

Latin Attitude

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

Let us set the mood. You are in a darkened dance hall with a sensuous rumba playing in the background. You see someone across the room that you might like to get to know. After working up the nerve, you introduce yourself and ask for a dance. The man gently caresses the woman in a strong & secure, yet gentle, dance hold, his goal being to seduce the woman with his dancing and attitude. The woman, being prim & proper, does the 'playing hard to get' game, whether she means it or not.



Latin Body Frame & Hold: The Latin dance hold is more compact than in the smooth rhythms (waltz, foxtrot, quickstep...). Stand 6"-12" apart with the body & head upright. A simple rule of thumb for the distance between the couple - if the woman is much shorter than you, stand further away from her. If she is much taller than you, stand closer.

Maintain a slight forward poise with your body towards one another, centered over the balls of the feet, not back on the heels. The man's arms & upper body should create a firm frame in which the woman is gently held. Both partners need to keep some tension (pressure) in the arms.

Each part of the body (toes, legs, knees, tush, tummy, hips, chest, shoulders, arms, fingers, head) has a role to play in figure execution and musicality. 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 forcefully dragged into action - toes. Other parts are influenced by another body part - weight change affecting the hips.

Stillness & Isolation: As with most dance rhythms one of the goals is to limit excess body movement. Try to utilize only the body parts that are necessary for the figure you are executing. This stillness/isolation technique, moving individual parts of the body independently of others, is very useful in dancing for leading & following by reducing the ambiguity. It will also improve the overall look and feel of the figure and movement. Excess movement can send mixed signals to your partner. It also has a tendency to look chaotic.

Isolation Exercise: Practice separating the body above from the body below the waist. The following exercise works the abdominals, diaphragm, and hip muscles. Begin by planting your feet firmly on the floor a hip distance apart. Tighten your tush (buttocks) muscles slightly, place your hands lightly on the hips, and then slide your rib cage to the left and then to the right. There should be no sagging or tilting of the shoulders. You should feel a pulling sensation of the muscles around the waist while keeping your hips & legs in place, immobile. Practice 1-10+ minutes/day will also have the added benefit of improving your muscle tone, strength, and trimming your waistline.

Yoga, Pilates, Belly Dancing, and some jazz classes and videos can offer a wide variety of other isolation exercises. The following belly dance site has several isolation exercises:

<http://www.venusbellydance.com/vocabulary.htm#beginner>.

After you have mastered stillness & isolation (or at least come closer) you can add back in some deliberate movement, styling, of a single region of your body, e.g. the unused arm/hand. When adding styling, strive to not influence or induce the movement of any other part of your body.



Four Points of Contact in the Latin Closed Position:

#1 – Man's left & Woman's right hands: The man's left arm should be held up with the elbow bent fairly sharply somewhat towards the floor. His left wrist should bend slightly to the left side with his palm facing the woman and thumb up. This will cause his fingers to be parallel to the floor. The woman should approach the man with her palm facing his and her fingers up and her elbow relaxed. Her hand should contact the man's at the fleshy part below their thumbs. She should then gently fold/cup her fingers over the man's hand between his thumb and forefinger. The man should gently wrap his

fingers around the woman's hand. Partners should gently fold their thumbs over each others hand, being very careful not to clamp down on their partner's hand. The man's left hand is held between the woman's cheek & eye level if she is shorter than him and the reverse if she is taller (hand is held between the man's cheek & eye level).

#2 – Man's right forearm & Woman's side: Women hold your left arm held out to the side & slightly forward. The man then places his right lower forearm under the woman's upper arm near her armpit. He should apply slight upward pressure to her upper arm and the woman in response should apply slight downward pressure. Man's right hand is not yet touching the woman's back, but his fingers and thumb should be together and his wrist should bend slightly downward. The woman should stand slightly to the man's right side.

#3 – Folding of man's right hand: The man folds his right hand around to gently touch the woman's left shoulder blade. Be very careful not to use this point to squeeze the woman, but rather it should be a gentle point of contact. Remember both of you need to be able to breath freely and be on your own feet, not leaning on or dragging your partner.

#4 – Woman's left hand: The woman places her left forearm & hand on top of the man's right arm. She gently holds his biceps with her thumb and middle finger, being careful not to clamp down. Her hand should be turned slightly outward from the wrist. If points 2, 3, & 4 have been made properly and if the partners are holding their arms up, then no light will be seen between the man's right arm & woman's left arm, excluding elbow overlap due to height differences of the partners.

Open Position: The handhold in open position is slightly modified. The man lowers the hold so he can aim for her waist & hip area (center of gravity). This allows him to communicate more effectively with the woman, i.e. 'lead'. The man also rotates his wrist inward so that his palm essentially faces him, giving the woman a very nice ledge to place her fingers on. This connection will also improve communication between the couple. In open position this is the only contact point, but there is another type of lead that is useful that is discussed in the section on Leading.



Latin Foot & Leg Work: On your next visit to the zoo or a farm check out the deer, camel, &/or horse; they have a nice Latin walk. For humans though it is not natural and our knees hopefully do not bend like theirs:

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.



Too often we see variations on the way Frankenstein would dance the rumba or the cha with all of his lower joints fused together, none moving independently. Not only does this non-mobility take more physical exertion, cause unnecessary tension (especially to the neck, shoulders, hips, & knees), and inhibit breathing, it also does not feel very good to yourself or your partner.

You might want to try the following exercise individually first with your hand on the wall or 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. Depending on the speed of the music you may wish to limit the step size to shoulder width or as small as 6 inches for the very quick ('&') beats. The American style Cuban motion is much easier to execute for the majority of dancers & is discussed below.

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 put all your weight on the right foot/leg. To move, first bend the left knee. Slide the pointed left toe forward in front of the right leg to feel the path and the place where you want to step, no weight. Once you have determined that the path is clear, test the ground to ensure it will support your weight by applying slight pressure to the left toe. Slowly lower the left 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. 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 slightly 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.



We do this subconsciously when walking backwards. We feel for the first back step with our toe, roll onto the ball of our foot, lower into the heel, and then place our weight onto the leg.

Now that you have mastered that, let us work on 'fast feet'. Allow the unweighted foot to linger & remain in the ending position of the previous step for as long as possible. At the beginning of the next step the foot moves quickly into position, ready to begin testing the ground. This does not mean that the entire body comes to a complete stop/freeze between each step and/or figure. There is continual motion of the knees and hips. The "freeze frame" makes a nice picture, but only when it is used occasionally.

Forward Checked Action: (International Style mainly) Use this action for forward moving steps that will be checked & then reversed. This action allows the couple to move slightly further apart from each other, giving a nice looking change of pace.

Latin Hips: Yes men, this includes your hips also. While the 'party line' states that the movement of the hips is only a result of the foot and leg action, the dancer can act to direct this action to make it less chaotic, feel better, & make it more pleasing to the eye.

There are mainly two types of hip movement that are not associated with the rotation of the body in the course of a figure: Settling into the hip at the end of a measure or figure and the Figure Eight hip motion. The hip movement in cha and the faster rhythms is generally less pronounced than in rumba due to the speed of the dance, but they still do move.

Settling Into the Hip: At the end of the measure or the figure, settle the supported/weighted hip gently towards the floor. It is like allowing the weighted hip to take a deep breath and then relax down on top of the supporting leg & foot.

Figure Eight: Gently guide your hip motion into a figure eight. For each step taken, the same hip does a circular motion as weight is taken onto that foot, the left hip moves in a counterclockwise direction and the right hip will move in a clockwise direction. As an example, in more detail: Step forward with your left foot while moving the left hip forward as weight is transferred onto the left foot, the left hip continues to move in a counterclockwise direction. Recover back onto the right foot and the right hip moves forward as weight is transferred onto the right foot, the right hip continues to move in a clockwise direction.

For starters, try just giving the hips a very gentle nudge in the right direction without moving the rest of your body. You too men! Try Brent Moore's method and practice in front of a mirror, but you might want to wear clothes if you are built like most of the population.

Sway: The Latin rhythms do employ some body sway. It is generally used by the man to assist (lead) the woman in achieving different positions and figures, such as in the woman's spiral preceding a rope spin.

A Brief Bit on Leading: A common complaint heard from the ladies is that the gentlemen are not leading. Well, guys for once it may not be your fault. What essentially happens is that the woman does not allow the man to lead. She interferes with the points of contact by flapping her arms, bouncing, faking the hip movement, and not sustaining

hand/arm pressure when dancing. The man cannot lead arms of jelly/spaghetti (limp arms) any more than he can ramrod arms (straight arm with a locked elbow). Men stand erect and keep “tone” in your arms, using the muscles in the upper arm to keep the arms in position and thus allowing the woman to feel his body movement if she has tone in her arms.

A good lead from the man makes clear his intentions to the woman before he begins to move. Clarity from the man is important, as it enables the woman to detect the speed, direction, and feel of a figure early enough to respond appropriately. Leads are subtle & clear communications beginning from the man’s body, radiating down his arms, and then to the woman. Woman, there is a fine line between reacting to what he wants you to do and jumping the gun by anticipating the man’s intentions.

There are three types of leads used by the man in the Latin rhythms: Physical, Shaping, and vocally telling her what you want her to do. Unfortunately the latter tends to make hearing the music & the cues rather difficult, so in actuality there are only two types.

Physical Leads – These happen as a result of contact between the man and the woman, generally through a slight bit of tension in the arm(s). Most of the time, in order to get the best results the man should aim this pressure towards the woman’s center of gravity (her hips), as opposed to other parts of her body, but there are exceptions. For example when in fan position, in order to indicate to the woman to close her feet at the beginning of the next figure, he exerts a gentle pressure towards the woman’s center of gravity and slightly to his side with his left hand.

Shaping Leads – The man shapes his body and/or arm to indicate to the woman the direction and/or position required. For example, the man can use his body shaping to indicate to the woman the direction and timing of a spiral.

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