

The Character of Rumba

By Kaye West and Larry Caves

Timing – the First Characteristic of a Rhythm

- The timing for Rumba always requires a 4-count pattern, though there are differences as to when the figure begins (count one or count two) and whether the first step is on a Quick or a Slow count. In social dancing, all of the patterns are acceptable because repeated time patterns may begin at any point.
- The Arthur Murray tradition of American style uses SQQ (so a Box begins with a forward step) and the Fred Astaire version of American style, the international style, and round dancing use QQS (so a Box begins with a side step). In all cases the Slow count is on a forward step. There are also differences in timing. Round dancing and American style ballroom begin on the count of one; international ballroom on count two.

If beginning on count two, 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 the rhythm, beginning on beat 2 of each measure, counting timing "2, 3, 4-1" so they **end** the pattern on the downbeat (so hip action is on the Slow count) corresponding with the prominent downbeat. See **Improving Dance Knowledge > Understanding Timing** for further explanation of timing.
- Measures in Rumba figures include two **components**: **Rock-Recover** (or two alternate steps with QQ Timing such as **Side-Close**) and one **Slow step** which could be in any direction. Variety is also achieved with *turns* or an *action* taking no additional weight change so each measure has three changes of weight. Therefore, consecutive measures begin with the opposite foot. And in a few standard round dance figures one partner or both have just *one* change of weight.
- Round dance routines are choreographed to mimic notes in the music, so other timing patterns are possible (such as SS, QQQQ, S/&S). One partner (generally the Lead) also takes one fewer (usually, or one more) change of weight to make a *transition* to and from identical footwork. In *identical footwork* dancers typically face the same direction instead of the practice of *opposite footwork* when they face each other.

Other Characteristics of Rumba

- **Walking** is done ball-flat, with same side lead with arms in opposition, with narrower tracks, with toes pointed out, with a great deal of contrary body action. All of these actions are created *because* the opposite hip is "left behind." So mastering Cuban motion / Latin hip action is key to Rumba walks. As a step is taken on the beat, the majority of body weight is over that foot and the toe of the opposite foot is left on the floor as long as possible. For further details, see **Improving Dance Knowledge > Body Awareness – Walking and Cuban Motion / Latin Hip Action**.
- **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 hip on the leg receiving weight is rotated **back** and pushed forward on the opposite diagonal ending above the toe of the other foot. In a higher level of hip action the entire body moves. Several levels of creating the figure-8 hip action are described in **Improving Dance Knowledge > Body Awareness -- Cuban Motion / Latin Hip Action**.
- Movements are **fluid and graceful** with **dynamic expression**. This is apparent in both walking and body motion. There is the appearance of a long-drawn-out action followed by very quick motion. The whole body moves in a sinuous, undulating fashion as if in waves. Some have likened Rumba walking to the style observed in a lion stalking its prey. Arms may move in large arial circles or appear to caress the body.

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- There is very strong contra body action (see **Improving Dance Knowledge > Body Awareness – Cuban Motion / Latin Hip Action**)
- There is a **strong physical and emotional connection between partners** with flirtatious, playful, or romantic overtones. The strong connection is evident in the *tone in the arms* which involves slight pressure at the hands with both pressing slightly toward the partner (known as a “push connection”), then as the hip on the same side of the body moves back, the pressure toward partner is exchanged with a mutual slight moving apart (known as a “pull connection”). Note that in these actions the hands remains essentially in place; there is **no** actual pushing or pulling the partner. This phenomenon is apparent in leading and following. Dancers also face their partner when possible and look at one another.
- Rumba has been called the “Dance of Love.” It is the slowest Latin dance; Bolero, from the Rhythm category, has a slower tempo.
- Rumba is considered a **Spot Dance** since in social dancing it does not move very much from one place on the floor. In round dancing, a routine can progress since all dancers move simultaneously so they can do so without interfering with other dancers.

Rumba Origins

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

- Havana, Cuba, is the setting where what is now known as Rumba originated from dance forms called Son and Danzón. These dances were a combination of African slave rhythms and the melodies of Spanish colonizers which became fashionable among affluent individuals after 1886 upon the abolishment of the over 300-year-old slave trade (created to provide labor for sugar plantations).
- Other versions of Rumba music and associated dancing developed, including Columbia (danced by men only), Guaguanco (involving coquettish interplay of partners), Yambu (enjoyed by older dancers), Bolero Rumba (using Rumba figures to the slowest music, but very different from the modern Bolero rhythm), as well as the American and International styles of Rumba.
- Emil Coleman, actor and orchestra leader born in what is now Ukraine in 1892, who was well-known for hosting debutante balls, brought Rumba musicians and dancers from Cuba to New York in the 1920s. Rumba (which they originally spelled Rhumba) gained broader recognition after Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers danced Rumba in the 1933 film *Flying Down to Rio*.
- In the U.S. both Astaire and Arthur Murray influenced the development of Rumba. In Europe, French-born Pierre Margolle (also known as Monsieur Pierre) was a dance instructor in London specializing in Latin rhythms including what he called the “square rumba.” In 1947 he and his partner Doris Lavelle visited Cuba and danced with Pepe and Suzy Rivera, the Cuban Rumba Champions, who informed them they were dancing on the wrong beat. Upon returning to England, it took them eight years to influence acceptance for Rumba to begin on beat two which occurred in 1955 when the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance (ISTD) codified the International style of dancing.

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- See also a history of Rumba at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po6HJ8Lt-6E>. Further evidence of the continual evolution of Rumba is apparent by viewing Amateur Rumba competition:
1980: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1Gcmq8xA4I> and
2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxijJxj-c7E>

Comparing and Contrasting International and American Styles of Rumba		
	International Style	American Style
Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They emerged from the same source (Afro-Cuban influences in Havana). • Societies have developed producing their own syllabi and ballroom competitions (Round dancing is non-competitive). • They use a similar rhythm pattern with three weight changes per measure and have similar figures (often with different names). Sometimes names used are at the discretion of the instructor or even omitted. (Unique cues are essential in round dancing). • The hip action used is the same, though the technique used for creating hip <i>elevation differences</i> (when used) can vary (see Body Awareness – Cuban Motion Latin Hip Action). Extreme extension of the hip sideways way beyond the foot is an illusion. • Tempo for both styles is about 30 measures (or bars) per minute, abbreviated <i>mpm</i>. If the tempo is described in beats, it is abbreviated <i>bpm</i> but this term can be misleading since some count changes of weight (the number of measures times three) and others count beats in the measure (so multiply by four). • Both styles continue to change and are becoming very similar. World DanceSport Federation (WDSF) standards are being used to judge ballroom dancing in World Games and eventually the Olympic competitions so will likely become the dominant authority. 	
	International Style	American Style
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original British dance teachers incorporated ballet elements as they shaped the rhythm with the “northern hemisphere” influences of straight bodies. • In walking, dancers arrive with a straight Leg, then the other leg bends. • This style is used worldwide. • 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. • The basic is Rock Forward, Recover, Back, -; Rock Back, Recover, Forward, -; • Figures begin on beat two of a measure with QQS timing. • Hip action is called “Latin Hip Action.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Southern hemisphere” influences of whole body movement are apparent as shaped by two major influencers (Fred Astaire and Arthur Murray). • In walking, dancers arrive with a bent knee which then straightens as it assumes weight. • Sometimes International style is also offered in competitions in the U.S. • 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. • The basic is the Box with the Slow count moving forward or back. • Figures begin on beat one of a measure with either QQS or SQQ timing. • Hip action is called “Cuban Motion.”