

Toni Heel
By Barbara and Jim German

Want to see some great Latin action? Let me introduce you to Toni Heel. Toni is always on the Latin dance floor. People are continually watching the rhythmic interpretation of Toni's hips and legs to the Latin beat. You can also watch Toni on the televised Latin championship finals.

By now you probably suspect that Toni Heel is not a person but a technique to help create Latin hip action. You are right. Toni Heel was a name created by a student several years ago during a Latin workshop. Toni Heel really stands for- toe, knee, and heel and represents the foot and leg action for creating today's Latin hip movement. Many years ago it was popular for the American School of Dance to utilize the "box" concept for many Latin rhythms. After the 1959 World Latin Championships, some American Schools began to slowly incorporate the hip movement of the world leaders. The leaders at that time came from International Schools and utilized more of a "diamond" basic incorporating the forward, recover, and side actions. Today, there is very little difference between the top American and International Latin dancers. So, let's look at the "Toni Heel" action and see what we may want to incorporate into our dancing.

FIVE TOES PLUS:

Let's begin by identifying parts of the foot. There are five parts of the foot used in Latin dancing: inside edge of foot, inside edge of toe, ball of foot, which is the front part of the foot, heel of foot, which is the back part of the foot, and whole foot. In Latin dancing the term "ball flat" is used frequently and refers to the weight distributed over that part of the foot in contact with the floor. "Ball flat" means the front part of the foot is first in contact with the floor and flat means the action completes with the whole foot in contact with the floor. Ball flat does imply how much weight is applied but rather the look of the foot and its action. Latin action involves using the various parts of the foot to create the desired movement. Today's Latin dancers have developed the use of the foot to create a very interesting and particular look. The foot has evolved to being more than that part of the body located below the ankle and covered with a shoe.

SHIFTING:

With all of this information to remember, how do we take a step or walk? A good question with an easy answer. Let's try an exercise first then move into taking a step. This exercise will allow us to feel the hip action resulting from the movement of the foot. For this exercise it is desirable to stand in front of a mirror with your feet approximately shoulder width apart. You should be in an upright position with shoulders over hips and hips over feet and have your weight equality distributed over both feet which are turned out slightly. (This is referred to as the "10 and 2" position. The name came from a clock face where our heads are at noon and our left toe is pointing at 10 o'clock and our right toe is pointing at 2 o'clock.) Now, keeping your feet in position, shift your weight to only one leg (for this discussion, shift your weight to the right foot). As you shifted your weight, your left foot, the non-weighted foot, has moved from whole foot to inside edge of foot and finally, as the heel releases contact with the floor, to inside edge of toe. Before transferring our weight back, let's add one change. As we transfer our weight back to the left foot let's also straighten our left knee after ball of foot and before whole foot. As we transfer our weight, the sequence of action will have our left foot will move from inside edge of toe to ball of foot where we will straighten our knee before lowering the heel to whole foot. The straightening of the knee and the lowering of the heel to whole foot has taken our left hip back. Note, as this was occurring with our left foot, our right foot has changed from whole foot to inside edge of foot, to inside edge of toe and at the same time our right hip has moved forward. Transferring our weight to the right foot, the actions include having the right foot move from inside edge of toe to ball of foot. At this point we straighten our right knee before lowering our heel to whole foot. As we began to straighten our knee, our right hip started to move back and became back when our heel came in contact with the floor. Of course, the left side of our body has also moved and our left foot has the inside edge of toe in contact with the floor and the left hip forward. The hips, because of the foot and knee actions, have made a figure eight movement. Although each hip only moved forward and backward, the movement of both hips together has created a figure eight look. Practice the exercise a few times without progression. Keep watching in the mirror to see that your upper body retains a stillness and both the upper body and hips are level with the floor; we are only using our feet and knees to create a hip action. When you are comfortable with this movement, the hard part is over and we can begin the forward

walk. You might see this type of action in belly dancing or the hula. These actions are all similar in nature since each is using the foot and knee to create a hip movement.

MOVING FORWARD:

To take our first step forward, let's stop the above exercise with our weight on the right foot. This means: the right knee is straight, the right hip is back, the left foot has the inside edge of toe in contact with the floor, the left knee is relaxed and veered in toward the center of the body, the left hip is forward, and our feet are pointing at "10 and 2". The first step begins by moving the inside edge of the left toe toward the right foot, but not too close. We continue to move the foot forward to a point 12 to 14 inches in front of our body and midway between our shoulders or in front of our "button line". Actually, the heel will be at this point and the toe will be pointing at "10". As you take weight onto the ball of the left foot the hip begins to shift and as you straighten your knee, the left hip will move back. As you lower to the heel of your left foot and take weight on the whole foot, your left knee is straight and your left hip has reached the furthest point back. (As you have probably noticed, your right hip has moved to its furthest point forward. Your right knee has veered in toward the center of the body and your right toe has inside edge in contact with the floor.) The look is the same as the above exercise with the exception that your left side is also forward since you stepped forward. By repeating the same set of actions and starting with the right foot you will achieve a second forward step. (Note, as the right heel is placed at the "button line" the right toe will be pointing toward the 2 o'clock position.) By repeating these actions several times, you will be walking the Latin walk and looking like a pro!

The amount of detail you are able to incorporate depends on your interest and the speed of the music. The desire to create a good Latin action and the slower the music the greater the look. Speed up the music and with less time you may not be able to incorporate all of the actions. The next time a slow rumba is played bring Toni Heel to the dance. Happy Dancing!

The nicest look on the floor usually involves a smile on the dancer's face so try smiling while the feet are moving. And at the end of a dance a special smile for your partner would be nice.