Where Did All Those Rhythms Come From?

by Harold & Meredith Sears

In England, in 1910, popular dance programs looked something like this (from *A History of English Ballroom Dancing* by Philip J.S. Richardson, 1946?):

- State Ball—Three quadrilles, three polkas, fifteen waltzes, and a final galop
- Smart Private Dance—Sixteen waltzes and four two-steps
- Country Ball—Fifteen waltzes, two lancers, and three two-steps
- Dance Club—Sixteen waltzes and four one-steps

That was less than one hundred years ago. We've maybe never danced a lancer or a galop, but we have so many other interesting rhythms to choose among today—from the tango and rumba to the hustle and slow two step. How and when did these new rhythms arise?

Waltzes and Polkas, Two Steps and One Steps —

These dances really did seem to be new. During the times of Queen Elizabeth I and of Louis XIV, everyone danced. But at this time, ballroom dancing involved the formal, stylized, pattern dancing of the quadrille, cotillion, and minuet—group dancing, processional dancing, where individuals formed rings and chains that circled and wound in intricate patterns —"square" dancing. These older dances were slow, courtly, subdued, and stately, with "deep bows, graceful separations and meetings, … always at arm's length." (Lloyd Shaw, *The Round Dance Book*, 1949)

There were even couple dances, but early engravings show these couples hand-in-hand in open position, in shadow, escort, and in butterfly. Dancers stepped in a stately manner. They also hopped, leaped, and capered. They wove and turned. But they didn't embrace.

Only with the **Waltz** do we see, in society, a consistent use of our closed position, a turning away from the rest of the group, and a new focus on one's self and one's partner. This dance position was even called "waltz position." Couples went round and round, whirling down the hall, and these were called "round" dances.

The first waltzes were thought to have originated in Austria or in southern Germany in the late 1700s from a peasant dance called the Ländler (3/4 timing), characterized by an upbeat tempo and rapid rotation. It came to Vienna during the 1800s and quickly became extremely popular throughout Europe and America. The **Viennese Waltz** was first exhibited in America in 1834 in Boston. Especially at the beginning of the 20th century the slower **Modern Waltz**, danced at about half the Viennese tempo, developed along with the Viennese waltz. Now, in Round Dancing, we are beginning to see a **Hesitation/Canter Waltz** (6/8 timing) that harkens back to the original Ländler, with its pauses and lilting rhythm.

As late as 1910, waltzers did natural turns, reverse turns, and the closed changes (forward waltz) that allowed one to switch from one turn to the other. Needless to say, we have many more figures to choose from now. We pause, we spin, we chasse and otherwise syncopate, and we can spend a measure or more developing this or that "picture" figure. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of today's waltz is its pronounced rise and fall, which has been traced back in its origins to the motion of a double-oared gondola cresting and dipping quickly into the trough of the next wave, and even to the measured gait of a Moorish camel, trekking across the sands of northern Africa (Don McDonagh, *Dance, A Very Social History*, 1986).

There is some evidence that in 1822, a Czechoslovakian poet named Celakovsky wrote a dance named the "Cracoviacs" that was almost identical to the **Polka**, but a popular story tells that in 1830, Anna Slezak, a little girl of Bohemia, was humming, and skipping to her tune, when a local schoolmaster happened by and wrote down the tune and the steps. The other village girls learned the "dance," and soon it was the rage in Prague, where they called it the polka, from the Bohemian pulka, which means half, and refers to the half step or closing step that was

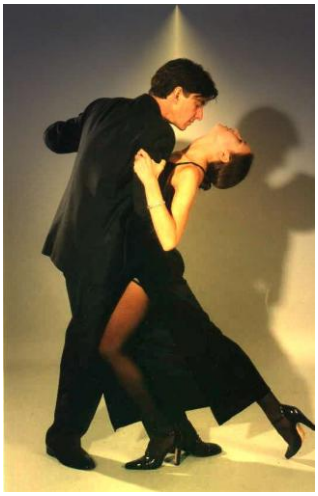
part of the major figure. The polka was being danced in Vienna in 1839, in Paris in 1840, and in London in 1843. In the United States, Professor L. De. G. Brookes, ballet master at the National Theater, N.Y., and Miss Mary Ann Gammon danced the polka in May, 1844.

The Johann Strausses, elder and younger, are well known for their waltzes, but they wrote wonderful polkas, too, with "the intimacy of the waltz and the vivacity of the Irish jig." (*Illustrated London News*, 1844).

The **Two Step** grew out of the nineteenth century galop and the polka, and at first was a vivacious marching dance with interpolated skips. It became popular in the U.S. around the turn of the century, pretty well pushing aside for a time the quadrilles, waltzes, and polkas that had been dominant. The patriotic music of John Phillip Sousa provided some of the stimulus for its development. At one point, he said that his *Washington Post March* "should make a man with a wooden leg step out."

In its simplest form, the dancer takes two skipping steps with the left foot and then two skipping steps with the right: quick, quick, slow; quick, quick, slow. The steps are small and under the body. There is no rise and fall, as in waltz.

The **One Step** is a smooth, steady, walking rhythm in which the dancer walks on every other beat (a "slow" count) or runs on every beat (a "quick" count). It evolved out of the two step about 1910 and was extremely popular at that time. One of the most popular one steps was the Turkey Trot. The man simply ran forward and the woman back, one step per beat, with some syncopated wing movements added for interest. Another was the Bunny Hug, and truly brilliant was the Castle Walk, created by Vernon and Irene Castle. The Castles' presentations of the one step, two step, waltz, and tango were so popular that Vernon has been called the "father of modern dancing."



Tango —

The word tango is of African origin, meaning drums or dance, and it has referred to many different styles of South American dance since the late 1700s. The **Argentine Tango**, done in closed dance position, developed in Argentina and Uruguay between 1860 and 1890, and the bandoneon, a concertina or accordion with buttons instead of keys, became the essential accompaniment. There was nothing proper or high-society about this rhythm. It was an earthy, erotic, proud, and passionate dance that has been associated with the gauchos (cowboys) of the pampas, with African slaves who had been brought to the country, with the bars and brothels of working-class neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, and even with criminal sub-cultures of the city. It had the look of a stylized duel, partners stalking each other in a restless prowl, bodies pressed together, intense eye contact, and legs thrusting in attack. There was no innocent romance or gay frivolity here. It reached Paris ballrooms in 1909, and the dance quickly became popular in England and in America prior to World War I.
After the War, tango became much less rebellious. By the 1930s teachers in Paris and London had refined it enough to be able to bring it into "proper" ballrooms. In the process, the dance was converted from a Latin to a Smooth rhythm—**International or English Tango**. Walking steps were introduced to make it progress around the room. The music was sped up, made more march-like. Movements became sharper and more stylized. Some of the flirtation, temptation, and maybe passion were taken out.

In the United States, more of the Latin features were retained, giving us **American Tango**, the simplest of the tango styles. Hollywood gratefully adopted this style so that leading men would have some chance of looking good. Rudolph Valentino danced the American tango in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* in 1921, and Arnold Schwarzenegger sort of did it in *True Lies* in 1994.

More Latin Rhythms —

Many forms of **Rumba** originated among the African slaves in Cuba and across the West Indies more than four hundred years ago. Its lower class forms were fast and erotic and left little to the imagination. Shirley Aymé has said that rumba arose "from the walk of the cock, and his pursuit of the hen bird." "Son" is a slower form and less sexually suggestive, a middle-class version. "Danzón" is slower still with a minimum of hip movement, an upper-class version.

The rumba came to the U.S. around 1913. In the 1920s, it was popular in clubs throughout New York City. It received a further boost from the publicity given to the Carioca, a specialty dance to rumba music featured in the very first Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers film, *Flying Down to Rio*, 1933; from the film *Rumba* with Carol Lombard and George Raft, 1935; and from flamboyant promotion by bandleader Xavier Cugat throughout the '30s and '40s.
Today, the rumba is fairly slow and civilized, but it does still incorporate some of its earliest earthy action. Steps are slow and close to the floor, and hip action is sharp and dramatic.

Paso Doble originated in Spain but was refined for the ballroom in France. It first gained popularity in Europe and the United States in the 1930s. The man is the Spanish matador with his proud, upright carriage, back arched, shoulders back, head up. Forward steps are heel/flat in a marching tempo or up on the balls of the feet in a more prancing attitude.

The woman is traditionally the matador's cape, and in figures such as Huit, Sixteen, and Chasse Cape she will dance more lightly and flowing. However, she can also find herself playing the role of a picador, a partner matador, a flamenco dancer, or even the bull itself. She must be prepared to flutter passively one moment and stand tall and strong another.

Bolero was a Spanish dance in 3/4 time during the 1700s, but it was danced to 2/4 music and then to 4/4 music in Cuba during the 1800s,

and it became popular in the United States in the 1930s. Bolero is smooth, powerful, romantic, full of love and yearning.
Bolero is characterized by a closer hold, almost a waltz closed position, by the side step that begins most figures, by body rise during that first step, by one of the slowest tempos in Round Dancing, and by a heaviness, an inertia, and a connectedness between the partners, from one body, through the arms, to the other body. So we don't just take the steps. We have tone that connects partner to partner, and each helps the other take each step. There is a dragging kind of feel and a consequent smooth flow. Especially during the "quick, quick," he pulls and then she pulls. Maybe it's like swinging on a double playground swing: he pumps and then she pumps.

Samba was born among the slaves on Brazilian sugar plantations. One mythical story tells of an escaped Black slave who encountered an Indian woman in the bush. They set up housekeeping there in the wild, and their children began a mixed race. The only difficulty was the parents' inability to communicate in each other's language, so their arguments took place in stomps, shakes, and shudders: the samba.

It really grew out of the Argentine tango, Brazilian Maxixe, and other musical influences. It was danced in the slums by the poorest classes. It was an activity looked down upon, repudiated, scorned, ridiculed, and even persecuted by the police. Samba was prohibited; even tambourines were prohibited.
The first radio station appeared in Brazil in 1923 but reached a mass audience only in the 1930s. Several recording studios formed at the same time. Earlier, popular music and even Carnival music included many styles in different regions of the country: polka, waltz, mazurka, schottische, maxixe, tango, samba, even charleston and foxtrot. But in the 1930s samba came to dominate all others and become a truly national, government-sanctioned rhythm. State-sponsored samba schools became the center of the Rio Carnival. Samba had reached Paris in the 1920s. It was introduced into the U. S. in 1939, at the New York World's Fair, and it saw a marked boom throughout Europe and America in the 1950s.

The characteristic count is "1a2." As in other Latin rhythms, delaying the taking of weight, ball-flat or edge-flat, shifts the hips to the side of the stepping foot, giving a "latin" hip action. A second signature feature is the "samba bounce." The upper torso is kept relatively quiet, but the mid-torso is supple and the hips and pelvis move slightly, forward and back—two bodies in unison.

Mambo originated in Cuba from rumba with swing influences and is Cuba's national dance. In 1947, Perez Prado left Cuba for Mexico. In 1949, he released *Mambo #5*. He moved north in 1951, and the dance developed into a national craze. In 1954, Perry Como sang *Papa Loves Mambo*. Teachers promoted it and even developed three separate rhythms: the single, double, and triple mambo, something we also see in jive and swing.

As a first approximation, mambo is a fast rumba. Many of the figures are the same as in rumba and cha, but to get them done in less time, we must take smaller, sharper steps with a somewhat tighter hold.

The **Cha Cha** developed in Haiti and in Cuba and migrated to the United States in the 1950s. If we can think of mambo as a fast rumba, then cha is a triple mambo. These three rhythms have many figures in common, but cha is danced faster and more open, allowing for more individual expression. Actually, the tempo of cha is about the same as that of rumba, but we are fitting five steps into a measure instead of only three in rumba, so cha feels faster. Where the rumba is danced quick, quick, slow; the cha is danced quick, quick, quick/and, quick; or 1, 2, cha/cha, cha.

The **Merengue** is a stepping dance that developed in the Caribbean during the 1800s and also came to the United States in the 1950s. One story has it originating in the Dominican Republic, where it was danced by a wounded general, and whose guests respectfully followed his every move, including the dragging of the right leg. This "limp" step gradually became smoothed out, and the dance became quite lively. It is the national dance of both the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The Haitian

style is more subdued and slower; the Dominican style can be extremely fast and is designed for crowded dance floors and little progression. Round dancers use the slower, more sensual style. It is a very regular Latin rhythm with a "quick, quick, quick, quick;" look, rather than the more drawn out "quick, quick, slow" of rumba. It is danced ball/flat or edge/flat with a rolling action and a subdued rumba kind of a hip movement.

Salsa evolved out of a wide variety of Afro-Caribbean rhythms in the 1950s and '60s—it wasn't particularly tied to any one country or rhythm of origin. Actually, the name was created in the early 1970s in a deliberate marketing strategy by a group of N.Y. Latin jazz musicians for a particular style of mambo. It was big in the '70s, declined in the face of hip-hop in the '80s, and reemerged again in the '90s. By the end of the millennium, salsa was a popular couple dance in clubs all over the world.
Salsa is sometimes referred to as "son of mambo," but it is a little faster, a little softer and less crisp; it is more side-to-side and has lots of turns and spins. Figures are timed with a quick, quick, slow, as in mambo and rumba, but the action is more like a quick, quick, quick, hold. During the hold, the dancer can introduce a little foot action or flourish. In Puerto Rico, a flick is commonly used. In Cuba, a tap, stamp, or scuff is more typical.

Foxtrot —

And finally, back to the United States. The foxtrot came out of a huge gaggle of "animal dances" that were popular in the early 1900s and that had formed out of the earlier two step. There was a Squirrel, a Snake Hip, Grizzly Bear, Duck Waddle, Lame Duck, Chicken Scratch, Turkey Trot, Eagle Rock, Bunny Hug, Bullfrog Hop, Kangaroo Hop, a Horse Canter, and a Horse Trot. And of course, there was a Fox Trot.

One story tells of Harry Fox (born Arthur Carringford in California), a burlesque comic and a part of the Ziegfeld Follies of 1913, who did a fast, comical dance to 4/4 ragtime music. The act was popular, the music was widely marketed, and Fox's "Trot" became popular in dance halls and

dance studios. It was introduced to members of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing in London in 1915.
In these earliest days, the fox trot was not the smooth: slow, quick, quick, of today (which if you think about it is nothing like a "trot"). Back then, dancers pranced, strutted, hopped, kicked, and capered. One of the first "definitions" of fox trot came from an American teacher who said, "There are but two things to remember; first a slow walk, two counts to a step; second a trot or run, one count to each step." It was an easy dance, and it quickly replaced the one step and the tango in popularity.
But the Castles and others wrote new figures for the rhythm, tamed it for the formal ballroom, and by 1916, the Fox Trot had evolved into the Foxtrot, a slower, more elegant, floating kind of dance. During the Jazz Age of the 20s, the foxtrot was sped up again. It acquired some of the jazzy hops and skips of the Charleston and became our present-day Quickstep. Of course, the quickstep didn't replace the foxtrot, but joined it, a close cousin. The existence of the quickstep maybe allowed the foxtrot itself to slow back down. In England, the foxtrot was danced at 48 measures per minute in 1927, at 42 in 1928, and between 38 and 42 in 1929. The quickstep was being danced at 54–56. We now do the foxtrot around 30–32.

The **Quickstep** formed about 1925 out of a marching one step, a fast foxtrot, and some of the jazzy hops and skips of the Charleston, which had originated as a solo dance in South Carolina and then was promoted by Ned Wayburn in the "Follies" of 1923 in New York. In the beginning, there was a lot of playful and even dangerous kicking to the side, which was smoothed out by 1926. Rise and fall came more from the ball of the foot and less from the knee, and the dance became more progressive, more gliding, and less choppy by 1927. The chasse was incorporated as a fundamental component of the dance. So, very rapidly, the quickstep evolved into an up, light, airy, skipping sort of a dance.
Mr. Alex Moore, one of the foremost teachers of English ballroom dance, has referred to the quickstep as, "a dance that can never grow stale, a dance that is unquestionably the most attractive expression of rhythm the world has ever known."

Swing —

The various swing rhythms are grouped with the Latins (rather than with the Smooths), but their character is not much like rumba and cha.

Lindy came out of the jazz and swing of the nineteen-teens and -twenties. In 1926, the Savoy Ballroom opened in Harlem. In 1927, Charles Lindbergh made his famous flight or "hop" across the Atlantic and so provided the perfect name for this lively style of dance. The story is that it was named the Lindy Hop by a Harlem dancer named "Shorty" George Snowden.

In 1935, Frankie Manning created the first big "aerial" step, called Over-the-Back. In aerials or airsteps, the woman is acrobatically guided through the air in time to the music, and the lindy acquired all sorts of lifts, flips, throws, and slides. We see some of these aerials in Steven Speilberg's 1979 movie, *1941*, and there was some of the real thing in Public Television's *History of Jazz*. However, Round Dancing isn't quite that athletic. Our lindy is smooth, easy, and down.

The lindy of the '30s gave rise to Jitterbug in the '40s, to Rock and Roll in the '50s, and to East Coast Swing, West Coast Swing, Jive, Shag, and others.

In Round Dancing, the dominant swing rhythm is **Jive**—East Coast or Triple Swing. Many figures are written to span a measure and a half with a rock, recover, and two triples. Another group of figures span two measures with a one, two, and a triple; one, two, and a second triple. We can distinguish between triple swing and triple jive. Swing is slower, and the triples travel more with a side/close, side, and a count of 1&2. Jive is faster, bouncier, has more knee action, and the triples are more in place with a step/close, side, and a count of 1a2, with a sharper and briefer second step.

When the tempo gets faster (or the dancer feels more languid), there isn't time to fit those triples in, and we can switch to what is called "Single

Swing." Each 6-count figure becomes: rock, recover, step, step (quick, quick, slow, slow)—four steps over the six beats of music. Less common is "Double Swing" with a rock, recover, press, step, press, step (6 quicks)—again four weight changes over the six beats of music but a total of six actions.

West Coast Swing is obviously related to the other swing or jive rhythms, and it evolved out of swing and lindy in the 1930s. In Rounds, it tends to be lazy, slow, and easy-going. It is the official state dance of California and dances well to easy-going bluesy or beach music. It can be an evocative, sexy dance. There is time to embellish the figures with whatever body styling one might be moved to add.

Where swing, jive, and lindy are circular dances in which the man and woman travel around each other, west coast swing is a slot dance in which the woman dances up and down within a 3 X 6–foot rectangle on the dance floor, sometimes making 1/2 turns at the ends and other times moving back and forth facing the same direction. The man leads the woman forward. He might block her way and send her back, or he might step out of her way, dance around her in various patterns, and then get back into the slot again.

West coast swing uses the timing patterns typical of jive, i.e., 123&4; 1&2, and 123&4; 123&4; but a common departure is to substitute a "touch, step" for the first triple. The Sugar Push is maybe the iconic figure of this rhythm, and it is usually danced: 1, 2, touch, step; 1&2—that is four quicks and a triple.

Hustle had its roots in New York City in the early 1970s. It is said that in the '60s the Twist all but destroyed ballroom dancing. No longer did the dancer need to learn steps or even have a partner. The twist ushered in the frug, swim, monkey, jerk, mashed potato, hand jive, madison, stroll, locomotion, freak—just as many quirky creations as we had animal dances 50 years before, only now we didn't touch. "Do your own thing." Then the hustle came along, and partner dancing was back. Van McCoy wrote *Do the Hustle* in 1975. The movie *Saturday Night Fever* came out in '77. Dancers could touch. The hustle was hugely popular.

The word "hustle" makes this dance rhythm sound a lot faster and more frantic than it really is. Hustle is related to swing, and the music is a pounding disco, but the tempo is slow—closer to west coast swing than to jive. Hustle is light, smooth, and flat, a soft gliding back and forth in the slot, with the man moving gracefully out of the woman's way. There are a lot of changes of directions and turns and spins by both the woman and the man. She may especially come to feel like a yo-yo, but a smooth and flowing yo-yo, not a jerky, bouncy one. Jive is "hot," but hustle is "cool."

The Nightclub-, California-, or **Slow Two Step** was originated by Buddy Schwimmer and others during the 1970s in crowded dance clubs on the west coast as a rhythm you could use with very slow love ballads. Faced with such music, some feel that the only thing to do is to embrace and sway back and forth. But slow two step encourages you to draw out a side step and use up some of the "extra" time that way. Schwimmer taught the dance as a quick rock, recover, and then a slow side; or a cross behind, recover, side. But round dancers dance "slow, quick, quick," with the side step done first and the rock-recover second. Slow two step is danced a little sharp and peppy. There is an elastic, push-pull connection between partners. It is up and flat—no rise and fall.

Well, have we touched on all the Round Dance rhythms? What might next be introduced? In Rounds, we have seen a little Texas Two Step, Disco Fox, and Peabody. Will some adventuresome choreographer write for us a Shag, Bossa Nova, Maxixe, Hip Hop (no, probably not that one :-). But round (couple) dancing has certainly developed a rich repertoire over the last hundred years.