

# The Character of Cha Cha

By Kaye West and Larry Caves

## Timing – the First Characteristic of a Rhythm

- Both **International and American styles** define the timing for Cha Cha as 2,3,4/&,1 (beat 1, the **downbeat**, accents hip action) corresponding to the original music (see **Cha Cha Origins** below).  
Using this rhythm, dancers typically take one preparatory step on count 1 (with Lead's right and Follow's left foot) then begin the **figure** with the opposite feet. They continue dancing a QQQ/&Q rhythm, beginning on beat 2 of each measure, often counting timing as "2, 3, cha/cha, 1" so they **end** the pattern on the downbeat in correspondence with the prominent **sound** heard on the downbeat. See [home.csulb.edu/~kwest](http://home.csulb.edu/~kwest) > [Walk In, Dance Out](#) > **Improving Dance Knowledge** > [Understanding Timing](#) for further explanation of timing.
- **Round dancing** generally counts Cha Cha as 1,2,3/&,4 (though a few dances have been written using "4/&1" timing). Most likely the reasons are (1) to consistently begin figures on the downbeat and (2) to make it easier to cue.
- Many Cha Cha figures use this QQQ/&Q rhythm (five changes of weight) consisting of two **components**: **Rock-Recover**, (QQ), with two changes of weight and a **Chasse'**, (Q/&Q), with three changes of weight (so the Chasse' is also called a **Triple**) yielding five changes of weight per measure. When one such figure is followed by another, the second figure begins with the opposite foot.
- Other figures are created by substituting a **Chasse'** for the **Rock-Recover** or by substituting two changes of weight for the **Chasse'**. Because of such substitutions, figures can have alternate timing patterns. Two chasses' in a measure yields Q/&Q Q/&Q (six changes of weight). QQQQ (four changes of weight) results when the normal chasse' is replaced with only two changes of weight which is useful when one partner changes from using "opposite footwork" to "same footwork" and transitioning back again.
- Round dance routines are choreographed to mimic notes in the music, so many timing patterns are possible.

## Other Characteristics of Cha Cha

- **Walking** is done with the ball of the foot hitting the floor first, followed by taking weight on the full foot (this is often described as "ball-flat") and the side of the body matching the foot that is moving is prominent (this is called "same side lead" so when walking backwards the side of the body matching the foot that is moving back is the side which leads). This foot is placed in front of, or nearly in front of, the standing foot when moving forward. For comparing walking in Cha Cha and Rumba to normal walking, see [home.csulb.edu/~kwest](http://home.csulb.edu/~kwest) > [Walk In, Dance Out](#) > **Improving Dance Knowledge** > **Body Awareness – Walking**.
- **Movements are fast and snappy.**
- There is a **flirty, playful, even sassy** ("anything you can do, I can do better") **attitude** with a great deal of **eye contact**.
- **Figure-8 hip action** is created with a rotation of a hip **back** then pushed forward on the diagonal to end above the toe of the other foot, then the newly-weighted hip is rotated **back** and pushed forward on

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the opposite diagonal ending above the toe of the other foot. When changed elevation of hips is used in hip action, the technique is different in International and American styles (see below as well as [home.csulb.edu/~kwest](http://home.csulb.edu/~kwest) > **Walk In, Dance Out** > **Improving Dance Knowledge** > **Body Awareness -- Latin Hip Action** for further explanation).

- Cha Cha is considered a **Spot Dance** since in social dancing it does not move very much from one place on the floor. In round dancing, with figures such as consecutive triple chas, the dance can progress since all dancers move simultaneously so they can do so without interfering with other dancers.

## Cha Cha Origins

The origin of a rhythm can provide clues as to its character. Cha cha is a “southern hemisphere” dance which is characterized by a great deal of body motion in contrast to the stately standard/smooth dances.

- Cha Cha began as a “club dance” in Cuba in the early 1950s with music composed by Enrique Jorrin. The first recording, by the band Orquesta America, was *La Engañadora* in 1953.
- The music was a slower adaptation of Afro/Cuban danzon´/mambo music where the *fourth* beat of a measure is divided in half, creating five changes of weight in one measure which was also called “triple mambo.” Those two beats plus beat 1 of the next measure produced a shuffling sound (cha/cha, cha) by dancers (on beats 4/&,1), creating the new name.
- [Pierre Margolle](#), aka Monsieur Pierre, was a Frenchman credited for establishing Latin American rhythms in the dancing world and establishing in 1947 the [Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing \(ISTD\)](#) with his partner Doris Lavelle and their colleague Doris Nichols. Their syllabus, completed in 1955, provided the foundation for the International style of Latin dances. While he had been teaching since 1918, by the 1930s he concentrated on Latin American dances, and in the early 50s visited Cuba where he discovered the Cha Cha (and refined his “square rumba” to begin on beat 2 of the measure!).
- Also in the early 50s one of the Orquesta America band members moved to Los Angeles, bringing the dance form with him. Proponents Fred Astaire and Arthur Murray influenced the evolution of the American rhythm style.
- By 1955 Cha Cha was established and extremely popular throughout Europe, the United States, and Mexico.
- Examples of how Cha Cha has evolved over time are discernible via YouTube. Here are random amateur championship selections from **1980** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BYEy8nS9cl>) versus **2020** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-laQBs4Dli0>)! Many other examples are available! More historical information is available about [Monsieur Pierre](#) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monsieur\\_Pierre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monsieur_Pierre)).

<b>Comparing and Contrasting International and American Styles of Cha Cha</b>		
	<b>International Style</b>	<b>American Style</b>
<b>Similarities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• They emerged about the same time from the same source.</li><li>• Societies have developed producing their own syllabi and ballroom competitions (Round dancing is non-competitive).</li><li>• They use the same rhythm pattern and similar figures (often with different names).</li></ul>	

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	<p>Sometimes names used are at the discretion of the instructor or even omitted. (Unique cues are essential in round dancing).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The hip action used is the same, though the technique used for creating hip <i>elevation differences</i> (when used) can vary (see <a href="http://home.csulb.edu/~kwest">home.csulb.edu/~kwest</a> &gt; <b>Walk In, Dance Out &gt; Body Awareness – Latin Hip Action</b>). Extreme extension of the hip sideways way beyond the foot is an illusion.</li> <li>• Both styles have evolved and are becoming very close together. <a href="http://WorldDanceSportFederation.org">World DanceSport Federation (WDSF)</a> standards are being used to judge ballroom dancing in World Games and eventually the Olympic competitions so will likely become the dominant authority.</li> </ul>
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<b>Comparing and Contrasting International and American Styles of Cha Cha</b>		
	<b>International Style</b>	<b>American Style</b>
<b>Differences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Original British dance teachers incorporated ballet elements as they shaped the rhythm.</li> <li>• In walking, dancers arrive with a <b>straight leg</b>.</li> <li>• This style is used worldwide.</li> <li>• Changed elevation of hips in figure-8 action is created by raising the heel of the foot <i>sending</i> the hip on the diagonal.</li> <li>• Pace is about 32 measures or bars per minute.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two major influencers (Fred Astaire and Arthur Murray) helped define styles.</li> <li>• In walking, dancers arrive with a <b>bent knee</b>.</li> <li>• Sometimes International style is also offered in competitions in the U.S.</li> <li>• Changed elevation of hips in figure-8 action is created by bending the knee of the leg <i>receiving</i> the hip on the diagonal.</li> <li>• Pace is about 30 measures or bars per minute.</li> </ul>