

Footwork and Latin Hip Motion

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This article highlights the importance of footwork and its relationship to hip movement in American rhythm and International Latin dance styles. Proper

footwork fosters greater artistic expression of the rhythm by enabling a more enhanced and synchronized hip action. This attractive quality is known as Latin or Cuban hip motion.

Footwork describes the part of the foot that is in contact with the floor over each step. It is sometimes mistaken for foot position which is yet another distinctive element of dance that describes where the foot is to be placed over each step. Good technique ensures that each step will start and finish on the correct part of the foot. American rhythm and international Latin dance leads are taken on the front of the foot and are commonly referred to as toe leads. These steps are actually initiated on the inside edge of the ball of the foot and then lowered to the flat part of the foot with the heel lightly contacting the floor. This is referred to as ball-flat footwork and is predominantly used in all rhythm dance styles.

There is a clear relationship between footwork, knee flex and the extent and



manner in which the hips move. Ball-flat is the essential classic footwork used for achieving Latin hip motion. When dancing a back rock, the footwork can either be taken as ball-flat or ball-heel. Ball-heel footwork occurs when significant weight is placed on the heel at the end of the step. For the most part however, all forward, side and back steps are taken as ball-flat. These steps are initiated on the inside edge of the ball of the foot from a flexed knee and finished on the flat part of the foot. As the step is finished the moving leg straightens and the corresponding hip rises. This action happens naturally due to the difference in the effective length between the two legs that is created by the flexed knee. Any combination of improper footwork or knee flex can easily result in unattractive hip motion. This is because the hips respond directly to the footwork as well as to the amount of bend at the knee over each step. Latin motion also helps to generate a natural upper body movement by creating diagonal counterbalancing forces between the raised hip and opposite shoulder. This improves balance and enriches the overall appearance.

Meringue is an excellent dance to practice for enhancing Latin hip motion. The basic step moves sideways as a continuous chasse, i.e., side-close foot action. Side steps are ideal for developing awareness of Latin motion as these steps more readily accentuate hip movement. It is always better to let the hips move naturally as a result of footwork and knee flex rather than to artificially force them to move. The key to Latin motion is to initiate all steps on the ball of the foot from a flexed knee while the standing leg is essentially straight. The knee of the stepping leg should be flexed on the beat while the standing leg is straightened in-between beats. As weight is methodically shifted from side to side, the hips will naturally rotate in a figure eight pattern. For steps taken over two beats, the stepping leg should remain flexed for the greater part of this duration and then straightened at

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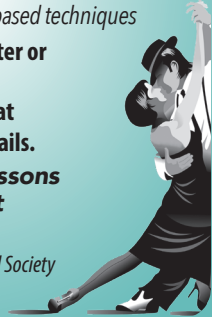
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the end of the second beat. It is important to avoid bending both knees at the same time as this would be awkward and not allow the hips to move properly.

It is interesting to note the differences between American rhythm and International Latin dance styles regarding leg and knee action. Some may agree that the differences in technique are difficult to discern between these two major styles. In International Latin, emphasis is placed on straightening the leg just before weight is taken on the moving foot. Conversely, in American rhythm, the moving leg remains slightly bent as the weight is taken onto the foot. Despite these stated differences, the basic formula for Latin hip motion remains largely the same. It is mainly dependent on footwork and knee flex irrespective of the dance style.

Using proper footwork and leg action greatly helps to form a solid base on which the entire body's movement is built upon. This is a key element in acquiring good quality Latin hip motion. Refined Latin motion makes the dance look and feel more elegant and less like a march. The goal is to allow the hips to move naturally and freely with the rhythm. Latin hip motion always adds an extra measure of creative expression that makes the dance much more enjoyable.