

Mambo Clinic Notes

Chris & Terri Cantrell

The following ideas have been collected in order to assist you in comfortable dancing and are not meant to be absolutes. The body alignment for closed position in the Latin rhythms (rumba, cha, samba, mambo...) is all-important in terms of dancer's comfort & confidence. It also extends to their ability to execute some figures.

Let us set the mood for Latin dancing. You are in a dark, smoky dance hall. You see someone across the room that you might like to get to know. The man approaches the woman and from that moment his goal is to seduce the woman, while the woman is 'playing hard to get'.

Latin Body Frame & Hold:



The Latin dance hold is more compact than in the smooth rhythms (waltz, foxtrot, quickstep...). Stand 6"-9" apart with the body & head upright. A simple rule of thumb for the distance between the couple - if the woman is much shorter than you, stand further away from her. If she is much taller than you, stand closer. The general rule is comfort.

Body weight should be slightly forward, centered over the balls of the feet, not back on the heels. Maintain a slight forward poise with your body towards one another.

The man's arms & upper body should create a firm frame in which the woman is gently held. Both partners need to keep some tension (pressure) in the arms. 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 (see below) by flapping her arms, bouncing around, faking the hip movement, and not sustaining hand/arm pressure when dancing. The man cannot lead arms of jelly. Man, even if you are a beginner, you can dance effectively, if you stand erect and keep a firm forward pressure on your partner.

Four Points of Contact in the Latin Closed Position:

CONTACT POINT #1 - The first point of contact is the man's left and the woman's right hand. The man's left arm should be held up with the elbow bent fairly sharply somewhat towards the floor. His left wrist should bend slightly to the left side with his palm facing the woman and thumb up. This will cause his fingers to be parallel to the floor. The woman should approach the man with her palm facing his and her fingers up and her elbow relaxed. Her hand should contact the man's at the fleshy part below their thumbs. She should then gently fold/cup her fingers over the man's hand between his thumb and forefinger. The man should gently wrap his fingers around the woman's hand. Partners should gently fold their thumbs over each others hand, being very careful not to clamp down on their partner's hand. The man's left hand is held between the woman's cheek & eye level if she is shorter than him and the reverse if she is taller (hand is held between the man's cheek & eye level).

CONTACT POINT #2 - The second point of contact is the man's right forearm & the woman's side. With the woman's left arm held to the side and slightly forward, the man should place his right lower forearm under the woman's upper arm near her armpit. He should apply slight upward pressure to her upper arm and the woman in response should apply slight downward pressure. Man's right hand is not yet touching the woman's back, but his fingers and thumb should be together and his wrist should bend slightly downward. The woman should stand slightly to the man's right side.

CONTACT POINT #3 - Folding of man's right hand. The man then folds his right hand around to gently

touch the woman's left shoulder blade. Be very careful not to use this point to squeeze the woman, but rather it should be a gentle point of contact. Remember both of you need to be able to breath freely and be on your own feet, not leaning on or dragging your partner.

CONTACT POINT #4 – Woman’s left hand. The woman places her left forearm and hand on top of the man's right arm. She should gently hold his biceps with her thumb and middle finger, being careful not to clamp down. Her hand should be turned slightly outward from the wrist. If points 2, 3 and 4 have been made properly and if the partners are holding their arms up, then no light will be seen between the man's right arm and the woman's left arm, excluding elbow overlap due to height differences of the partners.

During this entire exercise keep shoulders relaxed and stand erect not leaning over your partner.

Open Position:

The handhold in open position is slightly modified. The man lowers the hold in a way that he can aim for her waist & hip area (center of gravity). This allows him to communicate more effectively with the woman, i.e. lead. The man also rotates his wrist inward so that his palm essentially faces him, giving the woman a very nice ledge to place her fingers on. This connection will also improve communication between the couple. In open position this is the only contact point.

Latin Footwork:

Now that you are in the proper position, we will mess everything up by giving you the opportunity to actually move. So.....

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.



We suggest you try the following individually first. You may wish to have a hand on the wall or on 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, unless the Latin music is really slow (e.g. bolero) it is recommended that you take small steps, the faster the music, the smaller the step. Depending on the speed of the music you may wish to limit the step size to shoulder width, and possibly as small as about 6 inches for the very quick ('&') beats.

The American style Cuban motion is much easier to execute for the majority of dancers, so this is the style we will discuss.

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 we put all of our weight on our right foot/leg. To move, we first must bend the left knee. Slide our pointed left toe forward in front of the right leg to feel the path and place where we want to step, no weight. Once the path is clear, test the ground to ensure it will support our weight by applying slight pressure to the left toe. Slowly lower the 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. Now that we know it will support us, 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 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.



Subconsciously we do this when walking backwards. We feel for the first back step with our toe, roll onto the small of our foot, lower into the heel, and then place our weight onto the leg. Give it a try. We can hear the news now, "hundreds of people afflicted with strange disease that has them walking backwards".

To further add to the technique of Latin footwork you want to have 'fast feet'. This is where the foot lingers/remains in the ending position of the previous step as long as possible. At the beginning of the next step the foot moves quickly into position. This does not mean that the entire body comes to a complete halt between each step and/or figure. The "freeze frame" is a nice look, but not all the time. There is continual motion of the knees and hips.

There is no intentional hip movement in any of the Latin dances. The characteristic figure 8 hip motion is a natural consequence of changing weight from one foot to the other.

In truth, it is really not the feet alone that create the figures. Each part of the body (toes, legs, knees, tush, tummy, hips, chest, shoulders, arms, fingers, head) has a role to play. Some of roles may include being as still as possible or moving independently for effect (isolation type movements) - the shoulder, chest, and the head. Others work at tensing muscles - tightening the tummy and tush muscles. Body parts can also linger - feet, toes, and legs. Some parts are almost dragged into action - toes. Other parts are influenced by another body part - weight change affecting the hips.

On your next visit to the zoo or a farm check out the deer, camel, and horse; they have a nice Latin walk.

A Brief Bit on Leading:

In addition to the positioning of the arms & hands, 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 important, 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, using the muscles in the upper arm to keep the arms in position and thus allowing the woman to feel his 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.

Mambo Origin: 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.



Musical Timing: The musical timing of the Mambo is 4/4. That is, four beats to the bar or measure of music. It is very staccato in sound and much faster than the typical Rumba music. We dance the Rumba at 28 - 32 measures per minute, whereas we dance the Mambo much faster. Usually, we dance the Mambo at 38 - 42 measures per minute. Some very experienced dancers might dance it as fast as 48 measures per minute. This is much too fast for the average dancer, however you can see the great latitude you have in dancing the Mambo.



Rhythm: The standard rhythm of the Mambo is quick-quick-slow, as is the Rumba. The primary difference is the speed of the music. As with the Rumba and the Cha Cha, the ballroom dancers use the first beat of a measure to prepare for the first step by fully displacing their hip. This makes for their first weight transfer, or first step to come on the second beat of the measure. This causes their quick-quick-slow rhythm to be on the beats of 2, 3, 4/1. As we do with the other two rhythms, Rumba and Cha Cha, most round dancers step on the first beat of the measure, there by dancing their quick-quick-slow on beats 1, 2, 3/4. This is acceptable as long as the dancers stay true to the character of the rhythm. The quicks must be fast and there must be a dramatic stop on the slow, in most cases.