

# Cha Cha Cha!

Compiled by Chris and Terri Cantrell from a variety of reference and personal sources.

**History:** Before the rhythm was called the 'cha cha' it was referred to as the 'triple mambo'. The cha evolved from a desire to slow down the tempo and tame the aerobic and jerky actions of the mambo to make it easier for the general public to dance. The mambo was a fusion of jazz and Latin rhythms, qualities that much of the cha cha music of today retains.



Enrique Jorrin

Based on a variety of sources it appears that a British dance teacher, Pierre Leville, originally introduced the cha dance to the world in the early 1950s. He noticed that the rumba and mambo were occasionally danced with a couple of extra steps or hip movements. In 1948 in an almost parallel occurrence, bandleader Enrique Jorrin, of the Cuban dance orchestra *America*, composed the first known cha music. The music was a slowed down version of the mambo with syncopation in alternating measures (three step rhythm to two beats of music). The term "Cha Cha Cha" appears to have two origins: (1) from the shuffling sounds made by the feet of dancers to the syncopated portion of the music; (2) from the 'cha cha', seedpod producing plant, from the West Indies; these seedpods are used to create a small rattle also called 'cha-cha' also called the maracas.



Tito Puente

A few of the other artists that strongly influenced the cha cha include: Chicho O'Farril, Pérez Prado, Tito Puente, Charles Aznavour, Rubén Blades, Willie Colón. Cha cha is still popular today in Latin, pop, and country music. "Cowboys swaying their hips, what is the world coming to?" (anonymous). Country cha cha is typically slightly slower and uses less change up of body movement than other chas. Parts of the cha cha rhythm can be heard in the music of: Ricky Martin, Enrique Iglesias, and Gloria Estafan among others.



Perez Prado

**Timing:** Cha Cha music is written in 4/4 time and is generally played at a tempo of 30-32 measures/minute (~126 beats/minute). In Round Dancing the typical timing used is: 1,2,3,&,4 (QQ Q&Q). In the traditional ballroom setting the timing is counted: 2,3,4,&,1 (QQ Q&Q) beginning the figure on beat 2 instead of beat 1.

A fun variation on the timing is to use what is known as **Guapacha** (WAH-pah-cha) timing. The guapacha timing has a half beat hesitation followed by a quick catch up step. Hold the first half of a beat almost freezing but slowing drawing the free foot towards the weighed foot, then a quick quarter-beat second step, timing: hold, &, quick, quick, &, quick (-&Q Q&Q). To lead the guapacha timing, the man should strongly stretch the side of his body opposite to his free foot, e.g. on the first half of a turning basic the man should stretch the right side of his body and look to the left as he slowing draws the left foot towards his right foot. Hopefully, his stretched side will indicate his intentions to his partner ☺. The basic, turning basic, and time step are ideal figures to use guapacha timing on an occasional basis.



**Latin Hold, Footwork, Hips, & Leading:** For information on these items, please see the previous clinic notes (*Latin Hold, Latin Footwork, & Rumba Characteristics*) published in the DIXIE newsletter, [http://www.ctkr.com/#Clinic\\_Notes](http://www.ctkr.com/#Clinic_Notes), or contact us at [dance@ctkr.com](mailto:dance@ctkr.com).

**More on Latin Hips & Body Movement:** The hip movement in cha is generally less pronounced than in rumba due to the speed of the dance, but they do move. Yes men, this includes your hips. Too often we see variations on the way Frankenstein would dance the cha cha, with all his joints fused together, none moving independently. Not only does this non-mobility take more physical exertion, cause unnecessary tension (especially to the neck, shoulders, hips, and knees), and inhibit breathing, it also does not feel very good to either partner. Just as in rumba, the hips should move automatically as a result of correct foot and leg action, and also as in rumba this action can be directed to make it less chaotic and more pleasing to the eye. Keep the hip movement natural with direction and purpose. You do not need to overemphasize the movement of your hips or swing them deliberately, just give them a gentle nudge in the right direction. You too men!



**Stillness & Isolation:** As with most dance rhythms one of the goals is to limit excess body movement. Try to utilize only the body parts that are necessary for the figure you are executing. This stillness/isolation technique (moving individual parts of the body independently of others) is very useful in dancing for leading & following by reducing the ambiguity and will improve the overall look and feel of the figure.

**Isolation Exercise:** An example of an isolation exercise is to practice separating the body above and below the waist. The following exercise works the abdominals, diaphragm, and hip muscles. Begin by planting your feet firmly on the floor a hip distance apart. Tighten your tush (buttocks) muscles slightly, place your hands lightly on the hips, and then slide your rib cage to the left and then to the right. There should be no sagging or tilting of the shoulders. You should feel a sensation of pulling of the muscles around the waist while your hips and legs remain basically immobile. Practice 10 to 15 minutes per day could also have the added benefit of improving your suppleness, strength, and trimming your waistline.

Yoga, belly dance, and some jazz classes and videos can offer a wide variety of other isolation exercises. The following belly dance site has several isolation exercises: <http://www.venusbellydance.com/vocabulary.htm#beginner>.

**Head, Shoulders, Upper Body (rib cage):** All three of these areas should be kept relatively still in Latin dancing, except for deliberate, occasional styling. When they are moved unnecessarily you may lose the ability to lead or feel the lead from your partner. It also becomes very distracting to your partner and looks rather chaotic. If you wish to move this body part for styling effects, please try not to influence or induce the movement of any other part of your body. **Shoulders** are kept relatively still except in the up, down, and backwards (hyper extended behind your back) axis. Men, try to limit your shoulder movement to forward and laterally sideways movements for leading purposes. Ladies, your shoulders should generally remain still with a slight bit of forward movement as needed to maintain tension in your arm so that you can feel the man's lead. The **upper body** (rib cage) also remains still, except for the upward stretching that might be desired in some figures, such as the guapacha variation. The area just below the ribs and above the hips will move with the movement of the knees-feet-hips.

**Arms & Hands:** The arms & hands will move both in leading-following connections and styling. Keep a slight tone in your arms and try not to allow them to fling around as a result of a quick or jerky movement. More on this next issue.

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