

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with several stylized leaf motifs scattered across it. Each motif consists of a stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

LATIN DANCE

Elizabeth Drake-Boyt

 **Greenwood**
PUBLISHING GROUP

Latin Dance

**Recent Title in
The American Dance Floor**

Country & Western Dance

Ralph G. Giordano

Latin Dance

Elizabeth Drake-Boyt

The American Dance Floor
Ralph G. Giordano, Series Editor



GREENWOOD

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Series Foreword

From the Lindy hop to hip-hop, dance has helped define American life and culture. In good times and bad, people have turned to dance to escape their troubles, get out, and have a good time. From high school proms to weddings and other occasions, dance creates some of our most memorable personal moments. It is also big business, with schools, competitions, and dance halls bringing in people and their dollars each year. And as America has changed, so, too, has dance. The story of dance is very much the story of America. Dance routines are featured in movies, television, and videos; dance styles and techniques reflect shifting values and attitudes toward relationships; and dance performers and their costumes reveal changing thoughts about race, class, gender, and other topics. Written for students and general readers, *The American Dance Floor* series covers the history of social dancing in America.

Each volume in the series looks at a particular type of dance such as swing, disco, Latin, folk dancing, hip-hop, ballroom, and country & western. Written in an engaging manner, each book tells the story of a particular dance form and places it in its historical, social, and cultural context. Thus each title helps the reader learn not only about a particular dance form but also about social change. The volumes are fully documented, and each contains a bibliography of print and electronic resources for further reading.

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Preface

Nothing that happened while I was growing up prepared me to be an expert on Latin dances. Although Spanish was sometimes spoken in my home, it was incidental because my mother had spent some of her teen years in Mexico. She spoke it only with her friend Maria, because Bill Medina, who came out to our Iowa farm to help with the work, had married Maria in Mexico and brought her back with him to live in Des Moines. Maria didn't speak English at the time, and Mother was the only one she knew who spoke Spanish. So Maria was often at our farm, too; she taught me how to make sweet tamales and how to dance. Through Maria, I got an early taste of sweet tamales (corn mixed with sugar, raisins, and cinnamon) as well as the hot in my mouth, all-night doses of conjunto music in my ear, and a way of moving that went through the body and into the earth itself. Even with this kind of start, my trail to Latin dances was as long and winding as a conga line.

I love to dance. It has always been—since the moment I could walk—and always will be, my greatest joy in life. And in my world at that time, only one word encompassed the lofty goal of becoming a dancer: ballet.

As the only girl among four younger brothers, I had many “critics” of my dance creativity. Any “Latin motion” dancing was especially commented upon, and jibes from the “all-male peanut gallery” suggesting I take up belly dancing froze my core. Well, there were ways around that. Not all dancing had to have hip moves and the sexual connotations that went along with that. I took ballet and classical

Spanish dances as taught by Elizabeth Werbllosky in Des Moines, Iowa. A fiery, petite lady, “Miss Elizabeth” despaired of my ever being able to manage the multiple turns, changes of direction, and rhythmic response that any respectable dancer should have. So she patiently taught me as much as she could from the Spanish dances that her own teacher, Cansino (who also taught his daughter, Rita Hayworth), had passed on to her. I was very happy with that. No Latin motion, and no swinging hips suggesting sex of any kind in ballet or these Spanish dances. Now, if only I could get my fingers to articulate the castanets, I’d have it made.

Only, I never did quite make it. All that work did improve rhythmic response, but not enough to really go beyond perpetual amateur status. A huge gap fell between my abilities and my dancing ambitions. I was pretty stiff from riding horses, and age fifteen was late to start learning. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy; I just never considered the possibility that it might be impossible. And I didn’t give up.

While I worked at it, I read about dance and viewed every live performance, film, or TV show that had any dance in it. All kinds of dance, all over the world; wherever and whenever music played and dancers moved. I traveled a lot, and where I went, I recorded dances—some of which have since disappeared—that I saw in journals. I kept taking dancing lessons in the midst of raising two children and frequent moves with a husband in metallurgical engineering. I not only studied jazz and tap but also dance-like activities such as Tai Chi, stage combat techniques, Chinese wand exercise, and even foil fencing—for which I became a practice judge. But a frozen core (not to mention knees and ankles that don’t flex well) did not help, and my whole idea of dance was to get off the ground, not sink to it.

When I took classes in modern dance at the University of Arizona from two fabulous teachers, I was the oldest student in the class. But I finally learned that gravity wasn’t the enemy of expressive movement, and that the earth itself offers the strength of self-empowerment. And later, one of my professors at Florida State University, Dr. Anita Gonzalez, who is also a founding member of Urban Bush Women, took me with her on a research trip to visit these dance performers. There I began to understand how drummers and dancers “talk” to each other. I fell in with my neighbors, who were from all over the world—especially the wives of students from Egypt and Turkey. These Muslim ladies danced—hour upon hour—safe and secure from the eyes (and jokes)

of men, and I joined them until 9/11 struck, and it was no longer safe for us to dance together. But things inside my core had started to rattle.

Finally, another professor took me to a conference in New Orleans where we found a family-friendly zydeco spot, and somehow, with that same encouragement of inclusion, I managed to learn the Cajun two-step, gliding waltz, and the joyful zydeco, hitting that off-beat “limp” shoulder to shoulder with the best of them. I couldn’t get enough of it. We stayed so long into the night, sailing along to fiddle and accordion, that the frottoir player gave up, strapped me into the washboard, and handed me the spoons.

Well, that certainly was the beginning of the end, and better late than never! Ever since, I’ve looked for opportunities to try out just about every Latin dance I could find. True, capoeira and breaking will probably not be at the top of my list, but then again, you never know. So when one of my esteemed dance history associates (who had also been one of my professors) let me know that Ralph Giordano was looking for writers for the Greenwood American Dance Floor series, I raised my hand at once, delighted to be assigned the Latin social dances (even though I really, truly am not any kind of an expert on them). After all, I still have a lot to learn.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my grateful appreciation to everyone who guided me through the process of writing this book. Certainly Series Editor Ralph Giordano deserves my heartfelt thanks for guiding the process start to finish and keeping me on track. Editors Erin Ryan and George Butler at ABC-CLIO, LLC have been invaluable help in shaping the content, finding images, and putting the book in good form. Without them, this project would certainly not have been possible. I would also like to commend the Kentucky Daviess County Public Library staff, with whose help I was able to access excellent materials in support of my research. Thanks also go to photographers Jack Crockett and Allen Spatz for providing some of the excellent images that help tell the story of Latin social dancing in the United States.

My long-suffering family also deserves abundant credit for patiently enduring my absence during the time that my efforts were devoted to the project, especially husband Charly, who continually interrupted his own writing projects to sympathize with every setback or cheer each step of progress—not to mention his invaluable help with line editing. I offer him affectionate gratitude.

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Introduction

[Salsa is] a little animal that gets into your eyes and ears, and when it reaches your heart, it bursts out and you can't avoid it.

Celia Cruz¹

It is no exaggeration to say that Latin dances are among the most popular of social dances anywhere in the world. They are found everywhere and in all dance venues, from serious concert art dance performances (ballet and modern) to neighbors' patio parties and the hottest clubs in every major city of the United States. Indispensable to exhibition and DanceSport competition, Latin dances are the ultimate expression of couples' social dancing in the United States, as they allow dancers to explore the rich complexity of balances of power and pleasure in pairs; one to lead, and the other to follow. From the sudden intensity of tango corté figures to the snappy, sassy whip-steps and rolling pelvis of salsa, a dancing pair expresses relationship emotions in all degrees; attraction, combat, flirtation, betrayal, rejection, longing, desire, passion, and fantasy.

But couples aren't the only ones to enjoy Latin dancing. There is an almost inexhaustible variety of configurations possible on the Latin social dance floor. From celebratory conga lines to casino rueda wheels, to zumba classrooms filled with exercise enthusiasts to individual displays of virtuoso partnering in mambo or capoeira, Latin dances are one-on-one as well as one-to-many. And other social dance



Dancer Erin Boyt embodies the regal bearing and sensual romanticism of Spanish Latin dances. (© Jack Crockett. Used by permission.)

styles pick up a note of drama when touched with that unmistakable Latin rhythm and style. In their social forms (as opposed to exhibition and/or competition variants), Latin dances are infinitely inclusive; the basic steps are generally easy to learn in a few lessons, yet take a lifetime of study to master. They accommodate a broad range of physical and mental conditions; even wheelchair. Though each Latin dance has its own rhythmic and melodic signature, there is in every one the opportunity to improvise within the form. And all of them are held together by the inescapable “key,” or clave five-count beat that is at the heart of Latin music.

Latin dances are about power and the survival of identity in the unimaginably harsh conditions of slavery and immigration. They provide the space where identity and origin are proclaimed in a salsa, depending on whether or not the dancer steps out on the first beat.² The history of how these dances were brought onto dance floors in the United States is one bordered by racism. While media and mass culture

representations told the “tamed” part of the story, another part flowed under it like an underground stream—parallel but not visible—that is, until Latin began to dance with African-American jazz and together they made the big time in the recording industry.

The politics of Latin dances continue to change—from Hollywood’s early caricature of them (in which even the word “tropical” had negative connotations, connecting the Caribbean and South America to Africa) to the present pan-Latin salsa. Today, everyone is invited to the Latin dance party. While tango clubs thrive in Japan, Puerto Rican bomba y plena dances spring up with the spontaneity of mushrooms in New York City’s Central Park, entrancing anyone who wants to join the fun. And this vital multicultural and intergenerational exchange seems the most likely trend of the future, as the Americas (North and South) continue to proclaim themselves on the social dance floor.

Latin dances are extremely versatile and mutable; they can fit in anytime and anywhere, bridging between European and non-European dance styles. This mutability may have something to do with the unique position of Latin dance itself, that is neither quite as distal from European as, say, African dances, nor yet quite European in the same way as are social dances like a waltz or fox-trot. Perhaps this is why Latin dances are the dances of the expatriate immigrant who—whether by force or choice—is fragmented between nostalgia for the “old country” and the opportunities of the new.

This bridging is specifically expressed in both the movements of the dancers and the patterns in the music that accompanies them. With the exception of pivots or other quick turning moves required for tango, Latin dance steps are typically performed flat-footed and with a slight bend in the knees. But in closed hold Latin dance partnering, the upper body carriage is comparable to European ballroom and social dance styles. And while European melodies and song lyrics garnish the soul of Latin music, the rhythmic pulse and improvisational call and response in the playing of all kinds of percussive instruments—led by the drum—recalls African tribal affiliations to those whose ancestors were brought into slavery in the New World.

Latin dance occupies a fascinating middle ground as something between the “sweet and the hot,” a complex mix of elegant self-control with a little naughty spice slipping out now and then. Latin dances that made it to “the big time” in the United States had packed their bags and moved from rural folk to urban nationalism in South

American and Caribbean cities before arriving. And it was primarily in port cities where these dances flourished and changed: Havana, Cuba, New York City, Miami, Florida, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, where people of all classes, economic status, professions, and cultures mixed, matched, melded, and danced together.

Latin dance suggests an escape, or holiday from the workaday city life of the average American who has grown up under a strong Puritan work ethic. Being on vacation gives people permission to indulge in “non-productive” activities like dancing, something tourists from the United States took full advantage of as they took a short hop across the water from Florida to pre-Castro Cuba in the 1920s to 1930s. This tourist trade brought Cuban dance and music to the forefront, as Havana’s hotels and nightclubs rushed to provide the “cigars and rum” that were in short supply back home during Prohibition.

The origin of this dancing “south of the border” tinged with African roots provides a release of inhibitions in controlled and selective venues outside the ordinary life of most Euro-Americans. And while purists and moralists brought Latin dancing under some of the most virulent attacks that any social dancing had been subjected to, far more dancers were of like mind to one Mrs. Lillian Albers who, when faced with the choice between tango or church choir, promptly resigned from the church.³

An arbitrary distinction divides Latin dances into two categories; those with the distinctive “Latin motion” of the hips, and those without. Spanish Latin dances are defined as those most directly Spanish, with North African connections like the Argentine tango and its Brazilian cousin the maxixie, bolero (Spanish Cuban), and paso doble (Spain and Mexico). In these, dancer’s bodies do not break between the hip and torso, so the line is more closely-connected to other European dances. If there is any Latin motion, it is subtle. Furthermore, the Spanish Latin dances express a different relationship between partners in that the male is dominant. It is his job to show off the lady, just as it is hers to be seen. These Spanish Latin dances are described in Chapter 1, along with other social dances indigenous to the United States under the Latin “influence,” such as Conjunto/tejana (Southwestern United States), and Creole zydeco and Cajun (Louisiana and East Texas).

The larger collection of tropical Latin dances has the distinctive Latin motion (also called Cuban motion) of the hips and pelvis,