

HISTORY OF LATIN-AMERICAN DANCING

[Don Herbison-Evans](mailto:donherbisonevans@yahoo.com), donherbisonevans@yahoo.com

Technical Report 323 (1988), Basser Department of Computer Science, University of Sydney



The [author and Anna Piper](#) dancing the Cha Cha.

ABSTRACT

This article traces the some of the history of the International Dancesport championship 'Latin-American' Dances: Samba, Rumba, Paso Doble, Cha Cha, and Jive.

INTRODUCTION

Many dances popular around the world have originated in Latin America, for example the [Bolero](#), [Carimbo](#), [Conga](#), [Cueca](#), [Cumbia](#), [Joropo](#), [Lambada](#), [Macarena](#), [Mambo](#), [Merengue](#), [Rueda](#), and the [Salsa](#). Three such dances : the **Samba**, **Rumba**, and **Cha Cha**, plus the **Paso Doble** from Europe and the **Jive** from North America, have been singled out and are now performed all over the world as Latin-American dances in international [DanceSport competitions](#), as well as being danced socially. These dances are for couples, usually each consisting of a man and a lady. The holds vary from figure to figure in these dances, sometimes in closed ballroom hold, sometimes with the partners holding each other with only one hand. The figures in these dances are [standardised and categorised](#) into various levels for teaching, with internationally agreed vocabularies, techniques, rhythms and tempos. But it was not always so. These 'Latin-American' dances were only been introduced into Western-European society in the twentieth century, and have some diverse origins in previous eras.

The Romance languages (for example : Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Rumanian) are derived from the [ancient Latin language](#), and define a culture that has spread over a substantial part of the Americas. Three dances from this area plus one from Spain/France and one from the U.S.A. constitute the set of dances now internationally standardised as the 'Latin-American' dances. Note that the term 'Latin-American' here is an abbreviation of 'Latin and American' rather than a reference to the geographic area of 'Latin America' (Margolie, 1975, 1).

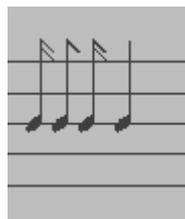
The three dances from Latin America evolved as a fusion of Indigenous, European and Negro forms. The [European conquerors](#) imported [Negro slaves](#) from various parts of West Africa into a large part of the Americas at an early stage, mainly because of the difficulty the Europeans had in persuading the Indigenes to work for them. [The African slaves](#) were imported in such number that by 1553, they outnumbered the Europeans in Mexico, and the Viceroy, [Luis de Velasco](#), urged [Charles V of Spain](#) to prohibit further influx (Sadie, 1980, 10/522).

Dancing played a substantial part in all three component cultures: European, Negro and Indigenous. In 1569, the Viceroy of Mexico ordered the [Aztec Calendar Stone](#) to be buried because the main recreation of the Negroes had become dancing around it. Subsequently, Velasco decreed that dancing be confined to Sundays and feast days only, and then only in the afternoons between the hours of noon and 6 p.m. (Sadie, 1980, 10/522).

Through the 17th and 18th centuries, a gradual fusion of the three cultures occurred to produce a new culture: Creole. As European dances were imported into Latin America, they were adopted and 'creolized' (Sadie, 1980, 10/529). In Cuba, [the Contradance](#) became the Contradanza Habanera (i.e., from [Havana](#)) with the adoption of a syncopated rhythm: (Sadie, 1980, 5/86)



Over the years, as the dance evolved, and its name became abbreviated to ['Danzon'](#). Later, the music became more syncopated with the inclusion of bars with the rhythm:



This rhythm had been used as early as 1795 in Brazil in a [Modinha \(love song\)](#) which had become popular in Europe at the turn of the 19th Century (Behague, 1979, 92). Complex syncopated rhythms are a feature now of all the Latin-American dances. A slower more refined version also evolved with the abbreviated name: [the 'Son'](#) (Buckman, 1978, 197).

[SAMBA](#)

The Portuguese imported many slaves from Angola and Congo into Brazil in the 16th century, who in turn brought their dances such as the [Caterete](#), the [Embolada](#) and the [Batuque](#) (Raffe, 1964, 313). These dances were considered sinful by the Europeans as they involved the touching of navels (Sadie, 1980, 10/47). The Embolada is about a cow with balls on its

horns for safety, and became a term meaning 'foolish' (Michaelis, 1955, 281). The Batuque became so popular that [Manuel I](#) passed a law forbidding it (Raffe, 1964,60). It was described as a circle dance with steps like the Charleston done to hand clapping and percussion, and with a solo couple performing in the centre of the circle (Raffe, 1964, 60).

A composite dance evolved in the 1830's combining the plait figures from these Negro dances and the body rolls and sways of the indigenous [Lundu](#) (Behague, 1979,93). Later, carnival steps were added like the [Copacabana](#) (named after a popular beach near Rio de Janeiro). Gradually members of the high society in Rio embraced it, although they modified it to be done in closed ballroom dancing position (which they knew was the only correct way to dance anything) (Ellfeldt, 1974,77). The dance was then called the Zemba Queca, and was described in 1885 as "a graceful Brazilian dance" (Burchfield, 1976, III/1466). This was later called the [Mesemba](#)'. The origin of the name 'Samba' is unclear: perhaps it is a corruption of Semba, although another suggestion is that is derived from [Zambo](#) which means the offspring of a Negro man and a native woman (Taylor, 1958,648).

The dance was later combined with the [Maxixe](#) (Raffe, 1964,438). This was also originally Brazilian: a round dance described as like a [Two Step](#) (Burchfield, 1976, II/865), and named after the prickly fruit of a Cactus, although now the word is used in Portuguese to denote a [gherkin](#).

The Maxixe dance was introduced into the U.S.A. at the turn of the 20th century (Stetson 1956,30). It became [popular in Europe](#) after a demonstration in Paris in the early twentieth century. It was described as having the steps of the Polka done to the music of the Cuban Habanera (Chicago, 1985, 7/968). The present day Samba still contains a step called the Maxixe, consisting of a chasse and point (Romain, 1982,19).

A form of the Samba called the Carioca ([meaning: from Rio de Janeiro](#)) was revived in U.K. in 1934. It was popularised by [Fred Astaire](#) and [Ginger Rogers](#) in their first film together: ['Flying Down to Rio'](#) (Shipman, 1979, 23). The Carioca spread to the U.S.A. in 1938 (Raffe, 1964,438). In 1941, its popularity was boosted by performances by [Carmen Miranda](#) (Maria do Carmo Miranda da Cunha) in her films, particularly ['That Night in Rio'](#) (Cawkwell, 1972, 189).

The Samba was further popularized in the 1950's by [Princess Margaret](#), who played a leading role in British society (Rust, 1969, 103). The Samba was formalised for international propagation by Pierre Margolie in 1956 (Lavelle, 1975, 69).

The dance in its current international form still has figures with very different rhythms, betraying the heterogeneous origins of the dance, e.g. the Boto Fogo is danced to a '1 & 2' quarter beat rhythm, whereas the Natural Rolls are danced to the simpler '1 2 &' half beat rhythm. The dance still retains a hip movement on the half beats between steps (the 'samba tic'), a flat carriage of the torso, and is danced with the weight forward onto a bent standing leg.

[RUMBA](#)

This had its origin with the African Negro slaves imported into Cuba, whose dances emphasized the movements of the body rather than the feet. The tune was considered less important than the complex [cross rhythms](#), being provided by a percussion of pots, spoons, bottles, etc. (Raffe, 1964, 431).

It evolved in Havana in the 19th century by combination with the [Contradanza](#) (Sadie, 1980, 5/86). The name 'Rumba' possibly derives from the term 'rumboso orchestra' which was used for a dance band in 1807 (Sadie, 1980, 5/88), although in Spanish, the word 'rumbo' means 'route', 'rumba' means 'heap pile', and 'rhum' is of course an intoxicating liquor popular in the Caribbean (Smith, 1971, 502), any of which might have been used descriptively when the dance was being formed. The name has also been claimed to be derived from the Spanish word for 'Carousel' (Morris, 1969, 1134).

The rural form of the Rumba in Cuba was described as a pantomime of barnyard animals, and was an exhibition rather than a participation dance (Ellfeldt, 1974, 59). The maintenance of steady level shoulders while dancing was possibly derived from the way the slaves moved while carrying heavy burdens (Rust, 1969, 105). The step called the 'Cucaracha' was stomping on cockroaches. The 'Spot Turn' was walking around the rim of a cartwheel (Rust, 1969, 105). The popular Rumba tune 'La Paloma' was known in Cuba in 1866 (Sadie, 1980, 10/530).

The Rumba was introduced into the U.S.A. in the 1930's as a composite of this rural Rumba with the [Guaracha](#), the [Son](#), and the [Cuban Bolero](#) (unrelated to the [Spanish Bolero](#)) (Ellfeldt, 1974, 59). It was particularly popularised in 1935 by [George Raft](#), who played the part of a suave dancer who wins the heart of an heiress through dance, in the movie '[Rumba](#)', although the male dancing was done mainly by [Frank Veloz](#).

The British dance teacher [Pierre Margolie](#) visited [Havana](#) in 1947 and decided that the Rumba was danced with the break step on beat 2 of the bar, rather than on beat 1 as in the American Rumba. This is not entirely true, as the 'beat' of the music is traditionally determined by the rhythm of the [Claves](#) (two sticks being hit together). The Claves are hit on half-beats numbers 1,4,7 in the first bar of a two-bar phrase, and half-beats 3,5 of the second bar. Counting full beats, these correspond to beat 1, the half beat before 3, and beat 4 of the first bar, and beats 2 and 3 of the second bar. Ideally one might dance 5 steps over the two bars to match the Clave beats. But instead it was decided to dance only on one of the bars of the Clave sequence. The American Rumba is danced on the first bar Clave beat. Pierre decided to use the second bar, stepping on beats 2 and 3, and he added an extra step on beat 4 for no obvious reason. He brought this back to Britain, together with many steps he learned from Pepe Rivera in Havana. These steps together with dancing the break on beat 2 rather than beat 1, after many years of heated debate in the 1940's and 1950's, became part of the standard International Cuban Rumba. (Lavelle, 1975, 1).

With only a transfer of weight from one foot to the other on beat 1 of each bar, and the absence of an actual step on this beat, the dance has developed a very sensual character. Beat 1 is a strong beat of the music, but all that moves on that beat are the hips, so the music emphasises the dancing of the hips. This together with the slow tempo of the music (116 beats/minute) makes the dance very romantic. Steps are actually taken on beats 2, 3, and 4. Weight transfer and turns are performed on the intervening half beats. Again, as in the Samba,

the weight is kept forward, with forward steps taken toe-flat, and with minimal movement of the upper torso throughout.



Neale and Nicole Byrnes
dancing the Paso Doble.

PASO DOBLE

The name 'Paso Doble' in Spanish means 'Two Step' (Smith, 1971, 416), and may be distinguished from 'Paso a Dos' which means 'Dance for two'. "Two Step" refers to the marching nature of the steps, which may be counted '1,2' for 'Left, Right'.

This may be contrasted with its alternative description as the 'Spanish One Step', so called because only one step is taken to each beat of music (Burchfield, 1976, III / 293).

The Paso Doble was one of many Spanish folk dances associated with various facets of Spanish life. In particular, the Paso Doble is based on the Bullfight. It portrays the Torero (the male dancer) and his cape (his partner), and is danced to the characteristic march music used for procession at the beginning of a corrida. Bullfights date back to ancient Crete, but only in the 1700s were they held in Spain (Pitkin, 1996,30). The dance itself became popular amongst the upper classes of Paris in the 1930's, and acquired a set of French names for many of the steps (Lavelle, 1975, 77).

The dance has still only limited popularity amongst English speaking society. The only places in Sydney where it is played regularly at social dances are the Italian and other European clubs.

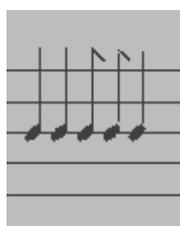
The competition version of the Paso Doble is danced with a high chest, the shoulders wide and down, and with the head kept back but inclined slightly forward and down, ("keep your eyes on the bull" urged my latin teacher). The weight is forward, but most forward steps have heel leads. Often it is choregraphed to the tune 'Espana Cani' (the Spanish Gypsy Dance), which has three crescendos in the music. These highlights are usually matched in the choreography by dramatic poses, adding to the spectacular nature of the dance.

CHA CHA

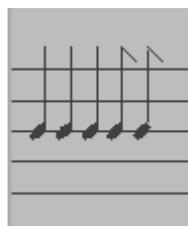
When the English dance teacher [Pierre Margolie](#) visited Cuba in 1952, he realised that sometimes the Rumba was danced with extra beats. This is said to be an innovation introduced in 1948 by the musician [Enrique Jorrin](#), combining two Cuban dances, the ['Danzon'](#) and the ['Montuno'](#). When Pierre returned to Britain, he started teaching these steps as a separate dance (Lavelle, 1975, 2).

The name could have been derived from the Spanish 'Chacha' meaning 'nursemaid', or 'chachar' meaning 'to chew coca leaves' (Smith, 1971, 161), or from 'char' meaning 'tea' (Taylor, 1958, 150), or most likely from the fast and cheerful Cuban dance: the Guaracha (Ellfeldt, 1974,59). This dance has been popular in Europe from before the turn of the century. For example it is listed on the program of the Finishing Assembly in 1898 of Dancie Neill at Coupar Angus in Scotland (Hood, 1980, 102).

It has also been suggested that the name Cha Cha is derived onomatopoeically from the sound of the feet in the chasse which is included in many of the steps (Sadie, 1980, 5/86). This would account for it being called the 'Cha Cha Cha' by some people, after the rhythm:



whereas others call it the 'Cha Cha' after the rhythm:



These differ only as to which beat of the musical bar is stressed by the dancing: beat 4 in the first case, beat 1 in the second (Rust, 1969, 105).

In 1954, the dance was described as a "Mambo with a guiro rhythm" (Burchfield, 1976, I/473). [A guiro](#) is a musical instrument consisting of a dried gourd rubbed by a serrated stick (Burchfield, 1976, I/1318). It has also been suggested that the name 'Cha Cha' is derived onomatopoeically from the sound of the seeds in the guiro being shaken.

The Mambo originated in Haiti, and was introduced to the West in 1948 by Perez Prado (Burchfield, 1976, II/809). The word "Mambo" is the name of a Voodoo priestess in the religion brought by the Negroes from Africa (Ellfeldt, 1974, 86). Thus the Cha Cha had its origins in the religious ritual dances of West Africa. There are three forms of Mambo: single, double, and triple. The triple has five (!) steps to a bar, and this is the version that evolved into the Cha Cha (Rust, 1969, 108) (Sadie, 1980, 4/100).

The "Cha Cha" is danced currently at about 120 beats per minute. The steps are taken on the beats, with a strong hip movement as the knee straightens on the half beats in between. The weight is kept well forward, with forward steps taken toe-flat, and it is danced with minimal upper-torso movement. The chasse on 4&1 is used to emphasise the step on beat 1, which may be held a moment longer than the other steps to match the emphasis of the beat in the music.

JIVE

This dance originated with the Negroes in the South East of U.S.A., where it had an affinity with the war dances of the Seminole Indians in Florida. One reference suggests that the Negroes copied it from the Indians (Benton, 1963, 4/17). Another suggests that the Indians copied it from the Negroes, who brought the dance from Africa (Evans, 1975, 41). The latter is more likely, as the word "Jive" is probably derived from "Jev" meaning "to talk disparagingly" in the West African Wolof language (Sadie, 1980, 9/652). The word "Jive" also has a similar meaning in Negro slang : "misleading talk, exaggerations" (Wentworth, 1975, 293), although this could have been derived from a modification of the English word "jibe" (Burchfield, 1976,426). The word has several other slang meanings : "gaudy merchandise", "marijuana", and "sexual intercourse". It is unclear whether any of these meanings predated the use of the term for the dance, and hence which is a metaphor for which (Wentworth, 1975, 293).

In the 1880's, the dance was performed competitively amongst the Negroes in the South, and the prize was frequently a cake, so the dance became known as the Cake Walk (Compton, 1963, 4/17).



A couple in their finest 'rags' doing

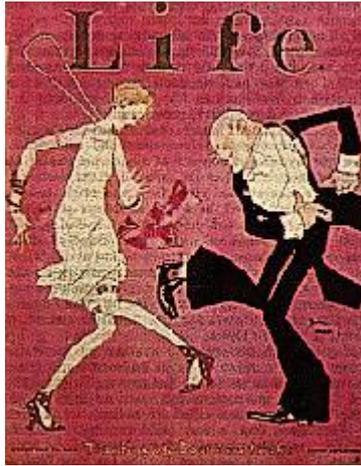
the cakewalk
on the cover of one of Scott Joplin's musical pieces.

It often consisted of two parts performed alternately : a solemn procession of couples, and an energetic display dance, all done in finest clothes. The associated music became known as Ragtime, possibly because the participants dressed up in their best "rags" or clothes, or possibly because the music was syncopated and "ragged" (Buckman, 1978, 160). The music and dances subsequently became popular amongst the Negroes in Chicago and New York (Javana, 1984, 34).

This exuberant dancing and music amongst the Negroes contrasted with the limited and dour dancing of the upper white classes of the U.S.A. and U.K. in the wake of Prince Albert's death in 1861 (Rust, 1969, 78). With the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, English speaking society perhaps felt more free to engage in more and energetic dancing, and a series of simple dances based on those of the Negroes become popular in white society e.g.: the Yankee Tangle, the the Mooche (Buckman, 1978, 167). Many had animal names, betraying perhaps a rural and pantomimic origin : Turkey Trot, Horse Trot, Eagle Rock, Crab Step, Buzzard Lope, Fish Walk, Camel Walk, Lame Duck, Bunny Hop, Kangaroo Hop, Grizzly Bear, and the Bunny Hug. The current Jive still has a Bunny Hug as one of the standard steps. The dances were all done to 4/4 Ragtime music, with stress on beats 2 and 4, and have syncopated rhythms. They all used the same elements: couples doing a walk, rock, swoop, bounce or sway. The closed position was considered by many to be indecent, and sometimes the lady wore "bumpers" to preclude body contact (Rust, 1969,83).

An interesting change occurred around 1910, when the individual dances were brought together, and the dancers encouraged to do these in an arbitrary order. It made every male dancer into an instant choreographer. The change was described as a change of interest from steps to rhythm (Rust, 1969, 84). It coincided with the publication of Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" in 1910, which rapidly became a worldwide hit.

As Ragtime evolved into Swing through the 1920's, new dances became popular. The Foxtrot was invented by Harry Fox for a stage show in New York in 1913 (Compton, 1963, 4/17). The Charleston was said to have originated in the Cape Verde Islands (Raffe, 1964, 60). It evolved into a round dance done by Negro dock workers in the port of Charleston (Rust, 1969, 89), and became popular in white society after inclusion in the stage show "Running Wild" in 1923 by James P. Johnson, which toured U.S.A. (Rust, 1969, 89). It subsequently became so popular worldwide that many sedate ballrooms put up notices saying simply "PCQ" , standing for "Please Charleston Quietly" (Rust, 1969, 89).



The Charleston

Life Magazine Cover, Feb. 18 1926, by John Held Jr.

The [Black Bottom](#) became popular after inclusion in the stage show: [George White's 'Scandals of 1926'](#) (Sadie, 1980, 2/769). Various authors have said it originated in New York, or in Nashville, or in New Orleans, but it seems more likely that it originated in the [a suburb of Detroit](#) of the same name.

In 1926, the [Savoy Ballroom](#) opened in Harlem in New York with the famous jazz band of [Fletcher Henderson](#). The dancers there soon combined the Foxtrot, Charleston, Black Bottom, and the various animal steps to form a new dance to fit with the jazz music. This dance soon became known as the [Lindy Hop](#) (Sadie, 1980, 11/5), after [Charles Lindbergh](#) who made the first solo non-stop transatlantic flight that year, because of the amount of time the dancers appeared to spend in the air (Javana, 1984, 34). In 1934, the dance at the [Savoy in Harlem](#) was described by [Cab Calloway](#) as "like the frenzy of jittering bugs", so it soon became known as the [Jitterbug](#) (Burchfield, 1976, II/425).

The current version called the Jive has basic steps composed of a fast syncopated chasse (side, close, side) to the left followed by another to the right (right then left for the lady) followed by a slower break back and replace forward. The hips are moved half a beat after each of the steps, and the weight is kept well forward with all steps being taken on the toes. In the chasses, by keeping the leading foot high on the ball of the foot, and the trailing foot fairly flat, an optical illusion is created called the "moonwalk", which gives dancer an attractive weightless appearance.

In its beginnings, in 1927, the dance became equated with youth (Javana, 1984, 34). Older adults disapproved of it and tried to ban it from dance halls by the rationalisation that because Jive was non-progressive, it disturbed the other dancers who were progressing anti-clockwise around the dance floor (Rust, 1969, 98).

The association between youth and this dance has continued through its subsequent metamorphoses as [Swing](#) , [Boogie-Woogie](#) , [B-Bop \(Beach Bop \)](#) , [Rock & Roll](#) , [Twist](#) , [Disco](#) , [Hustle](#) and [Cercoc](#).

Young adults have always been inclined to feel alienated by insecurity from parental criticism, and by inadequacy from lacks in understanding and coordination. From time to time throughout history, they have obtained emotional satisfaction by identifying with peers

in a cult of dancing. Of the various responses possible to alienation such as illness, crime, rebellion and cult, a dancing cult is the most benign (Rust, 1969. 170).

As always, dance is involved in the deepest emotional responses of our personalities, and hence with the foundations of society.

REFERENCES

Behague, G., "Music in Latin America", Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1979.

Buckman, P. "Let's Dance" Paddington Press, London, 1978.

Burchfield, R.W. (Ed), "A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary", Oxford University Press, 1976.

Cawkwell, T., and Smith, J.M. (Eds.), "The World Encyclopedia of Film", Studio Vista, London, 19.

Chicago, "The New Encyclopedia Britannica Micropedia", University of Chicago, 15th Edition, 1985.

Compton, F.E., "Compton's Pictorial Encyclopedia", William Benton, Chicago, 1963.

Ellfeldt, L., and Morton, V.L., "This is Ballroom Dance", National Press, 1974.

Evans, B., and Evans, M.G., "American Indian Dance Steps", Hawker Art Books, New York, 1975.

Hood, E.M., "The Story of Scottish Country Dancing", Collins, London, 1980.

Javana, J. "How to Jitterbug", St Martin's Press, New York, 1984.

Lavelle, D., "Latin and American Dances", Pitman, London, Revised Edition, 1975.

Michaelis, H., "A New Dictionary of the Portuguese and English Languages", Frederick Ungar Publishing, New York, 1955.

Morris, W. (Ed.), "The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language", American Heritage, New York, 1969.

Pitkin, M., "Death-Defying Skill in a Brutal Contest", The Daily Telegraph, Sydney, September 4 1996.

Raffe', W.G., "Dictionary of Dance", A.S. Barnes and Company, New York, 1964.

Romain, E. (Ed.), "Popular Variations in Latin-American Dancing", I.S.T.D., London, 1982.

Rust. F., "Dance in Society", Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969.

Sadie, S. (Ed.), "The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians", Macmillan, London, 1980.

Shipman, D., "The Great Movie Stars - The Golden Years", Angus & Robertson, Sydney, Revised Edition 1979.

Smith, C., "Collins Spanish-English English-Spanish Dictionary", Collins, London, 1971.

Taylor, J.L., "A Portuguese-English Dictionary", Stanford University Press, 1958.

Wentworth, H., and Flexner, S.B. (Eds.), "Dictionary of American Slang, 2nd Supplement", Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1975.

(revised 16 September 2012)