

Introduction to Mambo

History In the back country of Haiti, "Mambo" is a voodoo priestess. She serves the village in many functions. She is a counselor, healer, exorcist, soothsayer, spiritual adviser and organizes the entertainment. Part of her duties is the selection of the music and dancing. With this in mind, there is no folk dance or any other dance, in Haiti, called the "Mambo". A form of the Mambo, as a dance, originated in Cuba. With Cuba's large settlements of Haitians, it's possible there was some voodoo influence behind the name "Mambo".

The Mambo, as a dance, came to the United States in the 40's. It did not gain popularity until the early 50's, mostly due to the Cuban band leader Perez Prado. He took the rhythm of the sugarcane cutters and syncopated it. When he brought this new interpretation to the United States, it caught on rapidly in the larger cities, especially those with large Latin populations, and then spread over the entire country. The ballroom studios took great advantage of this new rhythm to increase the number of new students. It also brought back old Rumba students who wanted to learn the new faster version of their dance.

The English ballroom teachers treated the Mambo as a modification of the Rumba. In the United States, the teachers treated it as a separate rhythm and taught it that way. The Mambo was also the probable reason for the development of the Cha Cha Cha.

Musical Timing The musical timing of the Mambo is 4/4. That is, four beats to the bar or measure of music. It is very staccato in sound and much faster than the typical Rumba music. We dance the Rumba at 28 - 32 measures per minute, whereas we dance the Mambo much faster. Usually, we dance the Mambo at 38 - 42 measures per minute. Some very experienced dancers might dance it as fast as 48 measures per minute. This is much too fast for the average dancer, however you can see the great latitude you have in dancing the Mambo.

Rhythm The standard rhythm of the Mambo is quick-quick-slow, as is the Rumba. The primary difference is the speed of the music. As with the Rumba and the Cha Cha, the ballroom dancers use the first beat of a measure to prepare for the first step by fully displacing their hip. This makes for their first weight transfer, or first step to come on the second beat of the measure. This causes their quick-quick-slow rhythm to be on the beats of 2, 3, 4/1. As we do with the other two rhythms, Rumba and Cha Cha, most round dancers step on the first beat of the measure, there by dancing their quick-quick-slow on beats 1, 2, 3/4. This is acceptable as long as the dancers stay true to the character of the rhythm. The quicks must be fast and there must be a dramatic stop on the slow, in most cases.

Posture and Stance We use the typical Latin stance, hold and positioning while dancing the Mambo. Because of the speed of the Mambo, you will not be able to maintain the elegant tall, upright posture used in the Rumba or Bolero. To some extent, the dancers will maintain a posture about half way between the Rumba and the Jive. Posture not as loose as the jive, but not as ridged as the Rumba. The dance positions used in the Mambo are the same used in the stationary Latin dances. Because of the speed, the dancers probably will remain closer to each other than they would in dancing the Rumba or Cha Cha. More like where they would be, dancing the jive.

Characteristics Mambo figures resemble those of the Rumba and Cha Cha. Two major differences are the late weight transfer and the forward and backward movement. Rumba and Cha Cha have a side to side movement to many of their basics. We can dance the Mambo, in this manner, however, due to the speed, a forward and back movement is easier to use. The late weight transfer is also a product of the speed. Normally the dancer transfers full weight as he takes the next step. In Mambo we place the foot and then take weight and allow the hip to transfer as we pick up the other foot for the next step. This also means that there is more use of the inside edge of the foot when taking a step. The late weight shift also creates a softer "Cuban Motion" to the hips. Due to the jazz impute into the Mambo, you often find leg kicks and upper body movement associated with many figures. These add to the flavor and are a big factor in the popularity of the Mambo as a rhythm. The steps, taken in the Mambo, must be small. Because of the speed, large steps would not allow enough time for the other actions necessary to maintain the character of the rhythm.

Footwork Most steps are either forward or backward. The foot placement, for both the man and the lady, is to take weight on the flat of the foot or if on the ball immediately to lower the heel. As with most Latin rhythms, turning the toes out is the proper technique.