

# A Little Bit of Latin

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Rumba, Cha, Salsa, Mambo, and Merengue, oh my! These are just a few of the many Latin dance rhythms that originated in the countries of the Caribbean (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, The Dominican Republic), Central and South America (Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Columbia, Argentina...). These dances have been refined over the years and have been strongly influenced by other cultures, including African and the North American melting pot.

These rhythms have much in common, but they also have characteristics that are completely their own.

**Latin Body Frame & Hold:** The Latin dance hold is more compact than in the smooth rhythms (Waltz, Foxtrot...). Stand 6-9" apart with the body and head upright. Body weight should be slightly forward, centered over the balls of the feet, not back on the heels. The man's arms and upper body should create a firm frame in which the woman is gently held. In closed position, the man places his right hand on the woman's left shoulder blade with his elbow slightly rounded. The woman places her left hand on the man's right arm; she should place her thumb in the groove between the two large muscles in his upper arm. The man's left hand is held between the woman's eye level and the top of her head, this elbow will be more pronouncedly bent than in the smooth rhythms. When in the various open positions, the man's arm/hand is generally held lower (aim for her waist & hip area) so he can communicate more easily with her center of gravity (hips).

**Lead:** A good lead from the man makes clear his intentions to the woman, who then follows. The first ingredient of a good lead is for the man to dance clearly & confidently. Clarity from the man is all import, as it enables the woman to detect the speed, direction, and feel of a figure early enough to respond appropriately. Second leads are a subtle, but clear, communication coming from the man's body, radiating down his arms, and then to the woman. Thirdly, the man should have "tone" in his arms, use the muscles in the upper arm to keep the arms in position and thus allowing the woman to feel your body movement. Avoid the notorious "spaghetti" (limp arms) and the "ram rod" arms (arms held too stiffly and generally with a straight elbow). The woman should not try to anticipate the man's intentions, but should wait to accept & follow the man's lead.

**Foot & Leg work:** Latin rhythms are typically danced with little/short steps, toes slightly pointed out, stepping using the inside edge of the foot, a narrow knee line, and no or very little upper body movement. All of these factors lead to the characteristic figure 8 hip action. The footwork is similar to the action achieved when walking up and down stairs. Steps are taken with pressure on the ball of the foot with a flexed knee. As the weight is taken onto the foot, roll from the ball to the flat of the foot, the knee should straighten, and the heel of the opposite foot is then released. If the footwork is done correctly, this action should come naturally.

**Rhythm:** Many Latin rhythms are danced to four-count music using *quick-quick-slow* timing, including Rumba, Salsa, and Mambo. Cha and Merengue are also danced to four-count music but the timing differs slightly, *quick-quick-quick-and-quick* (1,2,3&4) for Cha and generally *quick-quick-quick-quick* for Merengue. Ballroom dancers typically start the first quick on beat 2 of the measure and the slow covers beats 4 and 1. This timing arises because of the strong accented second beat in traditional Latin music and a weaker accent on the fourth beat. In Round Dancing, we most often dance beginning on the first beat of the measure, which works well for music accented on the first beat.

Rumba: Europeans from Spain, Portugal, France and England who colonized South America and the Caribbean all imported slaves from Africa to take over the hard labor of the local inhabitants. The Rumba combined African and Caribbean rhythms in a dance that in its original form was extremely erotic and uninhibited. The lady would perform sinuous movements of the hip, chest, and shoulders, while the man did his best to respond. Since not all Cubans possessed this uninhibited quality, a refined version of the rumba named the *son* emerged. The *son* was slower and more sentimental, with movements that were mere flirtation as opposed to the promise of the real thing. The *son* was the actual dance exported. The name "Rumba" now includes many types of Latin American dances, including the *son*. The Rumba reached the United States in the late 1920's. In 1946, the British originally standardized the Rumba. They taught it using the United States technique (with couples dancing in a square or "rumba box" rather than moving around the whole floor).

Mambo: Mambo originated in Cuba in the large Haitian settlements and was probably influenced by voodoo music and ritual dancing. It is also considered to be an outgrowth of the Rumba. The mambo dance is attributed to Cuban bandleader, Perez Prado. He took the rhythm of sugarcane cutters and syncopated it. The mambo music usually has a staccato sound and a speed somewhat faster than rumba. Due to the fairly fast nature of mambo, dancers generally freeze on the second half of the slow count. This start-stop action gives mambo its characteristic staccato look. There were originally three types of mambo – Single (QQS): this is the mambo we do today; Double (QQSoh): danced 1,2,kick,step or 1,2,tap,step, this became the Conga; Triple (QQQ&Q or 1,2,3&4): the Q&Q (3&4) was danced with the feet in place, this Mambo version eventually lead to the Cha.

Cha: The Cha is an outgrowth of the triple Mambo and the triple Lindy. Modern Cha has Cuban, African, and North American influences and was introduced in the USA in early 1950s. The Cha Cha Cha name possibly came from the noise made by the slippers of Caribbean women.

Salsa: When Ignacio Piñero used the phrase "Echale Salsita!" (spice it up!) as the title of a new piece of music, he could not have known the impact that it would have half a century later. The phrase was later simplified to "Salsa". Salsa originated from Afro-Caribbean music and was later strongly influenced by American Jazz at the hands of Perez Prado.

Merengue: There are two popular versions of the origin of this Dominican Republic national dance. One story alleges the dance originated with slaves who were chained together and, of necessity, were forced to drag one leg as they cut sugar to the beat of drums. The second story alleges that a great hero was wounded in the leg during one of the many revolutions in the Dominican Republic. A party of villagers welcomed him home with a victory celebration and, out of sympathy, everyone dancing felt obliged to limp and drag one foot. Merengue has existed since the early years of the Dominican Republic (in Haiti, a similar dance is called the Meringue). It is possible the dance took its name from the confection made of sugar and egg whites because of the light and frothy character of the dance or because of its short, precise rhythms.