

Latin Attitude (part 2)

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The following ideas have been collected in order to assist in comfortable dancing and are not meant to be absolute, your experience may vary. While there are many similarities with all Latin rhythms, below is mainly geared towards rumba, cha, bolero, mambo, merengue, and salsa type rhythms.

Continuing on from last month...

Some of the information below is a repeat of information presented in the other Latin & Rumba clinic notes that have been published in the DRDC-DIXIE newsletter, BUT with a few new twists. Past articles can also be found at http://www.ctkr.com/#Clinic_Notes.

Latin Foot & Leg Work:

On your next visit to the zoo or a farm check out the deer, camel, &/or horse; they have a nice Latin walk. For humans though it is not natural and our knees hopefully do not bend like theirs:

Tranquil the upper body

Tuck in the tummy

Tighten the tush, make it burn

Tend to have a forward poise (*okay, we are pushing it but we ran out of "T" words*)

Turn out your toes

Tiny steps

Track your feet

Toes hug the floor

Okay, try that and get back to us --- Just kidding.



Too often we see variations on the way Frankenstein would dance the rumba or the cha with all of his lower 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, & knees), and inhibit breathing, it also does not feel very good to yourself or your partner.

You might want to try the following exercise individually first with your hand on the wall or a dance barre. Stand upright with a slight forward poise. Put your heels together and slightly turn out the toes (a loose ballet first position). Now for the hard part... moving. Depending on the speed of the music you may wish to limit the step size to shoulder width or as small as 6 inches for the very quick ('&') beats. The American style Cuban motion is much easier to execute for the majority of dancers & is discussed below.

Imagine yourself barefooted on a dirt path full of potholes and strewn with many rocks of all sizes. Your job is to carry a bucket of water balanced on the top of your head down this path. Got the picture, now here's the drill:

Since the bucket is on our head, we cannot look down. However, with the threat of stumbling into a pothole or tripping over a rock, we cannot confidently take a step. For this exercise put all your weight on the right foot/leg. To move, first bend the left knee. Slide the pointed left toe forward in front of the right leg to feel the path and the place where you want to step, no weight. Once you have determined that the path is clear, test the ground to ensure it will support your weight by applying slight pressure to the left toe. Slowly lower the left foot, with toes pointed slightly out for balance, until the heel touches



the ground, but still with only minimal pressure to ensure the ground is solid. Begin the transfer of weight from the standing/supporting right leg forward onto the stepping left foot and straighten the left knee. Then let the hip "settle" to a relaxed position (like 'waiting for a bus' type of stance). As the hip settles, the knee of the free leg should be allowed to naturally bend and the heel of the right foot should slightly leave the ground. Repeat with the right foot - first drag and place the toe (knee bent), press your heel to the floor (still bent knee), stand up on the foot (straighten the leg), and finally let your hip settle.



We do this subconsciously when walking backwards. We feel for the first back step with our toe, roll onto the ball of our foot, lower into the heel, and then place our weight onto the leg.

Now that you have mastered that, let us work on 'fast feet'. Allow the unweighted foot to linger & remain in the ending position of the previous step for as long as possible. At the beginning of the next step the foot moves quickly into position, ready to begin testing the ground. This does not mean that the entire body comes to a complete stop/freeze between each step and/or figure. There is continual motion of the knees and hips. The "freeze frame" makes a nice picture, but only when it is used occasionally.

Forward Checked Action: (International Style mainly) Use this action for forward moving steps that will be checked & then reversed. This action allows the couple to move slightly further apart from each other, giving a nice looking change of pace.

Latin Hips: Yes men, this includes your hips also. While the 'party line' states that the movement of the hips is only a result of the foot and leg action, the dancer can act to direct this action to make it less chaotic, feel better, & make it more pleasing to the eye.

There are mainly two types of hip movement that are not associated with the rotation of the body in the course of a figure: Settling into the hip at the end of a measure or figure and the Figure Eight hip motion. The hip movement in cha and the faster rhythms is generally less pronounced than in rumba due to the speed of the dance, but they still do move.

Settling Into the Hip: At the end of the measure or the figure, settle the supported/weighted hip gently towards the floor. It is like allowing the weighted hip to take a deep breath and then relax down on top of the supporting leg & foot.

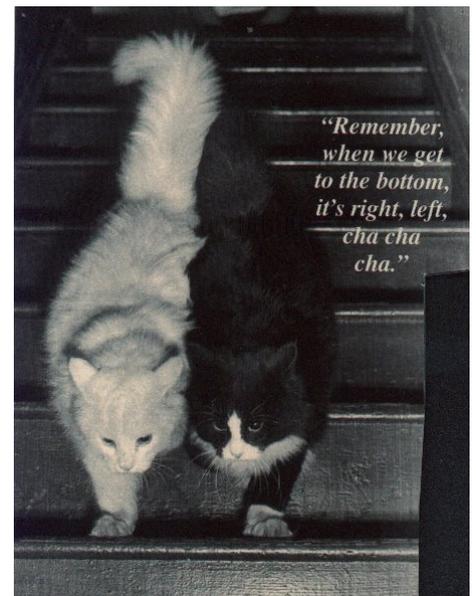
Figure Eight: Gently guide your hip motion into a figure eight. For each step taken, the same hip does a circular motion as weight is taken onto that foot, the left hip moves in a counterclockwise direction and the right hip will move in a clockwise direction. As an example, in more detail: Step forward with your left foot while moving the left hip forward as weight is transferred onto the left foot, the left hip continues to move in a counterclockwise direction. Recover back onto the right foot and the right hip moves forward as weight is transferred onto the right foot, the right hip continues to move in a clockwise direction.

For starters, try just giving the hips a very gentle nudge in the right direction without moving the rest of your body. You too men! Try Brent Moore's method and practice in front of a mirror, but you might want to wear clothes if you are built like most of the population.

Sway: The Latin rhythms do employ some body sway. It is generally used by the man to assist (lead) the woman in achieving different positions and figures, such as in the woman's spiral preceding a rope spin.

A Brief Bit on Leading: A common complaint heard from the ladies is that the gentlemen are not leading. Well, guys for once it may not be your fault. What essentially happens is that the woman does not allow the man to lead. She interferes with the points of contact by flapping her arms, bouncing, faking the hip movement, and not sustaining hand/arm pressure when dancing. The man cannot lead arms of jelly/spaghetti (limp arms) any more than he can ramrod arms (straight arm with a locked elbow). Men stand erect and keep "tone" in your arms, using the muscles in the upper arm to keep the arms in position and thus allowing the woman to feel his body movement if she has tone in her arms.

A good lead from the man makes clear his intentions to the woman before he begins to move. Clarity from the man is important, as it enables the woman to detect the speed, direction, and feel of a figure early enough to respond appropriately. Leads are subtle & clear communications beginning from the



man's body, radiating down his arms, and then to the woman. Woman, there is a fine line between reacting to what he wants you to do and jumping the gun by anticipating the man's intentions.

There are three types of leads used by the man in the Latin rhythms: Physical, Shaping, and vocally telling her what you want her to do. Unfortunately the latter tends to make hearing the music & the cues rather difficult, so in actuality there are only two types.

Physical Leads – These happen as a result of contact between the man and the woman, generally through a slight bit of tension in the arm(s). Most of the time, in order to get the best results the man should aim this pressure towards the woman's center of gravity (her hips), as opposed to other parts of her body, but there are exceptions. For example when in fan position, in order to indicate to the woman to close her feet at the beginning of the next figure, he exerts a gentle pressure towards the woman's center of gravity and slightly to his side with his left hand.

Shaping Leads – The man shapes his body and/or arm to indicate to the woman the direction and/or position required. For example, the man can use his body shaping to indicate to the woman the direction and timing of a spiral.

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