

Latin Footwork

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

Okay, after last month you have beautiful body and arm positions, and are going to take a stab at leading, so this month 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) always 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.

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