

DAN *and* SANDI'S  
THURSDAY NIGHT TRANSITION CLASS  
AND WORKSHOP

INTRODUCTION TO CHA CHA

Cha Cha is a “Latin” dance. Like rumba and mambo, its roots are in Cuba and other islands of the Caribbean. It was only a matter of time before the native dances of Cuba came to the United States.

After the Spanish-American War in 1898, America granted Cuba its independence following a brief occupation but by then, American companies owned much of the Cuban sugar industry and Cuban land. During Prohibition, Cuba with its beaches, tropical weather, and rum and cigar factories, became a tourist mecca for Americans. The dances seen there were unlike anything else being done in North America or on the European continent. The cha-cha was standardized in ballroom manuals for the first time in the early 1950s.

Some people say the name cha cha, originally called cha-cha-cha (for its characteristic triple step at the end of a measure), came from the sound of shoes shuffling in the triple steps. Others say it came from the name of the musical instrument used in the Caribbean, called a cha-cha, which is made with seed pods called tcha-tcha or kaw-kaw.

RHYTHMIC INTERPRETATION

The music of cha cha is easily distinguishable, with the “cha-cha-cha” ending of a measure. Five steps are normally taken in a measure with basic timing of 123&4, or *Quick, Quick, Quick & Quick*.

The values of each measure of music, expressed in different ways, are:

|             |             |            |            |            |
|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <u>Step</u> | <u>Step</u> | <u>Cha</u> | <u>Cha</u> | <u>Cha</u> |
| Quick       | Quick       | Quick      | and        | Quick      |
| 1           | 2           | 3          | &          | 4          |
| 1 beat      | 1 beat      | ½ beat     | ½ beat     | 1 beat     |

Be careful not to slop through the “cha-cha-cha” as three even beats. Remember to put full weight on each foot placement.

The music is usually in 4/4 time, played at 30 to 32 measures per minute.

DANCE POSITION

Always stand up straight, with your four blocks of body weight positioned over each other. Never “reach” for your partner by bending at the waist.

Closed position: This is a LOOSE CLOSED POSITION. Partners stand about six inches apart facing each other. The arms are not raised as in smooth closed position but fall comfortably from the shoulders and are rounded toward the partner. The man’s right hand is on the lady’s left shoulder blade. The lady’s left arm is to be on top of the man’s right arm. The lady’s right and the man’s left hands are joined at eye level. There is no offset of bodies (as in smooth dances) nor will there be an exaggerated top line. Dancers should look eye to eye. (There is also a “close” closed position, which is very close; it is used more in salsa.)

Open Facing Position: Partners are further apart, holding hands Man's left to Lady's right, or in shake hands position or butterfly, as a figure dictates. The arms should curve down from the shoulders, with forearms extending straight forward from the elbow, roughly parallel to the floor. Man's palm is up and Lady's palm faces down, with her fingers in the man's hand and his thumb on top of her hand.

Fan Position: The Lady will be at right angle to man, on his left side, at arm's length, her right hand in his left hand. The name comes from the imaginary picture of a fan that would be created by drawing an arc from the fingertips of lady's extended left arm to the fingertips of man's extended right arm. Or, you can call it an "L" position.

Shadow Position: The lady is on the man's left or right side, slightly ahead, both facing the same direction, often both on the same foot free; usually the man's hand is on lady's shoulder blade with lady's left or right hand in man's corresponding hand.

## FOOTWORK

Forward steps are described as being taken "ball" or "ball flat." Like rumba, cha cha rarely has any heel leads or "rise and fall," as all forward steps begin on the ball of the foot and backward steps begin on the toe. The feet move in two tracks, meaning you don't place one in front of the other like walking a tightrope.

## HIP ACTION

The characteristic of Cha cha is fast feet, leaving little time to develop the Cuban motion of rumba. However, relax and let a natural hip swing occur as steps are taken.

## CONNECTION

Each partner should have a slight pressure toward the other's hand. This creates a physical feel of being "connected". This connection allows each partner to feel movement originating in the other's body and is transmitted through the arms and the hands. Eye contact helps maintain this connection. What you're looking for in this connection is to allow your "team" to move as a unit even when apart and doing different foot work.

Connection is essential so that the man knows where the lady is to allow him to turn her at the right time. He cannot rush her steps.

## BASIC STEPS

In round dancing and social dancing, figures begin on the first beat of music, called breaking on the one (beat). Dancers in competition are required to "break on the 2" or start a figure on the second beat of music, which means the figure is counted *234&1*. This is done because the second beat of each measure in cha cha is accentuated. The dance "Four & One Cha" is called an International Cha-Cha because it is based on this timing. It is the only round dance that is danced this way.

Almost every step done in rumba can also be done in cha-cha. The differences are where the cha-cha characteristic tripling steps occur.

When moving forward or backward on the triple steps (also called chasses or cha-cha-chas), a locking action is appropriate. When the cha-cha-cha moves to the side, as in a basic, the steps are small, taken as side, close, side.