

Body Awareness – Cuban Motion / Latin Hip Action

By Kaye West and Larry Caves

Latin Hip Action, as it is called in International style, is called Cuban Motion in American style. While hip action is usually described as making a figure-8, the term Cuban Motion is likely more appropriate (as well as authentic) since the entire body can make figure-8 paths in space!

Figure-8 hip rotation is largely the same in both major styles of dance. They are danced in forward walks, back walks, rocks (both forward and back), in side steps and a side rock, and in stationary hip rocks. The “crossing point” of the path of the figure-8 shifts from above one foot to above the other foot (so there is some sideways motion as body weight changes from one leg to the other), but large hip motion is created by rotating the hip *back* with the spine as the pivot point then moving the hips in a straight line so that the opposite hip arrives over the opposite foot to rotate back around the spine on the opposite side of the body.

Variations of Hip Action are found in all of the Latin/Rhythm dances except Paso Doble which was created prior to the introduction of the Afro/Latin American influence in dancing.

Details for how to achieve Cuban Motion / Latin Hip Action, associated arm movements, and other ways hips are used in Latin / Rhythm dancing are explained below.

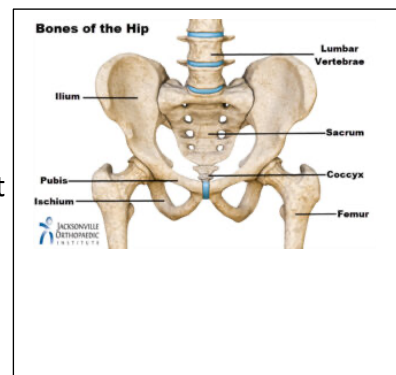
Description of Initial Stationary Hip Rocks

Below is a description of dancing *Hip Rock Left and Right (SS)* for the Lead when thinking only of the hips. Note that there is *split weight throughout*, even though there is more weight alternately on one leg than the other. **Read each column from top to bottom to note the action on the second half of each count:**

Beat	Beat 4 (previous measure)	1	2	3	4
On Beat	Stand w/feet apart and toes out with weight above R leg	Transfer weight to L leg above front of L foot	Weight ends on flat L foot with L hip back	Transfer weight to R leg above front of R foot	Weight ends on flat R foot with R hip back
On &	Rotate hips so hips are slanted with L hip forward	Begin to rotate L hip back (CCW)	Push hips diagonally forward toward R toe	Begin to rotate R hip back (CW)	Push hips diagonally forward toward L toe

Looking at oneself in the mirror with arms straight down at one’s side while doing hip action reveals that when weight is on the left leg the hip moves very close to the left arm and there is space (a gap) between the arm and hip on the right side, and vice versa, created because bodies are wider from side to side than from front to back. The larger one’s hips (hip bones of women are larger than that of men), the larger the hip rocks appear.

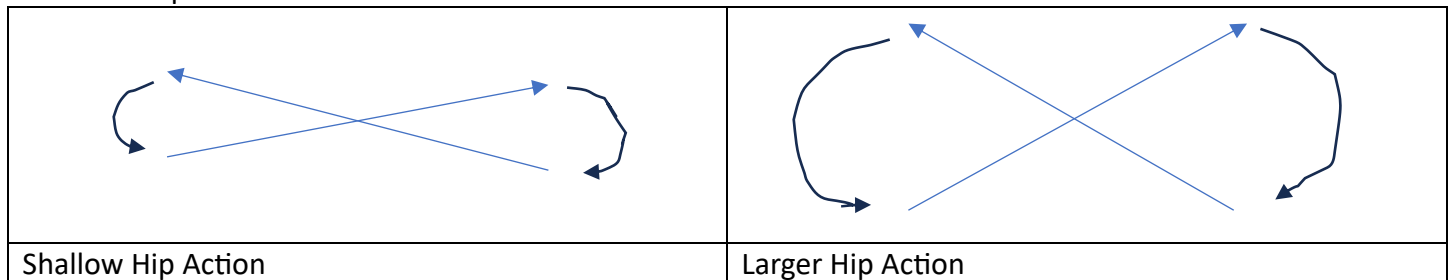
Experimenting with how wide the feet are apart demonstrates that the further apart the feet are, the larger the hip rocks appear. Additionally, one can notice that the hip is higher in elevation as it rotates out to the side; the figure-8 is not just on a horizontal plane; the outer part of the circle curves upward.



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The diagrams below illustrate shallow versus larger hip rocks. The difference lies mostly in how far the hip is taken back to be pushed from back to front for the next rotation. The body doesn't bend sideways to create large hip action. In fact, when the hip is pushed too far sideways, there is danger of the top of the femur (leg bone, which is slanted upward at the top to contact with the hip socket) popping out of place (notice above illustration). It is an *illusion* that the body *bends* from side to side! Techniques to amplify the size of the hip rocks are described below.



Three Additional Levels of Figure-8 Hip Motion

Dancers may select the level of hip motion they desire to implement. Each level involves more of the whole body action so the hip rocks seem to be larger and more expressive.

In order to demonstrate that everyone's hips can elevate on alternate sides when one bends the knees and to note the natural response of the body when knees bend, stand with feet together and alternately bend one knee and then the other.

When the left knee is bent forward as far as possible, the right hip is back and higher since the right leg is straight; the hips slant in two directions: down toward the front and toward the left side; the entire torso slants (hence, "forward poise"). And as the right hip is back, the right shoulder is also lower than the left shoulder. These postures reverse when the right knee bends. Also, if one keeps the arms straight down at the side while alternately bending the knees, the arm on the side with the hip back is *in front of* the hip so that the shoulders and hips are not on the same vertical plane; they are out of alignment or have "contra body action" which means that the top and bottom of the torso are "against" one another. That contra body action is also exhibited in a second way: by the shoulder and hip on one side of the body alternately being closer together while on the other side they are further apart.

Level 1

This level is created by elevating the hip when it is back (so it has lower elevation when it is forward). In American style this slant is accomplished by *bending the receiving* leg while the sending leg is straight. In International style dancers *land* on a straight leg, so in order to achieve the same slant, dancers elevate the *back* hip by *raising the back heel*. (International style is considered more difficult and American style is likely more authentic; again, dancers may choose which style to use.)

Doing hip rocks at this level, one can notice that as weight is mostly on one side of the body, the *knee* on that side makes a loop as the hip rotates back, then the knee on the other side makes a loop; the knees are making figure-8s (again, this is more pronounced the further the feet are apart). The shoulders also "fight" to appear to be remaining still as the hips alternately rotate back and, additionally, they are higher and then

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lower as the body changes its contra body posture from one side to the other. Close examination reveals that the shoulders also make figure-8 paths in space.

Note that there is continuous motion of the entire body. As one knee gradually bends the other leg gradually straightens.

Instructors sometimes caution dancers to keep their elbows in front of their body, but as noted above, when one knee is bent, the elbow on that side of the body appears to be behind the hip, so some might question that advice. When one considers that the reference line is an imaginary line extending through their bodies dividing the front half from the back half prior to any hip motion, there is an *illusion* that the arm goes back behind the body; it actually does not extend past that imaginary line.

In the past instructors cautioned dancers to keep their shoulders still while doing hip action, but today there is a recognition that shoulder movement helps to create the hip action. Shoulders must move as they “fight” to appear that they are still. Note, however, that the shoulders move *in opposition* to the hips (e.g., when the left hip is back, the left shoulder is forward).

Level 2

This level intentionally uses an added pelvic tilt and a compression of one side of the body and then the other.

When the left hip is back and high it can swing in a straight line with horizontal pendulum motion to momentarily be neutral and lower and then elevated again as the right hip lands over the toe of the right foot. This is accomplished by the right leg gradually straightening while receiving weight instead of remaining fully bent. This technique creates a larger hip action because the hip is elevated for a longer amount of time, and it provides the opportunity for the hip to make a circle around the toe prior to rotating back. The hip remains high as the right hip rotates back. When it arrives back, the right shoulder lowers (compresses) while the right hip remains up (so the right hip and right shoulder are closer together) which causes the left knee to bend. Some have likened this compression to an accordion which squeezes the top and the bottom of the instrument alternately.

Accompanying such compression the lungs can exhale and then inhale as the hips move forward and up, creating a wholistic movement of the entire body.

Level 3

This level involves using the arms to amplify the body movement. Some dancers begin to use their arms prior to achieving Level 2 above, which is reasonable because there are stages of using arms. Some teach doing the arms one at a time and then encouraging students to use the arms simultaneously. They say first the elbow goes out to the side (seemingly going back because of the hip placement), then the wrist, and then the fingers. The following method encourages dancers to use both arms in a similar fashion. However, learning and practicing arms simultaneously from the beginning, dancers recognize how the arm motions originated and that they represent natural movement.

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As a general rule, both males and females use similar arm motions and the major difference is in the use of the hands. Ladies use the flamboyant flamenco style as described below while men keep their fingers together.

Stage 1

Place hands about waist high in front of the body (ladies with fingers apart) with both thumbs pointed to the right (the left hand is palm down; the right hand is palm up). Move hands simultaneously toward the right (thumbs pointing the way) and when the left hand is centered at the body, flip both hands at the same time so that the left hand is palm up and the right hand is palm down. Then move hands simultaneously to the left (thumbs point the way) until the right hand is at the center of the body and flip them again. Repeat these actions so they become habitual.

Stage 2

Because there is a tendency of the body to sway in the same direction as the moving hands, implementing *contra body action* early is very important, since that is what is used in the Latin / Rhythm dances. So as hands move (as described above) to the right, the *left* hip goes back; as hands move to the left, the *right* hip goes back. Repeat these actions hundreds of times.

Stage 3

Continuing in the same general way, begin separating the hands wider apart (still having them move in the same directions as before and flipping them at the same times), extend the right arm out as far as possible to the right while the left arm is bent and in front of the body. After flipping hands, move arms to the left, extending the left arm out as far as possible to the left while the right arm is bent and in front of the body. Practice this repeatedly. Each arm is making a shallow figure-8 path in space.

Stage 4

Next think about increasing the size of the circles of the figure-8s and making a figure-8 path with each hand by using very large arm movements. This makes the back of the wrist (no longer the thumbs) lead the way! As an arm goes out to the side it starts lower in elevation, then rises up as if on a ramp and flips, then down the ramp moving toward the center of the body, then the thumb is at the waist and moves up the center of the body as if zipping a zipper, flips under the chin and coasts down the hill. Notice that the arms are on similar paths as before; when one hand is out to the side the other is at the center of the body. Also, each hand makes a figure-8 path. Practice this level.

Stage 5

At this stage the upper body also extends beyond the hips which move no more than above the feet; the ribcage is more involved. The top of the ribs extends out as an arm extends out; the bottom of the ribs seems to pull the arm back in. This action can be practiced by sitting in a chair and working the arms. The hips elevate alternately, but the hip motion is restricted in order to concentrate on the arms.

Also, ladies can implement flamenco style of their hands by bringing their middle finger and thumb closer together (as if they are holding a ping pong ball between them). Men simply keep the fingers next to each other as a “stronger” image.

And dancers (especially ladies) can experiment with other large figure-8 arm movements (circling the head, taking the zipper downward, crossing the arms in front, etc.). The image is that the arms are

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sticks that have long, flowing silk streamers (the paths the arms make in space) attached to them making large, graceful circles. Have fun with it!

Implementing Cuban Motion

After practicing Hip Rocks while remaining in place, practice the techniques when walking forward or back, when rocking forward or back, and when stepping or rocking to the side. Notice that in taking one weight change, the hip has lateral and pendulum motion then the rotary action for one-half of a figure-8.

Some have described the standing leg as the “dancing leg.” What this means in using Cuban motion is that the hip goes back *when weight is on the weighted leg*. The slower the steps, the more dramatic the Cuban motion can be.

A Caution

The Lead should take care to allow the Follower to rock back (the first step in many figures) so that she has time to complete the hip action (“Settling into the Hip”) prior to recovering. Typically, her hip is back on the count of “one” but her full weight is not over the foot until half way through that step (on the “and” count on a Quick step). Her body is not ready to move forward until the count of “a.” If the Lead tries to move her forward prior to that time, he can pull her off balance or minimize her hip action.

Other Latin Hip Actions

In the following situations there is no time for the figure-8 motion, but the hips play an important role in performing various figures.

Hip Twist

Hip twist action occurs in many places in both Cha Cha and Rumba for both the Follow and the Lead. Start with weight on a right straight leg with the left leg bent and the knee in front of the right knee. This posture elevates the right hip which is back. Press the left foot into the floor taking weight (feet swivel). Straighten the left leg and allow the right knee to come in front of the left knee, and this elevates the left hip which is now back. That action is called a “hip twist.” Pressing the left foot into the floor allows the lower part of the pelvic bone to tilt slightly forward which allows the swiveling action to be made with the least effort. One attempts to keep the shoulders from moving in space during this action. The hip twist changes the hips from extreme contra body on one side to extreme contra body on the other so it changes one’s facing direction. The hips move from back on one side to back on the other, so the body “twists.” Hence its name.

Note that when one has stepped forward with the right foot with the left hip remaining behind as the left toe remains on the floor, it feels as if the left hip rotates a bit further back (a “wind-up” similar to pulling a sling shot or bow and arrow back prior to releasing it). Releasing the left side of the body (by bending the left knee and moving weight fully onto the right foot) effortlessly creates the hip twist action including swiveling the foot. That is an easier technique than attempting to create the hip twist action by swiveling the right foot since nearly full-weight on the right foot has a great deal of resistance on the floor making it difficult to swivel.

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Forward Checking Action

In the first step of both the *New Yorker* and *Cuban Breaks* (Single and Double), the action of the forward step (for example, the left) is a *rock*, which means that the opposite foot (the right) remains on the floor. As the (left) foot moves forward in the first step, the hip on that (left) side of the body also moves forward so the other (right) hip is back. One checks the forward movement of the body by pulling the (left) hip straight back which causes the free (right) knee to move forward. The (right) knee meets or slightly passes the knee of the moving (left) leg. The moving (left) leg is straight and the free (right) knee is bent and there is split weight (with some weight on each foot).

In the case of the *Cuban Breaks*, next the (left) foot steps to the side so the (left) hip goes back. While it is possible to have a rounded, half-figure-8 action with that hip, the action occurs very quickly so it is acceptable if the (left) hip moves straight back. In *Double Cubans* the checking action and side step repeats.

Forward and Back Pendulum Action

In a figure such as a *Forward Chasse'* (aka *Forward/Lock Forward*), again there is a checking action, though there are differences from the above description. The term "chasse" means "chase" and comes from ballet where a second step chases (and literally catches up with) a first step so that the leg of the first step is pushed onward in the direction it was moving. The lock action occurs because of foot placement (See **Improving Dance Knowledge: Body Awareness – Walking** on this website).

When the (left) foot moves forward (on the first and third change of weight) in *Forward/Lock Forward*, the (left) hip moves forward and the right hip is back and is elevated because the (right) toe remains on the floor with the (right) heel raised off the floor. So, the hips have a vertical slant.

Then in the locking step, the (right) knee tucks immediately behind the (left) knee and both knees bend and both heels are off the floor. This causes the elevation of the hips to equalize though the (right) hip remains slanted further back than the left hip. Bending both knees moves the lower part of the pelvis slightly forward, creating the forward pendulum action. As the third walking step is taken, the (right) hip is again elevated because the heel is off the floor. It appears as if the hip swings back.

The action of the hips and feet for *Back/Lock Back* is similar to that for *Forward/Lock Forward*. As the back step is taken (with the left foot) the (left) hip is back and elevated, the bending of the knees in the lock step equalizes the pelvis, then the (left) hip is again elevated in the third weight change. When dancers do a series of forward/locks or back/locks, the pelvic pendulum motion is very apparent.

Forward and back pendulum action also occurs in Samba where the action is amplified with a greater bending of the knees, and it often is described as the "Samba bounce."

Horizontal Pendulum Swing

Besides as described above in Level 2 of hip action, a horizontal pendulum action of the hips is also very apparent in *Jive Chasse's Left and Right*. With weight on the (right) leg with (right) hip back, the hips swing to the side (left) during the three changes of weight ending with the left hip back. Then the hips swing to the side (right) during the three changes of weight ending with the (right) hip back. The feet may have a path side to side, but the *hips* have a path with a curve with the ends of the curve in front of the body.