

Salsa Basics

Pre-requisite

None

(These are basic patterns)

Introduction

Salsa was born in 1928 when Ignacio Piñería, a popular song writer, used the phrase, “Echale Salsita!”, which literally translates to “spice it up.” A number of dances sprang from this, and salsa took on the meaning of “Latin dancing”. It was very popular around the world, and the many dances sprang from the Latin world with a kind fierce pride. When you see marquees advertising salsa, they are really advertising Latin dancing including Cha-cha, Mirengue, Cumbia, Bachata, Mambo, Rumba, and etc. The form of what we know as salsa today came from Cuban influence of one particular branch of Latin dancing.

In 1962, when the Beatles came out with their song, “Love Me Do”, rock and roll took off and Latin dancing fell out of favor. By the early 1970s, Fania Records, producer of Latin music, needed to promote their artists and music that were primarily of Cuban flavor and of a rapid Mambo beat. They needed a name to apply to the music that would be easily recognized, and they chose the name, “Salsa”. This was extremely popular in the United States, with the epicenter being in the Cuban neighborhoods of Miami called “Little Havana”.

Although Cuban music was the basis for what we call Salsa today, it is not the only influence. Other influences since then have been Puerto Rico and Columbia. The salsa dance is also referred to as “Street Mambo”, taken from the fiery hot dancing of the mixed one-time upper, middle, and lower class Cubans in the Little Havana neighborhoods of Miami.

(Some historical material from “Let’s Dance”, 1998, by Paul Bottomer.)

In this segment, we are going to discuss:

- The music – how to step to the beat and how determine if it is a cha-cha.
- Contact – how to hold your partner.
- The basic foot work.

The Music

Salsa has a rhythm of four EQUAL beats in one musical bar. According to Latin tradition, it takes two bars of music to return to a basic position of dance. This was counted as “One-Two-Three-Four, and One-Two-Three-Four.” Today, it is danced as three equal steps, a pause for the fourth beat, followed by three more equal steps, and another pause. In counting the dance steps, sometimes the pause between the sets is combined with the last regular step. It is then referred to as “quick, quick, slow, and quick, quick, slow”.

The Count

Many dance instructors have many different ways of teaching. Some only count the steps, but use the Latin style of counting as in, “One-Two-Three-(Pause)” followed by “One-Two-Three-(Pause)”. Others count the beats, as in “One-Two-Three-(Pause)” followed by “Five-Six-Seven-(Pause)”. In classes at 2Step2 Dance Studio we use a mixture of these, because we choose not to count the pauses, but we like to count the basic to conclusion. In class, we use, “One-Two-Three-(Pause)” followed by “Four-Five-Six-(Pause)”.

However, for illustration purposes in this segment, we must use the count of the beats rather than the steps so that we can use a dance clock to keep track of the steps. Our count in this and following documents will be one of “One-Two-Three-(Pause for the count of four)” followed by “Five-Six-Seven-(Pause for the count of eight.)”

What is a beat?

A beat in music is a heavy guitar strum, a drumbeat, or some other heavy sound in the music. It is the **natural** place you would snap your fingers or clap your hands if you were keeping time to the music.

The important thing to remember here is that in dance, you put your foot on the floor on the beat as opposed to picking it up. To practice, you can snap your fingers and stamp your feet as you listen to the music (guys use the left foot and ladies use the right.)

Is it a salsa?

Listen to the music. The two most common Latin music beats are the fast Mambo beat of salsa or the steady cadence of Mirengue. You can dance salsa to most of the commonly played Latin dances except Mirengue and Cha-cha. If it is a Salsa, you should be able to count to the beat as follows:

When you hear the three steady beats with a pause, count it out. . If you can hear a quick, quick, slow, followed by quick, quick, slow, it is probably a salsa. Remember that Mambo (a major influence in salsa footwork) is relatively slow while salsa steps are fairly rapid.

An alternative is to watch what other dancers are doing before you go out onto the floor. If they are generally dancing in a more or less stationary position, rocking back and forth with every three steps and pausing between three step sets, it is a salsa.

If you still cannot determine what it is, ask someone nearby. Most dancers are friendly and they will be glad to tell you.

**Caveat
(Warning)**

We all get used to a certain style of dancing. Here at 2step2 Dance Studio, we are no different. We are used to the way we dance salsa. However, it behooves us to alert you to a different style of dancing the salsa that you might see. This is the use of the tap step to replace the pause.

Sometimes the tap step occurs on the first beat of music. This comes about, because sometimes the music has a more pronounced beat on the second count and dancers choose to take advantage of that. What you will see is a tap step with a stronger second step on the same foot followed by two regular steps. The tap step forces what would normally be the pause to count 1 and 5 rather than the traditional 4 and 8.

That basic pattern is repeated for the steps of the other side to complete a basic. At 2Step2 Dance Studio, we choose not to use this style.

Contact

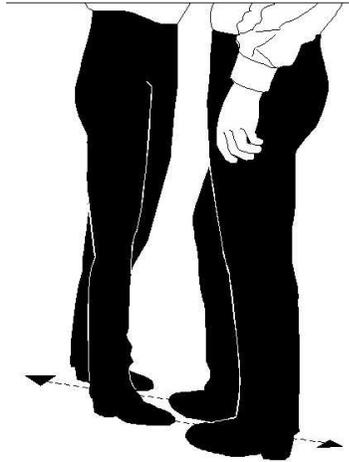
Face each other. There is no line of dance with salsa, but try to dance in the center of the floor so that moving dancers can dance around you. On a crowded floor, salsa dancers try to dance the same direction to conserve space and avoid bumping other dancers.



Gentlemen – Put your right hand under the lady's left arm and place it gently on her left shoulder blade. Keep your fingers together and turn the tip of your hand down so that it raises your right elbow to create a shelf for the lady to rest her arm. In Latin dancing, the clasped hands on the gentleman's left side tends to be held a little higher than in other continental dances. Hold your left hand out to the side about level with her chin but below her eyes. Hold your palm forward and fingers pointing to the outside to create a fence for her right hand.

Ladies – Rest your left elbow on the gentleman's arm and cup your left hand on the ball of his right shoulder. Gently rest your right hand on top of the gentleman's left hand.

Finally, hold each other slightly offset so that your right foot is pointing between your partner's feet.



We do three things to prevent stepping on each other's toes:

1. Ladies and gentlemen dance with opposite footwork – guys start with the left foot and ladies start with the right foot. Provided they are facing each other, as the gentleman steps forward with his left, the lady steps back with her right and there is always a place to put the foot.
2. Ladies and gentlemen dance parallel but offset to each other so that the right foot is lined up to always pass between the partner's feet. This prevents bumping knees and toes.
3. Ladies and gentlemen keep their feet fairly close to the floor when they step to prevent stepping on your partner if all else fails. Avoid dragging your feet – it is unsightly, it creates an irritating sound, and it will quickly wear out your shoes.

Connection and Frame

The connection and frame in Latin dancing is a little closer than in typical continental dances. This closer frame is created by holding the clasped hands a little higher (as already mentioned) and holding the arms of the clasped hands in a more vertical position. Also, the right hand of the gentleman goes a little farther around the partner to bring them closer together.

Try it out. If this is comfortable for you, it will give you a more Latin look. If it is not comfortable, there is nothing wrong with holding each other in a more relaxed position. Either way, you can do the footwork.

Two Positions (Closed and Open)



Like many stationary dances in the Western world, there are two basic positions – closed and open. The above illustrations show the normal closeness of the closed position, and the connection of the open position.

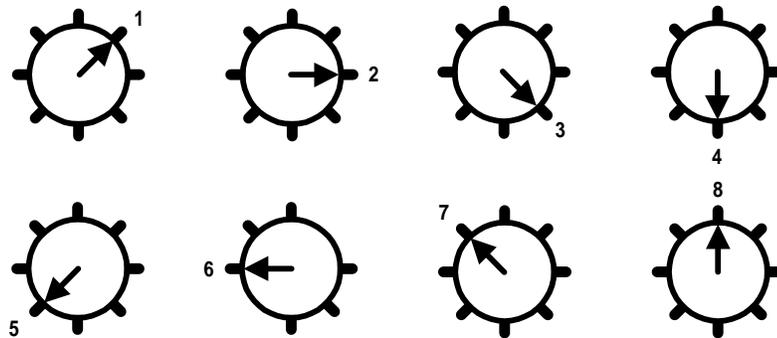
The connection of the open position is created by leaning slightly in toward your partner and keeping a tension in your elbows. The gentleman should hold the clasped hands somewhere about the height of the lady's shoulders.

The Basic Dance Area

The pattern for dancing basic salsa is a back and forth pattern. The starting position where both partners have their feet side-by-side is called the “spot”. The basic footwork (illustrated on the next page) is for the gentleman to rock forward on his left (lady back on right), replace the remaining foot on the spot, and then bring the feet together (side-by-side) on the spot. After a pause on the beat (or a tap step), the gentleman rocks back on his right as the lady rocks forward on her left. The second portion is a mirror image of what was done on the first part.



The dance clock



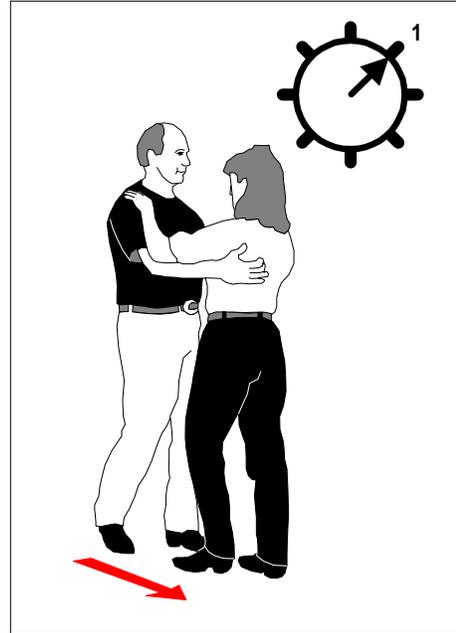
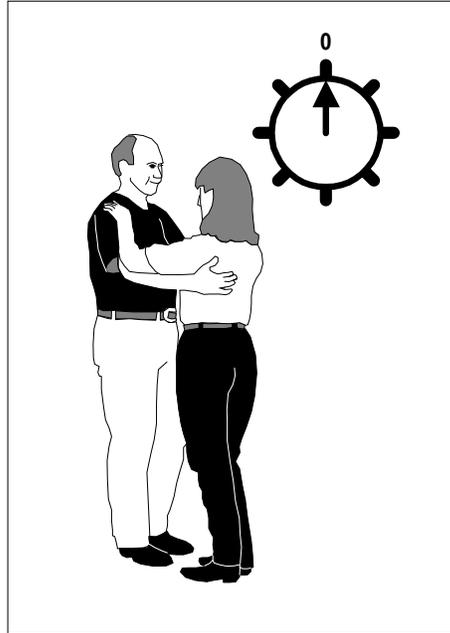
Unlike the regular clock, the salsa dance clock is divided into eight segments to correspond to the beats of the basic music. Clocks for other dances will be different. Steps number 1, 2, 3 are the first set as described above, and steps number 5, 6, 7 are the second set. Count numbers 4, and 8 are a pause.

(International dancers sometimes do a tap on steps 4 and 8 with the following step on the same foot. Also, note that some dancers pause or tap on counts 1 and 5 while dancing on counts 2-4 and 6-8 due to different rhythms of music. We at 2Step2 Dance Studio choose not to use that footwork.)

Timing of Steps

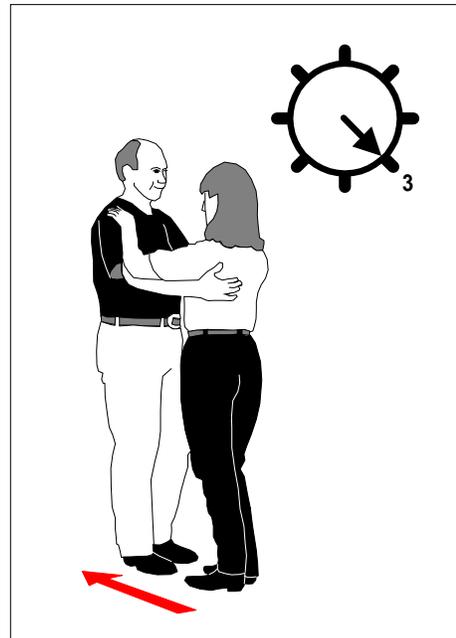
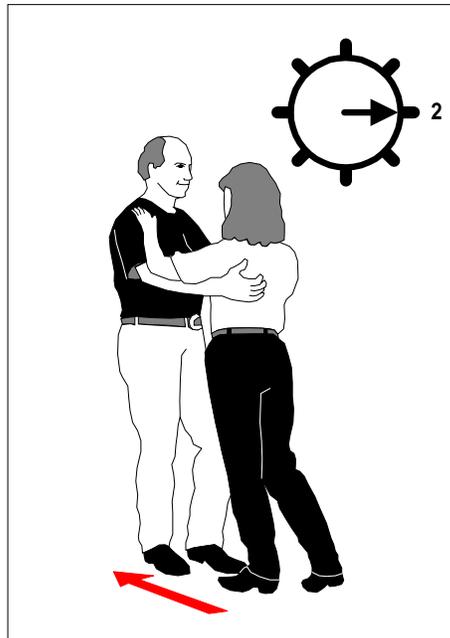
An important point to note is that the timing occurs after the step, not before it. Therefore, the timing for the first step occurs between point 1 and 2 in the diagram. The second step begins at point 2, the third step begins at point 3.

The Steps
(The First Set))



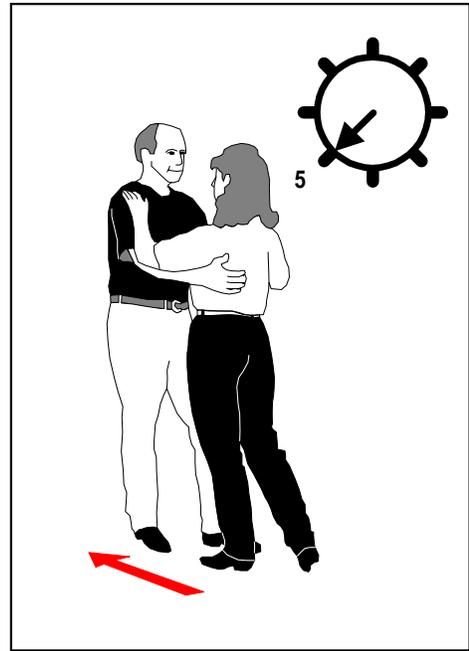
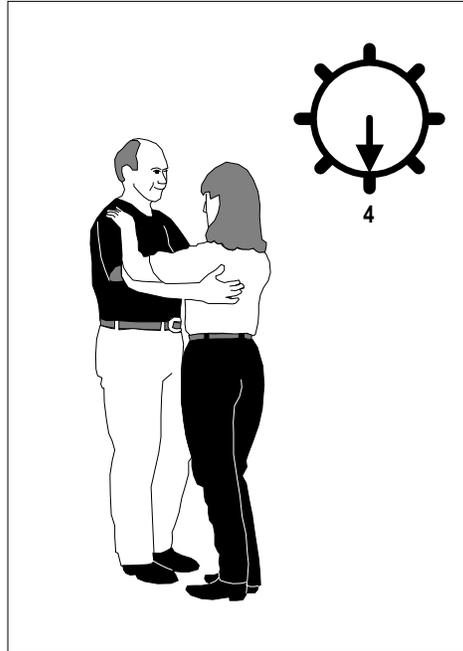
The dancers begin in CLOSED position with their feet together on the spot. On the count of 1, the gentleman rocks forward with his left – lady back with her right. However, although the weight is shifted to that foot, the body is NOT CARRIED OVER that foot. Instead, it is rather like stepping and pushing the other direction.

Step 2 is a replace step with step on count 4 returning to the starting spot.



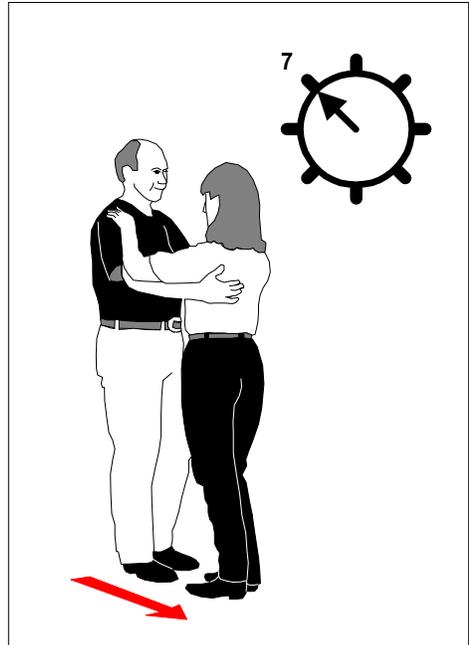
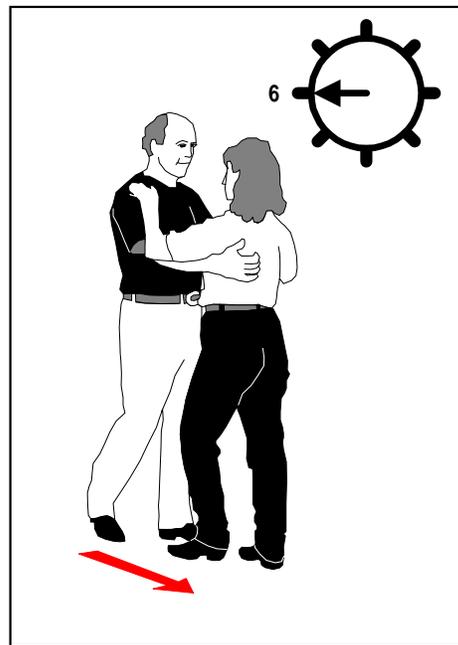
**The Steps
(The Second
Set)**

No step on count 4 but a pause. Step 5 gentleman rocks back with right foot and lady rocks forward with her left foot. (The exact opposite of the first set.)



(Count 6 and 7)

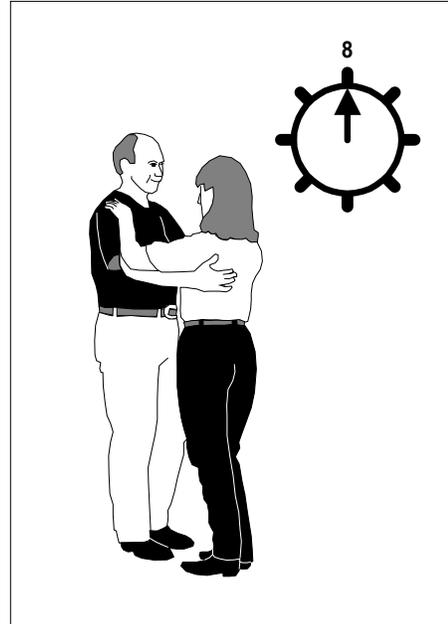
The partners replace the weight on their remaining foot in count 6 and return to the starting spot in count 7.



The final count of the basic salsa

In count 8, there is a pause before beginning the basic all over again.

Remember that the steps of 1, 2 and 5, 6 are like a rocking motion. They are a weight change, so do not fail to take the steps. Also, remember that this dance has a steady cadence or rhythm with a pause every fourth beat. Do not rush through the pauses



Don't be Afraid

Every dancer out there has "paid their dues". They have struggled just like you. However, they are concentrating on their own efforts and not upon you. They do not care if you make a mistake, so go ahead and make them. You have just as much right to be on the dance floor as they do, so get out there and dance. It may be a struggle, but that is ok. Dance as if no one is watching you.

Protect your Lady

As you are dancing, check often around you to be aware of the traffic and patterns that are happening nearby. Do not run your lady into another dancer and do not allow them to collide with her. Take smaller steps or maneuver her into an open spot if necessary. Even though the salsa is a stationary dance, you can maneuver on the floor somewhat. Avoid collisions with other dancers.

Take the Blame

If a collision does occur, remember that it does no one any good to get upset – this is just recreation. The best policy is to apologize regardless if it is your fault or not.

And last, but not least – if you do bump into someone and knock over their drink, offer to replace it, and try to be more careful.

Conclusion

The material presented here is not all-inclusive, but only touches the high points. There are many other tips to help in your salsa technique. Some of these tips will be presented in the course of other dance segments, while others may have to be taught in conjunction with an instructor present.

This concludes the segment on basic salsa.