959