

Salsa Dancing & Rueda de Casino Guidebook



**Steps, Styling, Technique,
Timing & Latin Rhythms—
Beginner Through Advanced**

Barbara Bernstein, Ph.D

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Cover Photo:

Danceintime dancers practicing “Puente Complicado”



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Dedications

This book is dedicated to the countless dancers who have taught me, learned from me, watched out for me, and partnered and collaborated with me. They have made it clear that the dance community is a diverse group of people who are deeply bonded by their common love of music and dance.

The book is also dedicated to my biological family, none of whom are serious dancers, but who nevertheless cheered me on selflessly as I pursued what I loved—making all this possible!

To all of you, my deepest gratitude.

Barbara Bernstein
Director, Danceintime

The job of feet is walking, but their hobby is dancing.

— Amit Kalantri, *Wealth of Words*

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Preface

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched— they must be felt with the heart.

— Helen Keller

To dance is human, and humanity almost universally expresses itself in dance.

— Judith Lynne Hanna

In an “earlier life,” before teaching dance, I taught math at a small college in Maryland. But I was very fond of dancing, and always made time to take classes in ballroom and foreign folk dance. One evening I went out to dance at a Latin club and would have to say that I fell in love with the music and the dance moves. I began taking Salsa and Rueda de Casino classes regularly. At some point, I started a practice group with a bunch of friends, and eventually, that morphed into running a formal class.

As a math teacher, I had grown accustomed to helping students by writing up summaries of my lessons. It felt natural to do the same when I started to teach dance steps. So I launched the Danceintime website and began posting videos and notes on many of the moves. Later, during the pandemic, I consolidated that information into what ultimately became this book.

My initial purpose was simply to document all the moves and techniques I had learned and then taught, as steps are the heart and soul of a dance. So the book starts with verbal descriptions and video illustrations of hundreds of dance moves. But dancing well requires more than just knowing moves. Once I began writing, additional considerations seemed to flow from my pen; I couldn't stop them.

This book summarizes things I have learned in more than 20 years of teaching both L.A. style Salsa and Rueda de Casino full-time. Rueda de Casino is a group form of dancing with couples arranged around a circle, doing moves in synchrony with frequent partner exchanges. It is exhilarating to dance in a smoothly flowing “Rueda” and it's no surprise that this dance style has become popular worldwide. L.A. style Salsa is also popular across the globe. It's the most well-known style of Salsa dancing.

Rueda de Casino was developed in Havana, Cuba in the 1950s by young men and women who are referred to as the “Founders” of the dance. They created dance moves that quickly became popular throughout Cuba and then in the rest of the world. Those of us who love this dance and whose lives have been enhanced by it owe a big debt of gratitude to these Founders!

Salsa dancing began later, in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was largely developed by Puerto Ricans and Cubans who were living in NYC. This dance evolved to be danced to Salsa music, which was relatively new in the late 1960s. Of course, as we all know, Salsa dancing became wildly popular.

In this book, I have shared insights that come from years of teaching experience. Like all insights, they are colored by my way of thinking and seeing the world. I hope they are useful to readers. They cover things like lead and follow technique (what you should and shouldn't expect from your partner!), how to add style to your dancing, information on Latin rhythms and percussion, the astonishing health

benefits of dance exercise, tips on how to deal with timing issues as well as how to study dance, avoid injury on the floor, and much more.

I think most people who have done a job for eight or ten years feel like they know it well. But when they look back 20 or 25 years later, they can see how much more there was to learn, and how much insight was gained in the intervening years. Experience is a great teacher; it keeps on teaching us—relentlessly! We continue seeing things from a larger perspective, no matter how long we have worked at something.

As you go through this book, bear in mind that there are many ways to do a dance move. And even if two teachers do a move the same way, they may conceptualize and describe the movement differently. I'm sharing moves as I do them and explain them, but there are other perfectly fine ways to do so. In some cases, I have described various options.

Steps may be done differently for physical, philosophical, or artistic reasons. Sometimes a move requires getting into a position that is physically difficult for some people, so they adjust the move. Or sometimes a dancer likes to add flourishes to a step for styling.

Rhythm can be handled differently too. Most groups start dancing on beat 1 but some begin on beat 5. Or consider the basic step of Rueda de Casino. There are videos in Chapter 1 of four different ways to do this step. I believe there is no right or wrong in these matters; there is value in respecting multiple approaches to an art form.

I need to make some comments about my step descriptions. In the past, teachers often referred to leaders as he, guy(s), man/men, etc, and to followers as she, girl(s), or lady/ladies. But today, it's very common for women to lead and men to follow, as old gender roles in dance have become less rigid, mirroring changes in society. Gender has come to have little meaning in partnership dance because dancers increasingly learn both parts.

There was a time, not that long ago, when only people who were preparing to teach learned both parts. As recently as the early 2000s, some studios didn't allow women to do the leader's part in classes, even if there were more women and that would help balance the lead/follow ratio. But now it is generally recognized that advanced dancers do better if they understand how the lead and follow affect each other. So there has been not only acceptance of dancers learning both parts but also encouragement for them to do so. (Some folks call this being "ambidancetrous.") In my dance company, many experienced dancers have learned to both lead and follow.

I have tried to minimize the use of gendered pronouns in writing this book. The terms leader and follower have primarily been used—sometimes abbreviated as "L" and "F" respectively. But even with abbreviations and occasional bending of grammar rules, the effort to balance political correctness and respect for gender neutrality with brevity and clarity has been challenging.

As a result, there are still occasional gendered pronouns in the book and definitely there are many in the videos. Some of these were recorded years ago when society was different. In particular, when I dance with my mentor, Glen, we switch lead and follow constantly. So while watching the videos, you should check to see who is leading and make no assumptions!

The point is that any male-oriented pronouns in the videos refer to the leader, even though the video may show a leader who is a woman (frequently myself!). Likewise,

female pronouns simply refer to the follower, regardless of the apparent gender of the follower. Please know that in no way is any use of pronouns meant to imply that leaders should be exclusively men, or followers exclusively women!

Many steps in this book have verbal descriptions or phrases that I use in class to help students remember the sequence of action in a dance move. I describe many actions in a few short words which I “chant” while students are learning. This is like a helpful “recipe” for the move. I began doing this when I was learning to lead Puente Complicado myself. It’s a long move with portions that repeat. I kept having trouble remembering what comes next. But at some point in my own learning, I started to chant the action while walking through the step. That helped me a lot, so I subsequently used this approach to help students as well.

However, in writing the book, I encountered a dilemma with my chants. There is some dance action in every four beats of music. I try to capture the essence of that action in just three or four syllables so that the “chant” is rhythmically related to the music. This requires that each syllable be said in one beat. The need to sometimes say “leader” instead of “he” or “follower” instead of “she” makes many phrases too long to be said in four syllables.

In addition, students in class can see what I’m referring to if I say something like “over the head.” But it’s unclear in a written description whose head is referred to—leader or follower, and what is going over the head—a right arm? Left arm? The fact is that it’s hard to describe movement clearly in words, especially in just a few words. Therefore, in this book, though I have outlined the action verbally, readers should ultimately rely on the videos provided as the “final word” on how moves are done.

Also, when only one partner’s action is described without designating if it’s done by the leader or follower, it is usually the leader. This is because leaders are responsible for remembering the sequence of action. Followers don’t have this responsibility because they are led. Similarly, in describing moves, I sometimes use the word “you,” with the assumption that “you” are a leader.

In keeping with this line of thought on gender in dance, there has been a movement to dance with leaders and followers switching roles repeatedly. There are now some Rueda groups that require advanced students to know both parts since “switch moves” are so frequently called. This is proof positive of a major shift in thinking about the relationship between gender and lead/follow!

Note that there are some moves in this book that are easy to describe in words, and really don’t require a video. For example, the move “Medio Sombrero” can be explained by saying that you “Do Sombrero holding only one of the follower’s hands instead of holding both hands.” Moves that can be described adequately in words do not always have a video.

Translations of the Spanish step names are included. It’s important to note that words can mean different things in different contexts as well as in different countries or regions. Translations are by their nature subjective. Words can be translated literally or by considering their meaning in the context of the dance. I used online information and consulted Spanish speakers from several different countries in putting together the list of translations. But they should be “taken with a grain of salt.” When it was sufficiently unclear how to translate something, no translation is provided.

Some words, like Enchúfala or Vacila, are used in many step names. It would make the text very “wordy” to repeat those translations every time, so I haven’t. I only mention the translation of words commonly used a few times. There is a complete

listing of translations in the glossary at the back so that words can also be looked up easily.

I included some personal anecdotes throughout, as well as “small world” coincidences related to dance steps or material under discussion. Most of these are presented as “Side Notes.” I like to think these human-interest vignettes provide some history and perspective—and sometimes humor—that lighten the technical content of the book. I would compare this to a cookbook that includes personal stories about family events surrounding certain recipes. But if you don’t enjoy these detours, you’ll lose nothing by skipping them.

When you watch the videos I reference, you should know that I had to remove some of the soundtracks we danced to for legal reasons. At some point, I began recording videos with music I had purchased the right to use. But when necessary, I either silenced a particular song that was a problem, replaced the original music with another song that I purchased the right to use, or replaced the music with a voice-over saying the beats. Note that the beat count can be slightly uneven in some places because the original music slowed down or sped up. (Also, links for the original videos with music that aren’t in this book can still be found by searching Danceintime’s playlist.)

Among the many videos here, some were recorded years ago at old Danceintime performances. Camera technology has improved during this time, so some pictures are not sharp by today’s standards. In addition, some performances were recorded in dark nightclubs. Despite these inconveniences, I think the action of the moves can be seen clearly.

Here is a helpful tip for watching YouTube videos. You can see the movement better if you slow the video down. Just click on “settings” (the little gear), and slow the playback to 75 or 50 percent....I remember well the day someone explained that little gear to me! It rocked my world and opened up a whole new way to watch moves which was enormously helpful.)

I like to think this book has a wealth of steps covering all levels. Chapter 1 deals with moves for new beginners (“newbies”), starting with the most basic concepts of how dancers count beats and when they take steps. No previous knowledge is assumed. Moves become increasingly sophisticated throughout the initial chapters. By Chapter 4, there is information on very advanced steps. Anyone who wants to look up a specific move may find the alphabetical index of moves at the back helpful.

There is material in this book that is relevant to more than one chapter. Some people may read through the chapters in order. Others may use this text as a reference book, looking up only topics of interest. In the latter case, each chapter should be constructed to stand alone and be clear. But for those who read through the book, this would involve needless repetition.

I handled this with the following compromise. Topics that are mentioned in more than one place are covered fully in the most relevant chapter. The coverage is briefer in other chapters, hopefully without sacrificing clarity. Throughout, I mention other sections where readers can find more detail about a topic under discussion.

In closing, I encourage you to check out DanceInTime classes (danceintime.com) in Washington DC & Maryland. They’re friendly and, like this book, address all levels of dancers. The motto “the more the merrier” certainly applies. Visitors from out of town are always welcome to share any moves they learn in our class with friends back home.

Documenting all these dance moves and sharing dance information has been a laborious but satisfying endeavor. My years of dancing Salsa and Rueda de Casino have been great fun and I hope you'll be able to say the same. It's been my experience that dance classes invariably create warmly bonded communities. The students' shared love of music and dance elevates this activity from simply a dance class to something well beyond that: an experience that fosters joy and connection. It is this perspective that I hope leaps off the pages of this book.

Barbara Bernstein
Danceintime



Performing Salsa for a school program.

Introduction: How To Use This Book

Do you like to dance?
Sure you do! It's great fun.

It's even more fun when you know cool steps you can do smoothly with a partner, keeping your lead-and-follow connection and your timing tight. That makes the moves feel really great.

This book covers all the dimensions of dance that enable you to walk onto the floor with grace and confidence—from how to do moves and add styling, to staying in synch with the music and your partner.

Whether you're a beginner or already a sophisticated dancer, you will find here a new spin on concepts that can enrich and improve your dancing. Several music and Salsa styles are described, and Rueda de Casino dancers will find information on calling, blending moves, and mind-blowing new structures.

Oh....and in case you need a good excuse to make time for this fun, check out Chapter 16 on The Astonishing Health Benefits of Dance Exercise.

Why not go ahead and give it a “whirl?”...

The chart below, along with the Table of Contents, provides guidance to help readers find what they are interested in. And bear in mind that since dance skills keep improving with practice, if you want to learn something that looks like a reach, it's just a matter of time and drill to get there.

Also note that the information in Part One, on dance moves, sets the stage for understanding the material in Parts Two through Six. You'll understand the later sections best if you have a number of dance steps under your belt.

Finally, when you look at the dance steps in the first four chapters, it is recommended that you **watch a video of the move first. The videos give everything else a lot more clarity** since it's difficult for words to fully describe movement. Videos should be regarded as the ultimate guidance on how moves are done.

1. TOPICS OF GENERAL “HUMAN INTEREST”

There is a lot in this book that is likely to be interesting to all readers.

- Chapter 8 - Lead and Follow Technique (Some tips apply to life beyond dance!)
- Chapter 9 - Helpful Insights for Learning (Some tips apply to learning in general)
- Chapter 11 - Dance Teams and Performances (Funny anecdotes about experiences on stage)
- Chapter 16 - The Astonishing Health Benefits of Dance Exercise
- Appendix A - Dance Humor
- Interesting photos sprinkled throughout the book

Other sections of the book may also catch your attention depending on your interests.

2. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN DANCE BUT HAVE LITTLE OR NO EXPERIENCE

The material below provides a general overview. After reading this, you will have the perspective to plan your next steps.

- Chapter 1 - Steps and Information for Novice Dancers
- Chapter 9 - Helpful Insights for Learning
- Chapter 20 - Dance Styles In Perspective; Sections A & B (Summary of all major styles of Salsa and some other Latin dances)
- The chapters listed in number 1 above

3. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN L.A. STYLE SALSA

- Chapter 1- Steps and Information for Novice Dancers; Sections A, B, C, and D
- Chapter 4 - Steps for Advanced to Master's-Level Dancers (Look at steps which are L.A. style or a blend of L.A. style and Casino such as “The Promenade, L.A. de Glen, Triple Toss, Advanced L.A, Rotanya, La Bonita, Serpiente Complicado, and Guanabacoa.”)
- Chapter 6 - Styling and Embellishments; Sections A, C, and D
- Chapter 7 - The Tremendous Importance of Timing; Sections A & C
- Chapter 8 - Lead and Follow Technique
- Chapter 9 - Helpful Insights for Learning
- Chapter 10 - The Seven Sins of Salsa (Article)
- Chapter 11 - Dance Teams and Performances
- Chapter 16 - The Astonishing Health Benefits of Dance Exercise
- Chapter 17 - Understanding the Music: Clave Rhythm and Percussion
- Chapter 18 - Etiquette and Safety on the Floor
- Chapter 19 - Differing Points Of View Among Dancers; Section C
- Chapter 20 - Dance Styles In Perspective; Section A on L.A. Salsa (Covers basic and intermediate L.A. Salsa moves)

4. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN RUEDA DE CASINO

Aside from the material on L.A. Salsa moves, all the rest of the book is relevant to Rueda de Casino dancers! Check out Chapters 1 through 4 on moves, and look at all the subsequent chapters for a wide variety of additional information.

5. IF YOU ARE A DANCE TEACHER

There is material in the book that may be helpful for teachers. Some suggestions are below.

- Chapters 1 through 4 (Find steps to teach your students—either entirely new moves or just a new “twist” on old moves)
- Chapter 6 - Styling and Embellishments (Find styling ideas your students may like)
- Chapter 7 - The Tremendous Importance of Timing (Strategies for dealing with timing issues)
- Chapter 8 - Lead and Follow Technique
- Chapter 9 - Helpful Insights for Learning (They are relevant to teaching, too!)
- Chapter 12- Blending Moves (Doing moves blended into a series is a great way to practice)

- Chapter 14- New Dance Structures (This is a novel approach to dancing Rueda de Casino and you can choose a structure that suits your class size and level)
- Others Chapters, depending on what would suit your classes
- Appendix A on Dance Humor - (Find humor to share with students)

6. IF YOU HAVE A SPECIAL INTEREST IN SOMETHING SPECIFIC:

In case there is a specific topic you want to read about, a few are listed below with references to where you'll find relevant information.

- Dance Steps
Chapters 1 through 4
- Safety & Health
Chapter 16
Chapter 18 Sections B, C, & D
- Styling and Embellishments
Chapter 6
- Music, Percussion, and Latin Dance Rhythms
Chapter 17,
Chapter 19 Section D
Chapter 20 Section B
- Dancing with Someone Trained in a Different Style
Chapter 13
- Overview of Latin Club Dances and Salsa Styles
Chapter 20 Sections A & B

About The Author

I began my career as a mathematics instructor at Bowie State University. I hold a Ph.D. from the University of Maryland's School of Education and a Master's Degree in Mathematics Education. Subsequently, I worked in a family business that published annual editions of a *Tax Guide for College Teachers*. But I've been a full-time Latin dance teacher in the DC area for over 20 years, specializing in Rueda de Casino and L.A. style Salsa.

It may seem like a big jump to start a career teaching math and end it teaching dance. But they are surprisingly similar—both require helping students feel comfortable with the subject, as well as a lot of drill to become proficient. I've always had a deep love for music and dance, and as a young adult, I studied Foreign Folk Dance, Ballroom, and Latin dancing.

As director of Danceintime, I've produced shows for a wide array of venues including the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage and DC's 20,000-seat Capital One Arena. In addition, I have taught private and group classes, wedding dance preparation, coached college dance teams, and run Salsa Bootcamps.

I've also taught workshops at Salsa events in DC, Baltimore, Miami, NY, Puerto Rico and Dublin as well as credit classes at local colleges in Ballroom or Latin dance. These include American University, University of Maryland, George Mason University, Prince Georges Community College, and George Washington University.

And Danceintime has been featured on ABC News, the WTTG Morning News in DC and Baltimore, Telemundo, and the Voice of America.

When I'm not dancing, I can often be found hanging out with friends over skim, decaf lattes, or singing in a Sweet Adelines chorus. And I'm a member of two long-standing bookclubs.

For questions, comments, workshops, speaking engagements, and in-person or online projects, contact danceguidebook@gmail.com.

For more information:

website: Danceintime.com

facebook: facebook.com/Danceintime5678

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Goofing off before a Salsa Congress performance.

Back Cover

Embark on a rhythmic journey through the vibrant world of Latin dance, where every step becomes a passionate expression of energy and movement.

In the *Salsa Dancing & Rueda de Casino Guidebook*, Barbara Bernstein shares over 20 years of expertise as the director of the DanceinTime studio. This guide covers everything from the fundamental techniques of lead and follow, to the intricate art of adding personal style to your moves.

Designed to cater to dancers of every proficiency, this book offers a wealth of information, starting with the most basic concepts for beginners and gradually progressing to sophisticated maneuvers for master-level dancers. Working in-hand with her written step-by-step instructions, Barbara also provides links to over 500 YouTube videos from the DanceinTime studio so that you can take advantage of this visual guidance.

Alongside the technical instructions, the guidebook is filled with personal anecdotes and humorous side notes, creating a delightful reading experience that transcends the boundaries of a mere instructional manual.

Whether you're a novice eager to learn the basics or an advanced dancer seeking new challenges, this guidebook is your passport to unlocking the joy, rhythm and spirit of community that come with dancing Salsa and Rueda de Casino. So, join Barbara Bernstein on this enlightening journey, and let the transformative power of dance shape your life both on and off the dance floor.