

Salsa on the Spur of the Music !

This document contains the "Script" (that is the spoken part) of the DVD "Salsa on the Spur of the Music". This may help non English speaking students to follow the video, as well as all students to practise the figures when you are not in front of the TV. A translation into Italian is available at <http://www.salsaisgood.com/scripts.htm>

Chapter 1 - Introduction

What you have just seen is our favorite salsa clip. We have traveled most corners of the salsa world, seen thousands of dancers, but nothing in our opinion compares to this clip. It is simply the most beautiful piece of salsa dancing we have ever seen. It has it all, happiness, joy sparkling from every beat, perfect merging with the music, naturalness, everything...

Nevertheless this clip does not contain any salsa figure, nor any shine. There are no dips, no acrobatics, no rehearsed decoration, no long studied stylistic moves. In fact, this clip does not even contain a single double turn. There are only basic steps, spontaneous footwork, Cross-body leads and decorations fully improvised on the spur of the music. More importantly there is a beautiful, natural and un-choreographed coordination between the dancers. The dance explodes with joy. The smiles seem to scream out the enjoyment of salsa. We cannot avoid feeling a smile of pleasure blooming on our own faces every time we see this clip.

I was once told that a good dancer is one who makes you see the music. Surely Stacey and Lucy make us see the music in this clip. This arises, at least partly, from being fully one with the music. Some people, like Stacey and Lucy, have talent, they dance with their heart and with their stomach. Others, us included, have to rely on the brain. This video aims at the people who need to use their brain to understand the music better, and hopefully push it down into their heart and stomach, one day.

Being part of the music when you dance means understanding rhythm and timing but also its variations and the accents. With the help of our timing CD, this is what we try to achieve in this video. We show you how to listen to the music, how to recognize the different instruments, how to understand their accents and how to coordinate your dancing to all these components. We will also suggest some ideas of how to decorate your dancing, and show you how beautiful simple salsa can be when dancers and the music become one.

Chapter 2 - Music timing

In music the unit of time is called a 'bar'. In the context of this video, each bar of music is made of 4 beats. In salsa, most phrases (both in music and in dancing) cover blocks of 2 bars, which means 8 beats. You can see the beats ticking in front of you now. We will use this salsa beat counter throughout the video. Pay attention to it to both train your ear to follow the music time and to synchronize your movements to the salsa rhythm.

Strong and weak beats. In musical terminology the odd beats (n1 n3 n5 n7) are called strong beats. The even beats are called weak beats. This distinction is important as you will soon see.

Music Accents. The accents are notes (or beats) which are louder than the others. The distribution of the accents is one of the factors which determines the rhythm of a piece of music. Here we introduce the most important difference between 'western' pop music and Cuban music (from which salsa originates.)

In most pop music strong beats and accents coincide. Here the hands mark the accents in the music. Notice how the hands fall on the 'odd' beats. This is why it is easy to 'find the beat' in western pop music.

In many styles of music with African roots the rhythm structure is more complicated. In swing for example (notice the hand clapping), the accents coincide with the 'even' beats and this is even clearer in reggae, one of the many forms of Caribbean music. In musical terms this is called syncopation. In Cuba the rhythm structure is even more complicated. It is based on the clave, and on other percussion instruments which interleave with one another marking both the odd and the even beats. This generates the 'Cuban' feel, and is one of the factors which makes it challenging for a 'westerner's ear' to 'find the beat' in salsa. But before we explain in details all these instruments and how they are combined let's have a look at the basic salsa steps.

Chapter 3 - Salsa basic steps

Before going into the details of salsa rhythm, let's say a few words about salsa basic steps. This video complements, but can not replace, an introductory salsa course. Consequently, we assume that you have taken, or you are taking, a salsa beginner's course, and consequently you know or you are learning to execute the basic salsa steps.

Salsa basic steps involve 3 steps over a 4 beat count. Three beats are marked by a step while the 4th one is a pause. Ballroom dancers may be more familiar with interpreting this as 2 quick steps followed by a slow one, as quick, quick, slow. quick, quick, slow.

At times the pause is replaced by a 'tap'. This is merely a decoration, though, and does not affect any of the concepts we are going to explain. For the sake of clarity we have decided to avoid tapping in the rest of the video.

Your basic steps can be synchronized with the music in different ways and we describe here the most common variations.

On1. Dancing 'On 1', the man steps forward on the beat n1 and back on the beat n 5. This is reversed for the lady. The action of stepping forward or backward is often called 'breaking', so you may hear the expression 'breaking on 1'. The pause happens on beat n 4 and 8. Dancing 'On 1' is probably the most widespread worldwide. It is characteristic of Colombian style, LA style, and contemporary Cuban style (especially with Timba music).

On2. There are 2 ways of dancing 'On 2'. One is mostly used in Puerto Rico where it is called 'on clave', and in Cuba, where it is often called 'contra tiempo' and is typically used to dance Son. The other '2 style' is typical of New York and originated in the Eddie Torres school. For clarity, in this video we will call these two ways of dancing 'On 2', 'on clave' and 'NY 2', respectively.

'On clave'. Dancing 'on clave' the man steps forward on the beat n2 and back on the beat n 6. Again, this is reversed for the lady. Basically we execute the same sequence as if we were dancing 'On 1', but we 'break on 2'. This may seem a mere formality but, musically, it makes a considerable difference. Now the breaks move from the strong musical beats (which carry no accent in salsa) to the weak beats (which carry the accents). As we explained before, this changes the 'feel' of the dance. Also, now the pauses fall on beat n1 and n5, which are the strong beats. This puts more emphasis on the pauses, compared to dancing 'On 1'. The resulting feeling is of stronger syncopation, and of needing to 'catch up' with the beat. It explains why some 'On 2' dancers say that dancing on 2 feels 'slower'. Clearly the speed of the music is the same, and the movements are the same, so 'physically speaking' nothing in reality happens more slowly. This is a feeling which is simply the result of tuning in differently to the musical accents.

This will become clearer after we explain the individual salsa percussions.

On2 NY style. Technically this can be seen as a hybrid between dancing 'On 1' and 'On 2'. Here we show the basic steps as if we were dancing 'On 1', on the spot (that is, without breaking). We mark the first 3 beats of the music and we pause on 4 and 8. This is the '1' component of dancing on 'NY 2'. The '2' component comes from breaking on 2 and 6.

Differently from dancing 'on clave' the man steps back on 2 and forward on 6 (as usual, this is opposite for the lady). Why this is reversed has to do with the different underlying philosophy of the relationship between male and female partners in the dance, and is only indirectly related to music rhythm.

Although, technically, dancing 'on NY2' can be seen as an hybrid between dancing 'On 1' and dancing 'on clave', musically, dancing 'on NY2' belongs to the '2' feeling, and should be considered as dancing 'On 2'. Also dancers 'on clave' and dancers 'on NY 2' can dance with one another while keeping their basic step, which is not possible with dancers 'On 1'. If you try, you will soon find yourself kicking your partner. and being kicked in return.

On3. Some dancers like to dance 'On 3'. We found this in Cuba and in particular in some central American countries. Most often though, dancing 'On 3' happens to inexperienced 'On 1' dancers who confuse the strong beat n3 for the beat n1. This, for example, may happen when dancers make a mistake in executing a figure, and catch up with the next strong beat. While this is not necessarily a terrible mistake, it is important to become aware of it, since this is the only way to correct it.

Chapter 4 - Salsa instruments

Since the advent of Rock'n'Roll, western pop bands have increasingly experimented with reducing the number of band members. Some top rock bands have counted as few as three musicians. Latin music has followed the opposite trend. Traditional Cuban music from Santiago de Cuba was often performed by very small bands, but when it reached the night clubs of Havana in the 50's it was deeply influenced by the big American Swing bands of that era. Latin bands started to expand in size. Even today, eleven to thirteen piece bands are just the average. Latin bands often needed a music director in order to perform.

The soul of a Latin band is represented by four instruments: clave, conga, piano and double bass, with the last two also playing a strong rhythmic role. Here we analyze each instrument,

including the guiro and cowbell, which are also common ingredients of salsa music. We will see:

- How each instrument plays
- How they interleave with the underlying musical beat
- How to hear the musical beat in each of them
- How to hear each of them within a band.

The Conga. In most common salsa patterns, the conga marks eight notes in one bar of music, spaced at regular intervals in time, with two notes for each beat. The rhythmic feel is generated by the distribution of the accents, that is, by the fact that some notes are louder than others, as well as by the fact that the conga can generate notes of different pitch. The conga accents are on the even beats (2 and 4). Beat 2 is marked by a note of high pitch and a strong accent (listen to it here..). Beat 4 is marked by two strong notes of low pitch (as here..).

The easiest way to 'find the beat' in the conga pattern is by identifying these two notes.

When a complete salsa band is playing, it may be hard to distinguish all eight notes of the conga. In most cases you will hear only the accents. Here we have 'summarized' the conga rhythm by playing only the accented (loud) notes. Try to listen to the accents, pay attention to the salsa beat counter and watch the feet carefully. If you learn to listen to this basic rhythm you will distinguish it easily in a complete salsa arrangement, and you will also be able to follow it in your dance.

The Clave. This is the core of any form of Cuban music. The basic clave pattern is usually played in either one of two forms - the 2-3 clave or the 3-2 clave. Other forms of clave also exist but are less common in salsa. In the 2-3 clave the first bar of music consists of two notes and the second bar of three (hence the 2-3 name), and vice versa for the 3-2 clave. Remember that a bar is made of 4 beats and the unit of salsa music consists of 2 bars of music. Here we have used only the 2-3 clave, but the explanations also apply to the 3-2 clave. Our rhythm CD contains exercises for both the 2-3 and the 3-2 clave.

The guiro and the cowbell. The guiro is not really a fundamental salsa instrument. However, when it is used in the arrangement of a song, it is very easy to follow and is a great help to beginner dancers. This is why we have included it here. The guiro's timing is very simple. A long note is played on beats 1,3,5,7. Two short notes are inserted between each long one. So, all the dancer has to do is to follow the long notes in order to find the fundamental musical timing.

The basic rhythm of the cowbell (this rhythm is also often played by the timbale player who hits the rim of the timbale with a drumstick) covers two bars of music. It is quite complex, starting with two long notes, and then proceeding with a pattern similar to the guiro but with the accents spaced differently. It can also be played in other forms, so consider the track in this video simply as an example. The easiest way to find the timing is to follow the long notes that mark the fundamental 1,3,5,7 and not to get distracted by the fast notes and accents. The cowbell is very common in contemporary salsa, if you learn to listen to it, it will also help to find the beat in fully orchestrated salsa bands.

The piano. The underlying base of modern salsa music, the contribution of the piano to a salsa band consists of sophisticated harmonies and syncopated rhythms. This is where the richness of salsa music shows itself at its best. Top salsa pianists show deep influences going

from classical music to modern jazz. Because of its crucial role, clearly there is no 'standard' piano pattern and a full description of piano styles in salsa would require several books. For the purpose of this video two concepts are most important:

- 1) the piano patterns are designed to interleave with the clave. In simple cases by playing 'with it', but most often by playing 'around it', that is by filling the spaces left empty by the clave. Hearing the beat in the piano necessarily implies understanding the clave.
- 2) The rhythm in the piano is not given merely by the timing of the notes it plays, but also by their melodic structures. This concept is too advanced for an introductory timing video and if you are interested in learning more we recommend you consult an advanced music books.

The bass. This is the instrument whose pattern differs the most between salsa and 'western' music. It simply plays where no western musician would ever play it! The first note plays off beat, between beat 2 and 3, and the second note marks the beat 4. This gives the typical salsa groove. Occasionally, the beat 1 is marked as well. The bass will help us less than other instruments to 'find the beat', however, when you reach the stage at which you are comfortable with the basic salsa rhythm, then the bass can really help you deepen the understanding of the syncopations and the groove of salsa. Pay attention to how the note on beat n4 anticipates the strong beat of the new bar of music (beat n5). And notice the note between beat n2 and n3, matches one of the 5 clave notes.

Chapter 5 - Distinguishing the 1 from the 5

As we explained before, in salsa each bar of music is made of 4 beats and salsa music phrases cover blocks of 2 bars, which means 8 beats. It thus becomes important to understand when the first bar of the 2 bar sequence starts. In other words how to distinguish the 1 from the 5. Salseros who like to dance 'On 1' or on the 'clave 2' normally are not too concerned about this difference, but dancers on the NY 2 can be very picky about this!

We give three hints on how to distinguish between the 1 and the 5, of decreasing levels of sophistication.

- 1) If you have developed your musical skills, you can recognize whether the song is on the 2-3 clave or on the 3-2 clave, and the job is done! In our rhythm CD you can find the difference between 2-3 and 3-2 clave clearly explained.
- 2) In a slightly simpler approach, you may recognize that most salsa music is based on a 'call' and 'response' structure, which also originates from African traditions. The first bar of music makes the call, and the second one responds. Here is a typical example in African music. and here is an example in salsa.. The clave itself can be interpreted as a call and response between the 2 and the 3 hits. Here is an example of a simple 2 bar piano phrase. The first bar of music sounds 'unresolved', 'unfinished', as if you have to hold your breath for the second bar which resolves it. pay attention to this, you will find it in most popular salsas.
- 3) Finally, the simplest, but also least accurate method.. most vocal parts start on the first bar.. so pay attention to where the lead singer or the choir starts and in most cases that gives you the first bar.. but be careful, this is a rough approach and it does not always work. music is too creative for such a simple rule to always apply.

Chapter 6 - Common errors. 3 ways of being 'out of time'

Now we have an understanding of what music timing is, how to listen to the salsa beat and how to follow each individual salsa percussion instrument. Learning often requires the knowledge of where typical mistakes are made. Here we describe the three most common ways of being 'out of time', in decreasing order of 'seriousness'. Pay attention to these and see whether you recognize which stage you are at:

Dancing completely out of phase with the music. This happens when the dancer is totally disconnected with the music. He or she can not hear the beat, can not find the 1 or the 2, and constantly guesses the rhythm. Coordination with the partner becomes impossible. This is what we call 'not dancing', movements and music have nothing in common.

If you fall into this class, it is probably wise for you to go back one step. Concentrate on the music without dancing, until the basic understanding of the rhythm is clear. Take a rhythm CD, possibly a one-to-one private music class. Then go back to practice your basic step.

Dancing too fast - faster than the music. catching up all the time. The dancer has a vague perception of the music, but fails to recognize the proper timing. The richness of the salsa percussion confuses the dancer who is not able to 'abstract' the underlying beat. Many percussion instruments playing at the same time create the general impression of 'speed'. He or she dances too fast. occasionally he/she realizes it and catches up with the closest beat.

Go back to your rhythm CD, and make the effort to isolate the fundamental beat. Use the rhythm CD to learn how to count. Don't be ashamed to count when you dance, you are at the stage at which you probably need to. Soon the counting will become automatic and you will not need to think about it anymore. Going through this stage, although frustrating, will considerably shorten your learning process. You may feel this slows down your learning unnecessarily, but if you fix this problem now your progress will be so much faster afterwards. You will more than compensate for this time investment.

Dancing at the proper speed, but just ahead of time. This is the most common mistake and affects also non-beginner dancers. Occasionally, you can find this in advanced dancers as well. It is the least serious and most subtle mistake. Because of this, it is the hardest to recognize and to correct.

The dancer recognizes the music and fundamentally dances at the correct speed. However his or her steps are just a fraction ahead of time. That is, he or she steps just a bit too early. How much too early? Our experience in studying salsa videos frame by frame has taught us that being ahead of time of as little as 1/10th of a second is enough to be noticeable. Our body is very sensitive to timing.

How does it feel? Probably perfectly normal to you. But to your partner it gives a sense of rush to the dance. it gives the feel that he or she is not given the time to execute figures properly. The dance does not feel relaxed. Somehow your partner feels you he/she can not enjoy each beat of the dance and each figure to its full extent.

This is a hard mistake to fix, because the dancer fundamentally understands the music. You need to relax. You need to take your time. You need to try to force yourself to dance as slow

as the music allows you too. You need to force yourself to move after you hear the beat, rather than anticipate it. Try to dance in response to the beat, rather than 'on it'. If you are afraid you may end up dancing too slow or late, you should not worry. dancing too slow happens very rarely, it is by far the exception to the rule.

Switching between dancing 'On 1' and 'On 3', or between 'On 1' and 'On 2'. A very bad habit which may result from dancing out of time, especially if you dance too fast, is to try to catch up with the music by jumping on the closer beat without paying proper attention to the music. Switching between dancing 'On 1' and 'On 3' or, even worse, between dancing 'On 1' and 'On 2' is a typical consequence. Watch these two clips carefully and see if you notice when the dancers mistakenly change beat.. learning to notice this will help you to prevent making the same mistake.

Another common mistake: confusing power with speed. Beginner dancers at time confuse the tempo of a song, that is its speed, with the energy of the song. In salsa, powerful music not always means fast tempo. Here is a popular powerful, but slow salsa. .and here is a popular romantic, but fast one..

Watch this clip carefully. We show a rhythm track of constant tempo. During the track, the arrangement changes and the music becomes more powerful.. this is simply the result of adding more instruments and playing different patters. But notice that the speed does not change. Rewind the clip and try to dance to it, paying attention to the constant tempo and the change of intensity of the music.

Chapter 7 - the 'right' way: being on time

Roughly speaking, if you avoid the mistakes we listed before, that is, if you do not dance too slow or too fast and you do not anticipate the beat, your basic steps are probably correct. Reaching this point should be priority number one for each salsa dancer, even before venturing into learning figures or shines.

Once you get here, with time, you can proceed further. Basic steps are just what the word suggests.. basic steps.. the first level of salsa steps. Once you understand the salsa timing completely, and you are able to follow it instinctively without counting, then you can free yourself from the constraint of having to follow the basic steps mechanically and you can experiment with improvising with your footwork, while you dance with your partner. This clip is a simple but beautiful example of it. Pay attention to how the dancers, especially the male dancer, rarely execute the standard basic step, but how they are always perfectly on time and perfectly synchronized. Despite the fact that the basic steps are rarely performed you should recognize that they are dancing on the clave 2, Puerto Rican style.

Basically you improvise simple shines while executing your partner-work. This is not easy to achieve and the first attempts may be frustrating, but if you learn to listen to the music properly, one day it will click. The crucial component is to always know where the beat number 1 or n2 are, so that, independently of what you do with your feet, you will always be synchronized with both the music and your partner. You may want to watch this clip a few times to notice all the details of the footwork.

How can you understand if your free footwork now matches the music? Imagine your steps can generate a sound. Would the sound of your steps match the music? If so, your footwork is right!

The importance of timing 'in the hands'. If you get to the level of completely freeing your footwork, your awareness of the salsa timing needs to be even more developed. You need to coordinate your actions with your partner in order to execute the figures, and, if you are a guy, you need to lead properly. Now you do not have your regular footwork to rely on for such coordination. Here is where you need to always be aware of what beat you are on. For example, Right turns are often lead on beat n5, if you dance 'On 1'. Your lead needs to start on beat n3 or 4 to make it smooth. XBLs are initiated on beat n2, if you dance 'On clave'; the woman walks in front of the guy on beat n6. In order to lead these actions you always need to know what beat you are on. Your brain needs to know this automatically, because you may be fully immersed in executing a figure. This is where timing needs to become second nature to you. But not only in your feet, in your hands too!!

Chapter 8 - Decorations, marking the break and accents, spontaneity...

Imagine a piece of music that repeats the same phrase over and over again. It would be boring. Similarly imagine the basic steps repeated over and over. They are boring too. Music gets interesting when variations are used. Similarly you can free your basic step and make it interesting as we just saw. But music goes from interesting to exciting when breaks and rich arrangements are used. You can add the same excitement to your dance too by learning how to decorate and interpret the breaks and the accents.

We saw that an accent is a note or a beat which is louder than others. Breaks are music accents which are emphasized by several instruments together, by generating a sudden release of energy. Here are a few examples..

The most obvious way to mark a clear break in dancing is by performing a dip. or a drop. several other stylistic moves are taught in standard LA and NY salsa, especially in lady's styling videos. Here we show you some example of more natural way to mark breaks.. observe them but do not learn them by memory, find inspiration from them so that you can develop your own and make them happen naturally in the spur of the music!

Chapter 9 - Decorations inherited from rumba

Many elements of salsa expressivity are inherited from Cuban rumba. Some have been maintained in forms very close to their origins, other have been modified to the point of making them hard to recognize. Here we use some nice rumba interpretations to highlight some of these decorations.

Probably the most typical is the 'drop' which happens with the off beat notes of the bass. here it is in rumba.. and here is Stacey showing it in salsa.

But the most common is surely the hand flip used by ladies either to mark their back breaks or to finish their XBL. Here is in salsa. and here is its rumba origin.

And obviously one of the trademarks of latin dancing.. the shoulder shaking. here is salsa. and here in rumba..

It is great to see a renewed interest in the rumba tradition. enjoy this clip and find inspiration for your salsa.

Chapter 10 - How to improve your timing

Now that you understand the concepts and the theory behind music, rhythm and dancing on time, all you are left to do is to put this into practice. Ultimately this relies on your determination, persistence and will to put in the effort and practice a lot. Instructors can teach you but you are the one who has to learn.

Here we give you 8 hints on how to 'make happen' all you have learned so far.

1) Listen to salsa all the time. There are two reasons why pop music comes so naturally to you. First its beat is easier. Second, you grew up with it; you spent thousands of hours listening to it. And there is one reason salsa is so natural to Caribbean people, they grew up with it and they spent thousands of hours listening to it. You need to catch up. Listen to salsa whenever and wherever you can: in your shower, in your car, when you do your housework. Day by day, you need to let it sediment on your brain. Initially you will not notice the difference, but one day it will suddenly 'click'.

2) Dance to slow music. All beginner dancers find it easier to be on time with fast music. The reason is simple, at fast speed mistakes are less noticeable. Pauses are shorter; not emphasizing them can be easily 'covered up'. Since beginner dancers tend to dance faster than the music, they find it easier to tune into fast music. To improve your timing you need to do the opposite. Practice to slow music. Very slow music if possible. Try to dance salsa to Cha Cha Cha. You will have to control your movements to be able to discriminate the subtleties of the accents. Learn to enjoy taking your time on the beats. Only when you are fully comfortable with this, then proceed to fast music. This is the rule music students have to follow when they learn to play an instrument, there is no reason it should be any different in dancing.

3) Count the beats. Don't be ashamed to count when you practice or dance. Everyone has to learn from the beginning by doing this. This is essential for you to learn to discriminate the fundamental salsa beat from the rest of the percussion. Count even when you listen to music and you are not dancing.

4) Play or vocalize the percussions. This is the next step after counting is under control. Try to dance while you play some percussion music, the clave being the best choice (as in this example.). Try to vocalize, that is to sing, the conga or the clave or the piano when you practice your basic steps or when you are listening to salsa. This will teach you how to isolate the instrument and how to 'find' it within the full salsa band. Then you will be able to listen to it and dance to it in a club.

5) Never, never, never practice any salsa figure out of time! At times you may find yourself practicing a figure that you have just learned and you may feel tempted to execute your movement without marking the salsa beats. maybe because you just want to make sure you

remember the figure. Train yourself to NEVER execute a dance movement out of time, whether at home, at a salsa class or in a club. If you need to try a figure slowly, do it at half speed. If you do not have music with you, count the beat. Train your brain to always associate dance with music, movements with rhythm.

6) Dance with people with good timing. This may sound a bit cruel to beginner dancers, but nothing helps your timing as much as dancing with advanced, confident dancers; and nothing damages it as much as dancing with other dancers with poor timing. Mistakes just get reinforced and harder to erase. Be nice to good dancers and try to practice a lot with them. When you become good, remember this, and be nice to beginner dancers by offering them a few dances.

7) Exercise. And don't even hope you will learn salsa without exercising- it just won't happen. Whether you want to learn nuclear physics, playing a piano or dancing salsa, exercise and practice is essential!

8) And the very final suggestion. what ever salsa figure or shine you execute don't forget to dance!!