

# Perfect 10



## The cha cha cha

Continuing our exploration of the standard ten dances, this month **Marianka Swain** uncovers the history of the cheeky cha cha cha

**I**f you're looking for a sweeping romance or a grand passion, you're better off with a waltz or a tango, but for the slow build of attraction, teasing, competition and, of course, full-on flirtation, nothing beats the cha cha cha," observes ballroom teacher and choreographer Alison West.

From the infectious basic to the show-stopping tricks, this is a dance that can wow a crowd with its dynamism and sexiness or simply provide a tantalising rhythmic cocoon in which two people can smoulder.

The cha cha cha is a truly international style, with roots in Africa, the West Indies, Cuba, the US and England. The origin of the name is arguably the West Indies and the religious ritual dances, which involved music, singing and movement. The seedpods of native plants were used to create a rattle, known as the "cha cha", which was played by the tribal leader as a guide instrument or metronome to dictate the pace and rhythm.

Photograph © Carole Edrich



Michelle van Vuuren and Julian Tocker perform a cheeky cha cha cha at Karen Hardy Studios

An alternative theory is that the name is onomatopoeic, inspired by the shuffling sound of the dancer's steps on the triple beat.

What is certain is that the major musical origin of the dance is Cuba, which, by the beginning of the 19th century, had become the cultural centre of the Hispanic world and one of the most economically prosperous of the Spanish colonies. In the 1820s, the Spanish authorities allowed the slaves in Cuba to establish cabillolos or councils, based on

groups by African nations, which gave them the opportunity to preserve their native traditions, including music and dance, as well as accepting European influence.

One of these fusions of Cuban, African and European rhythms was the *danzón*, originally a sequence dance performed in groups, with dancers twisting and entwining coloured ribbons to make pleasing patterns while maintaining a pulsing rhythm. As the dance developed, it became more of a courting form, with slower rhythms and couples dancing closer together.

Unsurprisingly, the sinuous hip movements, close contact and low centre of gravity led to its reputation as a scandalous form. In an article published in 1881, a *La Voz de Cuba* reporter recommended "banning the *danza* and *danzón* because they are vulgar vestiges of Africa and should be replaced by essentially European dances such as the *quadrille* and *rigadon*". The shock was based not just on the *danzón*'s sensuality, but also on the blending of cultural influences and styles associated with different classes.

**H**owever, the dance continued to grow in popularity, and in 1938, Oresta Lopez composed a *danzón* he called the "mambo", which combined Cuban melodies

"The seedpods of native plants were used to create a rattle, known as the 'cha cha', which was played by the tribal leader as a guide instrument or metronome to dictate the pace and rhythm"

with African rhythms from the street, and both the music and dance associated with it became sensations. Mambo was further solidified as a new genre when Perez Prado marketed his orchestral music under the name ➤



1950s Latin dancers Doreen Key and Leonard Patrick show that it's all in the hips

Photograph from the Dancing Times archive

“mambo” in the 1950s, bringing it to the attention of North America.

Meanwhile, musicians and dancers experimented with new beats and tempos, creating, among other variations, the triple mambo, which used Cuban side steps. In 1951, Cuban violinist Enrique Jorrin recognised that some dancers were struggling with the pace and developed the beat with a medium rhythm that was instantly recognisable and less frenetic, so anyone could dance to it and also improvise. The Cuban orchestra America built on this further by playing the music with a syncopated beat, leading to the cha cha rhythm we dance today.

However, this style might not have reached the UK had it not been for intrepid dance teacher Pierre Zurcher Margolie, who, with his partner Doris Lavelle, visited Cuba in 1952 and was intrigued by this variation on the familiar mambo, particularly by the split fourth beat which meant you started the dance on the second beat of the bar rather than the first. He took this interesting rhythm and several new figures back to London, teaching the style as a brand new dance.

The cha cha cha also became popular in the US in the 1950s, with American big bands playing in the world-famous Havana clubs and taking the new mambo music back home with them, in conjunction with renowned teacher Arthur Murray adopting and simplifying the style to make it accessible to students. Rhythmically, the cha cha cha was palatable to American dancers as a variation



Above, Robin Windsor and Kristina Rihanoff cha cha cha on the *MOVE IT* stage. Top right, Mr Sami, of Sami School of Dancing in Tel Aviv, teaches the dance to Rachel Chaviv in 1962



Photograph from the Dancing Times archive

on swing, which is also danced with a triple step and a break. As a competitive form, cha cha cha has several differences from the original style, including an increased sharpness in the motions, more flamboyant use of

arms and the addition of judge- and crowd-pleasing tricks, such as spins, drops and acrobatics, particularly in more recent years. However, the key to dancing it at a high level is having respect for its origins, believes Alison: “We

often talk about ‘Cuban motion’ – the characteristic Latin body action. This doesn’t mean isolated shimmying or booty shaking, but triggering the movement from the feet upwards. The *danzón* was usually danced on a crowded

floor, with the couple only able to produce rhythmic movement by skilfully moving their feet as little as possible in order to create ripples through their legs and thus hips and upper bodies. Just by putting pressure into the floor

and bending and straightening your knees in the right way, you can create much more impact and musicality than any of amount of spinning or arm waving.” Alison also believes the connection between music and movement is as important now as it was during the dance’s conception: “Whether you’re dancing a sensual cha cha to slower Latin music or a spicier one to an upbeat contemporary pop track, you need to listen carefully to the rhythm and let your movements flow naturally from that. “Lagging behind the music makes the dance lack impact, and rushing ahead makes it look frenetic and uncontrolled, but if you and your partner can match it perfectly, hitting the beats but also enjoying the flowing sensuality of the transitions, your cha cha will be unbeatably sexy.” ●

**Next month: Rachele Stretch discusses the samba**

Photograph © Murray Thompson