The Musicality of Salsa Dancers: An Ethnographic Study

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THE MUSICALITY OF SALSA DANCERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

The Musicality of Salsa Dancers: An Ethnographic Study

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Advisor: Stephen Blum

This work analyzes the musical knowledge and aesthetics acquired by improvisatory social salsa dancers who hone close listening skills through corporeal means. The connections that these dancers construct between music, self, and partner make evident an engagement with musicality that can be seen through their demonstration of kinesthetic entrainment, structural feeling of hypermetric conventions, and enactment of expressive microtiming within beat and metric structures. I introduce the concept of timespace to explain how dancers manipulate this physiological experience to create different feelings in a dance, addressing issues that dancers raised in our feedback interviews such as feel, flow, and play. Other issues, such as the flexibility and adaptability of dancers to follow and lead each other, regardless of their role in the leader/follower relationship of the partner dance, demonstrate that the more attentive a dancer is to the multivalent environment, the more rewarding the dance experience becomes. I utilize in-depth feedback interviews with participants of New York City salsa/mambo scenes, instructional videos, and musicality classes, as well as my personal experience salsa dancing for eighteen years, alongside work in music and social theory, and work drawing on phenomenology, to build an analytic foundation of musical knowledge that dancers enact within this popular dance music. This project offers readers a basic musical vocabulary and understanding of concepts that invite both dancers and musicians to make a deeper connection to the dance/music experience. As music is experienced in multiple ways, this dissertation incorporates multiple streams of theory
and experience. With the help of the participants in the project, I offer the beginning of an intersensorial explanation of the dance/music aesthetics of salsa.
PREFACE: Access to Video Examples

This dissertation studies one of the central concerns of salsa dancers, musicality, a set of issues often touched upon in conversations, in the studio, and on the dance floor. Portions of each chapter include analyses of video examples, the easiest technology to capture participants in action. The videos of participants social dancing were gathered with their permission prior to the feedback interviews conducted at a later date. The feedback interviews were also video recorded; excerpts of the feedback interviews are also included as video examples, although most interview transcriptions were integrated into the body of the dissertation text, where applicable.

Since these videos should not be easily downloadable or viewed on websites such as YouTube or Facebook, as per the IRB guidelines I discussed with my participants, I created a website where these video examples could be streamed for viewing only. All of the examples are organized by chapter and accessible to stream through the website created especially for this purpose at salsa.commons.gc.cuny.edu. The reader and viewer may watch any and all of the video examples as many times as they wish as long as they have an active internet connection. It is my intention to keep this website active until I secure a publisher that will likewise house the video examples on a similar streaming website. The library will live-capture a copy of this website, as well, to accompany the official dissertation submission.

The videos are, for the most part, unaltered. Many video examples are excerpted from the entirety of the song, as the whole dance was not needed to explain the issue analyzed. In the rare case a video was altered, it was to improve the sound (often to make the music louder) and/or the lighting (often to increase the exposure for videos taken in low light clubs), although there are exceptions where other interventions seemed necessary. The small video recorder did not use an attached light, and was most often mounted on a tripod, when space allowed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express the utmost gratitude and love to Daniel, my spouse, for standing by me as I followed the inspiration that embodied itself on our second date and still drives my scholarly ambitions into our eighteenth year—even, and especially, through times that seemed incomprehensibly difficult—to the culmination of this document. I hadn’t planned on this adventure taking so long and creating such hardship; I would not have finished without my family’s financial and housing support in these final years—I am grateful for their generosity. I thank the Baisley Powell Elebash Fund for supporting me with numerous grants; their support of scholarship of the arts of New York City funded the majority of my work on this project. I am also indebted to the time-honored tradition of mentorship. Professor Blum, thank you for taking me and my project on despite your “retirement.” The attention to detail that you have demanded of my work and candor with which you approach learning resonates in my own teaching. It is my hope to find a place where I am valued as much as you are here at the Graduate Center. Doctor Johnson, thank you for guiding me over these past fifteen years. Willa Cather wrote, “The end is nothing; the road is all.” The end to this journey definitely feels like something, but the very bumpy road that I traveled would have seemed impassable at times had it not been for your wry humor and realism. Your style of advisement is unique; I strive to emulate your amiable yet reticent technique when I mentor my own students. I thank Katie Straker for her patience and computer skills that made my transcriptions, even the most challenging ones, clear and professional looking. Last, but not at all least, I thank the participants in my study (and all of my friends that did not formally participate but entertained dances, conversations, emails, texts, or other informal scrutiny). The people I have met while salsa dancing have changed my life—even if we only shared one dance and were never introduced. The love that I have found in the shared
moments of magic, even if fleeting, lives inside the music and our bodies. The salsa communities I have been part of have inspired me to research and write this dissertation. This dissertation is dedicated to the dancers and musicians whose lives would not be complete without salsa/mambo music and dance. Thank you for sharing your love of this world with me. In turn, I offer this labor of my love to you: dive in, delve deeply, discover.
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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, diverse people have been increasingly drawn to the experience of salsa dance/music, creating aesthetic communities of musical movement around regional variations and their corresponding subgenres. This dissertation studies one of the central concerns of salsa dancers, musicality, a set of issues often touched upon in conversations, in the studio, and on the dance floor. How are aesthetics of movement generated and maintained with regard to the specific conventions found within the New York City area? How do dancers communicate the musical knowledge acquired by close listening skills through bodily movement? How does the enactment of musicality give value to particular dancers?

New York City holds a special importance for salsa dancers, as it is home to a rich history of Latin dancing. At the turn of the 20th century, Vernon and Irene Castle brought tango and early versions of other Latin dance styles to Broadway, and to their newly minted dance schools throughout the United States (Roberts 1999 [1979]). From the 1930s through the 1950s the popular Cuban partner dances of danzón and son influenced early mambo dancers of New York (Hutchinson-2014), especially due to the growing rates of immigration to the mainland and the tourist industry’s impact on entertainment during the Prohibition era. In the 1950s and 60s, dance halls such as the famous Palladium Ballroom and the not-so-famous Park Palace/Plaza featured live music to which mamberos of all races danced, although not always to the same basic step or the same bands (Garcia 2006). After the disco years of the 1970s, salsa dance was re-popularized, some say revived, by New York dancer Eddie Torres and legendary mambo musician Tito Puente. In fact, the modern New York style, characterized by multiple turns and intricate, double-handed armwork, was influenced by the hustle (McMains 2015).
Since the 1980s, salsa has grown into an international commodity with New York as its partly historical and partly mythical nucleus. I have met new dancers who come on pilgrimage from around the world to “see what it’s really like,” or use their vacation or sabbatical time to study extensively with New York salsa teachers. The City hosts dancers who have been dancing mambo for sixty years and still go out dancing more than once a week, as well as newcomers who drive in from Long Island for an event. New York City dancers create and express their musicality both physically and through a complex rhetoric. Aesthetics of movement and music are generated and maintained through various means: social dancing, studio lessons, videos, performance teams, and congresses (here in New York and around the world). Two recent books—a monograph by Juliet McMains (2015) and a collection edited by Sydney Hutchinson (2014)—offer thorough histories of the dance from a New York perspective as well as from those of dancers from other cities and with distinct salsa styles.

New Yorkers, especially, take their practice of salsa seriously whether for its performative challenges or "merely" its sociality. Age groups and backgrounds of dancers vary considerably though the overarching aesthetics seem to be maintained in close connection to the music with which each dance style is associated. The abundance of styles practiced—Cuban, Colombian, "on-2," "on-1," and "I just dance"—by these wide-ranging and often-mixed demographics in New York City represent variations of basic step patterns as well as other characteristic dance accents readily apparent to the trained eye (McMains 2015, Hutchinson-2014).¹

¹ Designations such as on-1 or on-2 refer to the first of the two breaking (a directional change in movement) beats that dancers choose for their basic stepping pattern, as well as these styles’ tendency for the basic stepping pattern’s movement. These styles will be explained in detail in Chapter 1.
Scholars of dance, such as Gerstin (1998) and Kaminsky (unpublished), have begun to include musicality as an important characteristic of social dancers, as have scholars working on salsa dancing, such as McMains (2015) and Garcia (unpublished). These studies, however, are not in-depth works that focus on analytical features marking what dancers describe as "sense of rhythm," "fluidity," and "naturalness" in the manner that music theorists have already realized for composers and performers. Salsa dancers, like musicians, cultivate their personal style and generate value judgments based on how they and other dancers move with and to the music. Few scholars have investigated exactly what makes a fellow dancer "good" or highly sought after by partners, although these are the dancers in which others take the most interest.

Statements made by dancers with whom I regularly interact indicate that they place a high value on musical/physical sensitivity—"musicality," broadly defined. This dissertation analyzes the musicality of salsa dancers through a framework based on my training and practice as both a musician and a social salsa dancer, as well as integrating scholarly work from social and music theory, (rhythmic) entrainment, and work adopting phenomenological approaches as a way of focusing on entrainment and other physical activities of the body. My goal as a dancer, musician, and scholar is to investigate what makes a social dancer "musical," or "good," from a dancer's perspective. Many, if not most, dancers pay close attention to the skill and expertise that both they and other dancers acquire with time and practice on the social dance floor. There is a wealth of musical and physical knowledge in the conversations and feedback interviews I have conducted with participants, as well as throughout the nineteen years in which I have been social dancing.

Six of the most important ways that salsa dancers engage their musicality are:
(1) *Embodiment of patterns.* Dancers memorize the “feel” of the basic count to the extent that
their bodies think/count for them, and commit movements by “putting it in my body” or “owning
it” in an effort to personalize specific steps, turn patterns, or styling gestures.

(2) *Manipulation of timespace.* Dancers perceive and experience dance/music as it is happening
in real time and space and manipulate the experience to create different feelings at the small-
scale level of the measure, mid-scale level of formal sections, and the large-scale level of the
song itself.

(3) *Hypermometric expectations.* Dancers express these through improvisatory phrasing and
projection of expectation (Manuel 1998, Huron-2007). For example, a leader can execute a turn
pattern taking up exactly the timespace of four measures, the ending of which lands on an
important boundary indicator such as a tutti fortissimo.

(4) *Expressive timing and microtiming.* Dancers utilize different parts of the beat to express
2000, Thaut [2005], Poudrier and Repp 2013, Garcia unpublished). Dancers play with their
partners, often withholding expected movements such as the drop of a hand or dragging a foot
until the very last moment possible before the next beat.

(5) *Flexibility and adaptability.* Dancers discuss and/or argue over the issue of clave flips, jumps,
and/or breaks—terms often given to any deviation from the standard eight-beat measure—and
how to best or correctly deal with them on the dance floor (K. Moore 2011 and Fiol personal
communications 2012-3). The willingness, and adaptability, of dancers to accommodate changes
in the music, as well as changes in their partners’ patterns, marked dancers as skilled and
musical.
Issues of "feel" and "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Hasty 1997, London-2004). These issues arose throughout the study and merge all other issues of musicality. What dancers said they were connecting to, how, and with whom mattered greatly. Dancers who feel the music and flow with it are considered more musical than those who cannot and do not connect and flow.

The dancers I worked with did not always articulate musicality in the ways I do above, but close analysis reveals that "good" dancers simultaneously listen, predict, and draw attention to musical features through particular movements of their bodies. For instance, one dancer drew his upper body backwards slightly after a particular beat in the song because the move "goes with the music." The singer, at that particular moment, emphasized the end of a syllable slightly after the second beat of an eight-beat measure (microtiming). Although this dancer’s stepping pattern maintained a basic count exactly on the beat, he correctly predicted that the singer would do this and he improvised his dance accordingly. His motion away from maintaining a straight torso conveyed to me that he was attentive to the vocal line (predicting a moment of microtiming based on listening to the singer’s style) while simultaneously attending to the (more) steady percussion lines that lay down the cues for landing important footfalls of the basic stepping pattern. He told me, "The more you listen [to salsa music], the more your brain is trained to listen to music." Although this dancer has no formal training in music, his experience listening and dancing to various Latin genres spans thirty-five years. He can "play" with the music without inhibition, because certain partners (the good dancers) follow his lead, thus making that particular social dance more "fun" because, in his words, "I feel that I wouldn't make a mistake."

One of the (ballet-trained) dancers who I interviewed mentioned how "contra-body motion" and "isolations" give added depth and character to individual dancers. One of the salsa studios she attended introduced guided listening to "hear the layers of the music, the different
instruments" and "clave," among other musical features, although my interviewee admitted to not understanding much of what the instructors were discussing—a point brought up by many of the dancers in the project. Interestingly, her ability to predict musical conventions such as accents and hypermetric constructions is strongly evident when watching her dance. I argue that this can be attributable to her background in other forms of dance and an immersion in salsa music outside of dancing events.

Another dancer mentioned that her partner needed to have good timing, but the feedback example that, in her words, “excited” her the most was one where the leader, unbeknownst to her, followed her basic stepping patterns even when she mistakenly changed the pattern. The dance remained smooth and flowing because the leader boosted the confidence of the follower and inspired her to improvise comfortably.

One participant told me that he knew when to prepare the final moves of a dance by cues in the music and their relation to the normal amount of time for sections within a song (hypermetric expectations, in the terms I use in this dissertation). He pointed out a familiar cadential pattern of changing rhythmic density juxtaposed with cadential vocal lines by utilizing striking hand motions and humming a hypothetical example. Another dancing friend understood that if he held himself "very steady" during a particular partner move, I could accentuate the motion he began with his leading arm through my entire torso with an upwards body roll (flow). Both of these examples illustrate what is often referred to as style or styling, but touch upon a deeper sense of the music and motion(s) enacted by experienced salsa dancers on the social dance floor. How a dancer moves indicates their participation in the act of music-making, similar to how musician play their instruments in an ensemble. The dancers with whom I spoke stated variations of “the music told me what to do” (even if their motion highlighted a new motive or
response to a musical line), then showed me specific examples when we watched videos together of them social dancing.

The idea of fun and play is directly connected to dancers' attentiveness to both their partner and the music. This attention to the music, and its various levels, is demonstrated through bodily movement. Participants have indicated that other characteristics of "musical" dancers are well-timed "spontaneity" and "unexpected" improvisation without losing their connection to their partner and the music.

Music, movement, and ethnomusicology

Dancers embody knowledge of musical practices for which musicians and musicologists already have a working terminology, such as anticipated bass, pick up or anacrusis, clave jumps and flips (K. Moore 2011 and Fiol, personal communication), ternary phrasing of binary subdivisions and binary phrasing of triplets (Manuel 1998), and elementary pulse (Kubik [1994]). Dancers, as do musicians, fashion their improvisations within stylistic conventions. For example, salsa clásica or salsa dura (classic salsa or hard salsa), salsa created in the late 1960s into the 1970s and music written in that style, often obfuscates clave direction by extending or abbreviating the measure by four beats; experienced on-2 dancers understand the effects of these stylistic conventions on stepping patterns and look forward to employing learned stepping and/or turn patterns when these occur, although they may likely not be aware of exactly what occurred with the clave or how to articulate their attention to the musical form.

In other styles of salsa, such as Colombian, often referred to as Caleña, conventions of clave are not as rigid as in salsa clásica (Waxer 2002). The clave can jump within a composition and create a change in clave direction, although the change is more readily apparent through
harmonic listening than clave awareness. The jump does not necessitate correction of stepping patterns; instead, in Caleña, dance moves can be executed on either side of the body or for only half a dancing measure without kinesthetic expectations being thwarted. Dancers that have formal or informal training in different styles exhibit a more flexible manner of dealing with clave flips and jumps, an issue that I address in Chapter 5. Dancers' choices demonstrate to other participants in the social arena their knowledge of the musical conventions that mark a particular subgenre of salsa as distinct, in effect demonstrating their musicality—even if dancers' means of articulating their decisions differs from those of musicians.

When ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood discussed the challenge of "bi-musicality," he argued that musicality derives from training in one or more cultures' musical practices. Training includes honing one's ears, though to really become musical one must practice. His description of practice involves a performer's whole body: "The training of ears, eyes, hands, and voice and fluency gained in these skills assure a real comprehension of theoretical studies…" (Hood 1960). No musician would argue that the mind is divorced from the body, nor would a dancer. The body, of which the mind is part, is a crucial component of how musicality is understood and expressed for both musicians and dancers.

David García's presentation at The Society for Ethnomusicology's 2013 annual conference, "Feeling Music and Hearing Dance: Decentering Movement and Sound in Son Montuno," demonstrates one method of analyzing how dancers embody musicality (Garcia 2013) by incorporating dancers' movements into a traditional transcription:

Analyzing the music of "La hipocresía y la falsedad" alone via transcription would not only result in a fixed representation of the sound, it would also limit insight to its recorded performance in New York in 1969. Analyzing these dancers' engagement with the recording as part of the music, however, not only situates the recording in North Carolina in 2013, it compels the music to be experienced as well as analyzed anew.
García's analysis of salsa dancers dancing to a son montuno provides a good example of how the decisions dancers make in real time correspond with musical features, thus providing agency to their musical interpretations. He transcribes musically important sections of the song and notates how the dancers' motions (not only the footwork, but other parts of their bodies) correspond to the music. His method is sensitive to the dancers' actions as well as to their verbal input during feedback interviews in which they watched the video. García and I both offer analyses based on the, necessarily intertwined, audio and visual components of dance. The analyses contained in this dissertation are similar to García's but expand into musical issues such as those outlined above.

From my experience as a dancer, many sought-after partners have developed a keen sensibility for musical issues, including Charles Keil's perspective on micro or expressive timing which he refers to as "participatory discrepancies" (with J. A. Prögler 1995, Keil 1995, with Steven Feld 1994, and Keil 1987), as discussed in my example of microtiming above; Felix Salzer's structural hearing (1982 [1952]), when dancers know that a formal section is coming to a close and end turn patterns or independent footwork, referred to as "shines," accordingly—especially when leaders prepare for a dip at the end of a song; and Edward Cone's hypermetric gathering of "musical energy," by analogy with the energy and trajectory of a ball being thrown: a measure of music inherently contains a beginning (where the music is expected to create tension, but has yet to do so), a middle ("a period of motion"), and an end (where the music has resolved tension) (1968:26-7).

Differences between sub-styles of salsa must be noted in a study such as this, although to gain a thorough analysis, I chose to focus on dancers who prefer to dance in New York City and, most often, to salsa clásica. My participants, and others with whom I have danced, include
dancers from various sub-styles, such as on-2 and on-1. My research has shown that some dancers can differentiate sub-styles, although only the experienced dancers can intentionally incorporate characteristic features of styles outside of the ones they commonly dance or switch between them without much struggle.

Dance has influenced many musicians' improvisations and has even shaped musical style and form (see work by jazz scholars Brian Harker 2008, and Howard Spring 1997). Some musicians, such as Tito Puente, have noted the inseparable connection between salsa music and dance and I aim to continue my research to include the perspective of more musicians than I have included in this work, regardless of whether they dance or not. Some dancers I spoke with have markedly different experiences depending on whether the event has live music or not. My personal experience with particular dancers is strikingly different in one setting as opposed to another—as if the attendant energy and unpredictability of a live band conjures up a more attentive dancer than one dancing to prerecorded music.

Scholars have noted differences between sub-styles of salsa dancing, most recently in the edited collection *Salsa World: A Global Dance in Local Contexts* (Hutchinson-2014) and *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (McMains 2015). Hutchinson's collection is a study of a global phenomenon as constructed by people grounded in particular locales: various sites in the United States and Latin America, two countries in Europe, and one in Asia. The chapters focus on the processes and particularities of media-influenced, commodity-driven cosmopolitan formations, as well as salsa and popular (partner) dance in general. Most importantly, the authors confront the inherent difficulty of making a clear demarcation between street, or social, dancers (*bailadores*) and their formally trained counterparts (*bailarines*).
Juliet McMains' *Spinning Mambo* addresses the history and aesthetic differences between New York mambo and salsa, salsa in Los Angeles, and rueda and casino in Cuba and Miami (2015). Her work traces the history of these particular dance styles and provides a strong foundation for the movement aesthetics within each, including an interesting chapter on how local styles have converged into an international one, "congress-style salsa," through the proliferation and popularization of salsa congresses and virtual communities. It is my aim to build upon Hutchinson, McMains, and Garcia's work by providing some answers to the whys and hows of dancing interactions—to build a better understanding of what many participants referred to as “feel.”

Theorists who offer multisensory and physical perspectives provide a method of articulating difficult concepts to which dancers often allude, although only some will be addressed in this work. Thomas Csordas's study of somatic modes of attention points to how dancers connect to multiple streams of information such as tactile, visual, aural, and kinesthetic (1993, 2003). With a view toward Edmund Husserl’s ([1966]) and Henri Bergson's ([1889], [1896]) theories of conceptualizing time through feeling, I conjoin the words time and space to explain how dancers manipulate timespace to create different feelings in a dance. These approaches help to provide frameworks and vocabulary for experiences that dancers state are important but have difficulty explaining, often resorting to gestures (a major reason for videotaping the feedback interviews as well as the initial dancing footage).

While my study investigates improvisatory social dance, I must clarify my reason for not including choreographed salsa routines in this project (beyond what the participants themselves mentioned and the control video utilized in the feedback interviews discussed below). Analyzing predetermined choreographic routines of dance seems like a wise place to search for aesthetics of
musicality, but the magic that dancers enact with their spontaneous choices of musicality during moments of improvisation socially enlivens the dance floor and the social milieu. As I researched the terms choreography and improvisation, it turns out that their distinction is not as clearly delineated as one may guess. The term *improvisation* itself is laden with knowns and unknowns; for example, one of the knowns that dancers refer to is an individual body’s predisposition to move in patterns of impulses established and made routine through training in a particular dance tradition as well as the body’s predilection for making certain kinds of selections from a vocabulary or sequence of movements (Foster in Albright and Gere 2003:4)

One of the means of spontaneity that improvisation builds on is what many dancers refer to as choreographic embodiment; movements must make sense within genre conventions. As a trained musician coming into the world of dance, I comprehend this broad use of the term choreography, but had never heard this use of the term before speaking with dance scholars. I had always understood choreography as dance movements that were prearranged to a particular piece of music—e.g., a choreographed realization of Stravinsky’s ballet *The Rite of Spring*. Each time the concert dance was performed, the similar movements would be seen at approximately the same times in the music. Salsa choreographies, in the way I utilize the term in this dissertation, abide by this rule. The use of choreographic movement types in salsa, and their relationship to musical construct or convention, must be left for a different project.

This project aims to provide a foundation for dancers and musicians to begin to understand each other, as well as for non-participants to better understand the aesthetic nuances between partners and music in social salsa dancing. How do dancers communicate the musical knowledge acquired by their close listening skills through bodily movement? How musicality is
acquired and enacted elucidates the practices of participants both in social settings (i.e., at dance events) and while not dancing.

The value that each dancer is awarded in the social arena falls on a continuum. No dancer on the social dance floor is immune from the value judgments of other dancers. I am interested in how each dancer views their own aesthetic preferences and those of other dancers. What generates these preferences and how does the enactment of musicality give value to particular dancers? Are similar aesthetic preferences found within each sub-genre, or are some aesthetic preferences found only in specific sub-genres? Participants cited their salsa classes, imitations of "good" dancers, and choreographies as responsible in part for their aesthetic preference, although spontaneity and creativity seems to "win" over pedantic movement. My research shows that "good" dancers exhibit multivalent listening skills and a fluency of motion that conveys sensitivity to the music and the dancing environs.

With this dissertation I aim to provide readers with a basic musical vocabulary whose concepts invite them to make a deeper connection to the dance/music experience. Music theorists provide specific vocabulary for musical features; phenomenologists offer ways of articulating elusive concepts; and dancers move among multiple streams of information, often navigating their worlds and words in an improvisatory manner much in the way they dance. As music is experienced in multiple ways, this dissertation incorporates multiple streams of theory and experience. With the help of my participants, I can begin to build an intersensorial explanation of the dance/music aesthetics of salsa.
**Personal Background**

I began salsa dancing in 1999 at lessons held early in the night at the local Latin club in my hometown in Connecticut. I was already a trained musician, at the time in between colleges for an undergraduate degree in performance/education. I had never formally danced, and knew very little about Latin music at the time. I quickly picked up the basics at the lessons in the club. Looking for a greater challenge, my partner and I took formal lessons from the teacher, Eddie Perez (no relation to El Gran Combo), in his kitchen in Stamford, Connecticut for almost a year. We graduated to lessons with Eddie’s friend Alex Matthieu, this time taking lessons in his living room; Alex refused payment beyond a bottle of port. Alex took occasional lessons with Frankie Martinez, or stole moves by watching other dancers at socials, would come back to Connecticut and perfect a move by practicing it with me. He then taught the moves to my partner. Since our lessons quickly diffused into a social event (the port may have had something to do with this), it became apparent that the place where I would learn the most on a long-term basis was the social dance floor. For the first five or six years that I danced salsa, I danced nearly three or four nights a week at Latin nights in bars or clubs, or to live bands, in Connecticut and New York. I taught basic social Latin dance through the Adult Continuing Education Program in my community and helped my first teacher whenever he needed a hand with his classes. I would dance on-1; I would dance on-2; I would even, and quite often, dance on-3. When I moved to Boston in 2005 for my masters degree, I took a year off from dancing to settle into a new program, but began to find the hotspots and understand the different social dynamics of Boston. On-2 was barely registering up there at the time; now it is oddly pandemic. When I moved to New York City for my Ph. D. in 2009, I fell back into the world of on-2 and its insular character, although I searched out
Colombian and Cuban dance communities as well. Salsa clásica/dura kept pulling me back, despite my love/hate relationship with the culture of on-2.

When I began fieldwork for this dissertation in 2014, I had already mapped out the questions and concerns that I would likely include in my project, although there were many more issues I wish that I could have spent time discussing with my participants. The tone of my interviews was one of a fellow dancer—inquisitive, knowledgeable, and understanding. I admit to learning more about the interview process with each interview I conducted; each participant, as one may expect, required a different approach, but I shared something in common with all of the participants—I love the dance and I love the music, passionately. I have danced with horrible dancers and I have danced with amazing dancers. It is this very dichotomy that pulled me to this research. There is magic hidden inside the perfect moment of a perfect dance and I wanted to know why it was easier to get closer to this magic with some people and to some music, and more difficult with other people and to other music. I pushed my dancing friends to answer challenging questions more than I pushed participants that I didn’t know very well. If I sensed that participants were comfortable and interested in the project, I spent more time with the interview than I would with participants who answered my questions succinctly. Some participants wanted to delve further into difficult topics, such as the ineffable somethings that often arise when speaking about how music moves one’s self. I am grateful for the time and energy that these participants gave to me, as well as that of the participants who kept me to my word of a three-hour interview. I gained valuable experience from both.

I have prepared for this research with nineteen years of practical salsa dancing experience in Connecticut, New York, and Massachusetts; just under a year-and-a half of formal salsa training; and seizing every opportunity I have had while traveling to feed my obsession of
studying social dance in Los Angeles, Curacao, Mexico City, New Orleans, and Munich, among other places. I have learned a great deal on the social dance floor and from occasional, though insightful, lessons in Boston and New York City. I have no prior training in dance. My interest in salsa, however, has moved me to explore other forms of dance such as Kathak (just under two years with Rachna Ramya Agrawal), bellydance (various teachers, three years), samba (very informally with friends), swing (six months with Paolo Lanna), tango (a few lessons and milongas in New York City), Afro-Cuban orisha dancing (one year with Richard Gonzalez and La Mora), and Dunham Technique (about a year with Joan Peters). My teachers and experiences, in my time both as a dancer and a musician, have inspired me to pursue projects that connect the two, sometimes disparate, worlds of musicians and dancers.

Methodology

This study addresses the musicality of dancers through analysis carried out in collaboration with twenty-five New York City-area social dancers of varied skill levels, with three exceptions: my first dance teacher, who was raised in the Bronx and danced for most of his life in New York City, but now lives in Florida; his star pupil, who had recently moved to Brooklyn from Florida; and another Floridian dancer of Puerto Rican descent. The dancers' age range was twenty-seven to seventy-nine years old with a median age of forty-five. Five participants were also trained musicians, either practicing or no longer practicing, with some participants more formally trained than others. Ten participants were professional dancers from a variety of genres: ballet/modern, jazz/tap, mambo/salsa, ballroom/dancesport, Polynesian, Hip Hop, and African. The remaining ten participants received no formal training in either music or dance.
Fifteen of the participants were male and ten were female. Classifications in racial differences proved difficult in the study since many of the participants did not self identify. Some identified as "white" and/or "Jewish," some as "Puerto Rican," some as "Black." Many self identified as a complex combination that culminated in "American." There were no simple comments about race throughout the interviews and I will refer to participants accordingly throughout the study, indicating self-identification if applicable to the analyses.

Most of my participants aligned with heteronormative gender constructions (men most often chose women to dance with, and vice versa), although some of the male leaders have led male followers and some of the female followers have been led by female leaders. Throughout the work of this dissertation, I adhere to heteronormative gender terminology (leaders are referred to as “he” and “him,” and followers are referred to as “she” and “her”), although on the dance floor there is some degree of variety (McMains 2015). At socials held in dance studios, male followers or female leaders may ask dance partners to dance with them (the degree of informality of these spaces is safer and less judgmental than a nightclub); this practice is less common at night clubs (unless within a group of people who know each other), although in these settings it is common to see women dancing together, often in groups. Despite a broadened definition of gender roles on the dance floor, especially in the last decade, I have witnessed dances between two women at socials or nightclubs interrupted by men on more than one occasion.

Six of the followers who I formally interviewed could follow whichever style of salsa the leader adopted, depending on the clarity of the lead. The remaining four followers would follow what their partners led them on, but preferred dancing on-2. I had seen most of these followers led by dancers whose counts and styles varied, thus I was able to confirm the participants’
answers to my interview questions. Eight of the leaders who I formally interviewed told me that they only danced on-2, although from watching these participants dance, I have to note some personal variation in their claims to staying on this particular count when we spoke about it during the interview. Three leaders I interviewed dance primarily on-1, but are somewhat familiar with on-2 styles, if only conceptually. One leader informed me that he could dance on any count but preferred dancing on-2, while three others told me that they didn’t mind dancing on whichever count their partner preferred. I could not verify all of these participants’ claims, but I believed their word when they told me that they liked to have a good time when they were out social dancing since I had been out social dancing with them. Albeit obvious, it is difficult to have a good time social dancing a partner style of dance without pleasing your partner.

My work with all participants consisted of two parts. I initially recorded the participant at a social dance with at least three different partners to at least three different songs. If the participant was male, I danced with him for one song. Female participants picked out their own partners, some of whom I had already interviewed for the project. If I had not already interviewed their partners, I made attempts to do so. The events included dance studio socials (events held in dance studios regularly rented out by dance teachers or event organizers), clubs, and venues such as community centers. At the socials, prerecorded music was the norm. Clubs and community centers usually featured live music with prerecorded music selected by a DJ before, between, and after the live music sets.

After the initial recordings, I analyzed the footage and prepared an in-depth feedback interview that took an average of three hours. I met with participants in their, or my, home, with few exceptions. The interview consisted of three sections:
1) Background and general questions: I asked participants to tell me a bit about themselves and their background, such as their age, where they grew up, language(s) they speak, occupation(s), and educational background. I asked participants about their experiences with music, either formal or informal. Dance backgrounds yielded captivating stories of participants' personal lives, mirroring the power that dance has had in shaping my own life. I asked both general and specific questions about dancing with partners in salsa, such as if there were partners with whom they especially enjoyed dancing and what this person did that made them an enjoyable partner. Many participants offered comparative examples of dancers with whom they did not enjoy dancing. At this point in the interview, we discussed characteristic features of particular dancers, both hypothetical and actual. We spoke of musicality on the terms presented by the participants and of the connections between dancer(s) and music. Lastly, I asked each participant about clave. What is it for them? Where, how, and from whom did they hear about it? What did it mean to them and their dancing?

2) In this section of the interview, the participant and I watched the videos of him or her social dancing. I began by letting the participant watch the first video in its entirety while I listened and watched for reactions. We then went through the video again, pulling out particular moments that stood out to each of us. Although some participants initially seemed daunted by the prospect of analyzing something they do "without thinking about it," most quickly became active in the analytical process after they saw a few of the details that I was bringing to their attention. Participants commented upon subsequent videos with increasing attention to detail and insightful comparisons. We spent approximately ten to twenty minutes on each (upon average) five-minute recording.
3) Lastly, we briefly watched two control videos—videos that every participant in the project viewed. Both videos were downloaded from YouTube with the intention of providing a basis for conversations about aesthetics, choreography, "street" dancing, and divergence of substyles within the larger framework of salsa. The first video consisted of a two-and-a-half minute choreographed routine of New York-style dancing by a young pair of professional salsa dancers. The second video showed another young couple improvising in a hybrid style at a street festival; most participants watched about three minutes of this five-minute excerpt. I did not provide background about either video until after significant discussion had occurred. I did ask that participants give me their overall impression and tell me things that they liked or did not like about the videos. Most participants had strong opinions about the videos and I altered my line of questioning depending on their comments.

The in-depth feedback interviews provided insight into the foundations of improvising and aesthetics within the conventions of this dance/music. Participants indicated the importance of how movement expresses musicality and how attention to the multisensorial realm of dance provides them with a rewarding and deep experience. Our work has enabled me to begin creating an analytical basis for understanding dancers' claims of "dancing in the music, as opposed to with the music" and "getting into the zone" or "the flow"—i.e., how dancers engage their corporeal knowledge of music.

For the past eight years, "musicality" has begun to be taught as a separate workshop in several on-2 studios in New York City, as well as through online tutorials and workshops at congresses. "Musicality" is also included in class descriptions as being an integral part of pedagogy. This formalization has arisen alongside the phenomenon of internet discussions, blogs, as well as becoming an articulated aspect of dancers' evaluations of themselves and other
dancers. I have included information gathered from these online blogs, tutorials, and teachers who teach courses advertised as “musicality” courses in this work. It is difficult for me to parse much of this information out, as it seems to create a feedback loop out of itself. For example, a few days after I had interviewed one participant (who was intrigued by my research), he posted an "advertisement" on his Facebook page offering dance lessons that focused on musicality.

Chapter Outline

I begin the dissertation with an introduction of the eight-beat measure, the basic unit by which salsa dancers and, arguably, musicians group the beats of the music. I explain the details and relationship between four different iterations of the basic step in forward-and-back styles of salsa dancing (on-1, on-3, Palladium-style on-2, and New York on-2), and analyze their stepping patterns and direction of movement with regard to the measure of the music. Improvisatory partner dancing simultaneously engages various social, kinesthetic, and music-theoretical issues beyond a basic stepping pattern. Despite the distinction between regional and stylistic variations, participants value skilled dancers who connect with their partner and flow with the dance/music experience over dancers who conform to strict maintenance of specific movement conventions. In the video examples that accompany Chapter 1, I demonstrate that the skill of following is not only embodied by the follower; a skillful leader is one who accommodates his partner and follows her.

Chapter 2 considers how dancers perceive and experience the dance/music as it is happening in real time and space. The first half introduces the many layers of music that dancers must attend to while listening and dancing, and the process by which they attend to these layers. In the second half, I introduce the concept of timespace to explain how dancers manipulate the
physiological experience of it to create different feelings in a dance at the small-scale level of the measure (expanded in Chapter 4 as expressive/microtiming), the mid-scale level of formal sections (expanded in Chapter 3 as hypermetric expectation), and at the large-scale level of the song itself. Timespace is the ether through which dancers move. Dancers’ command over when and which movements are placed in time and space have the possibility to create flow; I conceived of my particular use of the term timespace to explain how dancers control their bodies as instruments wielded through time and space.

Skilled dancers acquire and value hypermetric expectations beyond the measure of one clave rhythm to multiples of eight-beat groupings within larger formal structures. Chapter 3 demonstrates how dancers construct frameworks of phrasing and projection based on structural hearing, much as accomplished musicians do, but simultaneously listen, predict, and draw attention to musical features through particular movements of their bodies. Dancers take advantage of their corporeal knowledge of musical structures to heighten the experience of social dancing through what I call their structural feeling.

Chapter 4 delves into the timespace between the beats—the “play” that dancers referred to in our interviews. This chapter offers different ways to discuss microtiming and provides examples of dancers “playing” with the measure, their partner, and different lines of the music. I borrow the concept of tempo rubato, literally “robbed time,” from the performance practice of 18th-century Western art music, to get at the “feel” salsa dancers expressed in our interviews and on the dance floor.

Salsa studios and schools convey the high value of New York-style salsa, especially the importance of clave. Chapter 5 introduces the clave in its musical, socio-cultural, and practical
application for dancers. Issues of harmonic listening, as well as other means of “getting into the
music,” or “owning it,” are addressed and analyzed.

I close the study with a discussion of the connections between music, dancer, and partner through the framework of musicality. Participants emphasized the foundations of knowledge and comfort necessary in order to “take the dance to a different level” and what this meant for them socially and personally. Variables abound in social dancing, but the constructs of knowledge discussed above provide a foundation for dancers to improve their connections with themselves, their partners, and the music. These connections invite us to delve into the *something* in a dance/music experience that ultimately moves us to feel *it*. 
CHAPTER 1
The Embodiment of Patterns

Corporeal knowledge—ways of knowing expressed through movement—is acquired through practice. Dancers obtain this bodily knowledge in the same way that musicians do—through imitation, repetition, experimentation, and in many cases, formal lessons. Salsa dancers conceive of their movements in timespace through close listening to conventions in the music. The constructions of movement that dancers choose are learned explicitly through studio-based classes or implicitly through practical experience social dancing. This chapter introduces the eight-beat cycle of the music and addresses its connection to different salsa styles, and how these styles are acquired and embodied. The specificity of these different styles and the accommodation and adaptability of dancers to their partners will close out the discussion.

The Eight-beat Cycle

The basic cycle for dancers corresponds to the eight-beat cycle of the clave rhythm (Figure 1.1).

\[ \begin{array}{cccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 \\
\hline
\end{array} \]

**Figure 1.1**: Correspondence of 2-3 son clave with dancer’s measure.

The clave is an asymmetric timeline rhythm that consists of five attacks over an eight-beat cycle, or over two notated bars of 4/4 time. Although it is standard to notate salsa in analytical literature
and band charts in 4/4 or cut time, the dancing measure is what many musicians already use to guide their own musicality (Figure 1.2).

![Diagram of two 4/4 bars grouped as one measure]

**Figure 1.2:** A grouping of two 4/4 bars is perceived as one measure consisting of eight beats to the clave-sensitive musician and dancer.

The clave requires a full eight beats to be completed; dancers also require a full eight beats to complete a cycle of their own basic step. Bar lines of 4/4 time are not relevant for the dancer, and to some extent for the musician, if the clave is considered to be the ruling rhythm of salsa. Many dancers with whom I have spoken describe the “dancing measure” as eight-beats long. Some musicians I have spoken with refer to the eight beats required for an entire clave cycle as “one hit.”

Music theorist Martin Clayton differentiates between bar, “a description of notation,” and measure, “a metrical unit in general (i.e., an intended or perceived metrical unit)” (2008:28). Notated bars are merely graphic representations that do not exist in musical sound—an important difference for listeners and dancers who cannot, or do not, read musical notation. The concept of the dancing measure invites a deeper connection to the music—specifically the timespace necessary for one iteration of the clave rhythm. Similarly, salsa arrangers encourage “the gringos” [white instrumentalists] in their bands to feel longer stretches of the music by notating...
charts in 2/2, which gives more structural importance to the odd-numbered beats Figure 1.2. For these reasons, I have notated the transcriptions in this dissertation in 8/4 with perforated bar lines between beats 4 and 5 in order to give visual importance to the full eight-beat cycle of the clave, with its pair of integral components: the non-syncopated “two side,” and the “three side,” which contains an off-beat emphasis referred to as syncopation (seen on the and of beat 6 in Figure 1.2). Admittedly, the transcriptions are not practical to those accustomed to reading notation in 4/4, although I firmly believe that both musicians and dancers perceive salsa music in a meter of eight beats, regardless of what, as one musician put it, “Western music theory has taught us to believe we hear.”

The clave pattern can be played explicitly on a pair of wooden sticks, also called clave; or implicitly through the rhythmic patterns of the other instruments such as percussion (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 in Chapter 2), and melodic instruments such as the piano, singer, or horns. Salsa clave is a son clave, a pattern derived from the Cuban genre son, and can be played either in a 3-2 direction, where the syncopated half measure is heard first, or in a 2-3 direction, where the non-syncopated half measure of the pattern is heard first (see Chapter 5). The most common clave direction of New York City salsa music is 2-3, as shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2.

The basic stepping pattern of salsa styles consists of a repeated eight-beat pattern of alternating weight changes over six of the eight beats. The dancers' bodies fill up the timespace of the eight-beat cycle with prescribed weight changes, in essence feeling the beat through their connection to the floor. The correspondence of the eight-beat cycle to clave rhythms was either not important to, or confusing for, many of the dancers whom I interviewed for the project.

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2 Eliud Davis, personal communication, September 2016. Some dancers refer to beats 1, 3, 5, and 7 as corebeats.
Dancers were most often listening to the harmonic progression of the eight-beat cycles—from tonic to dominant and back to tonic—to decide the location of their basic stepping pattern within the musical framework. Chris Washburne considers the primary function of the bass to be rhythmic (2008:173), although I find it to be part of the metric schema, along with other harmonic motions (such as the length of melodic lines), in the sense that dancers are guided through the length of a measure by its harmonic alternations. A common eight-beat harmonic progression found in *salsa clásica*, “classic” salsa made in New York and Puerto Rico during the 1970s, is shown in Figure 1.3.

![Figure 1.3: Common eight-beat harmonic progression found in *salsa clásica*.](image)

An interesting characteristic for much salsa music is its tendency to accent beats or pulses other than the downbeat. Common bass lines, such as the anticipated one seen in Figure 1.3, pull the listener over the measure line (as well as the perforated bar line), disorienting novices and giving the music a forward momentum. Ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel refers to this anticipated bass as “perhaps the single most distinctive feature of Afro-Cuban popular music” (1985:249). The bass’s *tumbao* pattern, seen in Figure 1.3, anticipates the chord change that falls
on the downbeat of the piano’s *guajeo* pattern. The guajeo’s eight-beat pattern also coincides with the clave pattern. Figure 1.3 shows a guajeo in a 2-3 son clave. The downbeat attack lands on the two side of the clave and the anticipated side (marked with the note tied over the perforated bar line) falls into the three side. Dancers and musicians are listening simultaneously to multiple streams of information, including the aforementioned recurrent harmonic motions and other cyclical aspects of the musical framework. Listening and timespace are further discussed in Chapter 2; dancers’ understanding of and use of clave are further discussed in Chapter 5.

As with Arthur Murray footprint diagrams, many dances are often diagrammed by means of weight distribution and upper body movement corresponding with foot placement. To better illustrate how salsa dancers *feel* when they dance (Figure 1.4), I have separated weight distribution, indicated by the Ls and Rs, from direction of movement, indicated by arrows.

![Figure 1.4: Correspondence of the “feel” of whole-body motion/direction to the measure.](image)

In these diagrams, the LRL indicates when the leader shifts his weight onto the ball of his left or right foot. This onset of weight distribution can occur anywhere within the beat—on it, slightly after it begins, halfway through it, or even slightly before the next beat. Issues of microtiming are
discussed in Chapter 4. The beats upon which the dancers change their direction of movement, referred to as *break*, are indicated by the pair of arrows in Figure 1.4. The single arrow indicates the continued direction of movement of the leader’s body within a basic stepping pattern. Breaking is not, however, simply a matter of motion forward to back, or side to side. A change in the direction of movement necessitates an actual break of the *momentum* already begun in an opposite direction, hence my decision to illustrate the breaking beat with two arrows. The first indicates the leader’s motion moving into the beat, the second indicates in which direction the leader moves after shifting his weight. This distinction is important to the skilled dancer. It makes the difference between a dancer, or dancers, that plod their way heavily and with too much time spent landing the breaking beat and how “smooth” dancers implement the landing and moving away from the momentary directional break. In Figure 1.4 the leader lands on beat 1 with his left foot coming from behind him. As he lands on the beat, he simultaneously alters his direction from forward to backward—a push, more than a landing, per se. A dancer whom I was helping at a *practica* (informal practice social at a dance studio) had an epiphany upon realizing the nuance of the foot-into-body motion necessary to “make the dance smooth.” His response: “That changes everything!” As the leader moves backward toward beat 3, he steps in place on beat 2, simply lifting up the opposite foot he just stepped with and returning it to the place from where he took it. This motion is indicated with a circle (in Figure 1.4 on beats 2 and 6). On beat 3 he shifts his weight back to his left foot while continuing the motion backward. His motion continues backward until the moment he chooses to break the momentum and change direction on beat 5.

The counts on which the dancers break indicate, to some extent, which style of dance they are practicing. Myriad variations of stepping patterns and participatory discrepancies occur
frequently within a social dance, sometimes obfuscating the basic stepping pattern to the untrained eye. In this chapter I will discuss only four versions of what is considered forward-and-back salsa, a different style from those that move only back or from side to side. I do not mean to impart a value-judgment in describing only the forward-and-back styles. The musicality of salsa dancers is not limited to any particular style. I focused the project on the participants with whom I spent the most time for this project—self-identified New York-style dancers who choose to dance most of the time on-2—but am informed by my own dancing on various styles and several interviews with people who dance on different styles, such as dancing on-1 or dancing on “whatever.”

The eight-beat cycle can be thought of as divided into two halves or subgroups, each moving backward (indicated in Figure 1.4 with a clear box) or forward (indicated with a greyed box) with prescribed weight distributions. In this case, the first half of the cycle marks the backward motion during most of these four beats. The second box indicates the forward motion of the final four beats. Very often, dancers flip the two sides of the eight-beat cycle, in what I call medial transposition. In effect, a plus or minus 4, depending on how one perceives it, in a mod-8 system. I discuss how this is enacted on the dance floor after presenting the first two styles of dance.

Different Salsa Dance Styles

Dancers themselves usually divide forward-and-back salsa dancers into two categories: Those that break on the downbeat, and those that break on the upbeat. This designation stretches the definitions that musicians use for the terms downbeat and upbeat (see glossary), and I will clarify how dancers’ use aligns with that of musicians. Dancing on the downbeat, what is
referred to as dancing on-1, is the most popular style of salsa around the world and according to some dance teachers, the easiest to learn. “It’s just a quick way to get on the dance floor,” according to a current studio owner/dancer in New York City. “People get the dance easier and have more fun when I teach them on-1,” says an expatriate New Yorker who currently teaches “New York Style” on-1 in the Gulf Coast region of Florida.

When dancing "on-1" the leader begins his motion forward into the 1 with his left foot (motion begins backwards immediately upon shifting the weight down), lifts and returns his right foot in place on beat 2, and brings his left foot back on beat 3 (Figure 1.5).

![Figure 1.5: Salsa on-1.](image)

On beat 4 the dancers continue their backward motion without taking additional steps. This connecting motion can be executed in a staccato or legato manner, depending on the individual dancer and on whether their feet are staggered or together. Beat 5 begins the second half of the stepping pattern with the leader stepping back on his right foot (this beat changing direction forward), beat 6 is similar to beat 2 (in place to indicate weight change), and on beat 7 the leader will move forward on his right foot. Beat 8 consists of forward motion into the repetition of the pattern—again the connection depends on personal preference. Video 1.1 shows a couple dancing on-1. The male dancer breaks forward on beat 1 with his left leg while the female dancer
follows this motion by breaking back with her right leg. The cycle is marked by the leader steeping into the follower’s dancing space each time beat 1 returns. The regular alterations of left- to right-side weight changes in relation to the onset and nature of each step are internalized for on-1 dancers. As stated above, the dancer that has moved beyond a novice ability can feel the beat of the cycle without “consciously” counting. If the “wrong foot” is down at the “wrong time,” the follower may become uncomfortable. For example, if the leader began on beat 2 with the motions stated above for beat 1, the follower may not hear the music correctly through her body (more on this below).

Dancing on-3 is merely a beat transposition of the eight-beat dancing cycle (Figure 1.6).

![Figure 1.6: Salsa on-3.](image)

Analogous to melodic transposition, beat transposition maintains intervallic proportions, but produces a change in feeling for the sensitive dancer since the stepping pattern aligns differently to the metric and harmonic cycles in the music. Video 1.2 shows a couple dancing on-3. At 0:05, the leader begins his steps on beat 3, leading forward. It may be best to watch the follower’s legs—my legs—in this example (his tendency to back break can confuse those looking for “clean” forward-and-back dancing). My legs break out from underneath me on beats 3 and 7, as well as the pivoted accent at 0:19. At 0:28, he back breaks on beat 5, throwing me off (and likely throwing off the viewer of this video). By 0:37, he is back into his groove on-3, with some
appropriately added pachanga steps. At 0:45, he forward breaks on beat 1 and back breaks on beat 5, foreshadowing the latter part of this chapter that will value the art of accommodating to and being flexible with one’s partner. At 0:49, he leans into the lead singer’s accent, breaking forward on beat 3 and we end the except dancing on-3.

Some dancers that end up dancing on-3 claim an allegiance to “listening to” or “feeling the music instead of counting” and its implied connotations of studio-acquired knowledge. Some groups of people prefer to dance on three, although it is not very common in New York City. When I travelled to Munich, Germany in the summer of 2015, an entire social group that gathered to social dance at a particular studio/club only danced on-3, in what they call the Cuban style. Their teachers taught only on-3 dancing and the dancers did not accommodate other stepping patterns. In and around Boston, Massachusetts between 2005 and 2009 many dancers danced on-3, although New York-style on-2 was beginning to gain popularity. On-1 and on-3 are both considered are downbeat styles of salsa because the breaks in their basic stepping cycle coincides with beats 1 and 3, respectively. Many dancers refer to all of the odd beats in the measure as “downbeats,” likely because of the gravity these beats convey in the measure compared with the even-numbered beats. Interestingly, dancers also refer to the odd beats as “core beats,” again assigning the odd beats a gesturally inward, and downward, centripetal force.

Dancers sometimes transpose the eight-beat dancing cycle at the half-way point, a medial transposition, regardless of what is occurring in the music. To compare, Figure 1.7 illustrates the difference between the regular, alternating halves of backward and forward motion expected by

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3 **Pachanga** is a style of Cuban dance (“fast and syncopated”) music made popular in the U.S. in the early 1960s by charanga bands (that featured violins, a flute player, and a distinct timbale sound) fused with the New York-style brass and sax sound (Roberts 1999:160-3).
most dancers (the top line) and the repeated half measure that causes a reversal of the expected direction of movement (bottom line).

![Diagram of dance steps]

**Figure 1.7**: Medial transposition while dancing on-1.

In a medial transposition, the leader begins the second iteration of the eight-beat cycle on his right foot instead of the left, having already transposed the dancing measure by four beats (plus 4 in a mod-8). This creates a sense of being "on the wrong side," as some of the participants stated, making the pattern feel as if beat 1 has become beat 5 and vice versa since the downbeat of the dancing cycle no longer aligns with the musical meter. Video 1.3a shows Melvin and me playfully dancing on-1. At 0:24, on beat 1, he begins a series of arm motions to turn me. At 0:27, he accents beat 5 with a forward step on his left leg, instead of moving back and then breaking forward with his right leg, as I would expect for this half of the eight-beat cycle. This unexpected motion (essentially another 1, 2, 3) forces me to shift my weight (quickly at 0:28) to complement the shift in his. He remains medially transposed throughout the song and
into the next song. I do not “fix” his change. Video 1.3b shows Video 1.3a slowed to 80% speed, with the above analysis voiced over.

Medial transpositions can create unwanted tension in some followers if they cannot accommodate a change in learned turn patterns. I have met and seen many followers who cannot tolerate this sort of behavior and will, as one leader stated, “hijack” the dance. Followers described these moments as “fixing” the dance, or “making it right.” When I was still learning the feel of the music in my body, I invented a signal for my usual partner to change his direction; his musical sensitivity was longer in the making than my own, but his accommodation to my request impressive. I no longer backlead, and instead I find it pleasant to follow the leader. Some dancers do not notice or mind when they medially transpose the eight-beat cycle and are able to execute turn patterns and moves on either side of the measure. The dancers with extensive studio training, however, seemed to be more sensitive to medial transposition and perceive it as a mistake requiring repair, with “stutter steps” or behavioral patterns taught explicitly in New York on-2 classes. Dancers who danced socially more than they took lessons exhibited a greater flexibility in interpreting medial transpositions and did not necessarily view medial transposition as mistakes.

A characteristic feature of salsa clásica, interestingly, is frequent changes to the eight-beat meter, either by phrase expansion or contraction through clave flips or jumps, especially in

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4 Melvin is my first dance teacher’s current star student who is currently living in Brooklyn. Melvin had never danced on-2 at this point and I had invited him out to film and participate in the project to dance however he felt most comfortable. I made a point to dance with him first, early in the night, and accommodate his style, in part for him and in part for the people who were watching us. Before this night, he had declined every invitation to the more welcoming uptown socials that I had tried to expose him to first. It was not my preference to bring his to this particular nightclub, but he was (and is) one of the friendliest dancers with whom I’ve ever danced—no matter the highfalutin attitude for which this club is particularly known.
the beginning of the tune. Chapters 3 and 5 discuss these phenomena and the ways by which dancers predict, react, or otherwise deal with these issues.

On-2 styles of forward and back salsa dancing indicate that the dancers break or change direction on the second beat of the dancing measure. These styles are considered upbeat styles solely by exclusion—they are not downbeat styles. Many dancers consider the even beats “upbeats,” likely as the feel of these beats in the measure contrasts with the downward feel of core beats 1, 3, 5, and 7. Many of the rhythmic lines accent the second beat of the music in a syncopated manner—driving the listener’s expectations beyond the downbeat. Beats 1 and 2 are equally important in salsa clásica. The challenge in designating terms arises from a western construct being forced on music that functions in ways that deviate from western frameworks. Proposing a solution to this conundrum is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but a worthwhile project for development into a book for dancers and musician interested in the topic.

Juliet McMains' 2015 book, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa*, traces the origins of these dance styles. Based on my experience in eighteen years of dancing, on-1-style dancers (I am including on-3 to this group) can be found in any part of the world dancing to any subgenre of salsa, including New York, Colombian, Cuban, and even African salsa. Dancing on-2 is commonly seen in New York City, but it is, by no means, the only style of salsa that is danced in New York City. As in any metropolis, be it Munich or New York City, different people prefer different ways of dancing, depending on their upbringing and circle of friends, especially if the dancer decides to undergo formal training in salsa dance. To generalize that all New Yorkers dance the same is as absurd as saying that everyone in the five boroughs speaks the same language or has the same accent.
The Palladium-style on-2, sometimes called Power 2, is a beat transposition of the on-1 stepping cycle to begin on the second beat of the measure (Figure 1.8).

![Figure 1.8: Palladium-style on-2.](image)

Video 1.4 shows an old-timer, Carlos Beltram, dancing with Denise Gerard, daughter of the famed mambo duo, Millie Donay and “Cuban” Pete Aguilar, dancing Palladium-style on-2. Denise leads the dance in the beginning of this excerpt and Carlos joins in to lead in medial transposition. Both dancers show simultaneous influences of modern styles as well as homage to old styles in their movements. This video shows their weight changes on beats 2, 3, 4 and 6, 7, 8, more than it shows forward-and-back motion. Palladium-style on-2 is not as common as it was in the 1950s and early 60s, when many New York City dancers attended the famous Palladium nightclub in midtown Manhattan, after which the style is named. I've met increasingly fewer dancers in New York City who dance in this manner within the past ten years, to the point that I can think of only Carlos, who almost revels in throwing off the young followers with whom he enjoys dancing. Although he is, admittedly, an old-style dancer, Carlos will adapt to his followers and change his styles throughout a single dance. His dance training is diverse, spanning decades and styles, but his mambo has a distinct feel when he is inspired by the right partner and good music. McMains articulates the feel of this style well: “Palladium-style
dancers…actually stop their movement for a beat [beats 5 and 1], building tension that explodes into the next step rather than the smoother, more continuous movement of the modern Torres style” (2015:67). The once-famous Razz M’Tazz dance studio of the Bronx disseminated this style of salsa from the 1970s into the early 2000s, but since their departure from the New York City area, and the rising popularity of a competing style, the Palladium 2 is rarely seen or taught.\(^5\)

The man credited with the "revival" of salsa dancing in the early 1980s, Eddie Torres, codified an on-2 stepping pattern which breaks on beat 2, but begins on beat 1. This is commonly referred to as “New York on-2.” It seems the same pattern as dancing on-1 if we only take into account weight distribution of lefts and rights without looking at the arrows indicating direction (Figure 1.9).

![New York on-2 Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.9**: New York on-2.

While the onset of weight distribution remains the same as dancing on-1, the nature of each step changes. The first step is slightly backward on beat 1 with the left foot, beat 2 steps back, but is already moving forward, and beat 3 is either in place or moving forward into the next subgrouping. The second half of the measure reverses the general direction of travel. Video 1.5a

\(^5\) Razz M’Tazz’s owners moved to Milan, Italy where they taught for some time. I do not know if the style has been disseminated from that locus. When traveling to Curacao in the Netherland Antilles in 2001, I came across a tiny dance studio that taught this style although I did not inquire about how the teacher came to know this particular style.
shows me and Frantz dancing New York on-2. My steps land on the beat, whereas his lag toward the end of it. At 0:21, we both play with the music, and wait for the motion of the song to return. Again, one can see that the breaks land on beats 2 and 6; our legs extend out from underneath us (mostly) and accent the angles our bodies are making. Both Palladium-style and New York-on-2 patterns are also subject to medial transposition, depending on the aesthetics and/or attentiveness of the dancers.

Hutchinson and McMains both remark on New York-style dancers’ tendency to step and/or count beat 1 as early as half a beat prior to its occurrence in the music (McMains 2015:68). This is a common tendency for New York dancers, especially when they teach, though I have experienced all sorts of interpretations of the beat and metric cycle in my time here. Video 1.5b shows two New York-on-2 dancers who dance behind the beat throughout the excerpt. These two dancers are not lagging, so much as relaxing (kicking back, if you will) and having a good time. There is no pressure to perform at this social, and, particularly, between these two dancers. Both are capable and musically sensitive dancers; their preference here seems only to have an enjoyable dance. Video 1.5c contrasts these examples with a leader that dances “on top of the beat,” meaning the leader lands the weight of his steps on the very beginning of the beat. When considering how to convey how this feels to another person, I could only offer a hypothetical situation: Now that you worked at getting the basic step into your body, and you have practiced it to a moderately fast tempo—imagine being led by him. This feel is very uncommon in New York dancers, on-2 or other styles. The characteristic laid-back, relaxed quality of the New York on-2 cannot be observed in this couple’s dancing. In fact, the follower
told me that the leader was “manhandling” her (leading her roughly) a bit that night, something he usually no longer did when they danced together.⁶

When speaking with musicians, I noticed that they often offered the discrepancy between dancers’ counting and their actual footwork when they disparaged dancers’ inability to count correctly. Some dancers indeed purposely play with their beat placement more than others, but I have found that this tendency is directly related to the musicality of the dancer and their comfort with their partner, regardless of their dancing style.

Many dancers who learn, or socially dance, both on-1 and New York on-2 mention the striking difference between the two styles. In fact, it was the first issue that drew me to study salsa in depth over these many years. Over the course of my research and analyses, I discovered three levels of difference between these two styles.

First, the direction of movement in relation to the musical meter reverses (the leader moves backward at the beginning of the measure instead of forward), necessitating a modification of normalized gender bias aligning with the tonic chord (see Figure 1.3). Some of the participants took issue with this point. In the Palladium-style on-2, the leader “leads” the woman by moving forward into the first half of the measure, in the same way an on-1 dancer breaks forward before moving backward (see Figures 1.5 and 1.8). Since this type of leading originated with what is now an older crowd, it remains important to the kinesthetic sense of feel that these dancers (and those that learned in this style, such as my first dance teacher) use to determine the basis of their stepping patterns. Dancers who come from a younger generation, one

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⁶ Cameras sometimes make people act in a different manner from how they would normally act. When I danced with this leader later in the night, he also manhandled me, as well as danced on top of the beat. Interestingly, I cannot recall him dancing with any other people in the club that night besides the follower in this video and myself, although my memory could be failing me.
undoubtedly influenced by Eddie Torres, embodied the feel of the New York on-2, although good social dancers accommodate their partners regardless of their direction of movement.

An old-timer, Karen, witnessed firsthand the change in popularity from the Palladium 2 to Eddie Torres’s New York on-2. She was courted to teach with Eddie Torres when he first began his own dance troupe in the 1970s. I asked her how it felt changing from her on-2 (Palladium 2) to Eddie Torres’s version of on-2:

Not different. You’re still going forward on 2 and 6. It was nothing [for her personally, I’d argue]. At the time there was another dance teacher very well known for mambo and tango—Eddie Dorfer. You don’t see him around anymore. He was a real 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8. He would argue with everyone when we would go to these dance weekends. “No! No! Men should go forward on this and women go back on that!” There was a difference of men going forward on the 6 or going forward on the 2. There was a little change. But as a woman, you just follow who you’re dancing with. If you’re flexible and you really feel the rhythm, I can dance on-1, I can dance on-2. The only time I have trouble is when somebody’s dancing off beat on every beat and they don’t know what they’re doing.

Karen is an example of a spectacular social dancer (the reader will hear her name many times throughout this dissertation); she can follow anyone well. Here she conveys the conviction with which some leaders entrain their direction of movement to correspond with the dancing measure and do not subscribe to the “little change” introduced by the Torres style. In fact, many experienced New York-on-2 leaders begin their motion forward, but into beat 6 instead of the “old fashioned” beat 2. Those that medially transpose, or can follow such transpositions, break forward indiscriminately as Karen pointed out: “You’re still going forward on 2 and 6.” In fact, Karen’s favorite partner doesn’t always know if he’s going forward on beat 2 or 6 when he’s in the moment of dancing—a fact that surprised him during his feedback interview since he perceived moving forward into the 6 as a mistake.

The second difference between dancing on-1 and New York on-2 is that the break occurs in the middle of the sub-grouping instead of at the beginning: 1 2 3 (4) 5 6 7 (8). The change of
direction after motion has already begun in that particular direction creates an increase in physical excitement. The off-beat feel of a change of direction on beats 2 and 6 propels the dancer from the continued motion of beat 1, to a change on what ethnomusicologist David Locke would refer to as one of many choices of orientation within the matrix of the dancing measure (Locke 2011). Dancers on-1 also have the choice to emphasize beat 2, but an emphasis would require something other than a break in the direction of movement. New York-on-2 dancers syncopate their basic stepping pattern against the harmonic weight of the main melodic lines, adding another ostinato (their basic stepping pattern) to the metric matrix present in the music. Two participants, with nearly a sixty-year age difference, described the feeling of dancing New York on-2 as "flying" and "taking off." This is a striking difference from the descriptions my participants offered for dancing on-1. One younger dancer described on-1 dancers as “heavy,” meaning they landed on beats as a point of arrival instead of utilizing the beat as a pushing off point. I have found, however, that most experienced dancers in any of the styles described above employ the breaking beat as a pushing away from the gained momentum—a characteristic that makes the dance (and the dancers) appear smooth.

The third, and perhaps most important, difference in feel between the popular on-1 and the increasingly popular New York on-2, is that when dancing on-1, the non-active steps (in-place step and the connecting step) alternate throughout the cycle (Figure 1.10), giving on-1 an almost bouncy interpretation by some dancers.
When dancing on-2, the in-place step occurs *just prior* to the connecting step, dividing the measure into larger/longer chunks of active movements that outline the basic stepping pattern and non-active movements that attach the two sides of the dancing pattern (Figure 1.11).

These non-active steps produce a relaxed feeling since the increase in timespace can be utilized for self expression through improvisation. Many dancers referred to this space as “more freedom” or “more time” in the basic stepping pattern, although technically the eight-beat cycle takes the same amount of time no matter the style. Granted, given practice and inspiration, any good dancer can improvise no matter the basic step, but the relationship between the accents and timespace in New-York style salsa/mambo music and the characteristic drive for personal expression over partnered expression in New York City generate a special connection to the
music for on-2 dancers in the New York style. New York-on-2 dancers utilize these moments to a greater extent than do dancers of many other styles. In fact, my insistence on personally interpreting the music by means of bodily expression during these moments in the music mark me as a New York-style dancer when I travel to other places and dance different styles. This same insistence also makes it difficult for me to dance with dancers who are not accustomed to, or do not aesthetically prefer, the female to “take control” of these, or any other, moments in the music.

The Acquisition and Embodiment of Salsa

The dancers that participated in the study acquired their salsa dancing abilities in a number of ways. Nearly all of the dancers had at least some studio training, some on-1 and on-2, and others only on-2. The old-timers, the mamberos who began dancing in the 1950s and 60s, had the least contact with formal dance studios, although many of their moves are taught in today’s New York-on-2 studios. Many younger dancers had little to no prior salsa experience and had only taken lessons at studios and/or clubs. A few participants (and many of the dancers I have spoken with informally) told me that they grew up dancing some version of salsa (usually some form of downbeat dancing), but ended up taking formal lessons to learn the “real” or “correct” way to dance. This dichotomy of what has variously been referred to as “street,” “kitchen,” or “living room” salsa to studio-acquired knowledge has been addressed well by scholars such as those contributing to Hutchinson’s edited collection *Salsa World* (2014), and McMains in *Spinning Mambo with Salsa* (2015). Dancers have told me that since learning a particular style in a studio they can no longer dance other styles, and that this sometimes alienates them from the very living rooms where their families still dance salsa. Other dancers
have expressed the difficulty of code-switching, as it were, between styles, although a few leaders and followers have shown the ability to dance the style (normally the division is either on-1 or on-2) with which their partner is most comfortable.

Dancers also varied in their prior experience with both music and dance. Six dancers, including myself, had formal training on a musical instrument. Seven, including myself, had formal training in at least one dance style other than salsa. Two had extensive formal training in salsa and now teach salsa to others.

Most of the dancers that had formal training in dance exhibited a greater sensitivity to musical structures and partnering nuances than those without formal dance training. This effect seems to stem from the amount of practice and experience they have put into dancing to actual music (most of it choreographed, some by the dancers themselves and some by others) as well as by the physical experience of attending to themselves and others with regard to proprioception and embodiment. Much of dance is taught by example, meaning that successful dancers can watch others perform movements and then internalize and recreate the movement in their own bodies. The old-timers said that this was the manner in which most of them learned, albeit most often from non-formal sources such as other dancers on the Palladium dance floor, neighbors, and friends.

Some dancers spoke of the difficulty of learning salsa on-2 and spent a great deal of money and time taking classes (see Hutchinson-2014)—sometimes for months or years before they went out social dancing. These stories indicated to me the cultivation of an ideal ability, intentionally or not, in the studio-environment—a complete opposite turn from the informal, putting-up-with-partners-of-varying-levels that is expected on a social dance floor. One
participant performed group choreography on a stage prior to ever going out social dancing in an attempt to prove to himself that he “had what it took” to salsa.

The few people that shared these stories of years of practice and studio learning prior to social dancing are a minority, as most novices are influenced by their time on the social dance floor to take formal lessons. The acquisition of a level of skill, as perceived by fellow dancers, was achieved by practice and experience, much in the way that the formal dancers above were trained. The difference, however, is that the proving ground for most salsa dancers is the social dance floor. Many dancers have explicitly stated to me that a dancer is “no good” if she or he can’t dance for fun, giving value to a social dancer over a performer. One dance teacher, Joe, held the dancer that can do both in high regard:

But sometimes when you see choreographies up on a show, and the dancers look fantastic, they do a perfect job, but then you see them on the dance floor later in the evening social dancing and they’re horrible. There’s a difference between choreography and social dancing. An advanced dancer can do both.

Joe, and other participants, stated how choreography crosses into social dance. Of the pair of dancers we were discussing above, Joe stated: “If you see them social dance…I guarantee you’ll see the same moves. That is the reverse, bringing their choreography into the social dance.” I can attest to this habit of many dancers; partners with whom I dance often implement highly-stylized choreographed patterns into social dances with me. The success of this tactic varies greatly depending on the leader’s skill level and flexibility of accommodating dancers who are not familiar with the choreography.

There was an implicit assumption that performers and/or choreographers plan their moves based on their social experience, but often this is not the case in building an aesthetic of movement. McMains describes how stage performances in the early days of mambo drew from dance sources other than the social dance floor and how these moves, in turn, influenced social
dancers (2015:315-65). One participant told me of an epiphanal moment in his own dance
experience when he realized all of these highly-stylized turn patterns could be altered, even just
slightly, to be utilized on the social dance floor:

To me, staying on one line [characteristic of New York-on-2 style], I guess it was an
evolution in my dance. When I first started salsa, I thought you pick a line and you don’t
deviate from it. When I first performed with Carlos, you are always changing lines in
performances. We’d have our lines one way and he’d say, “Do a carousel and do an extra
quarter turn so that we’ll change the line this way.” I’ve never had an instructor change
the line in a turn pattern learned in class. It wasn’t until I did a performance that I found
out that you could do this. The thought had never crossed my mind. I didn’t know that it
was an option. If I could do this in a performance, why can’t I do this socially? I do it
from time to time, sometimes to move from an unsafe situation where you’re dancing
near someone that is not respectful of space and they are a danger to either you or your
partner.

This participant, and other studio-trained leaders with whom I have danced, often modify learned
patterns to fit with their partner and their space on the dance floor. Participants, and other
dancers, who learned primarily on the social dance floor do not perceive movements as
“modifications.” Instead, their perception stems from an intrinsic desire to make the social
practice of this partner dance comfortable, safe, and enjoyable.

In New York City, and other places where the on-2 culture has flourished, most dancers
join student troupes, classes taught by a studio whose goal is for the participant to learn a specific
choreography over the course of six to twelve weeks, and then perform it at a social in a
showcase where the attendees pause in their night of social dancing to watch such troupes
perform. These troupes are multifaceted entities. First, they generate income for the studio,
keeping advanced dancers challenged and inculcating newer dancers into the social fabric of the
studio. Second, they serve as advertising for the studio, and implicitly for the dancer. In the case
of the studio, if others see how much fun the performing and how good the choreography are,
they may be influenced to take a class or join a student “team.” In the case of individual dancers,
their skill is broadcast to each audience member watching them, thus inviting others to ask the performer to dance with them when the social dancing begins after the performances. Interestingly, as Joe and I discussed in our interview, some dancers can perform well, but social dance atrociously. Additionally, many performers will not social dance before, or even after, their performance at an event.

There was a direct correlation of skill level to how many hours each dancer spent on the dance floor or practicing at home. Dancers who aimed to perfect their moves outside of the studio, or other active learning environment, exhibited a faster learning curve, especially with regard to personal (not partnered) movement, than dancers who only danced on the social dance floor. Dancers who danced for fun at home, often in an informal manner of practice, were more uninhibited to improvise on the social floor and often exhibited a greater control of their bodies than those that learned solely studio-taught movements.

Increased skill level and sensitivity to the music were correlated to how often the dancer listened to salsa music outside of social dancing. Dancers that listened to salsa before they learned to dance; for pleasure at home, commuting, or exercise; or anytime not on the dance floor actively dancing with a partner evidenced a deeper connection to the music. These dancers understood the music (for example, its conventions of rhythm, pitch, harmonic progression, and formal structures) in ways that allowed their bodies to connect to the music as it unfolds instead of reacting after the sounds and/or patterns are processed by the “thinking” brain. This familiarity of the music in the body speaks to the physiological experience of timespace that will be addressed in Chapter 2. When speaking with a dancer, Juan, about how he knew to put an accent in his body at a particular moment in songs that he did not know, he explained himself: “I can feel it. It’s coming; it’s coming. Sometimes I miss it.” I asked him how he knew it was
coming and he responded with a sparkling smile: “Maybe I'm listening to too much salsa. The more you listen, the more your brain is trained to listen to music.” Juan’s comment illustrates the point that listening can lead to more than a conscious knowing of something, becoming rather a training in how to listen. His knowledge, and that of other skilled dancers, originates from the ability to know the music at various levels of understanding, thus enabling the musical dancer to prepare one’s body, and turn patterns, to coincide with musical features (more in Chapters 3 and 4).

Salsa is a music whose lyrics are predominantly in Spanish. This may merit the assumption that dancers who speak Spanish have a closer connection to the music, but I did not find this to be the case so easily. Often beginner dancers, no matter their language comfort, focused on putting moves in their bodies and executing turn patterns without mistake. Once a general foundation of movement knowledge was acquired, they could then turn their attention to the features of the music. Certain sub-genres of salsa, specifically salsa romántica, were more highly valued by Spanish speakers, although some participants had little to no knowledge of Spanish and still changed their dancing styles when these songs were played. Knowledge of Spanish certainly adds depth of meaning to songs such as “(Quítate de la vía) Perico,” where the happy-sounding lyrics play on the entendre of parrot/cocaine and its force similar to that of an oncoming train; “La Rebelión,” where the protagonist stands against the beating of a woman, and in turn slavery; and the many romantic songs that praise women’s beauty, depth of character (or not), and desires for furthering relationships (wink, wink, nudge, nudge).⁷

⁷ Frances Aparicio’s Listening to Salsa (1998) offers an in-depth ethnographic analysis of salsa song lyrics (especially issues of gender representation) and their importance for listeners.
Some salsa songs have lyrics in other languages such as Wolof, in the case of the popular salsa group Africando, or refer to the Afro-Cuban pantheon of Regla del Ocha, more commonly referred to as Santería, especially in the montuno sections. I have witnessed plenty of people that have no knowledge of Spanish, or Yoruba-based languages for that matter, singing the *coros* (the response portion of the call-and-response section of a salsa song) and utilizing the energy of singing along with repetition in order to power the exciting *montuno* section of a song. Often it is these kinds of intimate moments in the dance that propel dancers to explore the references and words that get stuck in their heads when they are off the dance floor.

Discussions of lyrics with dancers often courts a wide range of reactions, although for most who understand and/or speak Spanish, lyrics provided another layer of intimacy with the music, one with which they could choose to interact or not. For those with little or no knowledge of the language, the music drove their passions enough to keep them coming back to the dance floor. It is important to note that in many of the clubs and socials from which I drew participants either English or a combination of English and Spanish was spoken. Most New York City venues mix languages at salsa events, although some are solely conducted in Spanish, depending on the neighborhood.

Many of my participants, including myself, were drawn to the music, outside of their own cultural boundaries, because something in it appealed to them. These somethings often involve the issues of musicality that arose throughout this study. The dancers that are, as they stated, attuned to the music outside of the dance delve into the music with a passion commonly seen in musicians. Although their articulation varies greatly from that of musicians, dancers understand the music and express it in physical ways—embodied, corporeal knowledge—the means of which are explained in this study.
Accommodation and Flexibility

The existence of standardized stepping patterns may give rise to the assumption that dancers must adhere to one or another style to be able to communicate well with their partner. As stated above, most studio-trained dancers learn one style and stick to it without much deviation, depending on their experience on the social dance floor. Although differences in dance style exist, sought-after dancers exhibit a flexibility rich in corporeal knowledge that surpasses counting or mere reactions of following or leading.

Not surprisingly, in conversations the trait that arose as most important in a leader was to remain consistent with whichever beat he chose initially. In reality, though, not even the best leaders maintain the pattern with which they began. In practice, a good follower maintains focus on both the music and her partner, although not necessarily in that order. As one leader put it: "The way that you follow me, I feel that I wouldn't make any mistakes. Like everything is smooth and perfect. My fears [gestures *dissipates*] and my brain just works smoothly with the song."

Video 1.6 is a one-minute-ten-second clip of Karen, a “street”-trained mambo veteran from the days of the Borscht Belt in the Catskill Mountains, dancing with Danny, a regular “street” dancer, at an event held at Julia de Burgos Cultural Center in East Harlem during the spring of 2015. Video 1.7 is a slowed down version (75%) of Video 1.6 with a voiced-over analysis.

In the beginning they are dancing separately, a common indicator of New York-style salsa/mambo. You can see that Danny closes the frame\(^8\) with his 5 forward (0:13), a medial

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\(^8\) The frame is a term that designates how the dancers hold each other while dancing this partner dance. In a “traditional” western-style ballroom frame the leader embraces the follower by
transposition of dancing on-1. He closes the frame just after the entry of the coro line of the montuno. Karen follows although she initially places her 1 backward, which is how a follower expects the 1 to be executed. Instead of stopping, she double-steps backward on the same leg to compensate when she sees his leg moving forward to lead her into closed-frame dancing. At 0:37, during the exchange of the coro and sonero lines, he begins to rush his steps, increasing his internal tempo although the tempo of the music does not change. His steps phase to the point where his forward break occurs on beat 4 at 0:44. Again, she follows smoothly, although I know from personal experience that dancing on-4 can be challenging when one has embodied a sense of the music lining up with the feel of foot/weight placement. Danny separates the frame in the middle of this coro/sonero montuno, not later in the song when the mambo enters. They dance solo again and, although he breaks his 2 forward at 0:50, his accented motions don’t pledge allegiance to a particular stepping pattern. When he closes the frame at 1:07-1:08 he breaks with his 2 forward, aligning his lead with Karen’s tendency to dance on-2, but completes the next partner move, a cross-body lead\(^9\), with a forward step onto beat 1 at 1:11, thus "correcting" the medial transposition and returning to the downbeat stepping pattern with which he seems most comfortable. Karen, ever the spectacular follower, makes this dance seem as if nothing different occurred in the lead. Video 1.8 is slowed down with the counts voiced over and Danny’s breaking beats accented.

\[\text{placing his right arm under hers with his hand somewhere on her back near her shoulder blades and his left hand clasped with hers in the space between them at about her eye level.}\]

\(^9\) A **cross-body lead** is a partner move in which the leader pivots to open the frame perpendicularly to the follower and cues her to walk across the path he opens in front of him. Embellishments such as single or double turn are sometimes added to the motion for variety within the movements chosen for a single song.
I'm nearly certain, from my dancing experience with this Danny and over my many years dancing with different people, that Danny has no idea that he's changing his stepping and breaking pattern. He doesn't think about dance by means of counting. He's listening to the music and dancing according to what he feels most at that particular moment in the song, as evident by the shines\textsuperscript{10} he executes between 0:51-1:07. Karen also dances to what she feels while listening to the music at any particular moment, as clearly evidenced by her own solo work (which will be discussed further in Chapter 3), but what makes her a sensitive and skillful follower is her ability to shift and alter her stepping patterns before they manifest as weight changes. She doesn't put the "wrong" foot down and then "correct" her motion with a stutter step onto a different foot. Karen \textit{preempts} more than \textit{follows} in that her attentiveness to her partner surpasses mere reaction—she lands her weight changes and foot placements as if she could read his mind. Karen stated “I remembered being very conscious of his rhythm in my head. Is he on-1 or on-2? I would say to myself.” Interestingly, she doesn’t notice his phase to on-4 or care about any medial transpositions. This is because to Karen, myself, and a multitude of dancers, these changes in interpreting the dance are not necessarily mistakes—they are challenges on the dance floor that, if met well, make for the best dance possible.

Is this not the point of social dancing—to be social? Good following makes your partner happy and comfortable, thus enabling the leader to focus on his personal interpretations of the music, what many of my participants referred to as “flow.” Karen enables her partner to find his flow, encouraging him to become attentive to his own creative sensitivity, by acutely predicting his movements. Although not as “playful” as her dances with those who conform to a more

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} \textbf{Shines} are solo footwork executed while separated from your partner. It is considered an important aspect of New York-on-2 style to have the dancers separate from each other multiple times throughout the dance.}
consistent rhythm, she enjoys the dance for what it is. “I don’t know his name. I danced with him because he’s a friend. I danced with him five times that night. He’s not my favorite to dance with.” But she smiles and connects to the music, because he is also connecting to the music. She makes the most out of the dance, and the moments within it, through her skillful following.

The skill of following is not one reserved for only the follower. As various people have pointed out to me, a good leader is one who follows his partner. Video 1.9 shows Lindsay, the leader, and Brona, the follower, dancing at Carlo Konig’s bi-monthly social in midtown Manhattan in autumn of 2015. Lindsay is a professionally trained dancer (ballet, jazz, Alvin Ailey/modern) who has toured internationally. He has danced salsa for eleven years, at this point, with minimal studio training. Brona, a salsa amateur, had, at the time of the video, taken nine months of once-a-week formal training at a New York City-on-2 studio, but experienced informal social dancing prior to formal lessons. Brona had had a particularly bad night of disappointing dance after disappointing dance prior to recording this video. Lindsay, who had never danced with her before, had noticed her mood and made a point to persuade her into dancing with him although she was ready to leave. This excerpt is taken from their second dance of the night, only three minutes into their dancing relationship. At this point she had loosened up and was dancing closer to him, smiling more, and physically moving more parts of her body than she had with any other man that she danced with that night. In fact, when Brona and I watched these videos in the feedback interview, her body temperature changed and she became noticeably excited. Their dances wavered between dancing on-3 and New York on-2 with no indication when the pattern would switch.

Video 1.10 is the same video, slowed down to 80% of its original speed. Lindsay and Brona begin the dance on-2, but she is so behind the beat that she phases to land beat 7 as if she
is dancing on-3 at 0:03. She squeezes her steps for beats 6, 7, and 8 closely together at 0:07-0:08 to momentarily land her footfalls as if dancing in medial transposition of New York on-2. At 0:11, at the back break after the turn Lindsay initiates, she lands on-3. She then phases into a medial transposition of New York on-2—her 2 back, and very late on the beat (0:14). She remains in a medially transposed on-2 while Lindsay closes in for a spot turn\(^\text{11}\) at 0:17. He sets her into a turn to prepare her for independent dancing; upon finishing the turn, she places her 3 backward (0:26). Lindsay then caters to his audience (myself and another dancing friend) while Brona plays with and responds to his upper body motions (0:29-0:39). They both used the term “playing” to describe this portion of the excerpt. During this section she lands one of her forward breaking steps on beat 6 (0:36) but all of her back breaking steps on beat 3. She increases the tempo of her step at 0:40 and again lands her 6 forward at 0:41, but returns to his lead, breaking on beats 3 and 7 at 0:43. At 0:45 she turns to the right and lands her 5 back on her R foot (0:47) and comes forward into a side step (0:49), again emphasizing beats 3 and 7, but now with the 3 on her L side instead of her R side.\(^\text{12}\) At 0:52 she lands her forward break much closer to the 2, “correcting” her medial transposition, but places her back break closer to the 7. Lindsay recognizes her body’s request and closes the frame with his 6 forward, continuing to lead in the typical on-2 stepping pattern. Video 1.11 is Video 1.10 with the counts voiced over and Brona’s breaking beats accented.

\(^{11}\) A **spot turn** is a closed-frame partner turn in which the couple moves around an imaginary point in the middle of the frame. The centrifugal force of this turn is exciting and allows the partners eye contact, if desired.

\(^{12}\) She danced most of this excerpt RLR, LRL (beginning on beat 3) but after she landed her 5 back on her R foot, she waited until beat 3 to place her L foot out to the side, altering the weight distribution and onset of her movements in relation to the musical cycle. Any which way, her alterations in the dancing cycle did not throw Lindsay off from following her.
When Brona and I talked about these videos, she emphasized that his timing was really good (meaning consistent) and that she wasn't "going to try extra hard to make this look extra good." Importantly, she said: "I like this song and I feel like I'm dancing to the song."

As we watched the videos, she noticed that her count varied, though she initially saw this as a mistake: "I messed up. He's cute. He followed me! …We're still dancing to the beat, but we're not on-2 and 6 and whatever."

When I spoke with Lindsay about these dances, I mentioned how he didn't give her any hassle about straying from the New York-on-2 stepping cycle, unlike her other partners that night:

Because they have their steps and that's where it needs to be. If it's not there, then it's a mess. When I look at a lot of women having problems, it's just that the guys are not compromising…She's having fun because now I know exactly what's happening with her body…She's flowing…She can do whatever she wants.

What makes Lindsay a sensitive and skillful leader is his ability to shift and alter his stepping patterns before they manifest as weight changes—gliding into her lead, as it were—in the same manner that Karen adjusts to Danny in their dance. I have experienced Lindsay’s proprioceptive prowess firsthand, as he is one of my most enjoyable partners. From our earliest dances six years ago, he’s entertained my experimentation on him, as he once said to me: “What I like about dancing with you is that you’re always trying to figure out what makes me tick and I can see it in your eyes. When you start moving and switching steps [you’re thinking], ‘Let me see if he’s going to pick up on this.’” He always notices and modifies his dance immediately.

Lindsay is just one of many dancers who dance beyond the count, placing an emphasis on their partners. Like Karen, he believes that part of being a good dancer is making [your partner] look great. In our interview, Lindsay said, "…if you're going to be all flippity floppitying, I can
flippity floppity with you—and make you look good flippity floppitying." The power of conforming to your partner to make a better dance is not lost on Lindsay:

What is so amazing—it's a psychological thing also, when you take someone who is nervous and you tell them, okay, I got you, we're going to have fun. They start opening up. The whole thing is [that the] more relaxed you are the easier everything becomes. Things you thought you couldn't do, you're doing.

Lindsay is demonstrating a corporeal knowledge—a knowledge that makes him a sought-after dance partner. His body reads his partner’s movements and expressions as they are unfolding together in time with the music. Dances with such people are always wonderful and often inspiring, depending on whether the dancers enjoy the song. Mistakes cannot be made, because mistakes are a means of interpretation, not agreed-upon facts.

In the end, salsa is a social dance—one in which two people strive to have a good time dancing for several minutes to music they both appreciate. How a partner reacts to changes in a dance makes all the difference in the quality of the dance. Flexibility is more important for most dancers than the maintenance of a strict count. My research has shown me that, in most instances, the dancers who are the most sought-after and appreciated by both their partners and by onlookers are those who accommodate their partner with the utmost attention, making them happy and comfortable. From this foundation creativity flows. A creative partner who finds her or his flow through, as Csikszentmihalyi puts it, "complete absorption in the present moment" is a pleasure to dance with. Both leading and following are matters of corporeal awareness, of self, partner, and music. When your partner reinterprets “faux pas” into flow, the floor hums with energy. No matter which basic count you or your partner choose, or where or how you learned your steps, the decision to value the person over an ideal means that the one thing that both you and your partner can count is on a good time.
CHAPTER 2
Dynamic Attending and the Manipulation of Timespace

Dancers are bound to time structures dictated by the song to which they are dancing: the length of the song itself, the length of formal sections within the song, the length of measures whose beats indicate the tempo of the song. After salsa dancers find a partner with whom to dance, they must agree to a beat level, the referent for the basic step, and begin the dance. It is most common for the leader to begin the basic step, although the follower sometimes initiates the basic step and the leader follows her. Either way, the partners must agree on a single beat level on which to place their basic stepping pattern. Despite the complex rhythmic layering, salsa dancers and musicians often agree on the beat level which marks eight beats per measure (see Chapter 1). Maintaining a consistent beat can be a challenge for many dancers new to the dance floor or for those not accustomed to partnered dancing; as dancers become experienced they tend not to keep a highly regulated stepping pattern, valuing irregularity as a means of expressing their musicality. What is it that dancers are listening to that guides their decisions in the dancing process? How do experienced dancers become another rhythmic layer in the music?

This chapter addresses how dancers perceive and experience the dance/music as it is happening—in real time and space. The first half introduces the many layers of music that dancers must attend to while listening and dancing, and the process by which they attend to these layers—Mari Reiss Jones’s concept of dynamic attending. The second half introduces the concept of timespace to explain how dancers manipulate its physiological experience to create different feelings in a dance at the small-scale level of the measure (expanded in Chapter 4 as expressive/microtiming), the mid-scale level of formal sections (expanded in Chapter 3 as hypermetric expectation), and at a large-scale level of the song itself.
What Do Dancers Hear?

No single instrument marks the beat level for the dancer. This is one of the great challenges for the beginner salsa dancer. The pulse and beat levels occur simultaneously, with certain instruments marking their momentary affiliation to one or more levels before they drop down or rise up to the other levels again. In order for dancers to internalize all of these different rhythmic levels, these *feels*, beginners spend a great deal of time observing other dancers. Observation offers perspectives into how dancers embody musical knowledge. While beginners visualize their own feet making the motions of the basic step (the quarter-note feel), they may emulate other non-dancers who are nodding their heads or upper bodies (the half-note feel, or 1, 3, 5, 7). It is important to remember that this is a social dance, in a highly charged social setting. The music is loud, the smells are strong, people are touching and laughing, and, if everyone’s having a good time, the air seems to carry with it electricity. Either you are intrigued by the environment, or you are repulsed. If you are drawn in, you physically become part of the rhythm of the room once you begin to nod your head, even if you didn’t notice that you are now moving your upper body—you have become a layer.

Salsa is characterized by the interlocking rhythmic patterns performed by the instruments of the ensemble—bass, piano, assorted percussion instruments, lead singer, coro (chorus) singers (usually the other instrumentalists, especially the percussionists), and a horn section usually consisting of trombones and trumpets. If the band is a charanga band, the horn section is replaced by violins and a flute player. Although I have chosen to designate a measure of eight beats and a definite starting place, beat 1, musicians from various world areas—Cuba, regions of Africa, and even neighborhoods within New York City—have distinct ideas about where each instrument begins its rhythmic cycle and metric organization. Some dancers, as evidenced in Chapter 1, also
have different opinions as to where to indicate the beginning of cycles. No matter, adaptable musicians and/or dancers are those who can work within the boundaries that musicians and dancers set around them. I initially chose the constructs used in this dissertation as a compromise between the concepts of musicians and those of dancers with whom I interacted, hence the somewhat awkward time signature of 8/4. In this conception, there are eight beats to the measure—a quarter note indicating the beat level, and sixteen pulses to the measure—an eighth note indicating the pulse level of the measure. The eight-beat cycle is indicated by an amalgamation of the composite rhythms. Percussion, bass, and piano rhythms tend to vary less than brass or vocal rhythms.

Dancers hear the rhythmic patterns of salsa, particularly those of the percussion section, as cyclical events—repeating patterns—although not all dancers articulate their sense of these patterns. Figure 2.1 shows the common basic percussion patterns for both 2-3 son clave and 3-2 son clave for the verse section (A) of a salsa song.
Figure 2.1: Common percussion patterns of verse section. Open note-heads indicate open tones of a drum. Note-heads marked with an X indicate a slap on the skin of the drum.

The clave pattern is often played on a pair of sticks also called claves. If they are used in the verse section of a song (if they are used in the song at all), they will cut through the ensemble, even if amplification is used by the electric piano, bass, and vocals. As stated in Chapter 1, clave is considered to be an integral rhythm in salsa, though in salsa clásica clave is more often implied by other rhythms in the ensemble than it is heard outright in the verse portion of a song. Cásica (literally, shell) refers to the rhythmic pattern played on the side of the pair of tom-tom drums called the timbales. This crisp timbre carries over the entire ensemble, often in lieu of the clave. The eighth notes on the and of 4 and the and of 8 serve as projectiles that point the dancers toward beats 1 and 5, but it is that second quarter note that lands the dancer squarely (and very clearly) onto the two side of the clave. No other rhythm in salsa feels this way. The martillo (literally, hammer) pattern is played on the bongo, a pair of small hand drums each head tuned
differently. The timbre of the bongo is not always clearly heard over the ensemble but adds to the eighth-note foundational compound rhythm. The conga’s *tumbao* pattern also contributes to this stream of constant eighth notes. Most congueros play at least a pair of congas, each drum tuned to a different pitch. New York dance teachers draw attention to the slaps on beats 2 and 6 that correspond to the breaking steps of the on-2 dance styles. They also draw attention to the open tones, easily the most recognizable timbre of the instrument. Many teachers, however, do not teach conga patterns as clave specific, despite the tumbao’s lowest pitches falling, for the trained ear, on the three side of the clave. Instead, they teach the pattern as a “one-bar pattern” (four-beat pattern), likely because the slaps and open tones tend to remain in the same beat spaces no matter the length of the cyclical pattern the player chooses to perform. The maracas add buzz. This aesthetically pleasing sound fills the space between beats but does not distract from the pattern’s attacks of its rhythmic line. The timbre softens the edges of beats because the instrument’s attack is immediate, but the decay is somewhat gradual and gets lost in the volume of the ensemble, as well as the next attack. The güíro ripples, by its very construction. The ridges one hears as the stick scrapes its way drawn down the instrument for the long notes “rattle” through the dancer differently from the shake of a maraca. The timbre has teeth, timed and spaced; its upstroke is timbrally distinct from its downstroke and placed, also distinctively, on an upbeat.

The clave, timbale’s cáscara, and conga’s tumbao patterns take a total of eight beats to repeat, the length of time required for a basic stepping pattern. The bongo’s martillo and the

13. The conga pattern is sometimes referred to as the “tumbao, a term with several usages…the ostinato played by the tumbadora in rumba, and the patterns played by the bass which line up with the conga drum pattern” (Gerard 1989:65).
14. The concept of buzz that I attribute to the maracas is speculative, through my understanding of Shona musicians “decorating” their amplifying gourds with soda bottle caps which buzz, quite distinctively, when the musicians play their mbiras. This buzz could also be likened to the grit that one may prefer in the timbre of a voice.
marcaras and güiro patterns take up only four beats and are repeated twice for each clave cycle. Bongos and conga subdivide the beat with a stream of steady eighth-note pulses. These rhythms, and the changes in timbre of the martillo and tumbao, accent, or draw attention to, different beats or pulses within the eight-beat framework of the measure. When these rhythms delve into the pulse level they become rhythmically dense and active, propelling the music and dancer into the next beat. These rhythms provide clues to the direction of the clave, thus drawing the attentive listener simultaneously into additional levels of information. Brief solos, moments of improvisation that depart from the patterns seen in Figure 2.1, are rare in verse sections of the form, but can be heard during the ends of phrases, especially in the bongo.\textsuperscript{15} Bloques, rhythmic breaks that can take between four and eight beats, are sometimes added into the arrangement to create added excitement (see Chapter 5).

Vocal lines and percussion patterns change when the song moves into the montuno. Figure 2.2 shows the common basic percussion patterns for the montuno section (B) of a salsa song.

\textsuperscript{15} I am drawing upon Washburne’s salsa form and instrumental patterns in his sixth chapter of \textit{Sounding Salsa} (2008:168–76). Based on my bongo lessons with percussionist Jimmy Delgado, there are variations of timbre in the bongo line, but notating them would require more detail than necessary for this diagram and the argument of this chapter. Also, differences in technique create different timbral effects in the martillo pattern.
Figure 2.2: Common percussion patterns of montuno section. Open note-heads indicate open tones of a drum. Note-heads marked with an X indicate a slap on the skin of the drum.

One of the most prominent features of the montuno is that the main singer ends the verse section and the coro (chorus) of the song is heard alternating with improvisatory lines sung by the sonero/a (lead singer). The bongo player puts down his or her bongos and picks up a handheld cowbell called cencerro to play a pattern called the campana. The timbale player plays the mambo bell in a pattern referred to as the “mambo montuno ride pattern” when he is not playing the cáscara for the piano solos (Washburne 2008:171). This bell pattern locks into the campana pattern, creating a voluminous, ringing timbre that drives the band forward into the montuno. Washburne states that the two bells are used for the more energetic sections of the arrangement; What Washburne does not explicitly state, though, is that the two bells together generate the energy to which dancers viscerally respond.
Idiophones almost always catch the attention of listeners. Their asymmetric timeline patterns, such as those that the clave evokes, pull the dancer on an adventure a measure long. The campana’s lowest pitches, the most resonant, land on beats 1, 3, 5, and 7, while the higher, more tense, pitches fall on upbeats—creating an alternating feeling of high and low, lift and fall, an active and less active tension-and-release pattern. The dancers I spoke with often sang the campana line and bounced their bodies when we spoke of montuno sections of the feedback videos. Even though many of the songs that I recorded for the project did not increase in tempo during the montuno section, participants told me excitedly that “this is the part where the music speeds up,” or “I did that because the music sped up.” Although bands often increase the tempo slightly in the montuno section (what Washburne quotes percussionist Johnny Rodríguez as calling “agitating the ride [pattern]” 2008:171-2), this is not always the case. What dancers are likely trying to convey when they speak of a tempo increase in the montuno section is their physical response to the nearly ubiquitous increase of rhythmic density and volume that occurs here.

The term rhythmic density refers to the number of attacks performed between beat indicators—the quarter note level of Figures 2.1 and 2.2. The more notes that occur between beats (the more subdivisions of the beat into eighths and/or sixteenths), the more rhythmically dense the phrase or section of the song; fewer notes (dotted quarters, half notes), the less rhythmically dense. For the dancer, nothing would change; the basic stepping pattern would be executed at the same rate. What does change, however, is the number of events one now hears. More material occurs in the music in the same amount of time. Perhaps the horn lines have become intertwined, leaving the impression of no melodic resting point. Perhaps the sonero/a and the coro lines elide, pushing the lyrical energy forward.
Rhythmic density is contrasted with the term tempo, defined as the rate at which the beat is performed. If dancing to the quarter-note indicator, the basic step would physically become more challenging as the tempo increases. The eight-beat basic stepping pattern of salsa would remain the same, but would have to be executed more quickly. For example, Tito Puente's "Timbalero" has a faster tempo than Puente’s "Complicación."

Moments when rhythmic density increases occur in most montunos. Take, for example, two moments in Tito Puente’s, now classic, mambo “Timbalero.” These moments stand out for a dancer’s corporeal listening. At the beginning of the montuno, 0:59, the interlocking bells, cencerro and mambo, clearly pierce the ensemble on the original 1962 release on *Vaya Puente*. The introduction of a new timbre (and its associated rhythm) and a slight increase in tempo, after a well-executed bloque, excite the dancer (Figure 2.3). 

![Figure 2.3: Compound rhythm of cencerro and mambo bells at 0:59.](image)

At 1:24 the band performs another bloque, further exciting the dancers. The already exciting montuno becomes even more exciting with the bell patterns’ increase in rhythmic density at the end of the bloque, 1:26. Here the bells patterns change slightly, and interlock with a sort of insistence that has the propensity to drive a dancer crazy (see Figure 2.4).
The change in the rhythmic density of this cutting timbre generates a significant amount of the high energy that characterizes this portion of the song. Other factors that contribute to this high energy are accent pattern of the mambo bell, the two patterns’ points of contact, and the human element or microtiming, especially at such a fast tempo. Energy such as this encourages musical dancers to express themselves differently than they have earlier in the song; experienced dancers will likely separate from each other, as if driven apart by the forces of music, enabling the independent, complex footwork referred to as shines. If the partners stay in closed frame, the leader may tap into the thick rhythmic density by executing multiple turn patterns in succession.

Both rhythmic density and tempo affect dancers and listeners alike in visceral ways. Changes in heart rate and muscle tenseness occur, often with direct relationships to musical energy and forms (Langer 1953, Huron 2007, Becker 2009). Much in the way that an avid listener is compelled by the music to move their body (even if only slightly), a musical dancer is sensitive to how changes in tempo and rhythmic density contribute to the energy and motion of music. These factors are only two among multiple referents in the music, all occurring simultaneously. How is it that dancers attend to the musical lines such as those illustrated in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 and recognize or predict deviations from them in order to draw attention to and express their musicality while still acknowledging the referent of the basic stepping pattern?
Dynamic Attending

To say that dancers are only listening to percussion would be false, although many dancers did state its appeal when I asked what drew them to salsa. When I asked dancers how they found the beat, or how they begin their step, many pointed to the melody. Bass and piano lines sometimes also assist in finding beat 1, but overall, since the dancers I speak with offer so many different responses to my question, it seems they are drawn to salsa’s shifting foregrounds, debatable “strong” or “important” features, and a general inability to commit to one interpretation. Dancers listen to many different aspects of the song simultaneously and differently, depending on the person. What is important for the ways they attend to the music is that the rhythmic and harmonic cycles of a salsa song tend to repeat, making it easy for dancers with a musical sense to gain a working knowledge of cycles as the song continues.

Dancers do not listen to only one instrument at a time to make their musical decisions. Instructions by teachers to listen to the conga or to the cowbell serve as aural practice, but are not practical once the novice dancer gets onto the floor. Understandably overwhelmed dancers attempt to intake complex musical information while focusing, albeit meticulously, on maintaining their basic stepping pattern. Dancers gain confidence in their physical actions simultaneously with their understanding of the sound world through practice of their movements and listening to the music. Drawing on the feedback that my participants provided in our interviews, dancers evinced an understanding of the music referred to as dynamic attending, a process by which differences in rhythmic density are perceived simultaneously at different hierarchical levels. Mari Riess Jones, herself a trained ballet dancer, coined this phrase in the
field of cognitive psychology. Figure 2.5 illustrates a general model of a rhythmic sequence in Western music in duple meter developed by Drake, Jones, and Baruch.

Figure 2.5: A hierarchical metric structure associated with a rhythmic sequence (Drake, Jones, and Baruch 2000:253).

We can perceive the sequence as beginning on beat 1 and ending on beat 4 of a measure, with the beat level (our quarter note level) indicated as hierarchical level n. Hierarchical level n-1 is what I referred to in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 as the pulse level—the level performed by the conga’s tumbao and the bongo’s martillo patterns. Hierarchical level n-2 further increases rhythmic density with a sixteenth-note subdivision of the beat. Improvisational flourishes can be heard at this level, but usually are not constant, therefore creating pockets of energy when they occur and come to the attention of the dancer.

Moving above the beat level, at hierarchical level n+1 many listeners entrain by nodding their heads, what musicians call the cut-time feel of downbeat accents—1, 3, 5, 7. One can often see participants who are not dancing move to this stream of attending. This complex bodily motion consists of downbeats (when the head nods at its lowermost point) and of upbeats (the

upswing of the head at its uppermost point). One cannot get to the upbeat unless the entire
downbeat is enacted, so the motion is essentially the same as the danced beat level—a
connection of one beat to the one before and after it. The listener nods her head and rolls her
upper body so that her head motion could be perceived simply as a mark of either the downbeat
or the upbeat, although it is an indication of both/and. An on-2 dancer and teacher, Joel
Domínguez, refers to this level as the “corebeat”; arrangers sometimes notate charts in 2/2 in an
effort to encourage sight readers to feel the music landing strongly on beats 1, 3, 5, and 7. The
lower pitch of the campana strikes these timepoints during the montuno; other instruments’
rhythms accent these timepoints as well.

Hierarchical level n+2 is the side of the measure, approximately, in which the dancer
moves forward or back—the half measure. Musicians would likely tell me that this is the level of
the bar; Drake, Jones, and Baruch might agree, but recall (from Chapter 1) that salsa requires
eight beats to close the tension and release cycle of the clave.

Drake, Jones, and Baruch offer a diagram to illustrate how listeners attend to different
levels of information within the hierarchical structure (Figure 2.6).

![Image: Schematic representation of dynamic attending (Drake, Jones, and Baruch 2000:255).]

**Figure 2.6:** Schematic representation of dynamic attending (Drake, Jones, and Baruch 2000:255).

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17 Eliud Davis, personal communications.
The authors propose that listeners “focus on events occurring at an intermediate rate (the referent level) [beat level], and they then may shift attention to events occurring over longer or shorter time spans, that is at lower (faster) and higher (slower) hierarchical levels” (251). Listeners, they claim, become better at attending to multiple levels as they become older or with musical training—what ethnomusicologists refer to as informal or formal training, respectively. In my research and practical experience, a beginner dancer usually can attend only to the referent level, or struggles to find it and keep it amid the complex streams of information surrounding it. Advanced dancers have shown me that they are aware of most of these levels simultaneously. They are aware of larger formal structures in the music, often marked by what Drake, Jones, and Baruch refer to as future-oriented attending to hierarchical metric structures, while simultaneously performing surface-level analytic attending (the soloistic flourishes and fills common at the ends of phrases).

More important to the feel of dancing in the moment is that these levels occur simultaneously in the music. The tempo of the song remains, for the most part, the same. What Drake, Jones, and Baruch refer to as “lower” in the hierarchical structure is not “faster,” it is more rhythmically dense with respect to the beat level. What is perceived above the beat level is not “slower,” but less rhythmically dense than the beat. Drake, Jones, and Baruch refer to these levels as “faster” because the interonset intervals (the time between the attack points of successive events) of the sound events occur in close succession to one another, thereby seeming faster; and vice versa for their use of “slower”. Drake et al. claim that a person’s attention:

is guided by a single oscillator with a period termed the referent period…and is considered to be specific to each individual, and initially independent of the rate of sounds in the environment. In a sense it reflects a person’s general subjective tempo (254).
This attunement to a referent level and its subjective tempo perhaps works adequately in a laboratory setting, but on the social dance floor, the experience of dancers and spectators is not “independent of the rate of sounds [and visual stimuli] in the environment.” They see other dancers set the basic referent level—the quarter note basic stepping pattern. When a dancer’s interpretation of a melodic line increases the rhythmic density of his or her stepping pattern, the viewer corporeally understands that the referent level, the basic step, has not sped up or increased tempo. The subjective tempo that may occur in the laboratory may likely manifest in social rejection if a dancer can’t keep the beat clearly enough for a partner to follow him. The confusion between how these authors, and many dancers, use the terms faster and slower emerges from how we talk about perception, especially perceptions that are mediated through movement.

Timespace

Many dancers that I interviewed sang amalgamations of percussion lines, bringing to mind David Locke’s exposition on Nzewi’s “ensemble thematic cycle,” where the ensemble’s patterns are heard as “a well-blended whole whose melodies arise from the careful arrangement of interlocking phrases” (Locke 2011:51). It seems as if dancers feel the music much in the way Locke perceives meter:

…a matrix of beats of different duration and position within an isochronous time span that recycles repeatedly during performance. Beats flow at steady tempo, shaping musical time into equidurational units that are available to listeners and players…the position of individual beats and/or the durational values of a series of beats guide rhythmic creative choice (2011:52).
Locke’s metric matrix offers a perspective that keeps the music and dance in a “constant state of process” that is characteristic of African music and gives it an “aesthetic quality of everlasting energetic vitality” (2011:50), a quality that every one of my participants emphasized. Various levels of beat and rhythm occur simultaneously; Locke refers to one’s perception of the matrix as a “simultaneous multidimensionality” (2011:48). The extent of a dancer’s skill is directly tied to their perception of and physical expression of their interaction within these levels. This is the realm of what I describe as timespace.

Timespace is experienced as a synthesis of dancers’ cognition and embodiment of time streams with their proprioception, the physiological sense of the position of the body in space and the force and strength employed in its movement. The experience of timespace directly addresses the minutiae of events that occur between two dancers in the moment of the partner dance. It delves into the feel of the moments on the dance floor, many of which seem nearly magical to the people with whom I spoke.

Proprioception is a sense that many people take for granted in their daily lives but readily notice proprioception’s extremes, either when they lack it and are clumsy or have so much of it that they gracefully seem to float about.18 This sense allows us to feel where we are in space, how close we are to objects and people, and to gauge the energy needed to move ourselves through space. Neuroscientists have recently discovered that the gene associated with proprioception, PIEZO2, is also linked with our body’s sense of touch and its ability to perform coordinated movements (Price 2016). Our sense of self is connected to our sense of others. The timespace component of proprioception is perhaps easier to explain than time cognition and offers the means to discuss two aspects of movement within space—personal and partnered.

18 A compliment in a busy, professional kitchen is to move about as if one is a dancer.
A dancer must know where to place their next footfall, the next arm or hand placement, and the position of the torso and legs, both in response to the last movement and in anticipation of the next. Depending on various factors, such as how crowded a dance floor is or the skill of their partner, a leader and follower navigate their motions and the force by which they implement them. For example, if a leader wants to move his partner 180 degrees, he can lead her into a cross-body lead. That she’ll make it the full 180 degrees depends on the space, her skill level and/or her level of conformity to stylistic expectations. The amount of push to the follower’s back/shoulder area from the leader’s right arm can vary—too much and the leader forces the follower off balance, too little and the follower doesn’t respond to the cue. Each dancer must attune their proprioception to the movement habits of their partner. Some followers understand subtle changes in a leader’s shoulders and torso and can execute the motion based on a suggestion or subtlety of movement instead of pushing or pulling motions made by the leader. A follower that can pick up on subtle and/or gentle cues is considered smooth and is described by analogy as “pouring water into a glass” and “driving a [insert famous sports car brand here].” The smooth dancer understands what is being asked through their sense of proprioception and responds with the correct amount of rigidity—not too much and not too little. A leader explained to me the difficulty of being a follower:

You have the challenge of knowing when to be relaxed and limber enough to be led, at the same time, with salsa in particular, but maybe all dances, there is time for resistance. Without the proper resistance at the right time, certain moves cannot be led.

Followers do not need a leader to tell them how challenging their role is in a partner dance, but it is important for the leader to recognize that there is a personal flow of rigidity/non-rigidity as well as a partnered one. Different parts of the dancers’ bodies must tense to receive tactile messages from their partners and loosen up to execute said patterns; proprioception is an
immediate receive and react signal in the dancers’ bodies. Years of practice, trial and error, teach
a body to respond to the ebb and flow necessary to “make it look easy.”

At the other end of spectrum, leaders sometimes are required to force their followers to
move across the space in the time dictated by the tempo. Participants variously described
dancing with followers who require such interventions as “wrestling a bear,” “driving a truck,”
or “schlepping a bag of potatoes.” Such followers possessed either too much rigidity, which
stopped the motion of the request at the point of contact with her, or too little, which moves the
motion of the request beyond the point in time required to maneuver her through the movement
in sync with the music. A follower must know how to present her body to the leader, move it
through a motion with the appropriate amount of force, and have a general idea of where she will
end up at the completion of said motion. The leader also must know how to provide the proper
amount of contact to initiate a movement, *at the appropriate time in the measure*, so that the
follower can feel his cue and move accordingly. If he pushes too late or turns his wrist slightly
outward too soon, the moment is lost and the move must be abandoned to continue flow; a
different option will already be occurring. All this together, in a split second, is understood
through the proprioception of a skilled pair of dancers.

Even if a follower doesn’t always understand the exact request made by a leader’s
motions, her body will provide the necessary proprioceptive response to be led into unknown, or
unexpected, movements because her body senses the acceptable limits of the partnered motion.
One follower told me that in order to not anticipate her partner’s moves, she has to be “alert, but
quiet [pointing to her head], because I have to pay attention.” Most of the leaders I spoke with
stated that a follower’s ability to respond to her leader through the perfect amount of
resistance—how much touch to give and take, provided at *just the right time*, marked the
follower as skilled; these were the good dancers. Leaders were also praised for their ability to “go with the flow” or “not stop and start over, like a beginner.” Leaders were valued for their adaptability in the nuanced milliseconds of the dance, if a follower missed a cue, stepped on the wrong foot, or otherwise “messed up.” Many popular leaders with whom I spoke admitted to not planning out patterns and “just going with the flow, depending on what was happening in our dance.”

Dancers’ use their sense of proprioception to gauge movement with regards to the music, as well as their partner. One participant told me that he chose movements depending on how the singer was delivering a melodic line. In the case of the feedback analysis, I asked him why he had pulled his torso and head back at a particular moment in the song. He told me that this particular singer liked to hang back on the beat and that he felt good when he moved his body to connect to the pulling back of this main melodic line. He claims that he “doesn’t have to think about the music,” he simply “feels it.” A participant told me that she enjoys dancing salsa romántica (romantic salsa) with this leader precisely because he “gets into the songs.” Both leaders and followers had enough skills already practiced into their bodies to improvise and allow their proprioception to think for them—providing one of the foundations of a dancer’s corporeal knowledge.

The second component of a timespace experience is one’s cognition of time; this factor is not as easy to parse as proprioception’s role in how we sense ourselves, and our dance partners, in timespace. A dancer’s world is comprised of a flow of time moments connected by their knowledge and manipulation of them. The challenging task of articulating time cognition has been tackled by philosophers including Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead; and music theorists including Victor Zuckerkandl, Christopher Hasty, and Justin London; in works that
adopt a phenomenological and/or processual approach. They emphasize a lived experience of time, the body, and its senses. Dancers, also, emphasize their experiences as a feeling, or feelings, that arises from a complex of ever-shifting variables. How a dancer attends to such meaningful experiences can be gauged by one’s sense(s) of themselves and world around them.

Take, for instance, a few milliseconds of a partner dance. The follower’s foot has landed and she is now moving in a new direction. The dancer must be attentive to how her foot landed—where with relationship to her and her partner’s body (and others on the dance floor) and in which moment the foot landed with respect to the music—while she initiates a movement away from the weight change. The movement away from the landed foot depends immensely upon the direction of the toes and whether the correct foot (left or right) landed. The landing moment then connects to the motion away from the newly weighted/grounded foot through the dancer’s body. It is in this moment that the dancer prepares her options for the upcoming movement—what will the leader lead? How will she choose to react to the lead? Can she choose a movement other than what he expects? Is her weight on the proper foot to execute any of these options? A dancer considers options for future events based on the sensory input during infinitesimally small moments of time—a sort of past, present, and future. Which motion she chooses, I’d argue, depends on how she attends to (how she *feels*) her partner, the music, and herself in these few milliseconds. The more she can feel the relationship of her entire body with the moments that quickly pass, the more confidence she builds. Confidence facilitates experimentation and play with the music and her partner; in other words, confidence equals fun.

We can also turn these questions around to apply to the leader.

Both dancers’ high-arousal state of attention hones their focus directly “into” their dance; they are not impeded by every little movement because the body has learned how to immediately
process information from the senses to connect precise timepoints into a flow. Many participants spoke, or attempted to speak, about this important, yet elusive, quality of the dance/music experience. Paying attention to something is, indeed, an important component of a life well lived and an experienced well savored, but how does one parse out the moments that pull or push?

Philosophical arguments, such as those proposed by phenomenologist Eduard Husserl, of whether time constitutes consciousness or if consciousness constitutes time fall beyond the scope of this project. What matters to dancers is the experience of movement as a flow. A dancer does not dwell on individual moments, nor their connective tissues; the dancer feels the flow as an ever-shifting terrain upon which the overall experience is gauged. Process philosopher Henri Bergson’s concept of duration (dureé) pulls us into the priority of our experience of movement instead of the things that move (Lawlor and Moulard Leonard 2016). He perceives time as flow, “measured through the intermediary of motion” (Bergson-1956:50); “measuring time consists therefore in counting simultaneities” (57). “Every duration,” Bergson tells us, “is thick; real time has no instants” (52). Rhythm is movement, no musician or dancer would argue otherwise, and rhythm is complex. A song that compels a dancer to move does so because of many different musical features that occur simultaneously. Social interactions add another layer and serve to heighten the situation. The concurrent stimuli and their overwhelming effect on participants rendered many people at a loss for words during feedback interviews. Dancers, DJs, and musicians gestured at me, and toward themselves, as if searching for something. They told me, “You know, you just know.” The moments that move us the most are thick moments, because the instants blend together into a flow. A musically sensitive experience of timespace attempts to count the simultaneities that Bergson agrees exist in our perception(s) of experience.
Processual philosophy offers the perspective of lived experience, that it is through overlapping events one changes and therefore is. Through connecting events in a measure, in a group of measures, in a song, the dance can be understood. Bergson, and dancers, perceive time events connected in a synthesis; time events overlap in a dynamic becoming instead of a static being consisting of detached moments. Dancers don’t react passively to music and their partner. They are becoming, not being. Dancers are in constant flux, creating a future moment based on rapid input of information that is itself swiftly metamorphosing into the next beat.

Phenomenological and processual concepts invite the reader to experience reality as sensation, giving value to the things we feel. In the dances that we experience as the “best dances of the night” or the “one of the best dances I’ve ever had,” the partners focus intently on each other and the music, “losing” themselves in the moment, while being entirely present in every millisecond of the dance. Many participants told me that they “don’t think” when they dance, but the videos demonstrated that dancers think corporeally, with a knowledge honed through active listening and experimentation with timespace.

Active listening, a heightened and/or focused attention to the music, is necessary for understanding and manipulating timespace. Dancers who listen to the music only when they are social dancing exhibit less intimacy with the interactive layers of rhythms than those who increase their musical knowledge by listening to the music off the dance floor, or those that have danced for a long time. Dancers that don’t listen to the music often take longer to “put the music in their body,” or embody the music. This lack of embodiment is often indicated by a rigidity or stiffness—“marching to the music instead of dancing to it.” When watching such dancers one gets an overall sense that they are preoccupied with steps and/or movement patterns, not enjoying themselves, or are uncomfortable for some reason. If dancers have prior experience
with dynamic attending—the listening that takes place when one tries to dance to music of any kind—they are quicker to perceive simultaneity of rhythmic and metric levels found in salsa music.

One of the leaders who participated in the project, Frantz, has social danced to different genres of music other than salsa since childhood and discussed the embodiment of the count and the freedom that this knowledge grants to his overall dance experience:

Percussion eliminates the need to count. I know [where to put my feet]. I don’t need to count anymore. That initial stage, where [the music] is soft and you don’t hear any percussion at all is a little difficult. It’s not as easy to dance to a salsa song with soft to no percussion at all. It forces you to count more. I’m at the stage where I don’t want to count anymore. I just want to feel the song and enjoy the music and the dance, which is what I’ve always done. The counting thing came about when I started to learn salsa. Count?! Really?! I remember the first few salsa lessons: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7. I remember thinking, “Oh, I have to be aware of this count when I dance.” That was pretty foreign. That was a very strange concept for me because dancing prior to that was never about counting ever. It was about listening to the music, feeling the beat, and interpreting the music through movement, especially if there was a beat or some sort of—it didn’t even have to be percussion, per se. It’s something I do more so now than I did before. It’s not just the percussion that determines what I do, sometimes it’s something else. Some sort of sound or melody that I feel doing this particular movement for me interprets that sound.

Frantz articulates what many other dancers in the project hinted at: a sensitivity to the music that can be corporeally expressed and arrives through active listening to the music. Active listening to salsa requires attending to multiple levels of musical and physical information simultaneously—moving the dancer away from a simple parallel body movement of basic steps to a beat level. A dancer must first stop counting with numbers to achieve the skill of manipulating timespace.

Music theorist Christopher Hasty draws on process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s theories in his book Meter as Rhythm (1997) in which he treats meter as a processual concept, an unfolding of different levels of memory-based expectation. Building on Whitehead’s concepts of time and Bergson’s durée (duration), Hasty introduces his concept of
“metric or durational ‘projection’” in which listeners’ experiences take place as music occurs in time, offering options and expectations (1997.ix). Hasty perceives the experience of listening to music as a “creative realization of projective potential” (1997:174), an active listening (1997:84-5) akin to the engagement with which a dancer perceives music. This processual experience of music begins to articulate the knowledge that many dancers shared with me in their interviews. Hasty, and the dancers I interviewed, use the terms feel and felt to explain how time is experienced. Paying attention, or “getting into the dance,” requires simultaneous information processing from multiple sensory inputs, just as Hasty argues that “creatures…need to be highly attuned to last-minute information and flexible enough to make last-minute changes” (1997:94-5). The changes that dancers enact arise from active participation in the overall musical, physical, and social experience.

Justin London works with Mari Reiss Jones’s concept of dynamic attending, discussed above, in his book Hearing in Time (2004). Interestingly, he suggests that the different levels in a piece of music are, in actuality, “different meters” that give rise to different forms of entrainment (2004:19). Entrainment, according to London, is “a synchronization of some aspect of our biological activity with regularly recurring events in the environment,” connecting (outside of the body) music to (inside of the body) movement (2004:4-5). London acknowledges that whether a person perceives different meters simultaneously is arguable (204:50), but the dancers I interviewed seem to understand these “different meters,” or “hierarchical levels” according to Jones, in the way Locke refers to multiple meters co-existing within a matrix. The experience of different time streams provides complexity and depth to a musical genre or style, but usually does not provoke radically different interpretations of basic motions such as a culturally-agreed upon basic stepping pattern.
Entrainment is a physical and/or biological way to conceive of rhythm and meter in the body. Defined scientifically, entrainment is the interaction and consequent synchronization of two or more rhythmic processes or oscillators (Clayton, Sager, and Will 2005:2-3). Musically, one oscillator is a feature of the music, a particular beat level or rhythm; the second oscillator is the listener or dancer. Entrainment offers a means of active participation for the listener instead of a model where the listener is a passive recipient to musical information:

Instead of looking for musical cues transmitted from performer to listener as the sole determinants of time and metre precepts, music psychologists have begun to apply an entrainment model in which rhythmic processes endogenous to the listener entrain to cues in the musical sound (Large and Kolen 1994 quoted in Clayton, et al. 2005:2).

Entrainment theory has offered insight on how deeply listeners respond to music (Clayton, et. al. 2005:8):

The motor system is not only responsible for producing a rhythm, but is also involved in the perception of rhythm: this allows us to understand in part why we experience a visceral response to rhythm...Keil has referred to this phenomenon as ‘kinaesthetic listening,’ where music listeners experienced in performing music “[feel] the melodies in their muscles, [and imagine] what it might be like to play what they are hearing” (Keil 1995:10).

Extending these theories to dancers, one can easily perceive the process of entrainment to metric and rhythmic time levels as embodiment. The dancer feels different hierarchical levels and how rhythms interact with these levels. Even more, dancers would accent metric schema such as measures based on their corporeal knowledge of basic stepping patterns to which they have already been entrained. Hypermetric expectation, what I call structural feeling, forms from groupings of measures based on formal boundaries set by the arrangers. Experienced dancers become more than listeners who nod their heads to the music, passively loving it from the sidelines. Dancers add to the rhythmic levels just as musicians would in an ensemble; they actively draw attention to, and comment on, the music as it occurs in real time. Entrainment to
multiple levels must occur simultaneously for a dancer to separate one’s self from the basic step in order to dynamically attend to other levels and/or melodic lines. For timespace to be manipulated, the feel is not a single feel—it is a flow.

Magna Gopal, an experienced dancer with no musical training but an incredible sense of musicality, improvised a solo along with the tres guitar in a song that she had never heard before. Video 2.1 shows the social dance in the moments leading up to the tres solo in the prerecorded song. She is dancing with Jared (who was recovering from an arm injury at the time) at the La Vieja Guardia social in midtown Manhattan in February of 2016. Her movements demonstrate a sense of play, control, and an individual musicality, which I find striking compared to other dancers. At 0:25 the tres solo begins. The first opportunity her partner provides for her to fully drive her interpretation of the music—the open break at 0:31—she shifts her weight back into beat 6 (0:32). When she does move forward, as she is expected to by beat 2, her leg movements become the end of the tres phrase. At 0:41, she reconnects with the instrumentalist; this time with her right shoulder kinesthetically evoking a motion she had improvised with her left shoulder earlier in the dance, seen at 0:08 in this excerpt. Her bodily motions create visual rhythms that connect with musical ones, as well as manifest their own coherency throughout the dance.

Video 2.2 shows our feedback interview, also transcribed below (please watch the video, it holds the excitement of dance much more than the written word ever will be able to).
j: Again, you haven’t heard this song before?

Magna: No.

j: Look how you’re moving to the guitar.

Magna: I know. I can’t—

j: I mean—

Magna: I know. Something’s pulling me. [gestures to her torso midchest]

j: And you’re not a musician. [we watch her and the tres solo together] Your phrase is exactly the same.

Magna: [nods, slightly shrugs her shoulders, opens her palms on her lap] Yeah. Those are moments where I think I connect with the flow of the musician as a human being, not as a musician, as if they’re telling me a story. You know, there was a time…and there there was that time that I also did this. That’s what I feel like they’re doing, you know. [pauses, then gestures her hand open, palm toward her chest open again mid torso] If you notice, whatever I do in my feet tends to also get interpreted in [inhales slightly? and lifts her torso upward simultaneously with her shoulders while she tightens her hand into a ball/fist creating a gesture of great tension throughout her body and then she releases it] that movement. Which is how I would imagine them telling me the story. They’re like: Oh [she gestures more] and. Yeah.

j: not only the feet

Magna: If someone was communicating, their whole body gets into it. I tend to connect to the music in that way if I can find that flow.

Someone who was not attending to the music would have missed the moment, or connected with it after much of it had passed. Magna’s musical sensitivity is constant; she is not responding to something, she is actively engaging with the soloist as he creates the line of music, albeit a prerecorded line of music. There are phrases in Latin music that many musicians would agree are formulaic, or border the predictable (such as the melody from Don Azpiazu’s 1930 “El Manisero”), that contribute to predictive nature of this improvisatory musical genre. The phrase played by the tres improvises on the coro heard prior, but not in an exact manner. Magna
provides one example of many I recorded throughout my fieldwork of dancers connecting to the music during moments of improvisation because of their active attending to themselves, the music, and their partner.

The Feeling of Flow: Timespace Manipulation

Returning to the hierarchical levels of dynamic attending, dancers who are articulating the level of eighth notes, such as the conga part indicated in Figure 2.1, feel the pulse as faster than the beat, although technically the pulse level is more rhythmically dense than the beat level. Drake, Jones, and Baruch also refer to this hierarchical level as faster because the interonset intervals occur with more frequency with regards to the referent level, our beat level. To execute steps that land on every eighth note, as opposed to on every quarter note, requires more physical action. If a dancer begins with his feet marking the beat at the quarter-note level and then switches to marking the eighth-note level, the tool by which he indicated the beat now indicates the pulse. The dancer, as is the conga player, is subdividing the beat into two equal parts, but since the physical act of subdividing the beat requires the dancer and player to articulate their instrument with more frequency (interonset intervals), the movements occur faster in relation to one another. The timespace between the movements decreases in the same way that the timespace between beats decreases proportionately to a tempo increase. What is important, and not part of the vocabulary of dancers, is that when timespace is manipulated the dance feels different. The music doesn’t speed up, you do. When dancers connect to the music in ways such as the bell patterns in Tito Puente’s “Timbalero” (Figures 2.3 and 2.4), they recreate the physical actions required to articulate the bell patterns themselves. They are raising new energy on the
dance floor, even if they are dancing to an old recording. Both the recording (a fixed entity of the past) and the dancers (a malleable entity of the present) coalesce into something new and offer compelling new ways to experience and analyze the music (García:2013). My efforts to figure out feeling, a quality that most of my participants spoke of, drove me to analyze this elusive quality of the dance/music. I found it necessary to search out where the feeling resided in the music. One place I found it was the in-between moments of time, its connective tissues, its flow.

Music theorist and philosopher Victor Zuckerkandl gets into these in-between moments through his visualization of a wave form for our sensation of the measure. He conceives of the sensation in a two- or three-beat meter; he does not extend his measure to eight beats, but his concept of “away from” and “back to” beat 1 works well with how the dancer and musician perceive the measure of timespace in salsa (Figure 2.7).

![Wave form visualization of metric attending (based on Zuckerkandl 1956:168).](image)

**Figure 2.7**: Wave form visualization of metric attending (based on Zuckerkandl 1956:168).

Speaking in terms of entrainment, he states that “our sympathetic oscillation with the meter is a sympathetic oscillation with this wave” (1956:168). Measures are not simple units of beats that one mindlessly marks out because to express something musically, one must perceive the timespace unit as “…a whole made up, not of equal fractions of time, but of differently directed and mutually complementary cyclical phases” (1956:168), much in the way functional harmony
gives value to particular pitches within the framework of a scale in tonal music, salsa included.

Eight beats of time, no matter the tempo, is a sustained amount of timespace; the body moves forward, the body moves back. Even if the dancing style consists of a side-to-side motion, the body completes an entire cycle of a basic stepping pattern. As soon as we move away from our starting point, we are knowingly moving back to it. Zuckerkandl guides us away from a metrical marking of beats to dynamic attention to the timespace between them:

The wave line is a universal symbol for rhythmic processes in general. By shifting our attention from the discontinuity of the time marks to the continuity of the intervals between the marks, from the beats that separate the intervals to the intervals that connect the beats, we have turned from the metric to the rhythmic aspect of the phenomenon. A performance that is rhythmically alive will communicate the beat not as a series of disconnected time marks separated by empty intervals of equal durations, but rather as a continual process…a time wave (1959:116-7).

In triple time, Zuckerkandl perceives an interval of hesitation and suspense between the intervals within the wave; he claims that “other kinds of time reveal corresponding variations in the organization of the phases” (1956:168). If we extend Zuckerkandl’s wave concept to clave, our measure comes alive with dynamic tension and release, creating a driving energy that Chris Stover (2016) and I both perceive as central to the feeling of the music. The feel of the clave, and of any timeline pattern, arises from its asymmetry. A dancer, or any listener, cannot feel the clave without feeling the beat (and its related pulse), and vice versa. Zuckerkandl’s wave, the process of the in between moments of perception, implores us to perceive the footwork of salsa steps as a means of getting to the next place. There is no pause in any part of any style’s basic stepping pattern; some part of the body is always in motion. This is why I chose a diagram style other than Arthur Murray-style footstep diagrams for this dissertation.

Timespace requires the dancer to move in relation to the myriad time structures of the music and to his or her partner. The feeling of timespace begins as embodied listening when
dancers begin to know which beat they are on from which foot is weighted on the ground at a given point in the metric cycle without counting. When the dancer acquires this new ability and fully immerses him or herself into this newly acquired way of being, their body begins to think and feel for them. This corporeal knowledge of timespace opens up new realms of exploration based on the ability to simultaneously listen to the multiple levels of information in the music and feel how they connect or do not connect at any given point in time within the song.

The fluidity of movements/moments into one another indicates the physical skill of both the leader and the follower, but I believe that this physical skill is much more than the placement of a foot, a change of weight, and motion backward or forward. These moments reveal how timespace itself requires a corporeal knowledge of past, present, and future proprioceptive states in order to create total flow.

How Dancers Manipulate Timespace

Dancers can alter the feeling of timespace with respect to different levels of a song’s structure—the measure, groups of measures (hypermeasures), or the song as a whole. Just as rhythmic density variably fills the timespace between beats of a measure, timespace can also be filled variably in hypermetric units of formal sections of a song. This feeling of timespace often corresponds with dancers’ interpretation of the musical phrasing and symmetry of such events. Their ways of filling the mid-scale formal sections of a song allow dancers to establish hypermetric expectations through a structural feeling of timespace. Chapter 3 will delve into these hypermetric expectations through video analyses.

Dancers also variously fill the timespace of a measure to manipulate the feel of small-scale musical figures such as motives and call-and-responsive fragments. Music theorists and
Ethnomusicologists have variously referred to this manipulation of time as expressive timing, microtiming, and, notably ethnomusicologist Charles Keil’s “participatory discrepancies.”

Motions considered to be expressive nuances enacted by participants occur relatively quickly in the scheme of the dance—milliseconds—and are generally felt rather than seen by their partner. For example, the woman may feel the man’s shift of weight off-center or slide instead of land; the man may feel the woman pull back when he expected her to move forward. These nuances communicate expertise and playfulness, an intimacy with the dance/music medium. Experienced dancers who are observing others dance may notice these slight physical deviances from expectation, but all observers easily recognize the smiles and emotional interaction that these moments of play forge between the partners. Chapter 4 will address this aspect of timespace manipulation through video analyses.

Dancers fill large expanses of timespace differently depending on their dancing style. The difference in feeling between dance partners can be remarkable. I asked each participant what they look for in a dance partner and what their preferred dance partners did that was different from other dancers. Most leaders value responsiveness (sometimes stated as a “light” lead) and smoothness. Some leaders with whom I spoke valued dancers who are “rhythmic,” defined as “the way she moves her body to the music” or “not just know[ing] where your feet go, it’s how your whole body moves to it.”

Followers value leaders who pay attention to them, have a consistent basic stepping pattern—“stay on count” or “keep time,” and are adaptable to a follower’s missteps or expressive interpretations of the music. One follower stated, “I love dancing with a man who respects you while you’re dancing—respects the fact you’re doing shines, and lets you finish them.” Many followers watched for leaders who seemed to be having fun and didn’t take themselves, the
dance, or their partner too seriously. Followers generally didn’t want to feel as if they had to perform for their partners or were fodder for their leader’s display of virtuosity.

Both leaders and followers prefer to dance with people who have “personality,” particularly a happy one instead of a concentrated one, or dancers who are “fun.” They appreciate partners who make them feel as if they never make mistakes—again, shifting their perspective and priorities from correct execution of movements to playful connection with their partner.

The nature of a project that includes the term “musicality” did influence the thoughts of the participants. In response to my initial inquiry for participation, many participants thanked me for considering dancers a valuable part of the musical environment. During the feedback interviews, they all told me that they were sensitive to their partner’s attention to the music, although some seemed more “attuned” to their partners than others in the videos. Dancers told me that they valued a unique approach to musicality, “owning it,” or, as one follower worded it, “their sense of the music and how they move is similar to the way that I might want to move and interpret the music.” Many dancers were excited by videos in which they seemed to be “getting into it” and “enjoying [themselves].”

Some dancers described themselves or other dancers as “high energy.” Frantz, discussed above, is one of these dancers. When we were speaking about the intricacies of dancing, he told me, “I breathe and try to feel it. I try my best to feel the music.” I pressed him, asking him what it was.
Frantz: It’s difficult for me to explain this. I'm not sure I know what it is. I'm trying to digest it, internalize it, feel it [breaks down laughing]. It, meaning the music. I try to internalize the music.

j: What about the music are you trying to get in touch with?

Frantz: How—because I consider myself to be a passionate dancer, I’m trying to get the music to evoke an emotional response out of me. For example, when it’s up-tempo and fast, that energy (I do like high-energy songs, because I'm a high-energy person.) And I especially like dancing to an up-tempo, high-energy song with someone who also has a lot of energy to exchange with me. With a fast song, it’s about energy exchange [gestures between the two dancers in a partnership]. When I'm dancing, I want to feel that energy from her, and I want her to feel it from me. I can’t explain it. Maybe if I were an engineer or something, I could explain it better. It’s this mutual exchange of energy thing that happens.

Frantz’s dancing style fills up the timespace of a song with many turn patterns and partner movements that require the follower to attend to his requests almost constantly. He is a high-energy dancer. In order to connect with him, to make the dance most successful and fun, the follower is obliged to provide high energy in return.

I captured a dance between a follower, Erika, and Frantz for the project and was able to discuss the dance in feedback interviews with both participants. Frantz told me in his interview that he knew, and likes, the song—“Torero,” by the Colombian band Orquesta Guayacán. This song does not fall into the category of a typical New York salsa tune, but is frequently heard at this particular social run by a salsero who was born in Chile. Frantz enjoys dancing with Erika, whom he had recently met at this point:

I do love Erika’s energy and I feed off of that. Totally. And it was a great song. I love that song. That was an example of the perfect storm, for lack of a better word, but in a good way. Room to dance, song that I enjoy, and an excellent dancer that I connect with. Three elements were there and they made for a good dance.
Video 2.3 shows Erika and Frantz’s full dance. She kept him waiting at the beginning of the song as she took a sip of water. Then you see him lead her across the floor to his preferred dancing area on the other side of the room; she leads him back to the area of the camera. (She was a very attentive research partner.) He begins the dance at 0:31 and, after two basics and three cross body leads, he prepares her (0:42) for a dip with two-and-a-half turns, so that the lowest moment of the dip corresponds to the bloque/break in the song (0:46). Upon rising, she is vaulted into the maelstrom of his dance, which matches the high-energy of the call-and-response portion of the montuno (0:50). Each time one of her hands is released by him, she must immediately prepare it to be offered again. She wears a look of concentration, although smiles peek through at 0:57 and 1:29 at moments when they share eye contact. The time between 1:20-1:33 consists of an extended unit of complex movements that require her to be light on her feet and alert in her proprioception to follow with accuracy. She has not taken the classes that he has and doesn’t know the same moves, although she is a very capable and malleable follower. She is noticeably excited by his foot stamping at 1:35 and 1:37. The sonero changes the rhythmic delivery of his words at 0:32, leaving a sort of “space” for participation or response. At 1:38 she slightly shakes

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19 I left the video unedited so that readers of the dissertation could watch it multiple times to compare how other couples danced the song. Interestingly, in the beginning of the song, a man (on the left of the screen) asks a young woman in a white dress to dance in the Colombian-style salsa (altered to back break on beats 2 and 6), which he proceeds to show her. She seems a bit embarrassed and refuses to dance with him, rudely leaving him in the middle of the song. It is unclear whether she was unaware that this is the common style of dance for this (Colombian-style salsa) song, or simply was embarrassed to dance with him in particular. I’d venture the former because later in the song she is seen dancing the New York on-2 style with her friend, as if confirming the “correct” way to dance salsa. I admire the man’s breadth of knowledge that there are other styles of salsa dance possible, but more so for his bravery in trying it out at a New York “on-2” social. This recording occurred toward the end of this event, so many dancers had left, leaving a few stragglers of varying levels.
her head.\textsuperscript{20} He is always leading her to face away from him and back, away and back, turn and stop, turn and turn. He changes to bouncier motions when the music changes at 1:42, but doesn’t let up on the density of his motions (note the triple turn he leads at 1:47). She fits in brief hip styling, such as seen at 1:52, on beat 6, 7, and 8, but he doesn’t leave much other timespace for her to put her own interpretation into the dance. Her arms move in front of her, her arms move behind her. At 2:05, he initiates a spot turn with \textit{lapiz}\textsuperscript{21} movements in the legs that corresponds to the repetitive calls-and-responses on top of the dominant pedal point in this section of the form. She executes the first lapiz, but otherwise does not (because she didn’t go to the same studio as he did and isn’t familiar with this movement pattern). He seems to be biding his time until the next “dip moment” arrives. It does, after an abridged repetition of this section’s main melodic line, at 2:15. Now for the montuno’s instrumental solos. Her hands are at her hips; her hands are at her shoulders. Her wrists are parallel; her wrists are perpendicular. (The old timers call this pretzel dancing.) At 3:03, he sets up a hesitation, with great improvisational luck (he admits not remembering exactly where this moment in the song begun), that lands into the horn mambo. Now she can show herself off a bit. She steps a cross step\textsuperscript{22} forward and then pauses, as if in response to the horns’ questioning phrase. She executes two sets of cross steps and suzie

\textsuperscript{20} In all the videos that I’ve recorded for this project, moments of great connection to one’s partner and/or the music are marked by participants with a shake of their heads. The motion is usually directed to their partner as a means of communication and recognition of a meaningful moment, where something mattered, manifested: “I’m feeling this. Are you?”

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Lapiz}, literally pencil, is a motion borrowed from tango, but adapted for salsa. In this motion, a man leads a spot turn and the woman extends her right leg to the side, dragging it slightly behind her as she is spun around the spot for beats 5, 6, 7. The man also has the option of extending his left leg likewise on beats 1, 2, 3. Frantz told me that this motion was taught to him by Carlos König.

\textsuperscript{22} A \textbf{cross step} is any stepping motion where a dancer’s foot is placed directly in front of or directly behind the other foot and weight distribution is shifted onto the crossed foot. This motion requires the dancer to cross his or her legs as well, usually by lifting the foot up toward the knees.
Qs,\textsuperscript{23} but then adds her shoulders in and adds back breaks before squatting down, thrusting her left leg between his, coming up and ending in, as expected, a mambo jazz.\textsuperscript{24} Her face is beaming! They are hot! (Can you hear our little audience reacting?) Into it! (Look at how they landed that accent at 3:22!) Frantz’s accents land in sync with the music often; he continues complex and/or demanding patterns until he hears the musical cues that the end will be arriving soon (3:41). He always loves a dip—and ends the song, as he aims to, with one. At the end of the dance they are both smiling. It is near the end of the night and they both have been dancing with various people without pause for most of it. As they approach the camera (where Erika’s friend and I have been sitting and watching them dance), she says dramatically at 3:57, “Oh my god; he is exhausting!”

I began this portion of Erika’s interview by asking her how she liked his pauses, such as the one between 0:49 and 0:50. “I think that’s his timing thing. It’s a moment to breathe…I like the way he moves to the music.” Later she told me that, “He has a lot of energy and our dances are very energetic.” Frantz had commented on his exaggerated movements, his bounciness, and his exuberance because he enjoys the song, and its changes of texture, so much. He remembers having a fun dance with her and shows me by pointing out his smiling on the video. Both dancers had commented on their long arms, and the length of their movements can be seen in this

\textsuperscript{23} \textbf{Suzie Q:} For most on-2 dancers, the suzie Q is a cross step forward with the left leg on beat 2, followed by a simultaneous weight change and pivot on both balls feet on beat 3 (akin to the motion of the popular fifties dance “The Twist”), while starkly contra posturing the hips and shoulders against each other. Into beat 6, the right leg crosses forward and the twisting motion continues.

\textsuperscript{24} \textbf{Mambo Jazz:} A move where the follower accents her upper body, usually with a sharp head motion to her back on beat 6 and then returning to face front on beat 7, while simultaneously sharply accenting her back break and forward motion on respective beats. It is usually executed in one of two positions; either with the follower perpendicular to the leader, in the same manner as beats 6, 7 of a cross-body lead or at the end of a front hesitation (as a signal to the leader that the follower is done shining).
video. What is not so easily seen is the physical work that it takes both of their bodies to retake the timespace to keep up with the moderately fast tempo of the song. Frantz exploits the length and height of his body with movement choices that mark his style as long for salsa. They allow a partner to style motions that complement his length, such as the outstretched leg motions of the lapiz—something he readily notices and appreciates in a partner.

Video 2.4a shows Erika dancing with a different leader, Lindsay. Again, I was able to discuss the dance with both participants in their interviews. When I set this video up in Erika’s interview, she exclaimed, “Oooooo, Lindsay.” They didn’t know that I was filming this dance, offering a rare insight into two professionally trained (not in salsa) dancers just having fun together. Erika told me that she liked dancing with him and that this was one of the first few times that she had.

It was fun. It was experimental. We were experimenting and it was very sexy and I love that. And I don’t feel like Lindsay’s trying to hit on me or wanting to go to bed with me. So you can be free.

Lindsay and Erika begin their dance talking while side stepping on beats 1, 3, 5, and 7. The song consists of a montuno, with a simple sonero/call and one-word coro/response: “Juliana.” Erika initiates forward and back motion at 0:03, although he doesn’t respond until 0:07, as she gestures her left hand upward toward his shoulder; they are still talking to one another. He places his right hand on her waist, a very low hold for a salsa frame, and pulls her around in a loose spot turn, medially transposing her 2 back. She told me that she doesn’t count so this would not have registered to her as “incorrect.” At the end of the spot turn, on beat 1, he lets go of her right hand that he had been holding since the beginning of the song. Her body is thinking about the back break more than the hand—it’s a trick! You can see Erika’s hand bounce back up on beat 2 (0:10). Her right hand rises higher and higher until beat 5, when it is high
enough, and not doing anything else with itself, that Lindsay is forced to take it back into his lead, left, hand late into beat 8 (0:12), all while still conversing. The song continues its call-and-response. He tightens the frame up for another spot turn, but leaves her rotated 180 degrees, still in frame, to fill the timespace of beats 1, 2, 3, and 4. He doesn’t even move his feet back and forth, more side to side. By not moving into her space with his basic footwork, he gives her personal space to interpret the music (and the space) however she wants. He back breaks on beat 6 (0:16), as expected with their medially transposed basic, and then leads her into another cross-body lead. He again drops one of his arms away from her, this time his right, and she swings out, brilliantly smiling and shaking her head at something over which they had just shared a laugh, or perhaps the shake of recognizing their connection (see footnote 8). At 0:21, he requests that she take a turn, a single turn—no pressure. She spots her head, a mark of a trained dancer—completely unnecessary, but likely an unconscious gesture of familiarity as the two of them share a background in Alvin Ailey training and teachers. He vocalizes approval at 0:23, to her continued wide grin. After her turn, he slips his right arm under her left and leads her into another loose spot turn with both hands under her arms (0:23). This untraditional hold leaves her right arm floating in the air gracefully; she rests her left in a traditional frame on his shoulder. By 0:26, she is moving her hips more than she was at the beginning of the dance. More laughing at 0:31. More of the same one-arm leads and open-ended partner moves that don’t seem to have a teleological drive such as downbeat or pose. At 0:57, the coro returns to the longer one heard at the very beginning of the song and Lindsay opens the turn patterns. She moves forward into his over-the-head arm curl at 1:02, but since he doesn’t move out of her way, she rolls her body in response (the trombone mambos/moñas begin here). Despite their closeness, no movements he initiates trap her. The song changes into the trumpet mambos/moñas at 1:28; they are conversing
again (you can hear him say “Thank you. Thank you” at 1:30). At 1:39 he drops his hold on the frame. They maintain close proximity, but are not in a closed frame. They dance separately and play with each other, exploring and copying movements. Lindsay’s sensitivity to his partner is such that he is well aware when Erika is done with this section of the dance, and he closes the frame before she becomes uncomfortable or self conscious, at 2:07. It seems as if marking the formal boundaries of the song with movement is less important than experimentation and exploration. At 3:08, Lindsay leads her out of the side-by-side motion to correspond with the change in the montuno to the trumpet mambo. They continue their dance with Erika leading more than she realizes. At 3:30, when the vocal line(s) return, he initiates more turn patterns. At 3:38, He pulls his upper body back in correspondence with the expressive timing of the vocalist; she responds with a slight backward motion of her own neck and head. At 4:01, Lindsay cues her into a spot turn, corresponding with the return of the main melody of the tune. At 4:06, Erika experiments with the lapiz leg movement that Frantz had a preference for when we filmed his dances with Erika a month earlier. The song ends shortly after that and I come back from my own dancing to tell them that the camera had been on (4:25). They were overjoyed to be caught in the act. Listen to Lindsay’s reaction of an emphatic “Yes!” at 4:30, followed by a howling (by the both of them) at 4:32. Lindsay (who love the camera on him) says, “I didn’t even know!” at 4:38—note his near-immediate connection with the electronic gaze at 4:44. Video 2.4b is a version of Video 2.4a, but edited for better sound.

Lindsay enjoys following the follower (more in Chapter 1) and giving her space to open up and explore the music and herself. Lindsay loves to play with the music and his partner. His sense of proprioception is so extraordinary that it seems to expand into his partner’s body. Erika said of Lindsay, “He’s reacting to me as much as I'm reacting to him…”  The milliseconds in
which he reacts are barely perceptible to the eye. My video analyses indeed show Lindsay reacting to his partners’ movements before his partners register them as fresh memory (retention): “I'm playing with the movement of her body.”

Erika and I discussed the difference between leader Frantz, who "knows the moves they teach you in class" and has "fancy footwork," and leader Lindsay, who prefers "feeling it" when he dances:

j: [After watching a portion of the video of Erika dancing with Lindsay] So you think you're actually feeling it. [Erika nods her head] What is it? Or what are the many things that make up it?

Erika: The it is the music. The it is him. The it is the soul trying to get down and dig in deep to the soul of something [gesturing a pushing motion with both hands face-open palms downward from her navel area]. You may not quite hit it, but you're digging in [still gesturing with accents to her movement on "hit it"].

j: How do you get in there?

Erika: Personally, I think slowing it down a little bit and letting yourself find it. What he does is open up and [he] leaves some room for me to do whatever it is I feel [she rolls her shoulders in succession and closes her eyes a little—her hands are grasping toward herself, but not touching] and then he goes with that.

j: So is slowing it down, not putting a lot of turn patterns in?

Erika: [nodding affirmatively] Yes.

j: Because the tempo is approximately the same as the song with Frantz. Approximately, it's really not that different. There are some fast songs and there are some slow songs, but most of them are just right there in the middle. This is not much different. But what you're saying, in music we call it rhythmic density. [I explain the differences between tempo and rhythmic density and her eyes light up.]

Erika: Ah, yes!

I asked Erika how dancing with Lindsay differs from dancing with Frantz, because she obviously enjoys dancing with both of them (as do I). She was quiet for a moment.
Erika: Frantz is definitely faster. I'm always tired when I'm done with Frantz. I'm always out of breath. We are moving so fast for me. Lots of turns and twirls. I enjoy the turning and the twirling. I hope to get better at it.

j: He'll only put more in the better you get at it. Maybe you should rethink that plan.

Erika: Frantz feels like this high energy, it's the stuff you learn in class that you didn't know you could do, but somebody is good at leading it so you feel, oh I can do that, I didn't know that I could do that. Because some of that stuff I haven't learned in class. I'm learning on the dance floor as I go. That has to do with the lead. If he's good, I'll look like I've done it before, but I really haven't. Frantz makes me feel like I can do it, but generally, the pace is fast. He likes to dance fast.

j: I still don't think it's fast. [I am referring to both the tempo and the pace of the movements when I say this, but purposely being ambiguous so that she will elaborate.]

Erika: It's the density. It's the way we move to the music. We move more inside of that rhythm [timespace of the basic count]. It sounds so corny, but I feel like Frantz gives me good energy. It feels very pure; it feels very good. It doesn't feel sexual. It feels like we both love dancing and we're both bringing that love together. We're both having a really good time. I never have a bad dance with him. I'm always enjoying it. There's a joy in dancing and I feel that both of us are really enjoying ourselves. That's what I enjoy about Frantz. It's different than Lindsay. With Lindsay I totally enjoyed that dance! That dance for me was a lot of fun. It was little off the beaten path. We weren't trying to do as much in the given time frame. But it felt like we were trying to feel it, and connect with something [she gestures a scooping motion with both hands]—and find it. I feel that in order to do that you have to slow down.

j: What is it? What is something?

Erika: Find it. To find your connection with the music, your connection with your partner, and your own soulfulness in the dance [again gestures around her torso]. I feel if the dance is going too fast it becomes all about the technique, and not enough about the soul of the dance. With Lindsay, we were collectively, in agreement, we're going find the soul of this movement. We're going to work that [isolating her torso], and do all this stuff, and we're going to play, and we're going to have fun.

j: So you can find the soul through movement. [Erika: Nodding] The more you experiment with different movements, the more you put it inside the body and move it back out.

Erika: Yes.

j: The more it surfaces, perhaps.
Erika: And he gave me the space that we weren't trying to do so many steps in one beat, or whatever, in one bar.

j: Like squeezing it in, stuffing it in. The more you stuff in,


j: Perhaps. Maybe.

I can tell at this point in our interview that I am drawing her to conclusions that could go awry quickly. I don’t want her to think that a dancer who has more formal training in salsa is less capable of acquiring soul in their dance than one who learns on the street; Frantz isn’t less capable of soul in his dance than Lindsay. I also did not want her to assign less value to the skills required to execute improvisatory movements than to execute stock movements; Lindsay is not technically less adept at salsa than Frantz. Their styles of salsa are different. The soul that their salsa will bring to the dance will feel different.

j: Both are chock full of technique. You come out of a turn and do a little thing and there [Lindsay] is doing the opposite thing. That's a lot of technique. Not only can he see it, which is its own technique, the recognition of what he sees, he can automatically, without even hesitating, start and do the very same thing you did and then add a little something of his own onto it. That's a lot of technique.

Erika: You're right.

j: There's something to be said about the training [I mean the specialized dance training that both Erika and Lindsay experienced since they were young], but also maybe something about you two as individuals and dancing together. A+B you don't get AB, you get C. You get something very different. Then you have the music underneath, or with, all of that. Because you guys are dancing to the music, listening to the music, having fun, yes?

Erika: We're having a great time. That's probably one of the best dances I've ever seen myself on video. Unplanned, unscripted. The choreographed stuff doesn't even look that good.
Many dancers that I interviewed thought that the improvisatory dances that I recorded for their interviews demonstrated a higher quality of dancing than the dancing shown in past recordings of choreographed routines that they had seen of themselves. The attention required in improvisatory dancing seems to bring a different energy to each event. Erika explained to me that she moves differently when dancing with Frantz than when dancing with Lindsay. Each partner brings out different ways of feeling in us when we dance depending on how we fill up the timespace of the music with each other. What slows down for Erika in her dance with Lindsay is not the tempo of the music, but the rhythmic density of the timespace. She told me that there is “more room to explore.” When she verbalized explore, she simultaneously moved her right hand in a gorgeous, palm-down downward gesture from chest to pelvis region, implying that she was exploring something within herself. Erika and Lindsay were exploring the music by means of their bodies, feeling it together.

It, the elusive quality that so many dancers search for in themselves, the music, and the moment of the partner dance, materializes when Erika is able to take the time(space) to feel the music however she wants to. Lindsay’s dance style encourages his partners to listen to the music and interpret it for themselves. He’ll go along for the ride. What the video analyses demonstrate is that Frantz fills the dance with motion and turn pattern after turn pattern, most requiring a two-handed lead and high-energy attention, whereas Lindsay often follows his partner's motions, allowing her to lead the dance. Frantz controls the interpretation of the music—his feel of the music. While Erika, and other partners, greatly enjoy his interpretations, the style is a busy style—timespace is filled to brim with action and rhythmic density. Dances with Frantz leave his partners happily breathless at the end of the dance. His feel is a unique and exciting feel that keeps women lined up for him throughout the night. On the other side of the spectrum is
Lindsay, who often opens the frame with one-handed leads allowing his partner to move more freely than she would in a two-handed lead. The follower acquires a leading role in the dance, interpreting the music for herself. Lindsay’s style encourages more freedom than Frantz’s—timespace is controlled by the follower, waiting for her to take the lead. Lindsay will provide an outline, he says, “I'm going to follow you.” Lindsay will follow you as you experience what Erika described as the *it* in the music and in him.

*It* is inside Erika’s body. *It* is also inside your body and mine. The words and the physical gestures that Erika used while watching the videos in our interview attest to the importance of a multisensorial experience of dance. She *feels* the difference between these two dancers because there *is* a physical difference in how each of them fills the timespace of the music. How each dancer presents their soul through their style of dance will feel different because of how they move through timespace. *It is something.* How and when we fill space with our bodies makes us *feel*—it is how we know the world around us. Dance is the matter to the energy of music; the music, myself, and my partner materialize *it* together when we make the connection.
CHAPTER THREE
Hypermetric Expectations and Structural Feeling

Rhythmic and metrical units, such as musical phrases and sections of verse or chorus, are expanded beyond the eight-beat measure to construct frameworks based on conventions common to salsa genres. Dancers use these frameworks to predict important boundaries in the music and mark them with accented movements or completions of complicated turn patterns. In music theory, this concept, where units of one level nest into “higher-level” units (above the measure), has been termed “architectonic levels” and, more recently, hypermeter. Hypermeter invites the listener and dancer to expand beyond the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, that a beginner focuses on when learning the basic steps and turn patterns.

Hypermeter in salsa is defined here as a grouping of eight-beat measures to form a higher-level unit where measures acquire functions similar to those of specific beats within a measure. The first measure in a hypermetric unit initiates tension, the middle—or intervening—measures become the place where notes and movements connect to one another, and the last measure resolves the tensions of the middle. Edward Cone offered a metaphor for musical motion of a thrown ball:

If I throw a ball and you catch it, the completed action must consist of three parts: the throw, the transit and the catch. There are, so to speak, two fixed points: the initiation of the energy and the goal toward which it is directed; the time and distance between them are spanned by the moving ball. In the same way, the typical musical phrase consists of an initial downbeat, a period of motion, and a point of arrival marked by a cadential downbeat (1968:26-7).

26 Edward Cone (1968).
The most common hypermetric groupings in salsa are the two-measure unit (Figure 3.1a) and the four-measure unit (Figure 3.1b).

**Figure 3.1a:** A grouping of two measures perceived as one hypermetric unit.

**Figure 3.1b:** A grouping of four measures perceived as one hypermetric unit.

These hypermetric units can be extended, for example by repetition of two-measure units, which is common in vocal choruses (Figure 3.1c). The repetition of hypermetric units, both two-measure and four-measure groupings, is a common building block of salsa song form as will be demonstrated below.

**Figure 3.1c:** A pair of two-measure hypermetric units filling the timespace of four measures of music.
Sometimes a four-measure grouping can be contracted into a three-measure unit, as may occur with breaks in the arrangement or other grouping variances such as verses.

In many western musics, rhythmic and melodic/harmonic tensions are often resolved on the downbeat (beat 1) following a hypermetric unit, the point of arrival for Cone. Downbeat harmonic resolution in salsa is anticipated by the bass pattern on beat 8 of the preceding measure (see Figure 1.3), but fully resolves (when the remainder of the melodic instruments enter) on the downbeat. Other clues, such as the main melodic line, direct the listener to the downbeat. The characteristic layering of salsa’s rhythmic patterns (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2), many of which accent beats other than the downbeat, encourages dancers to connect with different instrumental and/or vocal lines as they improvise their movements. Dancers are able to draw attention to the music’s polyrhythmic complexity while maintaining the feel of hypermetric units that usually correspond to the conventions of phrasing found in the genre.

Felix Salzer (1952) offered a Schenkerian approach of active listening to tonal relationships over expanses of music, but, as any listener knows, tonal relationships are never far removed from metric ones. I expand on Salzer’s concept of structural hearing as knowledge of large-scale form to help explain how dancers utilize structural feeling—the knowledge of large-scale form as sensed from relative durations of timespace.

Perhaps obviously, the concepts of structural hearing and structural feeling are related in that hearing and feeling input into the same body. Dancers’ demonstrate their knowledge of large-scale musical form through the structural feeling of hypermetric units, sometimes inferred or confirmed by other musical features such as harmonic rhythm, cadential patterns, and timbral or textural clues.
Christopher Hasty (1997:174) discusses hypermeter under the heading “‘large-scale’ meter as container.” He explains that “…hypermeter, rather than being itself meter, is a feeling of metrical correspondence in the relevancy of a past ‘model’ for the formation of a novel phrase or period [of time]” (181). He points to the “feeling of regularity or at least ‘rightness’ in the duration of larger groupings” (182), something many participants brought up during our interviews. We experience music as information given to us over the course of time and create expectations based on past experiences. Hasty perceives Edward Cone’s concept of the musical energy inherent in hypermetric constructions as one that welds the three components of initial downbeat, period of motion, and point of arrival (the next downbeat) together “into a continuous whole” (50). Feedback videos showed dancers planning multiple-measure turn patterns that demonstrated the kind of musical energy Cone perceives in hypermeter; musical dancers often projected their movements over a longer expanse of time than a measure. Hasty remarks on Cone’s attention to the energy in the musical structure.

The energy of the initial impulse extends through the entire duration … musicians have found this image compelling, I think, because, from it Cone has developed a cogent treatment of rhythm as something distinct from the regularity of meter—an understanding of rhythm that exceeds measurement and homogeneous repetition and that corresponds to our intuition of rhythm as a fluid gesture” (50).

Hypermeter is a trajectory of musical energy beyond a simple counting of beats and measures. Skillful salsa dancers exhibit a knowledge of this energy when they create arcs of tension and release that aim for a song’s formal boundaries. Their structural feeling of timespace is based, in part, on their hypermetric expectations. These expectations are demonstrated through their choices of movements and gestures—the more skilled the dancer, the more fluid the movement and manipulation of musical energy over and through structural sections of the song.
Typical Salsa Form

A typical *salsa clásica* (classic salsa) or *salsa dura* (hard salsa) song is laid out in two main sections: the first pre-determined, or composed out (A); the second open-ended, improvisatory (B). The first section (A) consists of an introduction/head, usually one or two four-measure units; and verses, the number of units varies depending on the song. The second section (B) consists of the *montuno* where vocalists exchange a call-and-response in which the lead vocalist, the *sonero/a*, improvises while the remainder of the band responds with a predetermined chorus, the *coro*. The montuno is broken up by precomposed sections of horn arrangements called *mambos*, solos by instrumentalists, and, especially when performing live, improvised sections of horn arrangements called *moñas*. The mambos, solos, and moñas are generally grouped into two- or four-measure units. The introduction/head, usually the beginning of the precomposed section (A), is repeated in some variation at the end of the song. Figure 3.2 illustrates an outline of a typical New York salsa clásica/dura song.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>large-scale form</th>
<th>song</th>
<th>small-scale form</th>
<th>hypermetric groupings</th>
<th>descriptions of sonic material</th>
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<td>A1</td>
<td>03:36</td>
<td>a1</td>
<td>1/2, 5</td>
<td>variation of head (phases to accent beats 8, 1)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.2:** Outline of "Salsa y Control" performed by The Lebron Brothers on their 1970 album *Salsa y Control*.

Column 1 indicates the largest formal structure.

Column 2 indicates time points on the audio recording.

Column 3 indicates the smaller sections of the form that make up each of the larger sections.

Column 4 indicates the measures in each part of the form indicated in Column 3--each straight line indicates one measure (eight beats) of music; groups of lines separated by space designate the lengths of hypermetric units; 1/2 indicates four beats; and whole numbers indicate on which beat a section ends if it does not end with a full measure.

Column 5 provides a verbal description of the sonic material.
“Salsa y Control” consists mostly of two- or four-measure units. At 0:08, 0:23, and 0:38 (b) the sonero sets up the expectation of hypermetric regularity from which he deviates at 0:54 (b1). At the beginning (a), the middle (f), and end (a1), groupings of three measures upset the feeling of even regularity, marking important parts of the form. Repetitions of melodic and harmonic material occur often. Sections c (0:13) and d (0:28) each contain a pair of identical two-measure units. In the montuno (B), two-measure units of mambos/moñas are paired with instrumental solos or vamps (h).

Variations in salsa clásica/dura often occur by diminishing the length of, displacing, or outright omitting the verse section. These mostly-montuno songs begin with an instrumental introduction and move quickly or directly into the montuno. Dance bands of the mambo era tapped into what many dance bands, or later DJs, tapped into: dancers want the section where they can let loose and improvise. This style of arrangement creates immediate excitement on the dance floor, much as hip hop innovator DJ Kool Herc noticed that dance floors filled up with additional energy when funk songs came to “the break.” In salsa, this part of the form is called the montuno; in funk, James Brown called it “the bridge”; in the creation of hip-hop, it was called “the break.” These mostly-montuno songs utilize listeners’ expectations of excitement.

In every genre there are songs that convey messages or stories of social distress (common in New York salsa of the 1970s) and songs with light-hearted, if any, lyrical content (as in the case of many salsa romántica [romantic salsa] songs). Both could be danced to, but their intentions are different. In some instances, verse(s) conveying messages became abbreviated or outright omitted in order to heighten the improvisatory section of the song, thus making it more popular to an increasingly diverse crowd, many of whom did not speak Spanish. Some participants in my research even referred to the verse section of the song as the introduction,
revealing their impatience to get to “[the part] where you can get down” or “the exciting part.”

No matter the musical training of the participant, most marked the montuno as the part of the song “where you let loose.” One one-timer told me, “I wish they’d just play montunos and leave out all the rest.” Representative songs of this mostly-montuno style are Tito Puente’s 1958 “Mambo Gozón,” whose sung portion consists only of a montuno, and Spanish Harlem Orchestra’s 2007 “Sácala Bailar,” where the four-measure introductory verse quickly gives way to the montuno. Figure 3.3 illustrates the outline of another mostly-montuno salsa.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>large-scale form</th>
<th>song</th>
<th>small-scale form</th>
<th>hypermetric groupings</th>
<th>descriptions of sonic material</th>
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<td>06:48</td>
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<td>07:15</td>
<td>h</td>
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<td></td>
<td>09:09</td>
<td>b1</td>
<td>full band accents 1, 2, 3</td>
<td>end of song</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.3:** Outline of "Cógele el Gusto," title track of Wayne Gorbea's Salsa Picante, released in 1998.
“Cógele el Gusto” represents a common formula for live salsa bands in New York City, although many bands include extended exchanges between the coro and the sonero/a. A nine-minute song for a salsa social, however, lasts longer than most New York on-2 dancers prefer to dance to one song. Studio-recorded songs in this mostly-montuno style are abbreviated versions of this form. “Cógele el Gusto” begins with a one-measure instrumental ostinato, or vamp. This vamp groups neatly into a four-measure unit by the boundary indicator of the band’s entrance (a1). The four-measure units are confirmed at the entrance of first coro (b). The first coro and later mambos are two-measure phrases repeated to flesh out four or eight measures of the song. I have chosen to simplify the phrase groupings of the piano solo into four-measure phrases, although nuances of phrasing beyond normative groupings often demonstrate the musicality of the soloist. There are two other exceptions to normal multiples of four-measure groupings throughout the song: the end of the bongo solo beginning at 5:09 and the jazz-influenced “trading twos” toward the end of the song at 8:02. The former is likely human variance during the live recording session; the latter “trading twos” (i 4-8) add up with the two-measure grouping of i9 to create a balance of timespace equivalent to three units of four measures each, the same timespace allotted for the trombone solo (e2, 6:01), the conga solo (e3, 6:48), and the solos from i1 to i3 (7:34).

Salsa romántica, not directly a New York-style salsa, expands the composed section of the song (the A of Figure 3.1) in a manner more akin to alternating verse-and-chorus song forms common in rock or pop genres. The montuno section is contracted to a brief portion of the song near the very end; it, too, is often composed out instead of improvised—although live performances would require different strategies.
While there is a general understanding of musical form among experienced dancers, many songs played in New York City are either not typical New York salsa songs or they do not follow the forms stated above. As the audience for salsa has widened, so has the repertoire. For example, Colombian salsa has recently been played with more frequency in many clubs, to the dismay of some of the old timers. No matter the form, experienced dancers can predict structural changes based on their structural feeling.

Expectation and Play

Musicologist David Huron writes about how listeners form expectations of music even as unfamiliar songs unfold: “One of the most important discoveries in auditory learning has been that listeners are sensitive to the probabilities of different sound events and patterns, and that these probabilities are used to form expectations about the future” (2007:60). These expectations are part of the dynamic attending processes of which dancers are aware. Musical dancers simultaneously listen, predict, and draw attention to musical features through particular movements of their bodies, thus taking advantage of the corporeal knowledge that is structural feeling. These senses of the music add to the ability of dancers to manipulate the feeling of timespace within sections of the song. Structural feeling is part of what some people refer to as “unconscious” thinking or the nearly ubiquitous “feel” of which participants spoke. This structural feeling heightens the experience of social dancing and encourages dancers to test their abilities of prediction.

Magna Gopal, a professional dancer with no background in dance or music training, exhibits acute structural feeling and heightened musicality. In our interview, she clearly articulated how she understands musical structure and plays with songs she doesn’t know:
Not all music inspires a connection, just like not all people do. I treat it in the exact same fashion. There are some songs that really call out to me and some songs that I’ll do my basic to, I’ll stay on time. I approach the songs that inspire me with that memory game, you know, where you flip over a card and it’s apple and it’s elephant, and then an orange or an apple. And you’re like, Oh! Where’d I see an apple before? What came after apple? What did I see? Oh, it was an elephant. I pay attention to the music in that fashion. I try to pay attention to the structure, the patterns, and see if I can predict where it’s going and then I play with it in that way.

Magna has an immense curiosity that challenges her to figure how things work and teaches musicality “from a dancer’s perspective. I'm not a musician.” Her method, though, exhibits deep musical understanding.

I group [the music into] sentences and paragraphs. A sentence is two bars of music, which equates into one basic step, eight beats. Eight beats make one sentence. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. I group that into one paragraph of four sentences and, generally speaking, after one paragraph things either change or repeat. Sometimes they end up being grouped together depending on the style of the song. Latin jazz, I always find their introductions and their conclusions have paragraphs repeating, then a change in the paragraph, then that paragraph repeats, and then that changes, and then that repeats. But in songs that have verses and choruses and stuff like that, I find that they have paragraph A, B, C, D, E, and then you get A again. So if you can pay attention for A, B, C, D, E, then you have a good chunk of the song that you can play with. I teach like that.

When she took a private music lesson with a musician friend of hers, he explained that she was thinking similarly to how musicians think, but that musicians don’t have a 5, 6, 7, 8. In practice they do, if they claim that the clave pattern rules salsa, but Magna is likely not going to get into the heated debates that I usually dive right into with musicians when talking about music and dance. Magna’s thought process demonstrates a sensitivity to musical form that marks styles as unique from one another. Her musical knowledge evidences her musicality. She told me that this is how she is able to play with the music.

Compton, a leader who participated in the project and a long-time acquaintance of mine, stated that since his younger days he has always been deeply connected with music. He imitated reggae rhythm guitar and bass lines when he was young and later studied classical guitar, but
quit to dedicate himself to the martial arts. His dancing exhibits an intimate connection to the music although he is not familiar with the entire repertoire of salsa songs.

C: No, I don’t know the song. It looks like I know the song. Maybe I’ve never heard it in my life, but if you understand music you know what’s coming next.

j: How do you understand the music? What are you doing that makes you look like you know the music?

C: Ah, that took me a while. I never could do that before. Many songs I don’t know. I’ve never heard them before, but I can dance and have fun with them because I understand the structure of the music. That will tell me what’s coming next. I can tell you. I already know. Music is music. It has certain basics in it.

When Compton and I spoke about his dances during the feedback portion of our interview, he laughed when I continually picked up on his connection of movement to the music: “I knew something was going to happen then, I just didn’t know what.” He often correctly predicts a major change in the musical form—something his partners, me included, adore about dancing with him. It makes us feel alive in the music because we aren’t reacting to the music passively. It is actively exciting for both Compton and his partners, as if we’re all part of the magical “something” that draws people back to the dance floor.

Video 3.1 shows Compton and Erika dancing in the early summer of 2015 at Carlos Konig’s social in midtown Manhattan. The recording starts shortly after the beginning of the song “Oiga, Mire, Vea,” a Colombian-style salsa by the band Orquesta Guayacán. Some Colombian salsa departs from the hypermetric expectations of New York-style salsa, although this example does mostly consist of two-measure or four-measure hypermetric units. Figure 3.4 provides an outline of the first four minutes of “Oiga, Mire, Vea” with time indications of both the song in full and the excerpt analyzed in Video 3.1.

27 The DJ for this particular social tends to play many Colombian and tropical-style salsas.
Figure 3.4: Partial outline of “Oiga, Mire, Vea” by Orquesta Guayacán from the 1992 album Sentimental de punta a punta.

I asked Compton why he begins the dance side-to-side rather than back-and-forth.

C: That part of the song is low key. I might just do that [close, in-place basic step with “small stuff” such as hip motions] and wait for it to get going.

j: Let’s see if it develops.

C: Just taking my time. [just as the song changes into the coro:] See, huh? [pointing at the screen with raised eyebrows because he leads her into the first cross-body turn exactly as the song changes at 0:24]

j: But see how you already led the turn before it happened? That’s my point.

C: Let me see; let me see.

j: Listen again.
C: Listen again. But listen to the music now. It’s musical. [We listen and he gestures each entrance of the vocals with his hand—at first side to side and then forward when the music changes]

j: We’re saying the same thing. I’m telling you that you knew about it prior to it happening. You already predicted.

C: Okay. Yeah, because it’s time to move now.

j: You can feel that it’s time to move.

C: Yes. Basically, I was waiting. Wait, wait, wait and now he’s [the singer] ready to go.

j: And you went simultaneously with it. It seemed like you knew what was going to happen. Do you know the song?

C: No I don’t know the song. [Although in the video it seems as if he’s singing along with the title coro.] Musically, I knew that was coming next. That part had to come up next. He was singing it. Okay, he’s ready to go now; now we’re ready to go. Okay baby [gestures close dancing], it’s time to go [opens frame], and then we take off! [gestures the lead for the cross body]

By the time I had begun recording their dance to this song, Compton had heard the introduction and groupings of three and then two units. He is, however, still flirting when the verse continues at 0:48 (second column). Compton opens the frame with a one-hand connection when hypermetric units of repeated lyrics return at 0:15 (time points of the fourth column). On beat 7 of the final measure of this section, Compton prepares a cross-body lead so that Erika’s motion forward coincides with the next formal section c at 0:26. He repeats the cross-body lead for the repetition of c and then closes the frame for eight beats of sensual wiggling again at 0:34, the end of the final two-measure grouping; Erika accents the final beat with a drop and shake of her hips. Compton then opens the frame up again with the song as it changes to the next verse. Video 3.2 is Video 3.1 slowed down to 75% speed, with a voiced-over analysis.
Video 3.3 shows a later section of the same dance, beginning at song time point 1:36. At 0:10 on Video 3.3, the final two-measure unit of A, c1, serves as a transition between the A section of the song and the bridge-type section B; this is the moment where schematic transcription in Figure 3.5 begins. When Compton notices the music change at d, he finishes the turn he had led her into and changes his lead for a one-handed connection and instigates a side-to-side direction with his feet. This basic change of direction indicates that this portion of the song feels differently than the previous sections in which forward-and-back motion seemed more appropriate. The one-handed connection allows Erika more freedom in her movements and interpretation of the song. Their simultaneous, independently improvised squat at 0:15 (the and of beat 6 and beat 7, m. 2 of Figure 3.4) surprised Compton in the feedback interview.

C: Suélta la. Suélta la! Suélta la! [Let it go!]

j: There’s no cue.

C: I guess she’s listening too...“She must be [your] dance partner; [you both] practice every day,” people say. No.

Erika recalls the dances that I filmed with her and Compton as the first few times that they’ve danced together. By executing the same movement at the same moment as he does during this simple side-to-side motion, Erika physically demands an appreciation of her ability to improvise and interpret the dance (although she likely wouldn’t say it in these terms). Vertical or sudden movements that change the placement of a dancer’s torso garner more attention than movements of an arm or hand—movements often taught in ladies’ styling classes.

Compton lets go of Erika’s hand when he rises from the squat, giving Erika more freedom than he normally gives to novice dancers. Erika accents the end of her turn, m. 4, with an in-place hip swirl (starts out large and then tightens on repetition).
Figure 3.5a: Schematic transcription of B section of “Oiga, Mire, Vea,” mm. 1-6.
Figure 3.5b: Schematic transcription of B section of “Oiga, Mire, Vea,” mm. 7-12.
Simultaneously with Erika’s hip accent, Compton shimmies\(^{28}\) his shoulders in response to the mambo’s “call” although there is no particular musical response to this “call” until the trumpets “respond” on the and of 6 into beat 7 of m. 5. The second, third, and fourth times that these particular moments come around in this first four-measure unit, Compton accents each of them:

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\(^{28}\) A **shimmy** is a usually rapid forward-and-back motion of the upper torso of a dancer, sometimes seen most prominently in the shoulders. It feels similar to a trill in notated music.
first the shimmy in m. 4, then a torso drop\(^{29}\) in m. 5 coinciding now with the trumpet accent, and finally, in m. 6, he raises his left leg to the side on beat 7 after he places his weight down on the and of 6. Again, he doesn’t accent the first measure, m. 7, of the next four-measure unit. In m. 8, Compton thrusts his right leg while turning into Erika’s dancing space (while raising his arms above his head) to correspond with an accent on beat 5 in the trumpet line, eliciting a verbal response (“ha ha!”) from Erika. He then repeats the drop squat in m. 9 on the and of 6 into 7. He ends the four-measure unit with a torso drop, but with slightly different weight distribution, simultaneously with the trombone response to the trumpet mambo in m. 10 — the same beat in the measure as when they both squatted simultaneously at the larger structural change to B (m.2). In the next four-measure unit, Compton again accents the second beat 5 that comes around at the end of the trumpet line (m. 12) by placing his right foot into her dancing space (again with raised arms), although less intrusively than the first time (m. 8). He continues to dance with the trumpet line and accents beat 5 of m.13 by getting slightly closer to her before and executing a slight upward body roll with a prominent head flick on beat 6. Compton increases the dancing space for the final eight beats of the section, only slightly dropping for beat six of m. 14; Erika accents beats 7 and 8 with hip swirls. As the mambo transitions to the coro in m.15, Compton both leans out to his left side on beat 6 and drags his torso to return to center on beat 1 of m. 16. They both sense the upcoming change through the musical cue of a long low dominant chord in m. 16 and get closer to each other. Erika raises her arms enabling Compton to come back to a closed frame; Compton responds by placing his arms in complement to hers. Erika accents the second horn

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\(^{29}\) Compton’s torso drop consists of a motion begun in his shoulders, connecting through his torso, into his hips and feet. He crosses his right foot in front of his left (the weight-bearing one) on beat 5 and brings his left foot back to the side, but places his weight changes to correspond with the trumpet accents, not the “basic” stepping pattern. He drops his left shoulder in time with his weight distribution, heightening the feeling of the drop.
attack by dropping on beat 7. The transition is a short, two-measure unit (similar to how the B section began) tacked onto the longer, four-measure units of the mambo. Their attentiveness to the musical cues reward their expectations. They are now in position to begin partner dancing when A returns, and it does with coro 1. Compton, however, continues side-to-side motion while Erika attempts to return to a forward-and-back stepping pattern. Compton waits until the 5, 6, 7 side of the measure to return to forward-and-back motion—a starting pattern common to on-2 dancers who learned at least ten or more years ago. Video 3.4 is Video 3.3 slowed down with a voiced-over analysis.

Compton represents the highly musical dancer. My videos of him include many instances such as the ones above. Throughout our interview, Compton addressed most of my “Why did you chose that move there?” questions with variations of “I'm just thinking about the music. That’s the beauty in it. It’s not about the next turn pattern,” although he’d be the first to admit that when he began dancing salsa, consecutive turn patterns were all he was able to do. It took him years of practice, social dancing, and inspirational friends and teachers to become the skillful and musical dancer that he is today.
Karen (seen in Chapter 1) is a dancer who has the musical sensitivity of a trained musician, but none of the training or vocabulary. In fact, she didn’t realize that she was predicting musical structures until I pointed out a beautiful instance of her improvising in a social dance. Karen had never seen videos of herself social dancing although she has an extensive library of videos from her days as a professional mambo dancer. When I asked her why she moved certain ways in the videos, she replied, “I don’t think when I dance. I just dance.” But the videos demonstrated a different kind of thinking—the corporeal knowledge of structural feeling that marks a good dancer.

Figure 3.6 is a schematic transcription of a moment that I brought to Karen’s attention in our interview. The transcription begins forty seconds into the montuno of The Lebron Brothers’ song “Salsa y Control,” the example of a typical New York-style salsa in Figure 3.2. In Video 3.5, Karen is dancing with Danny at the Julia de Burgos Community Center in Harlem during the spring of 2015. At this point in the song, Karen and Danny are dancing apart from a conventional frame, common for New York-style dancers, especially the old timers. Focus on her movements, especially her feet.

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30 This video excerpt can also be seen in Videos 1.3-1.5 where I discussed Danny’s phase of the basic count and Karen’s skill at following Danny’s inconsistent stepping patterns.
Figure 3.6: Excerpt of montuno section (schematic transcription) of “Salsa y Control” performed by The Lebron Brothers on their 1970 album *Salsa y Control*.
In the second half of measure 3, on beat 6, she seems to connect to the trumpet moña and changes her movements to those that are more improvisatory and rhythmically dense than the stock “Palladium” shines at the beginning of the excerpt. In measure 4, she freezes on the and of 3 through beat 4 and then simultaneously accents the trumpet attacks on beats 5 and 6 with her left toe to the back. That she picks up on the rhythmic density of the trumpet line to shape her solo work is impressive and only one example of her musicality, but her prediction of the accents on beats 5 and 6 is extraordinary. Her sensitivity to the song seems outstanding given that she is not familiar with the song and this is the first iteration of this moña. What occurs shortly after this moment, however, demonstrates her expectation based on structural feeling. At measure 5, after the end of the trumpet mambo, she dances a simple back step breaking on beats 2 and 6. At the beginning of measure 6, Karen again increases her rhythmic density similarly to how she initially increased it in measure 3 when she improvised with the trumpet moña—as if she expected an exact repetition. At beat 5 of measure 6, when the trumpets do not restate their moña, Karen adjusts her motions to complement the lack of rhythmic density and back steps into beat 2 where Danny comes toward her to close the frame. The trumpet moña does indeed return (m. 7). Karen’s guess was too early. Video 3.6 is Video 3.5 slowed down to 65% speed, with a voiced-over analysis.

Karen admits to not knowing most songs that she dances to, in her words a sort of “Alzheimer’s” of the music so that each time she hears songs she likes “they’re new and exciting for me.” Granted, she certainly has many years of experience and is familiar with many of the “great mambo hits,” such as those performed by Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez. Karen was really impressed while watching herself in the video, although she didn’t like the “boring” song very much. Her excitement throughout our interview was infectious and evocative of how she
commands energy on the dance floor. She explained to me that she is not choreographing the
dance because she doesn’t know the song:

I would never even think of even thinking about an eight count. Because of your training,
[janice], and what you’re looking for, you can see things that I would [respond to with]:
“Nice combo, Ka.” I wouldn’t even analyze it the way you’re able to. Fascinating!”

Karen is considered one of the best dancers in the group of old timers with whom I sometimes
dance. She rarely gets to sit and often has to politely decline offers to dance so that she can rest
her septuagenarian body. Karen’s musicality is noted by most dancers who see her on the dance
floor; her favorite partner told me that “She feels exactly what the music is saying.”

Participants without the musical training of Compton or the innate sensitivity of Karen
also emphasized the importance of correctly predicting and executing a specific movement or
turn pattern to a particular moment in the music, risking incorrect predictions solely for the
chance of a rewarding one.

One dancer acquired the knowledge of when to prepare for hesitations31 by following his
followers:

I remember dancing socially and when I’d give [a partner] a hesitation just because I had run
out of things to do, I could tell by their body language that something was a little off. Some
women looked a little confused about why I was giving them a hesitation at that moment, the
women who I believed had more experience dancing. Women with average-to-little experience
dancing wouldn’t care one way or the other. Someone who is an experienced dancer, I’d notice
a look in their face: Why are you giving me this right now? Or, I didn’t give them a hesitation—
that was the biggest indication—when that bridge in the song comes and I didn’t give them the
hesitation. Sometimes they’d backlead me. Both experiences made me realize that there is
something here that I’m not catching. Eventually I realized that this is the part of the song
where my partner is expecting me to give her the hesitation so she can do her thing. When I
would listen for that moment in the song and give her the hesitation at that moment, I saw that
smile, that

31 A hesitation is a partner move in which the leader plants body and feet forward facing with
his legs slightly open (normally the weight is equally distributed) and his hands also forward
facing and supporting the follower’s hands as she utilizes the force and balance he provides to
improvise solo work while grasping his hands.
little glimmer—okay, now I’ve got it. Now I make a conscious effort to listen for that moment in the song to give them that hesitation.

This dancer is notably sensitive to followers’ emotional reactions, a trait of his that extends beyond the dance floor. It is not surprising to hear that he acquired some of his knowledge of the conventions of salsa music, and its associated movements in the dance, from his partners. He intends to give his partners “the best dance of the night”: “I do look for cues as to whether or not the person I’m dancing with is enjoying the dance. That’s important to me.” Through his extensive dancing with various partners he has gained a knowledge that he and many of my participants refer to as “feel.” He actively listens to the structure of the song to predict placement of new moves or to predict how long a turn pattern or move should be.

Many leaders attempted to predict the end of a song so that they could plan their moves to correspond with the ending, as opposed to just having their motions stop in the middle of a phrase. Rob, “one of the least musical dancers” (his words), discussed this challenge in our interview:

j: Did you know that the song was going to end?

R: No. This one I struggled with a little bit more [than the previous song we discussed—“Ni Hablar”]. You can tell because I’m in the wrong spot for it. I’ve got some little mini-pattern going. I always like to end with either the simple dip or just the arm over the head.

j: So you’re aiming for it?

R: But I don’t hear it’s going to end here because as I listen to the music, earlier on…[as the song ends with clear tutti chords] I should have known. The problem was there wasn’t enough of an end there. In the Celia [Cruz] song [“Ni Hablar” with Johnny Pacheco] you heard more. I sensed [that] you had more measures where the density [we had spoken of this earlier in the interview] went down and I knew something was coming up and I could finish whatever I was doing and be done when we were, but here, I didn’t because there was a lot of trombone work in there, and then all of a sudden I had about one measure and it’s gone. The problem is that it’s in the middle of something and I was kind of stuck and that stinks.
“Ni Hablar” offers multiple rewards of hypermetric expectation. The song is a mostly-montuno style salsa with an embedded verse (Figure 3.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>large-scale form</th>
<th>song</th>
<th>small-scale form</th>
<th>hypermetric groupings</th>
<th>descriptions of sonic material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A?</td>
<td>0:02</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
<td>four-beat anacrusis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0:11</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
<td>instrumental introduction (four mm phrase)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0:21</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>sonera sings introduction melody on &quot;la&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0:30</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1 introduced by sonera (four mm phrase)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0:40</td>
<td>c, d, d</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1 sung by band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:07</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>verse 1 (phrasing in three groups of four mm each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:17</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1 repeats--bongo player switches to campana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:27</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
<td>sonera's &quot;la&quot; lines--campana rhythm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:36</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
<td>sonera's &quot;la&quot; lines repeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:45</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:54</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1 repeats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:04</td>
<td>c, d, d</td>
<td></td>
<td>verse 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:31</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1 with sonero improvising on &quot;la&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:40</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1 with sonero improvising on &quot;la&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1?</td>
<td>2:50</td>
<td>b1</td>
<td></td>
<td>coro 1 shared with sonera in montuno-style improvisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.7: Outline of “Ni Hablar” performed by Celia Cruz and Johnny Pacheco on their 1975 album *Tremendo Caché*.

All phrases and underlying chord progressions group neatly into four-measure units (and, as with Wayne Gorbea’s “Cógele el Gusto” in Figure 3.3, into ten-second time intervals). The verses simply extend into three four-measure units, with the final group repeating harmonic and melodic material of the second. Just before the section change at 1:27, the bongo player switches to the handheld cowbell (*cencerro*) to play the *campana* rhythm (see Figure 2.2). Normally, this signals that the song is moving into the montuno (B?), but we hear the a section, the introduction, repeated. The campana rhythm indicates a 3-2 clave—driving the song forward with new rhythmic interactions although the melodic and harmonic material is nearly identical to the first
minute of the song. When the cencerro signals a change at 2:48 (m. 1 of Figure 3.8), it is the first time such a loud and timbrally piercing instrument is used to signal a change of section.

Figure 3.8a: Schematic transcription of the final ten measures of “Ni Hablar” (time point 2:48 to the end), mm. 1-6.
Prior to this moment, transitions between sections were primarily indicated by trumpet riffs, and at the end of verse two, by a piano trill. At 2:48, the cencerro breaks away from its pattern for one measure and then returns to the campana rhythm in m. 2. The sonera trades improvisations with the band’s abbreviated coro, singing in a fashion expected of a montuno section; importantly, the band finally breaks away from four-measure harmonic progressions to two-measure harmonic progressions with the exciting one-measure call-and-response between the sonera and the coro singers expected of a montuno section. The cencerro drives the tempo to increase slightly, although a change of tempo is not a usual trait of salsa songs. If the band were performing live, this is the part of the song they would likely extend, offering solos to various instrumentalists. In this recording, however, Rob heard something else happening that signaled an ending to his untrained ear.

Figure 3.8b: Schematic transcription of the final ten measures of “Ni Hablar” (time point 2:48 to the end), mm. 7-10.
I asked Rob when he knew the song was coming to an end thinking that he was going to respond with “the cowbell.” (Interestingly, later in our interview Rob did mention a campana phrase such as the one clearly heard at 2:48 [m. 1] as a “signal” for something new.) Rob responded to my question with this:

I’ll tell you what I usually hear. Let’s see if it happens. That’s the key right there and a lot of bands do it. They go from, and I never really put my finger on it, but you know it. They go from the rhythmic density to none. For like three seconds. Maybe just a measure or two. And you’ll hear it. You heard it. She did it there. And usually they drag out a tone, their pitch might get a little, eh, maybe not, always higher. But you hear it here, because I know it’s going to happen. But now that you mention it, I just put two and two together. That’s what it is. So, yeah, that’s how I know it. She’ll drag, they’ll usually drag out a tone, or drag out a beat, or drag out a sound, and you know that’s going to be it.

I asked him to indicate on the video when these things were happening in real time and he marked the long note for the syllable “-lar” (m. 8) and the silence of the band for beats 5, 6, 7, and 8 followed by Celia’s long note for the “-ar” of the word cantar (m. 9). Rob made a point to explain to me:

Rob: So, that’s why, as a guy, if it drags on too long, then it’s annoying because I just thought the song was ending and made a last motion, and it’s—they’re still going.

j: Messing with your expectations.

Rob: Exactly.

This type of ending—a break from the rhythmic density in the band followed by a held note or chord—is common in New York-style salsa, although some arrangers will purposely play with listeners’ expectations of the form. There are many other features that characterize this song as typical and prepare listeners for the end, but I’ll leave those for an analysis in Chapter 4.

The song that Rob considered more difficult than “Ni Hablar” is “Algo Criollo” performed by Pachapo y su Comparsa on their 1980 album Pachapo y el Super Tumbao.
Pachapo Jiménez, a Puerto Rican musician who is influenced by South American music but composes songs in multiple salsa and “tropical” genres, recorded this album in New York City. This song is difficult to parse without a musically sensitive ear, and even with musical sensitivity, predicting the ending would prove difficult for many listeners. Figure 3.9 offers an outline of the song.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Large-scale form</th>
<th>song</th>
<th>small-scale form</th>
<th>hypermetric groupings</th>
<th>descriptions of sonic material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>00:10</td>
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<td>00:20</td>
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<td>00:29</td>
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<td>00:39</td>
<td>c</td>
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<td></td>
<td>00:49</td>
<td>b b1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>00:58</td>
<td>d</td>
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<td>01:14</td>
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<td>e</td>
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<td>f</td>
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<td>02:46</td>
<td>g g</td>
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<td>02:55</td>
<td>g1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>03:08</td>
<td>b b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>03:17</td>
<td>d</td>
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</table>

**Figure 3.9:** Outline of “Algo Criollo” by Pachapo y su Comparsa from the 1980 album *Pachapo y el Super Tumbao*.

“Algo Criollo” is an interesting example of a mostly-montuno, embedded-verse structure. Expected four-measure units of timespace mark the first minute of the song, but are interrupted by the trombone bridge—an awkward, noisy-sounding melodic block, at d (transcription in Figure 3.10).
What was four becomes six—three units of two measures each, although the arrangement is confusing to the ear because the final accent of d is on beat 6, and it stumbles into the following coro (1:14, m. 7) on the and of beat 4 (sharing the same bass pitch) because of a messy tape cut on the analog mastering for the album. The later verses group into three two-measure units just as the trombone bridge does, but alternate with the coro’s pair of two-measure units. The piano solo returns to clearly demarcated four-measure units, but closes with a two-measure build up to

Figure 3.10: Schematic transcription of bridge in “Algo Criollo.”
the trombone mambo at g. The second iteration of g has an extra measure tacked onto it, offsetting listeners’ expectations of either two-measure or four-measure regularity. The final trombone bridge returns with no signal preceding it, suddenly ending the song instead of functioning as a transition as it had earlier. There is no long note held by the singer nor long chords that are different than what we heard the first time d was stated. By the time Rob senses the end coming, “…all of a sudden I had about one measure and it’s gone.”

“Algo Criollo,” is not a commonly heard song in New York City, where Pachapo is not very popular; in fact, many music vendors and people in stores were convinced that I meant (Johnny) Pacheco when asking if they had any Pachapo albums. His arrangement style doesn’t conform to hypermetric expectations of New York listeners. The intonation of the horns, pianos, and sometimes the singers is rough to the ear and the production often sloppy, much in the way live recordings of jazz greats can sound harsh when compared to studio-produced, or remastered, recordings. This is in stark contrast to much of the hypermetrically consistent, clean and tight production by Fania or other New York record labels. A 2003 version of “Algo Criollo,” performed by Colombian band Los Titanes, cleans up the trombone intonation, removes the messy piano playing in the bridge and the formal misalignment of beats, and “corrects” the hypermetric groupings so they fit more neatly into listeners’ expectations of four-measure units.

The hypermetric grouping of salsa songs, combined with timbral alerts for upcoming section changes and other conventional preparations for such changes in the form, enables dancers to predict important moments in songs, especially endings, in order to improvise changes in their choice of dance moves and turn patterns. Leaders articulated to me the importance of being able to predict changes, but placed special emphasis on making the end of their dance correspond with the ending of a song. Some leaders practiced rote memorization of these
moments, but nearly all admitted their excitement when they land a good guess in an unfamiliar song.

Frantz, a leader who participated in the project, has little to no musical training and admits to memorizing a great many of the songs he hears at socials, but it is through his very practice of memorization (active listening) that he is able to predict key moments in songs with which he is not familiar. He is known among his salsa friends as the guy who always dips his partner at the end of songs. In fact, he likes to tell his friends, “to never miss a dip moment.” Frantz’s musicality stems from his desire to plan the dance well.

F: At the end of a song, on a dip, especially when I know the song. You know what's great? When I don't know the song and I correctly anticipate the final accent. I love that. It's like magic. To me that is magic. I don't know the song, but I'm listening. There's something that happens in a song where you hear the build up towards the end. I know what it sounds like and I know what that feels like, so I'm listening to that. But sometimes, especially in salsa, there's no telling. Salsa songs are very funky, right? Sometimes there's a buildup and a clear accent that ends the song, and sometimes there is totally not. Sometimes you get an accent and a couple of beats afterwards. Those moments when I don't know the song, and I just go for it and say, “Okay, the song is going to end here, let me just hit it,” and it's like Bam! right there on the nose. It makes it look like I knew exactly what I was doing when I didn't. I love that. There are plenty of times when I'm off. I'll do it too soon, or, more often, if I don’t know the song, I'll be late with it. The song will be over and I'll just do one last twirl and dip, which is not so bad.

j: You are aiming for those moments.

F: I do!

He raises two important issues in this quotation. First, he is actively listening, “I know what it sounds like…,” while simultaneously enacting structural feeling, “and I know what that feels like…” In our interview, Frantz utilized the verb “to listen” in two ways, sometimes simultaneously: “to listen” to the music (with one’s ears and mind) and “to listen” to one’s partner (as in paying attention to their motions and moods). Secondly, his desire to end songs in a dip forces him to take risks with his predictions. When he mistakes the final accent of a song,
he’ll amend his dip accordingly. In one instance he prepared for a dip and executed it, but the song had two final chords instead of the one that Frantz predicted. He “compensated by doing a double, what they call a double pump” and Erika, his partner for that dance, did not know that he had made a “mistake” since Frantz was able to improvise convincingly.

Hypermetric Expectation or Memorization?

One may argue that many dancers simply memorize salsa songs in an effort to plan their turn patterns and other motions to that particular song. While this is certainly the case for some dancers, there is a clear distinction between improvisation and memorization. Joe, a studio owner and professional New York on-2 dancer, likes to compare listeners’ expectations of the ending of “Shave and a Haircut” to someone who is able to improvise (Figure 3.11).

![Figure 3.11: The call-and-response pairing of the musical ditty “Shave and a Haircut.”](image)

A person who is conditioned to American popular culture would associate the second bar of this ditty (derived from musical conventions established during the early 20th Century) in correct temporal relationship with the first. In other words, the “two bits” of the musical phrase is the associated response to the call of the first bar. Joe believes that dancers who are merely planning moves to accents in the music are beginning to “get it”—“it” being the structural feeling
mentioned above. We returned to the differences between live and prerecorded music often throughout our two interviews.

jm: Do you find there are any benefits to dancing to prerecorded music?

J: Yeah, in the beginning. It trains you.

jm: How does it train you?

J: Because it's the same damn thing all the time. For example, I'm going to ask you to clap on three. [counts 1, 2, and I clap simultaneously to his saying 3]. Now I'm going to give you this: [sings “bum” to "shave and a haircut, two”—stops short of the final quarter note of "cents" but I miss my entrance. He repeats the exercise and I clap where he wants me to clap.] You could clap. Why did you clap?

jm: Because I know what's coming. I know the ending of that.

J: Does that make you an advanced person? Think of it in terms of dancing. Does that make you an advanced dancer? If you are dancing to prerecorded music and you know where the hits [accents] are because you've heard it so many times, does that really make you an advanced dancer? The answer is no, because you're not improvising. The question is: Can you take your skill level to the point you can improvise just like the musicians were last night. The reason why they lasted twelve minutes and didn't just do the four-and-a-half minute version of the song on the CD is because they're looking at the dancers. That's why I begged my students to come and experience [a live band]. That goes back centuries, maybe even more than that. Back when one community would communicate to another through drumbeats. The band needs the dancers to improvise, to make it interesting. What you heard last night, you will never hear that same way again. It is the moment right there. If they see that the dancers are in, they'll give you a twelve-, fifteen-minute song. If they would have been playing for a charity where nobody's dancing, they'd keep it down to four minutes because it's boring for them. That is the improvisation they're doing. If you can interpret that as a dancer, wooo! Now you can start calling yourself an advanced dancer. Unfortunately, prerecorded music doesn't allow for that.

Interestingly, this go-to example Joe uses when teaching falls neatly into a 3-2 clave pattern, although this is something he didn’t mention in our interviews. In fact, he, and most New York dancers, default to a 2-3 clave pattern when clapping along with songs or explaining how their dance style fits the music better than on-1 (more on that topic in Chapter 4). Despite the popularity of the 2-3 clave pattern, some dancers whom I interviewed either didn’t hear a
difference between the two (when I demonstrated) or knew that there were two versions, but couldn’t demonstrate the difference. Few could point it out in a song unless actual clave sticks were being played. I speculate that dancers who don’t hear a difference between the two versions of clave would predict the ending of musical instances similar to “Shave and a Haircut” because they have experienced salsa enough to know that a rhythmic response often occurs—the sides of the clave alternate. The three side is followed by the two side; the two, by the three.

The studio environment, however, actively encourages rote memorization of particular repertoire. Both lessons and social dances at studios routinely feature DJs instead of live musicians. The DJ at one particular event “tends to repeat [songs] to a certain degree,” so that dancers can memorize or more readily predict breaks and important structural events than they could to songs with which they have no familiarity.

Rachel, a follower who participated in the project, explained to me that one of the songs we analyzed in the feedback interview “will just stop. It’s very punctuated. You’re either going to dance over that and ignore it, or acknowledge that [the break or stop] is there and do something with it.” She perceives the dancer who ignores the breaks as one lacking in musicality. In Video 3.7 you can see Rachel and Juan dancing the first minute and forty-five seconds of Tito Puente’s 1950 “Cao Cao Maní Picao,” a brief three-minute song. At 0:04, you have the strong sense that Rachel knows the song since she lowers her body with the first break in the song. At 0:19, she utilizes Juan’s one-handed lead to lower her body in time to the music’s break, reminiscent of Palladium-style freezes. At 0:53, another break occurs and Rachel correctly predicts it as shown by her choice to lower her body. Interestingly, she adds hip movements (0:56-7) that don’t correspond with the music. These hip accents, however, would fit with another version of the song, also released in 1950, by La Sonora Matancera performed with Celia
Cruz on vocals. At 1:07, Juan leads her into another open break and Rachel repeats a variation of the drop that she implemented at 0:53 and its following (absent) accents with her feet—this time accompanied by silence in the version of the song played by the DJ at this social, but aligning with the piano in the compound version she knows. She has a familiarity with the tune, but does not differentiate between versions of the song. She’s willing to include the accents because Juan is giving her space to interpret the song and she hopes that they’ll fit with the music.

R: [Juan] is engaging with the music in a dynamic way, and with [me], and with the steps.

j: That’s you knowing what’s going to happen with the music?

R: Yeah.

j: It looks like you were doing it [the side-to-side hip motions at 0:55] even before he sang it. You were almost ready to come down.

R: I don’t realize it’s happening.

j: I feel like you were expecting [I sing the phrase ending that is in a different version of the song]. You predicted something and it didn’t happen. But [Juan] didn’t have a problem with it.

R: There’s too much going on there. I got excited and felt like there was space, physical space and space in the music, so I had to style something, but then the steps don’t really end up matching what’s happening in the song. I tried to syncopate it [she is referring to her footwork in jazz footwork terms\(^{32}\)] and there was no syncopation happening. If there had been—sometimes I just guess and I either get lucky or I don’t.

j: How does it feel when you get lucky?

R: It feels great. It feels like you’re hitting the sweet spot.

j: So it’s worth risking it to have that feeling?

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\(^{32}\) **Syncopation** (jazz parlance): Stepping (putting one’s weight down, often as a weight change from one foot to another) on an unexpected part of the beat, often an and.
R: I suppose.

j: You’ve risked it twice now. You had the [sings the first one at 0:52] that didn’t happen. But you did it anyway and here you put in more and syncopate it and it didn’t work, but yet you keep trying. There must be something worthwhile in the reward of landing it.

R: [laughing] Yeah, usually I don’t have to watch it back.

j: There must be something in there—[meaning the moment when the prediction is correctly rewarded]

R: There is a moment of connectedness.

j: Connected to the music?

R: Connected to the universe. Not to be grandiose, but there is something larger than me. But yeah, connectedness to the music.

Video 3.8 shows the visual content of Video 3.7, but overdubs a slightly slowed-down version of Sonora Matancera’s “Cao Cao Maní Pico” onto moments of the video where Rachel places her accents that connect to the blended version of the song she is dancing to in the video. The versions of the song are nearly identical—both are stylistically mambo-era recordings, but one version encourages a little something extra from the dancer who is paying attention.

Rachel is consciously working at connecting with the music (even if the version she hears is not the one she knows in her body). She is a close listener and values when her partner also listens to and feels the music. It is important to note that Juan allows his partners physical space so that they can interpret the music as they feel moved. If Juan had the song completely memorized and wished to “choreograph” it, he’d have to contend with how Rachel wants to interpret the song. Juan, instead of grasping both of her hands and executing complex arm work and/or turn patterns, gives her timespace to fill however she wants to and is able to. The timespace that Juan grants isn’t squeezed into particular moments of the measure. Both dancers are free to communicate their interpretation of the music and each other in the moment.
Many followers spoke about how Frantz “listens to the music in a way that a lot of guys don’t.” For instance, Rachel explained that

It feels there’s this nice “in syncness” about our dances, in sync with the music…he’ll do a lot of dips and hits and stuff on parts that seem to go with the music and accentuate it. I also feel that he notices if I do something that works with the music; he enjoys that. I feel that we’re both part of this non-verbal conversation about the song.

Even if Frantz doesn’t have the song memorized, his follower can rely on his attention to both her and the music. Rachel’s implication that there are three parties involved in a salsa dance were echoed by other participants throughout my interviews. Good dances, reported the participants, occurred when the music, the leader, and the follower come together for three to five magical minutes on the dance floor—the dancers’ full attention on both the music and their partner. On some occasions, even the audience will interact with the music and/or the dancing couple further heightening the excitement in the room. For most socials with prerecorded music, the lack of opportunity for the dancers to improvise with a live band is replaced with the opportunity to improvise with particular partners, each a unique tangle of personality and skill level.

Compton has stated to me many times, that regardless of the song and the dancer’s familiarity with it, the dance is about whom you are dancing with and what you both are feeling at that moment in time: “You can know a song in and out, it’s about inspiration.” And he’d be the first to state that the variables of your partner’s moves create tension in the dance. Each moment is unique and offers a range of reactions, based on the conventions of the dance. No matter how much planning a dancer can attempt to a prerecorded song, those moments appear and disappear in the actuality of the experience. Compton stated it succinctly: “Music is opportunity—you blink and it’s gone.”
CHAPTER 4
Expressive Microtiming and Tempo Rubato

Dancers manipulate timespace at the small-scale level of the eight-beat measure through movements that demonstrate a sensitivity to the musical layers and to their partners. Many dancers spoke of the feel that their partners had when they danced with them—“he feels the music,” or “I like how she plays.” When I investigated what they meant by play or feel in the feedback interviews, most often dancers demonstrated an intra-measure manipulation of timespace. Music theorists often refer to this sense of time feel or play as expressive or microtiming, defined as rhythmic displacement of notes below the beat level—a departure from regularity (Iyer 2002:403, also see Ohriner 2016, Stover 2009, Benadon-2006, Prögler 1995). A different way of discussing slight variance in timespace manipulation between referent beats as expressive device in the performance practice of western European art music is known as tempo rubato, literally, robbed time. There are two versions of tempo rubato: one in which the underlying pulse remains constant while rhythms fluctuate, the other in which tempo and rhythm fluctuate in all parts at the same time. The first type of tempo rubato is the most relevant to salsa dancers and musicians since rhythms are improvised in relation to fairly consistent rhythmic patterns at the quarter- and/or eighth-note levels.

This chapter investigates the feel of timespace manipulation at the measure level as intention that delves into the realm of corporeal knowledge. How do dancers play with the timespace in a measure, but not get off count or confuse their partner? Why do dancers improvise these moments and what effect does that have on their partner? Do dancers manipulate their timing consciously or subconsciously, and how do their movements relate to the music? Dancers who are “conscious” of their placement of motions with regard to the beat demonstrate a
purposeful direction of their energy to pull back against the beat or rush into a downbeat. Dancers who value the ability to dance “without thinking” and demonstrate musicality still hone their skills through practice (of some kind) over time, thus exposing a knowledge of musical constructs and sense of musical play regardless of their consciousness or ability to articulate it. After video examples to support my thesis that dancers utilize their bodies as instruments to play with the music in the same manner as musicians play with expressive timing variations, I close with Charles Keil’s concept of participatory discrepancies and the social implications of this kind of musical play.

Feel as Corporeal Intention

A dancer or musician who feels, or conceives, beats as portions (instead of finite attacks) of timespace attends to multiple levels of information to inform their listening—in salsa, most often the eighth-note pulse level (often the conga’s tumbao or the bongo’s martillo, but other instruments can feed into this level—see Chapter 2). This is not unlike how most people determine the length of time in a beat, regardless of whether we mark a pulse level or not. In salsa dance/music, a listener attends to beats and/or pulses because the music is rhythmically dense and complex. The eighth-note level serves as a sort of lowest-common-denominator density referent. Simultaneously, many instruments mark the quarter-note beat level through their rhythmic accent, thus reinforcing the feel—and importantly, the expectation/projection—of the next beat. The beat becomes alive and variable in the body of the skilled dancer who manipulates the feeling of beats within timespace, instead of becoming dull, equally spaced, and march-like (to use Compton’s favorite way to describe beginners).
One way that dancers can manipulate this feeling of timespace within the measure is by stepping on different parts of the beat when they shift their weight from one foot to the other. They play with the placement of their footfalls to land on the beginning timespace of the beat—“on top,” in the middle of the beat—“in the pocket,” or at the end of the beat—“behind.”

Hutchinson explains how New York dancers who dance the Eddie Torres style of salsa “step well ahead of counts [beats] 1 and 5, pushing their count [stepping pattern] nearly a half beat closer to [the Palladium style on-2]” (2014:34), although this is neither a conscious, nor consistent choice by most New York dancers. McMains confirms this tendency from her own experience and points out that experienced dancers consciously dance behind the beat as a marker of their, as they state it, “truly advanced salsa dancing” (2015:68). As dancers begin to embody the different levels of feel mapped out in Chapter 2, they become confident in their improvisatory explorations.

Justin London claims that there are limits for the least amount of time between metric-based perceptive occurrences (what we call pulses in our measure). He claims that “the lower limit for meter, that is, the shortest interval that we can hear or perform as an element of rhythmic figure, is about 100 milliseconds” (2004:27). The time intervals to which he refers are interonset intervals, “the time span from articulation and articulation” (2004:27), or what we would likely call the space between consecutive attacks of sound. Music theorist Rainer Polak draws this interval of time closer to 80 milliseconds (forthcoming). Although the difference between perception of stimuli and perception of meter are not the same, a study claims that humans are capable of perceiving very brief fractions of time between interonset intervals. Neuroscientist and professor of music Micheal Thaut claims that we are capable of perceiving even smaller fractions of time between interonset intervals of other types of data streams:
The data demonstrate convincingly that the rapid and precise adaptations of rhythmic movements to subliminal tempos changes during our behavioral experiments have a precise neurological basis in the brain. The data show that these small time fluctuations in the range of a few milliseconds are indeed registered and coded by the brain in the strength of the brainwave currents measured over the primary auditory cortex. … These studies provide some suggestive and intriguing neurological evidence for a notion that music communicates temporal order in auditory perception through its time-ordered sound structures, regardless of whether changes in rhythmic patterns are perceived consciously or subconsciously (2005:47).

Studies that Thaut cites in his volume point to the rich connections between sub- or unconscious perception and bodily motion that scientists are only just beginning to recognize. Vijay Iyer also examines the connections that cognitive science has found between the body and the sound world around it (2002). Like Iyer, I argue that dancers, and musicians, have known about these connections since time immemorial (if I may be so grandiose) when they use constructions such as “feel” and “I don’t think when I dance.”

Many dancers and musicians, however, do consciously think about their actions and movements when performing. Their attention and sensitivity to themselves and their partners demand that we value their use of the word feel. For example, dancers choose to modify how their foot meets the ground. Various techniques are employed: accents, such as stomping loudly or tapping the foot and springing it upwards; or placing it down and pivoting it or sliding. Any change in how a dancer’s body meets the ground or otherwise connects to their partner is sensed proprioceptively. A certain choice could be interpreted as a mistake—and sometimes it is, if a dancer perceives motion through a framework of correct or incorrect rather than as a range of possibilities—or this choice could be perceived as one of many immediate presents that offer multiple protentive options. How a dancer manipulates the feel of a particular moment demonstrates conscious decision on the dancer’s part. Dancers utilize their body in similar ways to how musicians utilize their instruments in order to create feeling in music.
The personal choices musicians make concerning feel are based on both intellectual and emotional considerations. For example, when a conscious decision is made to play either ahead or behind the beat intellectual processes are at work. The motivation behind that choice is often rooted in a musician’s emotional perception of the music, such as, a desire to build excitement or tension within the groove (Washburne 1998:161).

Followers who wish to express themselves play with their partner’s expectations. The follower knows what the leader is doing, where he wants the follower to land and to go from there. These are the moments of retention and immediate present that we can then play with, if we are quick enough. Magna Gopal, speaking of what makes the leaders she prefers to dance with different from other dancers, put it this way:

I'm usually going off of: this is where we are, I know where you want me to be, I'm just going to get there differently than how you asked, and that shouldn’t be a problem for you. I’m still going to be exactly where you want me to be.

Magna plays with her partners by not exactly fulfilling their requests. She knows what their lead is requesting of her body, but why do the same thing over and over? Why not try something different, something new? She builds excitement with dancers who are open to her sense of interpretation. A leader who would be confused by a cue not being followed, as another participant put it, “exactly as it was taught in class last Thursday,” would not find that tension pleasing. Most leaders who are confident in their ability to improvise and adapt to their partner find dancers such as Magna a joy to dance with precisely because of her own improvisatory skills.

Video 4.1 shows Magna dancing with Jared in February of 2016 at La Vieja Guardia social in midtown Manhattan. Magna had never danced with Jared before, nor heard this song before. Video 4.2 offers a slowed-version of the video, at fifty-percent of its original speed.

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33 A longer version of this video was analyzed in Chapter 2 (Video 2.1).
Figure 4.1 is a transcription of the measure beginning at 0:17 with markings for Magna’s motions. At 0:17, she marks beat 1 with a bend of her right knee, but chooses not to step or change her weight. He pulls her arms apart on beat 1, and ends the motion at the beginning of beat 2. Still standing in front of him, she seems to stop moving for a millisecond, but slightly moves her head to the right—even closing her eyes briefly (0:18). As the vocalist weaves his line upward, she attaches herself to it, and moves her left hand slightly (in a circular motion—marked with a schwa—akin to the singer’s neighbor-note melodic choice) somewhere near the and of beat 3 (0:19). Then she snakes her upper body and head toward her left hand prior to when the singer begins his dominant pitch—somewhere before the and of beat 4 (0:20), and then pulls the motion back down and diagonally across her body, lifting her right leg and foot around beat 6 (0:21). These motions are not counted. Instead, they occur with, or before, the vocalist’s melodic line, playing with the timespace in-between the beats. In order to continue the dance and fulfill the motion her partner is about to request (he is preparing a cross-body lead), Magna centers her neck and head, and back steps with her right leg on beat 1 (0:22)—not on beat 6 of the previous measure, as would be expected, then walks across his lead on beat 2, “correctly” realigning with stylistic norms.

![Figure 4.1: Transcription of Magna improvising at beginning of Video 4.1.](image)

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34 This measure begins at 0:08 in Video 4.1.
She continues to play with him at 0:27. He prepares another cross-body motion, but she plants her left foot down on beat 2 with no intent to move across (0:28). He had attempted to turn her, first by cueing her with a gentle and slight circular motion of his left, lead, hand at 0:26 into 0:27 and then with a cue to her left shoulder. Playfully, Magna only gives him her shoulder, isolating her shoulder from the rest of her body—not the reaction he was expecting. She lets him pull it back (shifting her weight to her right foot late on beat 3), but takes her left side with her shoulder motion, placing beat 4 back on her left foot, but not shifting her weight onto it (0:31). On beat 7 (0:32), she quickly shifts her weight onto her left leg and slightly kicks her right foot out, extending the motion initiated in her shoulder. But to get to the proper side of her body to execute what he expects of her, she is required to make the change of weight one more time and this she does starting late after the and of 8 (almost on beat 1), as she propels herself into beat 2 for the cross-body turn that he initially requested (0:34). Figure 4.2 is a transcription of the weight displacement (and non-weight displacement) of her feet and the forward-and-back motion of her left shoulder.

![Figure 4.2](image)

**Figure 4.2**: Transcription of Magna improvising with coro line of Video 4.2.

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35 This measure begins in 0:13 of Video 4.1.
What seems to be a shift of weight is not always a weight displacement, creating an interesting feel for her and her partner. Also, her shoulder motion connects with the coro line and responds to its musical impetus. When the coro rests from the and of beat 7 through the next measure, Magna continues the back-and forth motion of her shoulder in the same rhythm as the and of beat 5 through beat 7, marked in Figure 4.2 with “ghosted” note heads. She knows that she has locked into the music with these two moments of her dance; her smiles indicate to her partner that she is connected to the music and having a good time dancing with him to this particular song. After she lands the turn (that he requested about eight beats ago), she beams and he cracks a smile of recognition. Her motions (because these are beyond a dancer’s mere steps) are neither planned, nor landed on particular counts. Some push ahead of the beat, some lag behind—depending on how she wants the motion to feel with the music and with her partner. Magna told me during our interview that Jared “never knows what to expect from me.” We spoke of how she interprets the music and demands that her partner attend to it as well: “I will pull them into the interpretation.” In this video you can see Jared shift his upper body back and forth and push his left foot outward and back between 0:30 and 0:32. He seems to be “getting into” Magna’s playful interpretation of the song. She admitted to being especially sensitive to his recovering arm injury during this dance, although she makes a point of never playing beyond the possible range of framework that any leader provides:

I'm very active in the conversation and I have a lot of opinions, in general. Who I am in life is infused into my dancing. I am opinionated and I’m active in any conversation I take part of. I rarely take a back seat. There are always multiple ways to get something done. If we’re constantly doing something repetitively, I get bored with it. We’ve been constantly doing a cross-body lead and I always walk over at this timing. What if I didn’t. What if I pulled against the lead a little bit and then launched myself forward. Oh, that works. Or it doesn’t work. Why didn’t it work. I feel like I affected the lead. How can I do that without affecting the lead.
Although she does make a point of not affecting the lead, Magna does want to know that her partners are also actively participating in the play. She does want to create affect in the lead, hence the pulling and launching that a follower can do within the framework that a leader sets. She plays with the timespace of the beats within a measure, altering how she moves and how her movement is perceived by her partner. She can physically change how she feels and is felt, directly and intentionally, with relation to the musical experience.

**Expressive Microtiming**

Dancers’ footfalls and other motions often do not land, or occur, at the same timespace within each beat. Slight variances occur so that a motion, or the goal of a directed movement, could land in a different timespace each time it is realized, even if it lands on the same beat in the measure. Although such variances sometimes occur because of a lack of skill, more often slight manipulations of timespace indicate that a dancer is experimenting with the feel of music and/or his or her partner. Working with my participants, I was able to get a sense that dancers perceive individual dancers who play with these slight variations in timing as more musical than other dancers. The vocabulary that dancers utilized, and the manner in which they spoke of fellow dancers, reminded me of how musicians have compared one another throughout my life.

Musicians refer to the intentional “dis”placement of notes as microtiming or expressive timing; the latter term designates the importance of this musical phenomenon to personal interpretation of music. Musicians utilize pitch, timbre, dynamics (volume), and rhythm to express themselves in time within the idiom of sound. Dancers utilize different parameters to express themselves in time within the idiom of space: space (how their movements fill, or move, through space), rhythm (timing and the relation of these movements), dynamics (the
proprioceptive qualities of their movements), and characteristic use of body (as in posture and/or
gesture). Arguably, a musical transcription can capture the expressive microtiming of a
musician’s musicality due to the two-dimensionality of audio-based transcriptions. Through
feedback videos, my participants and I were able to point out particular moments that marked
manipulations of timespace at the level of the measure—how dancers manipulated their
placement of beats (or expected placement of beats) within the measure. Experienced dancers,
especially those familiar with the genre, can quickly recognize nuances in videos; participants
quickly became fellow analyzers, often expounding on particular moments that either I or they
saw in the videos, as they caught onto my method. It is challenging, however, to create
transcriptions that capture this aspect of dancers’ musicality due to the three- and four-
dimensionality of dance. The motions of dancers are not easily captured in transcription (as
evident in the two excerpts above), and the attempts I forge here are meant to accompany
multiple viewings of the source video.

Rachel, a follower, described a trait of one of her favorite dancers, Juan: “he speeds up or
slows down.” Rachel’s sense of the beat level is such that she is comfortable enough to depart
from it herself, as I discuss in Chapter 5 with an example focusing on her in the same song I will
analyze below. As I parsed out exactly what she meant by Juan speeding up or slowing down,
she elaborated that she enjoys “the way he waits on the back beat and then accentuates.” Juan’s
sense of the beat level is malleable; most often he dances behind the beat, but never disconnects
from the music. When I interviewed Juan he told me, "The more you listen [to salsa music], the

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36 Each category has numerous subheadings, as would each musician’s categories. These data
categories for dance are found in Judith Lynne Hanna (1987 [1979]) To Dance is Human: A
37 Juan was the first person that I interviewed for the project. We did not have the chance to
follow up and discuss videos that I recorded later while data gathering for other participants.
more your brain is trained to listen to music.” He seems to play with the music without inhibition, I would argue, precisely because of his knowledge of the genre. Dancers who play with the beat (really the timespace between each beat), and their partners’ expectations within the construct of the measure, draw the attention of other dancers. Their feel appeals to dancers who may or may not understand what exactly is being played with. Juan emphasized that such play could only be enacted with certain partners, namely “good dancers,” because these dancers can follow his lead, “almost as if [they] could read my mind.” A dancer that is sensitive in his or her proprioception can almost predict their partner’s moves; their corporeal knowledge extends to knowing how close or far he or she can push or pull a partnered move to heighten the tension of an otherwise normally spaced pattern. He told me that some dancers are “thrown off” by the unexpected and get confused. The “good” followers are able to internalize multiple timespace perceptions depending on skill at dynamic attending, one stream of which is the stepping pattern of their leader. Personally, I have always enjoyed how Juan feels the music and wondered how Rachel would articulate her enjoyment of dancing with him.

Video 4.3 shows the beginning of Rachel and Juan dancing to Tito Puente’s 1950 mambo “Cao Cao Maní Picao” at a social in midtown Manhattan in February of 2015. Although they both seem to connect with the song almost immediately upon the start of the dance, I will focus on Juan. At 0:06, he hops upward, bringing his left leg into the air with the horn accent on beat 7. When the horn line repeats, and the end accent returns, he slides his left foot along the floor (as is necessary for the transitional movement leading Rachel into the cross-body lead beginning at 0:08). When horn accents return, he (and Rachel) bring back the hopping motion (0:19-20). From 0:20-0:22, Juan moves diagonally to his left with a flurry of footwork that is more rhythmically dense when compared to Rachel’s basic stepping pattern, but he returns to fairly
basic weight distribution and stepping pattern after that half measure. At around 0:40 Rachel pointed out a moment where Juan “speeds up with little hops” (0:41 and 0:44) and “sort of suspends time for a second and then comes back down” (0:44-5).

R: Earlier he was doing that, [suspending time] too. The thing is I'm not so consciously aware of this when I dance, but it feels nice.

j: While you’re dancing?

R: Yeah. It changes it from someone who’s doing it in a rote, memorized sort of way to someone who is really engaging with the music in a dynamic way, and with you, and with the steps. It’s nice.

The dynamic quality of Juan’s movements derives from a playfulness within the timespace of the measure. He knows where the beats are and where Rachel will likely be (or how to deal with it well if she is not where he expects her), and is enjoying the moment deeply. He is attentive to the nuances of the song, of his partner, and of the space around him. The question of the researcher is how, exactly, does he do this in a way to express to his partner, and to those around him watching, that he is fully enjoying the moment?

Video 4.4 is edited to include only the latter section of Video 4.3 and is slowed down to 55% speed. Beginning with Juan’s rhythmically dense, diagonal move to the left in the regular-speed version (0:20 in Video 4.3), we can see that he lands beat 1 with his left foot directly underneath him (beginning of 0:05 at the first iteration of “Cao”). He then initiates a rather quick movement by propelling himself sideways off his weight change (to his right foot) on beat 2 and takes a long step between this step/beat and his step on beat 3 (his left foot, on top of the beat), which he lands to the left side of his body. What is rhythmically dense turns out to be him playing with, “engaging with,” the song. He steps twice between beats 3 and 5, but the placement is difficult to pin down. It is easier to listen to the song and hear how his motions connect to the lyrics. After crossing his right foot in front of where he landed beat 3, he lands it on the second
iteration of the word “Cao.” He then brings his left foot around from behind and taps it so that the tap coincides with the third iteration of the word “Cao,” itself slightly late on its offbeat entrance. Juan steps out of this moment with a marked stomp to the floor slightly after beat 5 with his left foot (end of 0:07, almost timepoint 0:08), as he prepares Rachel for another cross-body lead. Figure 4.3 provides a musical transcription of the melodic line and Juan’s footwork for the first half of the measure.

Figure 4.3: Transcription of measure that begins at 0:05 in Video 4.4.

What the transcription cannot provide is the feeling of how he alters the line of his body from vertical to diagonal within this measure—nearly creating a three-dimensional triangle with the angles that he creates between the placement of his feet and his head at different timepoints within the measure. Rachel talked about how his movements add “texture” to the dance. The force of how he propels his body through space, seemingly falling away, or pushing toward his partner, creates a dynamic tension in timespace that is palpable to others who understand the medium of dance—certainly to Rachel. Figure 4.4 attempts to outline Juan’s triangle in a series of stills derived from Video 4.4.
**Figure 4.4:** Still photo timeline derived from Video 4.4 demonstrating three-dimensional triangle. Arrows indicate the direction of motion/energy; their color associates them to the plane on which they interact.

At the beginning of the measure, Juan centers his weight below his torso, as is common for salsa dancers, and downward for beat 1. He shifts his foot outward to the right for beat 1 and uses the energy to propel his body (torso and head last) to the left—on the same plane (marked with black lines and arrows) as he centered his weight on beat 1. By the time beat 3 arrives, he has shifted his entire body to the left side, completing the triangle of that plane, and polishes the moment off with the flair of increased rhythmic density discussed above. Late on beat 5, with an expressive microtiming response to the musicians’ microtimed placement of the final iteration of “cao” late on the and of 4, Juan moves forward—beginning to form a triangle on the plane closer to Rachel (marked with red lines and arrows). On beat 7, he moves across the dancing space diagonally. By the end of the measure, beat 8, he is already preparing the cross-body lead, and has re-centered his weight below his torso, although his right shoulder is open to Rachel (cueing to her that a cross-body motion is likely going to occur in the next measure).

Later in Video 4.4, as we approach the moments where Rachel tells us that Juan “suspends time,” we can see that he lands right on top of beat 1 at 0:39. This measure will be the third iteration of the melodic pattern seen in Figure 4.5.
He does not step on beat 2 (as Rachel may expect), but steps on beat 3, which corresponds with a horn accent at 0:40—the third time the horns accent this beat. He brings his right foot immediately back under his body, crossing it in front of his left to make another diagonal line with his body, and times the placement of his footfall (and a weight change) with the second “Cao” of the coro response on beat 4—not where Rachel would expect this weight change to take place, which would normally occur on beat 5. Here he seems to speed up; more steps occur in a timespace normally reserved for fewer motions and steps, and certainly his steps are not aligning with the “correct” basic step that one learns in a studio. The motion to bring his left foot around for the next step seems to take forever; Juan is so far behind beat 6 that his weight change lands almost on beat 7 with his left foot. Here he seems to slow down. On the and of 7, he quickly shifts his weight to his right and, immediately, on beat 8 (or somewhere close to that moment) his left leg is up with a hop (its highest upward moment accents the and of 8—as if an

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38 Slow motion analysis of this video was not made easier by the microtiming variations of the in-house clave player. His “interpretation” of the clave was something that Rachel brought up in her interview; often this clave player’s mistakes and/or late entries were distracting and made focusing on her partner a challenging experience. Luckily, he didn’t play along with more than a couple of songs that night. Personally, I often dance on the opposite side of the room for the very reason to provide aural distance from not-so-experienced percussionists at this event. It takes a great deal of focus to not listen to clave sticks in such a room and still focus on the music being played through the speakers.
inhalation) that does not come down until beat 1 of the next measure. The next measure (beginning at 0:44) is a slight variation of the same motions.

As the music changes in the following measure, so do Juan’s motions (0:48-9). In this measure his motions, or lack thereof, counter the rhythmic density in the music (Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6: Transcription of measure that begins at 0:48 in Video 4.4.

He kicks at the floor at 0:49 with his right foot, in the middle of beat 1, and holds it in the air—suspending time—until he crosses it over his left foot, and puts it down (weight included), on beat 4, when he suddenly raises his back (left) foot. He hops back on his right foot, (with left leg bent at the knee), into beat 5. He replaces his left foot down, as expected, to land (late on) beat 6 forward. He then switches his weight to his right foot a bit late on beat 7, and closes the measure with another little hop on beat 8.

Recall that Rachel said that Juan engages with the music in a dynamic way. Watching them as an observer, I see them both dynamically engage with the song and their love for the moment of the dance. In their improvisation, they chose a hopping motion for a characteristic flair in their interpretation of this song during its first moments. In our interview, Rachel told me that “his hop is a nice way of lengthening a phrase,” which Juan does by hanging in the air on the crest of the hop, or not. I have seen both dancers hop in other songs, but this song brought out
more hopping on both their parts than usual. Juan’s characteristic foot swivels were also present. Rachel picked up on these as well: “He has a nice swivel in his foot that makes it seem like his foot wants to move with the song. It’s like it’s being held down and he still has to express the music somehow.” Juan engages so much of his body in the dance that his feet are only one interesting detail. He slides them, pivots them, taps, kicks, and stomps. Poetically, one might say that it seems as if the music is dancing him, but this is not how a dancer dances. Juan became the dancer he is in these videos through practice; exposure to different styles, partners, and dancing environments.

How Juan manifests the feel that Rachel enjoys when dancing with him comes from an attentiveness to how music and his body move through time. Rachel describes Juan’s dancing as “intentional…as if he’s teasing…tickling the music or something.” He gets into the music, as the vernacular goes. Although I have omitted an analysis of Rachel’s movements in this chapter, dancers who play with the music as she does inspire Juan to get into the music more than partners who are worried about executing moves correctly. He told me:

I focus on my partner. The music is there, it’s working [gestures around his ear with his finger]. I feel like the music is telling me, “Don’t worry. Have a good time.” It’s like somebody’s telling me, the singers or the musicians telling me, “I know you like this music. Go ahead, dance! We’re here! We’re helping you.” I feel a connection. … It feels like flying.

The playfulness and love that he has for the music and dancing manifests in his actions much in the way the composer, arranger, and musicians are treating the music, regardless of whether that energy was captured on a recording or is created live.\footnote{One reason why salsa clásica, and earlier mambo, captivate such a broad listening audience so many years after their initial popularity may be the tendency of bands to record their studio records in “live” takes, where the band members would play simultaneously but be recorded on individual microphones for later manipulation when the album was mastered. This recording}
music and his partner comes from interactions within the musical experience that defy, but do not elude, explanation. The feelings that Juan generates with his motions as he moves through timespace challenge those who wish to reconstruct a moving, four-dimensional art form onto a piece of paper. Dance is meant to sweat and trip and play with expectation. The dance/music experience becomes imbued with energy at the smallest level of the measure if dancers fully attend to the way the manipulation of timespace feels in a song.

The musical sensitivity of a dancer such as Juan marks him as a good partner for songs that focus on lyrical content, thus drawing attention to the microtiming variations of the main melodic line. Juan is a sought-after partner when a salsa romantica comes on because of his tasteful interpretation of the music and how well he connects with the lyrics, his partner, and the music simultaneously. Other bands, such as the popular Africando, favor slightly different song structure than salsa dura, and draw attention to the vocal line much in the way that salsa romantica focuses mainly on the lyrics. Compton, a leader, often chooses to dance with me over other dancers when songs from this band are played because he knows that I will respond to his interpretations of the vocal line, such as once when we swayed forward and back with the main vocal line each time the hook in the lyrics returned. Compton said that there was no other way to dance to this particular song; if the song was danced “straight 1, 2, 3—5, 6, 7, you would lose the feeling,” a point with which I completely agree. The lead singer hovers above the beat level,

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style fell out of fashion with the rise of salsa romantica, when musicians would record tracks individually (Washburne 2008). Studio musicians today can contribute tracks to an album and never set foot in the same room as the other musicians who end up “playing” on the same track. Studio-recorded music from the era of salsa romantica into the present almost always utilizes click tracks, thus eliminating the very feel of expressive microtiming variations that many dancers love. Very skilled musicians can “play” with/against a click-track, but the ensemble’s group musicality diminishes greatly unless they record “live,” or have experience playing live together.
dipping down only occasionally, seemingly to remind the dancer that he is aware of the other hierarchical levels within the song. The space between the beats matter just as much as the beats themselves. How dancers playfully, or sensually, interpret the timespace of the measure makes you feel deeply inside the music and is a characteristic of skilled, experienced dancers.

**Tempo Rubato**

Magna and Juan push and pull the timespace between the beats within the measure but never lose their dynamic attending of the quarter-note level of the basic step. Their sensitivity to the music and their conveyance of musical expression to their partner is finite, yet feels magical—nearly ineffable. These are the moments that create smiles on partners’ faces; you can see Magna’s partner, Jared, smile after she comes out of the measures I analyze above. These moments of play and thwarted expectation are felt, if not seen, between dancers. Every dance is a new event involving new variables and new opportunities, especially when dancing with dancers whose skill-level consists of expressing and interpreting the music.

Musicians trained in Western art music refer to the slight slowing down or speeding up in tempo of a melodic line (Type II), or all the lines in a musical piece (Type I), by a performer as *tempo rubato*, literally robbed time in Italian. The type of rubato related to salsa, where an underlying pulse (and its related beat) remain constant while lines around it fluctuate, applies to dancers as well as to the instrumentalists that make up the ensemble (Type II). Time, for the dancers and musicians, can be added to one line of music by increasing the timespace between notes (slowing down), but must balance by a relative decrease in timespace between other notes in the same phrase (speeding up), so that the phrase “feels right” in relation to the constant
pulse/beat level of the music in which it is occurring. Neither the dancer, nor musician, can lose track of the pulse or beat level—to do so would go against the flow. Type II rubato was common in Western European music of the 18th century (however lesser known this fact is now), and influenced later composers from the era, notably Frédéric Chopin—known for his highly expressive piano works. Although Type I rubato can be found in music of many eras, it is considered a characteristic of the Romantic Western art music (19th Century) and pieces from this era are commonly performed with Type I-style rubato. A slight detour to explore Chopin’s Type II rubato, and how he taught feel and flow to his students, will reveal how a sense of time must be in relation to the surrounding musical context.

Pianist and scholar Edward Dannreuther (1844-1905) included instruction that Chopin directed to his professional pupils in his seminal book on ornamentation [1895]. To the present day, many performers and listeners alike may be surprised to find out that Chopin kept (and used!) a metronome on his teaching piano and used it to correct his students:

The graces are part of the text, and therefore part of the time; they must be justly fitted in—and therein lies the trouble! … The singing hand may deviate, the accompaniment must keep time. … Fancy a tree with its branches swayed by the wind; the stem represents the steady time, the moving leaves are the melodic inflections. This is what is meant by Tempo and Tempo rubato (161).

“The steady time” of accompaniment, or at least as steady as humans are capable, drives Type I of rubato; without it one would not feel the inflections that the performer expresses to the listener. Likewise in salsa, dancers who internalize “the steady time” of the pulse and beat levels can deviate from it, and express themselves as long as their motions fit into the overall time of the measure. Dancers can tease the medium of timespace through their movements; they manipulate the feel of the tempo.
The expressive microtiming that skilled dancers exhibit is a trait that most of the dancers with whom I spoke learned on their own, intuitively, through time spent dancing with many different dancers in the social dance environment and through years of listening to salsa music. Some dancers attributed particular movements (shines) to teachers; this is where the journey of musicality begins for most salsa dancers who learn in a studio. The challenge, however, is in understanding these movements in relation to the music, and finding ways to articulate such a relationship.

For dancers, tempo rubato can be a powerful concept although the genres compared here are strikingly different. Salsa generally maintains a consistent beat, but it is this very consistency that allows the manipulation of its timespace to feel so enjoyable. The entrainment to a beat, and pulse, level allows the skilled dancer to attend to other musical factors almost instantaneously. Magna told me:

> When I started dancing, I was much more concerned with being on time, being on a beat. That’s been many years now. I can stay in tempo; I can stay in rhythm; I know where my beats are in the music so if I ever exit out of a movement, I know where I should be and where my weight should be. I know how to follow my partner and I can play with the music and that’s all that matters to me.

In fact, most of the participants in the project stated this to me in some version or another. All that really mattered was that they were having fun with their partner; they were especially happy if the music was good too. Participants marked dancers who started to play inside the measure and exhibit a manipulation of timespace at this level as highly skilled. Jessica, a mostly self-taught dancer, told me that she “loves energy and playfulness ... partners who can keep the dance steps but at the same time go outside of it and just play with it and not really follow the linear steps. I prefer someone who is more advanced and can make it more fun.” Fun, for her, could be found in the moments in between the basic steps. Even without formal musical training, she
senses a connection—a sincerity—between an advanced partner and the music. When we watched a video of her dancing with a partner she described as “blah,” (I offered, “he’s trying”), she told me that, “It’s not real. You can move your body all you want but if I don’t feel it, the energy—I just can’t see him actually really dancing.” No matter how much this man tried to impress Jessica, how hard he hit the accents in the music, she was not convinced (nor was I) that he was “feeling it.” There was no finesse in his motions. Seeing the lack of feel in a dancer (this was not the only example I gathered throughout my fieldwork) shows how not playing with the timespace in a measure, or plodding through straight time (the 1, 2, 3—5, 6, 7), makes a dancer seem to “march” rather than “dance,” and explains why Jessica, and so many others with whom I spoke, differentiated between dancing and “actually” or “really dancing.”

Dancers have used metaphor and analogy to explain the feeling of dancing with particular partners throughout the many informal conversations I have had over the course of almost twenty years of social salsa dancing. This seems the most effective means to convey the feeling of expressive microtiming that a partner characteristically accrues. “Dancing with her is like driving a fancy sports car.” “She follows as one pours a glass of water.” “Dancing with him was like starting an old lawn mower with one of those pull starters.” “Elastic.” “Heavy.” I found that dancers gestured issues of timespace manipulation when words failed them. They would pull their hands away from their body, gesture pulling away from their partner, or make other gestures that, most often, clearly conveyed feeling to me. Modern dance and ballet teachers have also applied metaphor to convey the feeling(s) of moving through timespace.

Successful teachers are often those who put creative spoken metaphors to skillful effect: evoking appropriate imagery and understanding that results in changes in the students’ kinesthetic concepts and neuro-muscular patterning and so in their physical performance. Likewise, choreographers frequently employ metaphorical language to explain and demonstrate simultaneously in order to achieve the desired nuances in a dancer’s performance (Farnell 1999:151).
Since my project did not include detailed analysis of choreography, nor study of popular student performance troupes, research of how metaphor is applied in studio settings deserves further investigation. My investigation into improvisatory dance reveals that the language dancers use when they speak of the manipulation of timespace elicits the connections and individuality that dancers cultivate over many years within the communities where they frequently dance.

**Participatory Discrepancies and the Conversations That Draw Us Back to the Dance Floor**

A common issue that I encounter when sharing my fieldwork videos with people who are not familiar with the intricacies of salsa or partnered social dance is the tacit assumption that dancers’ footwork will move consistently with regard to the musical measure, although the goal of most dancers is to become so adept with the dance that they can play with the music and “have a good time.” Dancers who are “feeling it” on the dance floor often look messy and idiosyncratic to an observer not versed in the subtleties of timespace manipulation. Spontaneous creation and improvisation “in the moment” appealed to most of the dancers that I interviewed; they enjoyed “those little things that will get you going…make you crack a smile.”

Charles Keil proposed a theory of participatory discrepancies, where slight misalignments of music such as beats not struck simultaneously (“out of time”) or pitches not played together (“out of tune”) give power to music because of its unique human quality (1987:275).

Music is about process, not product; it’s not seriousness and practice in deferring gratification but play and pleasure (French 1985) that we humans need from it; “groove” or “vital drive” is not some essence of all music that we can simply take for granted, but must be figured out each time between players; music is not so much about abstract emotions and meaning, reason, cause and effect, logic, but rather about motions, dance, global and contradictory feelings; it’s not about composers bringing forms from on high
for mere mortals to realize or approximate, it’s about getting down and into the groove, everyone creating socially from the bottom up (Keil 1995:1).

Keil’s contribution to the study of expressive microtiming in music is striking and he has inspired many scholars to look deeper into the nuances of what moves people to love the music that they do (e.g., Prögler). Keil has aroused both enthusiasm and distaste for his particular style of ethnographic inquiry, but I evoke his spirit here to remind readers “that every groove has a material dimension” (1995:3) and that this material dimension resides in the movement that music creates in our bodies. Recalling dancers he had seen recently in Cuba, Keil wrote that “the best dancers were consistently ‘between the beat’ in their footwork, providing a hermeneutic or between-the-lines interpretation of drumming patterns that were certainly complicated enough before the dancers added their moves to the mix” (1987:279). He suggests that we look to musicians, as well as to dancers, and ask the experts in both areas ethnographically “where do they think the magic of participation is coming from?” (1987:279). I certainly did not restrict my research to “experts,” and I may not have asked this exact question, but all of the dancers with whom I spent time exploring issues of musicality certainly answered it in many ways throughout the course of our interviews. The value of manipulating the timespace of the measure, consciously or not, moved through nearly every dancer’s body. They would respond to my questions that delved into their domains of feel and flow, of it and something, but there were consistent tropes in the interviews: Almost all dancers with whom I spoke told me that salsa music made them move and that they were most happy on the dance floor, being social, being with their partners, in the music.

40 In searching for the video examples for Chapter 1, my attempts to find clear examples of different versions of forward-and-back salsa styles that aligned with the music clearly and consistently from the footage I recorded for the project were usually thwarted after the first measure of music, sometimes even after only four beats.
Dancers are not that different from musicians in how they relate to one another, their sensitivity to the overall environment, and their acquisition of finite skills—albeit dancers hone different motor skills. I found that I could replace the word “musician” with “dancer” in many of the writings that addressed how musicians dealt with, or conceived of, musical structures, behaviors, and personal styles and still maintain the essence of the passages. For example, in response to Keil’s theory, Ingrid Monson writes:

While being ahead, on top, or behind the beat is certainly one aspect of the interactive process that professional jazz musicians mentioned to me in my ethnographic work (1994), the issue is embedded in the larger issue of instrumental/social roles within the ensemble and the ongoing monitoring of musical processes that musicians talk about as “picking up on” the musical situation. The ability to anticipate and participate is much more than a matter of being ahead or behind the beat: it is also the product of the history of interaction between players, their cumulative musical knowledge of the repertory and transformative devices, their technical skill, their recognition of familiar passages and aesthetics in performance, and their ability to actively deploy sound to affect each other’s musical behavior. Several musicians…mentioned to me the importance of pushing or pulling back an ensemble according to the context of performance. In other words, being ahead or behind may be as much an active decision varying according to the larger context of musical events (among them fills, call and response exchanges between soloist and rhythm section, gradual build-up of interactive tensions throughout multiple choruses, and the trading of time-keeping roles within the ensemble) as a generally fixed characteristic of a person’s style. The social metaphor of “conversation” is something that both Berliner and I encountered in our work with musicians…(1995:87-8).

Nearly every dancer with whom I spoke used the term “conversation” or “dialogue” to explain the interactions he or she had with their partner and the music, just as Magna did above. Music making and dancing requires simultaneous attention to a multitude of information streams. Dancing, as my first teacher is fond of saying, “is a contact sport.” It is an endeavor that requires people to be active, to participate in an exchange with another person about movements and the music to which you are both dancing. The words that participants chose to describe their preference in partners expressed the vitality, the near-cosmic connection and commitment that
Keil alludes to in his writing: wavelength, lock in, and the zone. Daisuke, a formally trained musician and social dancer, spoke to me about what he looked for in a potential follower:

Someone who is expressive, who is not thinking so much. Someone who responds, who is having a good time, smiling. Someone who is just dancing, really not caring about whether or not people are looking at you. Someone who is dancing with you rather than dancing to look good. Someone who has a good connection [gestures between two people]. It’s not just on the dance floor, when you’re having a conversation with someone or on a date—some people are not open. Some people are not willing to tell you as much, or try to get to know you as much. I don’t know if it has to do with how secure or confident one feels. I think it’s the same in real life. When you first meet somebody, they just present themselves how they are; same on the dance floor. They don’t care what anyone else thinks. This is who I am; this is how I dance. It doesn’t matter if this is right or wrong. I will do what I want to do. Also, having energy. The best dancers have, they give me a lot of energy. You have to give. They’re not going to just give it to you right off the bat. But at the same time, I have to feel comfortable giving my energy.

The ways that dancers and musicians share themselves are intimate and playful. The energies that a dancer gives throughout the dance relate to the manipulation of timespace at different levels of the music to create different feelings within a dance. The small-scale manipulations of timespace at the level of the measure interact with the patterns notated in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, and the melodic lines, such as those Juan and Magna interact with in the analyses above. How a dancer manipulates timespace at the level of the measure provides the joy of “being in the moment” that so many dancers spoke to me about in our interviews. We are drawn to the music and know that something is in there. The conversations that dancers and musicians have with each other are the magic that Keil and Monson write about. When dancers push and pull themselves in a sort of rubato with the near-constant and complex flow of salsa music, the participatory discrepancies of timespace manipulation make the conversation interesting. Recall that some of the participants whom I spoke with, and danced with, have been dancing to similar music for over sixty years—and go out dancing more frequently than someone writing a dissertation on the topic of salsa dancing goes out to dance. Some people wonder how we don’t
get bored dancing to the same, somewhat predictable, music, especially if we attend events where a DJ plays prerecorded music. Improvising a playful, intimate dialogue with a different partner (or even the same people at different times) to the “same” music promises that the experiences will always be fresh. The conversations will be spontaneous and the dialogue will feel natural the better and more comfortable we become when dancing.
Simultaneously with the rise in popularity of on-2 dancing came an increase of discourse among dancers surrounding clave and how dancers of this particular style listen and connect to the music. On-2 dancers, both in New York and around the world, can often be heard stating that their style “adheres to the clave,” that they are dancing in the music instead of with the music because of their awareness of clave, or that they dance en clave—distinguishing themselves from dancers of other styles of salsa. Clave’s history is a complex and multifaceted one that has been utilized by teachers of many different styles as an often-sensationalized narrative for salsa’s roots in African musical forms, granting invested students the opportunity to delve into the history of the dance/music. Many dancers I interviewed, however, found the concept of clave confusing and challenging to identify, despite many dance teachers’ insistence that it is a crucial component of the music. This chapter introduces the various concepts of clave and clave breaks, presents the discourse of clave and the rhetoric employed by on-2 dancers, and provides examples of how on-2 dancers listen (and don’t listen) to salsa music. This chapter reevaluates the concept of dancing en clave and returns it to its place in the music, regardless of the particular style of salsa to which a dancer pledges allegiance.

The Concepts of Clave

Following other scholars of salsa, as well as some dancers’ opinions, I consider clave to be an asymmetric timeline pattern that “functions as a rhythmic organizing principle for the
entire ensemble [i.e., the performers of the musical instruments].”\textsuperscript{41} As illustrated in Chapter 1, the clave rhythm is contained within an eight-beat cycle, as is the basic stepping pattern of the salsa dance. Salsa music is considered to be governed by the clave rhythm, either as 2-3 son clave (Figure 5.1a) or 3-2 son clave (Figure 5.1b). Rarely, salsa music utilizes rumba clave (Figure 5.1c). New York and Puerto Rican style salsa, known as salsa clásica (classic salsa) or salsa dura (hard salsa), most frequently utilizes the 2-3 son clave.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure51a.png}
\caption{Figure 5.1a: 2-3 Son clave.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure51b.png}
\caption{Figure 5.1b: 3-2 Son clave.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure51c.png}
\caption{Figure 5.1c: Rumba clave (most commonly in 3-2 form).}
\end{figure}

Clave holds various meanings to the many different people involved in the world of salsa. Chris Washburne refers to the multivalent application of the term: “Within the salsa context, clave is a negotiated multilayered symbol that embodies ethnicity, issues of identity, and serves as a gauge for judging authenticity” (2002:120-1). Clapping the clave in dancing environments implies that you have a deeper understanding of the music than a simple counting of beats necessary to step through the dance. Joining in when others clap the pattern provides a sense of camaraderie, raising energy in the room, regardless of the depth of knowledge you bring to the action.

Most musically-sensitive dancers are aware of the clave, at some level of perception, in their aesthetic evaluation of the music. But many dancers, especially beginners and novices to the social arena, are not conscious of how clave works or its aesthetic values. Most of the dancers who participated in the project did not use clave as the main referent to connect to the music for dancing. Instead, after I analyzed our feedback interviews, it seemed that many dancers listened to a combination of instruments and harmonic progressions to make many of their structural dancing decisions, such as when to start a measure or when to change turn patterns. In fact, some dancers could not identify the clave pattern unless it was clearly indicated by a pair of wooden sticks, also referred to as claves, within the instrumentation.

Contrary to popular belief, clave has not always been a keystone component of music theory discourse, nor were the rules surrounding its use codified in the manner they are today in particular styles of salsa. David Peñalosa writes in his seminal work *The Clave Matrix*:

The Cuban concept of clave as a simple pattern conveying a larger and more complex structure was codified during the mid-twentieth century. This was the period when Cuban popular music assimilated greater harmonic sophistication [especially through Mario Bauza’s efforts in Latin jazz in New York City] and there was a significant increase in interactions between Cubans and non-Cuban performers, composers and arrangers. As a result, clave became as important a component of music theory in Cuban popular music
as the rules of harmony. Because the concept was codified in popular music, many musicians consider clave to convey not only a general rhythmic structure, but also conventions of composing and arranging that are specific to popular music (2009:213).

Switching the direction of the clave or ambiguous clave was not considered to be “wrong” until much more recently in the music’s history. One hears, and reads, the term Clave Police (generally capitalized) thrown around by New York musicians, dancers, and scholars, as if breaking the rules is criminal. This leads one to surmise that if there are indeed “rules,” per se, that they, too, are also fairly new—and subgenre specific. The codification of clave practices likely arose out of the innovative period of the 1940s, following the rise of popular Afro-Cuban dance/music such as that of Machito and his Afro-Cubans and Arsenio Rodriguez (Peñalosa 2009:143 and García 2006:64-92). The origin of the term Clave Police seems more recent; arranger Marty Sheller told me that he began using it only twenty years ago.\(^42\) Percussionist and arranger Kevin Moore states that Sheller criticized one of Moore’s student arrangements with the admonishment, “If I wrote that arrangement for Tito Puente’s band, the ‘Clave Police’ would have come knocking at my door” (Moore 2011:45). Clave Police or not, arrangers who write in the New York style, such as Sheller, play with the clave in ways that challenge both the listener and dancer, although not always in the same manner.

In present-day New York or Puerto Rican style salsa, once the clave begins, it commonly maintains its direction (2-3 or 3-2) throughout the song. Vocal and other musical accents tend to fall on the beats of the two side and are syncopated on the three side, even if the clave pattern is not explicitly played by the claves themselves. The modern-day, New York listener assumes an uncompromising attribute in the clave: once the pattern is established, it will remain the same. Historically, though, there is evidence of irregular and shifting claves in genres that influenced

\(^{42}\) Personal communication, May 24, 2017.
mambo and salsa, such as danzón and son. Pioneering New York mambo arrangers, such as Mario Bauza and Edgar Sampson deftly played with clave directions within their songs to great success (Peñalosa 2009:143 and Sanabria quoted in Peñalosa 2009:248), laying the very foundation for later Latin-jazz innovators who gave us the songs that form the canon of salsa clásica.

Current subgenres of salsa differ in their adherence to keeping clave consistent; for example, timba prefers a clave license (this phrase, similar to an “artistic license,” is attributed to Juan Formell) where the pattern can change (much as in the sophisticated ways that Bauza and Puente experimented with in the 1950s), and Colombian salsa need not take sides (what some musicians refer to as cruzao [crossed]), because the melodies and the dance often behave ambidirectional—in four-beat measures instead of eight-beat measures. Although most New York dancers will comment on the strict adherence of New York and Puerto Rican style salsa to one clave direction, a constant or clear clave direction is not always evident in the salsa clásica that many New York dancers love. Salsa clásica, in fact, often obfuscates clave direction in the verse section (A) in order to heighten tension that is later released in the montuno (B) section of the song.

The Half-Measure Interruption

The arrangers of salsa clásica frequently incorporate rhythmic breaks, called bloques, particularly in the A section, or head, of the arrangement. A bloque is an illusion of a halt in the forward motion of the music, usually by means of a sudden decrease of rhythmic density, or silence, broken by chordal attacks by the full band—a feature of Latin music beginning in the time of Arsenio Rodríguez (1940s) and culminating in the extended bloques of modern timba.
(Moore 2011b). In salsa clásica, a bloque can be arranged as a single eight-beat measure, but can also be composed as a truncated, four-beat unit added to a formal section characterized by groupings of eight-beat units. Dancers (and often musicians) often refer to any pause in the forward motion of the music as a break—as in a break in the forward motion of the music. I will refrain from using this term so as not to confuse it with its use with the break in a dancer’s direction of motion. The issue, however, is that when a bloque consists of a four-beat unit added to another section of normative eight-beat measures, a half-measure interruption disrupts the dancers’ concept of the measure. Figure 5.2 provides an outline of a typical salsa clásica song with half-measure bloques in the A section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>large-scale form</th>
<th>song</th>
<th>small-scale form</th>
<th>hypermetric grouping</th>
<th>descriptions of sonic material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>00:27</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>verse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>00:55</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>01:23</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
<td>verse 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>01:50</td>
<td>c</td>
<td></td>
<td>sonoro/coro alternates [10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>02:16</td>
<td>d</td>
<td></td>
<td>full band bloques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>02:22</td>
<td>e</td>
<td></td>
<td>trombone mambo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td></td>
<td>trumpet mambo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e</td>
<td></td>
<td>trombone mambo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f1</td>
<td></td>
<td>variation of trumpet mambo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>03:01</td>
<td>d</td>
<td></td>
<td>full band bloques (variation) with sonero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>03:10</td>
<td>c</td>
<td></td>
<td>sonoro/coro alternates [14]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>03:44</td>
<td>e</td>
<td></td>
<td>sonoro/coro overlaps w/trombone moña [mambo?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f/g</td>
<td></td>
<td>trombone moña continues w/ trumpet moñas added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>04:14</td>
<td>c</td>
<td></td>
<td>sonoro/coro alternates [10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>04:38</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.2:** Outline of “Trucutú,” performed by Tommy Olivencia y Su Orquesta, from their 1975 album *Plante Bandera*.

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43 Kevin Moore defines a bloque as when “the whole band stops keeping time and re-enters in complete rhythmic unison with a challenging syncopation. Listeners and dancers who can hang on long enough are rewarded with an incomparable feeling of exhilaration when the rhythm section roars back in” (2011b).
Column 1 indicates the largest formal structure.

Column 2 indicates time points on the audio recording.

Column 3 indicates the smaller sections of the form that make up each of the larger sections.

Column 4 indicates the measures in each part of the form indicated in Column 3—each straight line indicates one measure (eight beats) of music; 1/2 indicates half of a measure (four beats); spacing between groups of lines indicates hypermetric units, many of which are repetitions of melodic/harmonic material. For example, beginning at 2:22, sections e and f each contain a pair of identical two-measure hypermetric units.

Column 5 provides a verbal description of the sonic material. Numbers within brackets indicate number of measures where groupings are difficult to read in Column 4.

At the four-beat bloque, indicated in Figure 5.2 by 1/2, on-2 dancers have options for how to deal with the insertion of a half measure. Dancers can simply memorize the song; perhaps they worked on a choreography to this particular version of the song and know it intimately or simply have years of familiarity with it, therefore they expect the half measure to occur and plan for it with their steps accordingly. A dancer with forty-six years of dancing and even more years of listening experience said “I would, depending on where I was with my partner, play around, do a like musicality move. I would probably break out of the closed position [gesturing a closed frame] and do a little shine or something, in time with the music for the break.” Another dancer may have sensitive hearing and immediately sense that the 1, the starting side for the motions that they have been conditioned to know through entrainment, has begun four beats earlier than they expected. This dancer seeks to remedy the change to the regular eight-beat measure created by the four-beat bloque. Dance teachers have created a sort of “cottage industry” of dance steps precisely for these moments in the music, and some on-2 dancers pride themselves on recognizing these moments and executing such steps during a dance. A third option is to ignore (or not notice the problem of) the half-measure insertion and medially transpose the dancing
measure—a problem for many followers of the on-2 style. Followers have expressed “being on the wrong side of the measure” as a fault of the leader and usually overpower him by backleading or breaking away from him to “correct” the direction of the basic step. In my own experience with New York on-2 dancers, it seems that some dancers’ strict adherence to executing particular movements only on particular sides of the measure marks an inability to improvise, or maintain flow, given the variables of a partner dance.

Many dancers in New York, and online salsa dance forums, refer to any interruption in the measure as a clave break, even though many dancers are not aware of clave in the music or express uncertainty of it when pressed for specifics. In order to clarify the differences between a half-measure interruption and a clave break—an interruption to the alternation of the two-side and the three-side, I will first take the reader (and listener) on the experience of one of these half-measure bloques and then parse out the meaning, function, and implications of these bloques and their relationship to the clave.

Before I dive in, however, I want to refresh the reader in general clave conventions (rules, if you will). According to Peñalosa,

From a strictly rhythmic point of view, the sequence of the clave’s two cells is always antecedent – consequent; the three-side is sounded first, answered by the two-side. From the perspective of chord progressions on the other hand, clave has a reversible sequence. It can be in either 3-2 or 2-3. The harmonic factor means that there are two possibilities for the “one” [beat 1, the downbeat] in relation to clave. The “one” of a song or phrase is either on the first beat of the three side (3-2) or the first beat of the two-side (2-3) (2009:138).

Dancers are listening for the “one,” the downbeat or beat 1, to begin their basic stepping patterns that correspond to the eight-beat measure. They do not need to know in which clave the song is to begin dancing. Once they begin dancing, there is a half measure interruption; some dancers ask themselves: Is this a clave break? According to the book of Peñalosa,
According to practice, the structural integrity [alternation] of clave should be maintained when switching the “one” from one side to the other. It has been done however using two three-sides, or two two-sides in a row, thus “breaking” or “jumping” clave. When this happens the rhythmic progression is interrupted and the dynamics of clave are momentarily defused (2009:156).

The dancers who are asking if the half-measure interruption is indeed a clave break are really asking if they need to find beat 1 again sooner than the standard eight beats to complete a stepping cycle. For musicians, the question of clave break raises other issues, most importantly that the strict alternation between sides of the clave is broken. Peñalosa’s footnote quotes John Amira and Steve Cornelius’s work that discusses the rhythmic drive created by regular alternation of the clave’s sides (2009:248), but fails to mention the rhythmic dynamic created by the bloque itself. The dancers (and musicians, and other aficionados) with whom I spoke explicitly stated that they loved the excitement that the “breaks” and “sudden stops” caused in the music (and the dance). Many of the old-timers expressed the opinion that the new salsa was boring because it lacked the “horn breaks” that characterized mambo and let you know “when the exciting part was coming up.” Do breaks stop the rhythmic motion or add to the excitement of the tune? Before we choose sides on The Clave Wars, let me return to “Trucutú,” an easily recognized tune in the canon of salsa clásica.

Case Study: The A section of “Trucutú” by Tommy Olivencia y su Orquesta

We have already established what happens to the dancer listening to “Trucutú” above—a half-measure interruption occurs and the dancer deals with it, or not. What happens to the clave in the introduction? Does it “break” or otherwise change? Starting at the very beginning, the first four-measure unit of the introduction seems clave ambiguous (Figure 5.3).
The horn line suggests 3-2 clave while the prominent timbre of the timbale player’s cáscara (literally, shell of the timbale drums) pattern does not commit to either clave pattern by striking eighth notes instead of a clave-specific pattern. The conga and bongo (seen above as a compound
line) generally keep to four-beat patterns that do not indicate a clave direction. 3-2 clave direction could be interpreted by the accent on the and of beat 4 of m. 2 leading into quarter-note accents on beats 5 and 6, but this moment is fleeting and the accent pattern not repeated in the following measures. The most prominent features of these opening measures are the cáscara’s eighths and bright horn melody. Figure 5.3 includes both the 3-2 clave and the 2-3 clave patterns marked at the top of each system in light grey, although the clave pattern itself is not played on the claves, or any other instrument at this point in the song. Although the melody syncopates into what could be the three side of the clave (beat 5 of each m), if one hears the melody in a 2-3 clave, the absence of any clear attack on beat 2 precludes a definite feeling of the 2 side of the clave in the first four beats of each measure—at least for these first four measures.

The second four-measure unit, beginning in m. 5, is in 2-3 clave, as indicated by the rhythm played on the cowbell mounted on the timbales, the mambo bell (Figure 5.4). The horn melody, a repetition of the previous four measures, still asserts 3-2 direction, but loses to the clear timbre and now clave-specific pattern provided by the timbale player’s mambo bell. The conguero continues four-beat patterns, with the addition of the dominant pitches on the and of beat 2 and beat 3 in mm. 6-7 and the first half of m 8. The bongocero continues to improvise accents on both the higher-pitched drum (the macho, male) and the lower-pitched drum (the hembra, female), but does not commit to either clave direction.
Figure 5.4a: “Trucutú,” mm. 5-11, with both clave directions indicated, mm. 5-8.
Figure 5.4b: “Trucutú,” mm. 5-11, with both clave directions indicated, mm. 9-11
The bloque in m. 9 raised an issue between myself and a musician with whom I spoke about this song. He had trouble fitting the four beats into “one hit” [one iteration] of clave. He flipped the clave one way and the other (upon multiple listenings) to try to feel which clave fit best into the beginning sections of the song, as he gently cursed me for his nightmares at “ruining this song” for him. As a “native Puerto Rican” pianist/percussionist, he said that no one read charts for this song on the island and that he had never seen a chart; he just knew to play in whatever key the band leader called out. Upon our close listening, the first four measures drove him insane; he says that he never realized the tension and likely listened to it with the knowledge that it was 2-3 clave throughout because once m. 5 clearly resolves the tension, one’s interpretation of the tune changes.

As a dancer somewhat conditioned to the “structural integrity” of clave alternation, I feel the measures leading into the bloque simply continue the 2-3 pattern the mambo bell dictates, thus placing the half-measure bloque of m. 9 on the two side of the clave. This feels correct given the convention that melodies will accent the strong beats of the two side of the clave and the band’s bloque accents the downbeat. The musician with whom I spoke flipped the clave this way and that, back and forth (3-2, 2-3), anything, it seemed, to try to make algebraic sense of the problem. But practically, if the musician was playing the song live, or I was dancing to the song on the dance floor, this bloque would not pose much of a problem for either of us. The practical issue for the musician and dancer is to make the moment flow. No matter which clave the bloque occurs in, the music continues past it in real time. The two-measure trumpet solo that follows the bloque (mm. 10-11) could be squeezed into either clave pattern because the soloist doesn’t provide clear accents or other indications of clave irection. The bongocero and conguero both accent the first downbeat after the bloque, but not the downbeat of m. 11. The bongocero accents
to beat 6 in both mm. 11 and 12, while the conguero briefly implies a 2-3 clave with his low G on the and of 6 in m. 10, but not in m. 11. We are left with more of the same ambiguity that we found in the beginning of the song until the return of the second four-measure unit of a, an exact repetition of mm. 5-8, eighteen measures later. The trumpet solo “could go either way,” much to the vexation of the musician with whom I spoke.

So what happens to the clave in “Trucutú”? An additional half measure is added into the arrangement to make the music more exciting. If we count the bloque at m. 9, we feel it as the two side of the clave, but without a three side. The music continues harmonically on the tonic chord, forcing the dancer (and listener) to start counting again with beat 1 after only getting to beat 4. The clave direction of m. 10 is again somewhat ambiguous. Likely the dancer, as the musician I interviewed, resets him or herself back to the two side (since the bass/harmonic pattern corresponds to what was heard earlier in mm 5, 6, and 7). If we count the bloque as a clave flip of 3-2 beginning at beat 5 of m. 8 (Figure 5.5), we are left with the trouble of figuring out the extra four beats at the beginning of m. 8. But as nothing jarring (i.e., the bloque) has happened at this point in real time, it is unlikely that this interpretation would occur.
Figure 5.5: “Trucutú,” mm. 8-11, regrouped with clave flips of reinterpreted bloque.

The structural integrity (the alternation of sides) of the clave remains the same, although their grouping has now changed. The issue remains the same: To get the trumpet solo at m. 10 to a 2-3 clave requires a juxtaposition of the same sides of the clave against each other—a blatant “mistake” in the arrangement, according to the musician I interviewed and, likely, most modern-day New York and Puerto Rican musicians. For dancers, however, the change of feel in the direction of dance either bothers them or it doesn’t. If a dancer notices a change and makes
adjustments to his or her steps, this would certainly mark the dancer as musically sensitive and physically capable of expressing such knowledge. If the dancer doesn’t notice, the music still goes on.

Upon closer inspection, one begins to piece together a purposeful trick in the ambiguity of the arrangement. The arranger, conservatory-trained Luíz “Perico” Ortiz, also obfuscates normative hypermetric expectations by adding three-measure units in between four-measure units for each verse. There is a purposeful ambiguity of timespace at the level of formal sections as well as the level of clave feel, alongside thick jazz voicings in the horn lines. The characteristic nasal, rumba timbre of Chamaco Ramírez’s lead voice, as well as his off-tune flatness, crunch against the horns’ voicings, giving the song a visceral quality (rich with what Charles Keil deems “out of tune” and “out of time”), that made nearly everyone I played it for smile broadly from ear to ear upon recognition in the first measure or two.

When the montuno arrives, (B), and with it the meshed rhythms of the bongo player’s handheld cowbell and the timbale player’s mounted bell patterns that clearly indicate a 2-3 clave direction, the listener feels a release of tension—but still no clear clave pattern played on clave sticks. Perico so deftly weaves together the trombone and trumpet mambos with these bell patterns that any musically sensitive listener becomes gleefully entwined in intricate counterpoint—proving that good salsa music is much more than clave. The ambiguous clave and half-measure bloque return with the recapitulation of the introduction, A1, closing the song in the expected manner typical of New York/Puerto Rican style salsa, regardless of whether the dancer decides to keep strict correspondence of his or her steps to the measure or not.

The interesting harmonic progressions, non-normative hypermetric groupings, transitional half-measure bloques, and contrapuntal weavings make “Trucutú” an example of a
salsa clásica song worthy of connoisseurs. Ambiguous clave direction heightens the tension between formal sections of any tune, and is a common feature of salsa clásica, be it from New York or elsewhere. Although not all salsa clásica songs incorporate half measure interruptions within small-scale formal sections, those that do offer added excitement and increased tension for dancers—an arranger’s nod to the past. Interestingly, a later version of “Trucutú,” sung by the Mambo Legends singer Frankie Vasquez, omits the half-measure interruption, keeping the entire A section in eight-beat measures—a common revision preference of present-day arrangers.

When I mentioned the Frankie Vasquez’s straight version of “Trucutú” to the musician I interviewed about this song, he told me that, “Back then, it was okay. It was Olivencia [earlier he had explained the near-God status Olivencia held in the hearts of Puerto Ricans]. There are seniorities; you don’t question things. Now they’re going to be questioned if they do it.” If clave changes occur, nowadays, they are smooth and flawless sounding. How fascinating, to me, that the very music that has influenced modern-day musicians, and motivates an entire genre of dancers, can be now viewed as incorrect, cruzao, or somehow problematic, when in fact the very tensions it raises were intentionally orchestrated to great success both contemporaneously and to the present day.

Clave Changes: Breaks, Flips, and The Fake Out

Bloques that create half-measure interruptions are noticed and discussed by some dancers of various styles of salsa who refer to these situations as clave breaks or clave changes. While the example of “Trucutú” above proves that not every half-measure interruption contains an actual clave change, dancers who aspire to a deeper connection with the music would benefit from
understanding the different types of clave changes and how they affect, or do not affect, the
eight-beat measure of the dance. Multiple threads found on online forums such as
salsaforums.com and dance-forums.com reference the work of Kevin Moore, musician and
author of many practical books on clave, timba, and other Cuban music. Moore’s work intersects
with that of David Peñalosa, author of *The Clave Matrix* (2009), quoted above. Both works
provide examples and exercises for understanding clave, while Peñalosa offers an in-depth
historical analysis of clave context, permutations, associated rhythmic patterns and concepts. I
offer a summary of the three types of clave changes that Moore categorizes in his 2011 book
*Understanding Clave and Clave Changes* below to clarify their terms and functionality for the
dancer.

Type 1 juxtaposes the two clave directions against each other, forcing a clave break
(Figure 5.6).

\[
2 – 3 \quad 2 – 3 \quad 2 – 3 \quad 3 – 2 \quad 3 – 2 \quad 3 – 2
\]

*Figure 5.6: Clave break (Moore’s Type 1 clave change).*

Three measures of 2-3 clave occur and then three measures of 3-2 clave occur. There is no
bloque, nor half-measure interruption. For Peñalosa, the clave break is an instance *not*
maintaining the structural integrity of clave—the balance required of the alternating sides
interrupt the alternation of the 2-side and the 3-side” (2011:44). Peñalosa uses the terms “clave
break” and “clave jump” synonymously (2009:156). Type 1 clave break does not require dancers
to change their steps because the music maintains eight-beat measures. Harmonically, the music
maintains the (usually) tonic downbeat to which the dancer is attending, or, at the least, the eight-beat regularity of harmonic rhythm. Would a musically sensitive dancer notice a change in clave? It would depend on the dancer. I have known musicians who are usually sensitive to clave fail to notice clave breaks until they were pointed out to them by other musicians. I have met people who simply would not think much about clave changes such as these because, “All of the good music is good!” For many people, the experience of this music is not about analyzing the direction of clave as an intellectual endeavor. Often, the experience of salsa is about enjoying time with friends, dancing, and good music. As stated above with regard to “Trucutú,” good salsa is more than just the clave.

Type 2 clave change incorporates a half-measure bloque that maintains alternation of the clave’s sides, but flips the direction of the clave in the next full measure of the music (Figure 5.7).

\[
2 - 3 \mid 2 - 3 \mid 2 - 3 \mid 2 \mid 3 - 2 \mid 3 - 2 \mid 3 - 2 \mid \left[ \begin{array}{c} 3 \end{array} \right]
\]

**Figure 5.7**: Clave flip through added half-measure interruption (Moore’s Type 2 clave change).

Three measures of 2-3 clave occur, and then a half-measure interruption (either a bloque or other transitional phrase) is added to the arrangement. Peñalosa refers to half-measure bloques as half-claves, “truncated” figures or measures, or “transition phrases” that occur at the seams of formal sections of a song (2009:145-57). After the half-measure interruption, the clave is flipped to 3-2. Sometimes, the arranger balances out the small-scale formal section with another half-measure; this is not always the case, and arrangers can incorporate one interruption without adding a
balancing half-measure at a later place in the section. Importantly, for musicians, the alternation of sides was maintained: 2, 3, 2, 3, 2, 3, 2, 3, 2, 3, etc. Structurally (i.e., rhythmically) speaking, the clave “does what it’s supposed to do.” Harmonically, beat 1 (usually a tonic chord) was reasserted by the arranger after only four beats instead of the normative eight. These half-measure interruptions (to the eight-beat measure) are the moments in the songs that dancers notice precisely because of the anomaly that the four-beat measure presents to their eight-beat stepping units. The harmonic expectation that the measure will alternate between tonic and dominant is thwarted by the arrival of another tonic four beats later signaling the beginning of a new measure (Figure 5.8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 – 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>I (varies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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**Figure 5.8:** Harmonic expectation offset by half-measure interruption and subsequent clave flip.

Musically sensitive dancers are attending to a sense of a downbeat more than they are attending to clave direction. When the downbeat is reasserted earlier than it was expected, the dancer is forced to redefine their place in the measure. Peñalosa explains:

In popular music ‘one’ [beat 1 of the measure] can be found on either side of the clave, because the harmonic progression, rather than the rhythmic progression[,] is the primary referent. Put simply—in popular music harmony trumps rhythm (2009:136).

Truncated figures or transitional phrases included in an arrangement always create abnormalities to the regularity of the eight-beat measure. Dancers who are “paying attention to the music,” and have experience with this phenomenon, can feel that the bloque signals an upcoming change at the level of the measure and move accordingly to prepare themselves and their partner for the
next section of the song. Some of the dancers with whom I dance in New York City take pride in knowing “stutter steps,” that their on-2 teachers have taught them; Moore considers these stutter steps “the dancing equivalent of breaking the clave” (2011:50). Other dancers variously “fix,” or do not fix, their stepping patterns. Those that do not change their steps either intentionally medially transpose the dance or do so without the knowledge that they have changed the side of the measure with the corresponding side of their body on which they started.

Type 3 clave change—what I refer to as The Fake Out, or “the no-change clave change”—is a misnomer. Moore refers to his Type 3 clave change as “breaking the clave without changing clave direction.” An arranger introduces a half-measure bloque that repeats the side of the clave that has just occurred, and then continues in the original clave pattern in the following full measure (Figure 5.9).

\[
\begin{align*}
2 & - 3 | 2 & - 3 | 2 & - 3 | 3 | 2 & - 3 | 2 & - 3 | 2 & - 3
\end{align*}
\]

**Figure 5.9:** The Fake Out, or “no-change clave change” with added half-measure interruption (Moore’s Type 3 clave change).

Three measures of 2-3 clave occur, then a half-measure interruption of some kind occurs but accents the same side of the clave that has just occurred—thus the clave no longer maintains the structural integrity of alternation. After the interruption, however, the clave continues as if nothing strange has happened. The clave sensitive listener/dancer may wonder what just happened (or not, because the interruption is only four beats and the Clave Police aren’t real, are they?), but otherwise the downbeat is reasserted after four beats and the music (and the dancer) moves on.
The type of clave change that occurs in “Trucutú” is a version of The Fake Out, or Moore’s Type 3. Perico decided upon an arrangement where the clave alternates from the three side to the two side into the bloque (m. 9), initially appealing to the “rules” of structural integrity upheld by The Clave Police. He then fakes out The Clave Police by not flipping the direction of the clave. In fact, the listener may not be certain as to what happens after the bloque. Ambiguity, which opens the arrangement, returns in the measures after the bloque, due to the trumpet solo that does not commit to either clave, as if teasing our desire for clarity (Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.10).

Perico tricks even the most clave-astute listener into the bloque. By alternating the clave direction into the bloque, the listener/dancer hears the bloque as an exciting change, but nothing that warrants a total reinterpretation of the musical flow. The downbeat is reasserted after the half-measure interruption and the music moves on—a momentary faux pas, if you will. This is one way the arranger can play with our expectations, but only if we are paying attention. As the dancer with forty-six years of experience explained above, although I will paraphrase here, a skilled and musically sensitive dancer can execute motions that draw attention to important moments of musicality in the musical flow; we can play with the expectations of our partners, but only if we are paying attention.

Figure 5.10: Clave direction in the introduction of “Trucutú,” mm. 1-11.
Moore questions the reader as to why an arranger would “want to break the clave and the basic dance step in order to connect two sections that are already in the same clave” (2011:51)? Extending the question to one of style: Why do arrangers of mambo and salsa clásica add half-measure interruptions by means of bloques or other transitional material when the harmony could have been shifted and the structural integrity of the clave left intact? For Moore, and the example he discusses: because “the transition is electrifying” (2011:52). The aesthetic reasons that both Moore and Peñalosa point out were verified by the dancers with whom I spoke—often by the wide smiles of recognition and happiness that dancers and DJs wore on their faces when I played the first few measures of “Trucutú,” and the sounds they made as they “got into” the tune. “It’s a classic!” “Love this tune [or album]!”

Due to the ambiguous nature of the clave in the verse section of “Trucutú,” as in many other salsa clásica tunes, such arguments are often left for those who have, or strive to have, a deeper understanding of the music beyond its functionality on the dance floor. The connoisseur would find this something of a fool’s errand: where one wishes to find the secrets of the elusive clave change, one instead unearths the general characteristic of salsa clásica to mess with our expectations of clave and create tension through ambiguity.45

44 Moore’s specialty is the Cuban popular music of timba, arguably the height of clave license in Latin popular music presently. The “wonderful example” that Moore uses for the Type 3 clave change is “Llegó la música cubana” by Manolito y su Trabuco. Moore provides a tiny addendum to the song title, noting that at the end of the tune the singer “includes a reference to both Willie Colon [a Nuyorican/New York trombonist and arranger] and Luis ‘Perico’ Ortiz, the arranger of Pedro Navaja” (2011:52). Perico is also the arranger of “Trucutú,” and many other clave-creative arrangements well-known to the salsa canon.

45 One dancer simply told me that “Trucutú” is “in 2-3, and has breaks in it, but then again I know the tune very well.” After we had spoken for a while, we surmised that perhaps there was a backwards learning of it, since one couldn’t unlearn the clave direction once it was internalized. Also, I’ve found that the tendency of New York-style salsa to be written in 2-3 influences many New Yorker’s reactions when I ask them about clave.
The dancer who would like to understand what effect bloques and other half-measure interruptions have on normative eight-beat measures can count through the music and conduct small-scale formal analyses. The mere instance of a half-measure interruption, however, does not invariably demand a clave change. What changes are the number of beats within that small-scale formal section from an expected standard of groupings of eight-beat measures. It is not crucial, or even necessary for any style of dancer to understand clave breaks, flips, or Fake Outs, but deeper investigation would draw the dancer “into” the music, establishing the foundation for making new connections with the repertoire, themselves as a dancer, and their partners.

Peñalosa lays out offerings to both sides of The Clave Wars at the end of his section on clave in popular music in two tiny lines at the bottom of the page:

Some claim that breaking clave is occasionally necessary for musical purposes. Others dispute this assertion, seeing it as simply inferior writing and/or arranging (2009:157). Granted, Peñalosa footnotes Cuban musician Juan Formell with the former opinion and New York musician Sonny Bravo (who once played with Tito Puente and is referred to as “The Chief of Clave Police” by Marty Sheller⁴⁶) with the latter. In his book, Moore dramatizes New Yorkers’ strict maintenance, to the point of sterilization, of a single clave direction. The seriousness and extent to which clave is regarded by New Yorkers is echoed by on-2 dancers who adhere to a rhetoric of clave.

⁴⁶ Personal communication, May 24, 2017
The Discourse of Clave and the Rhetoric of On-2 Dancers

How on-2 dancers talk about songs such as “Trucutú” provides insight into the discourse surrounding the on-2 dance style. On-2 dancers tell me that the clave “changed,” “flipped,” or “jumped,” although they are usually unclear on what exactly occurred beyond the fact that a half measure was added to the arrangement. In fact, many on-2 dancers that I have spoken with over my years of dancing have difficulty pointing out the clave rhythm unless it is clearly indicated with clave sticks—something verified in the feedback interviews conducted for this dissertation. Certainly, there are some New York dancers of various styles, including those of Eddie Torre’s on-2 style, that intimately know and understand how salsa music works theoretically, but it is the discourse of on-2 dancers, specifically, that marks them as distinct in the salsa world.

Dedicated on-2 dancers, as well as dedicated dancers of other salsa styles, spend a great deal of time discussing the nature of anomalous moments in the music, for it is these very moments that bring the seasoned dancer challenges beyond the usual ones of a partner dance. The online forums that discuss clave changes evidence the value of searching for advice on how to functionally deal with the matter of the half-measure bloque on the dance floor as well as how to understand what is happening musically. Beginner dancers feel a sense of pride and progress when they are able to change their direction of dance according to musical cues or begin to prepare for changes when they hear a bloque in the music. On-2 teachers, especially, take the time to teach advanced students to hear these sorts of changes in the music as well as drill stepping patterns that can “fix” the “off timing.” But is it always the clave changing that they hear? As outlined above, no.

On-2 dancers are cued in to the value of clave as a music-theoretical concept and employ it as vocabulary clout. Invoke the clave and thou shall be known as a better dancer. Are on-2
dancers listening to the clave particularly? Perhaps some dancers. But an assertion arose (sometimes tacitly) in my interviews that the on-2 dance style is better than other styles of salsa partly by virtue of its dancers’ desire to delve into musical issues such as clave.

Many teachers with whom I spoke described the difficulty of learning this style; that on-2 has “a higher learning curve” or “takes longer to learn.” Some participants verified this opinion, while others simply said that it was just another basic step—something that a body could be, in my words, entrained to know depending on the dancer’s body sense prior to learning this particular style. Whenever I asked about the difference between on-1 and on-2 styles almost twenty years ago, I kept hearing the same phrase from disparate people: On-2 dancers dance in the music, not simply with the music, as on-1 dancers do—implying that on-2 is more closely connected to the music than styles such as on-1 or on-3. I hear the same aphorism today. Marc, a teacher, put it to me this way:

I think the dance [on-1] itself is limited. It hasn’t evolved as much and as quickly as the on-2 has. People that dance on-1, they’re following just the downbeat, or the cycle of the repetitiveness of the music, whereas an on-2 dancer goes deeper. They’re listening to the same thing, but they’re also listening to the different rhythmic patterns. They go a lot deeper than that. The extent at which they’re going gives them a greater feeling of the music. That allows them to interpret the music a lot better, or to dance a lot better because they’re interpreting the music in a way that the other dance styles don’t go as far.

He implies that on-2 dancers are better listeners, something I did not find to be particularly true in my interviews. The amount of musical knowledge dancers exhibited (either physically and/or verbally) was directly connected to their past history of dance/music exposure or their innate sensitivity, not their training in the on-2 dance style. Experienced dancers could hear the music’s layers and create expectations based on past listening experiences, even within a song they are hearing for the first time. They had a sense of formal structure (see Chapter 3), a playful sense of timing (see Chapter 4), a consciousness of timespace and its relationship to the music (see
Chapter 2), and most importantly, a flexibility with themselves and their partners through a heightened sense of body awareness (see Chapter 1). These dancers acted much in the same way that I have experienced musicians working together in improvisatory genres. They are playful and flowing because they know the routine and have practiced using their bodies as instruments. They are attentive and sensitive to their surroundings because they love what they do. Self-taught dancer and teacher, Magna Gopal, expressed her ambivalence of clave knowledge in this manner:

I know what you’re talking about. I know the rhythms of the clave. It doesn’t really do much for me. There are times that I’ll pull it out of the song to play with it, but it doesn’t mean anything more than that … I can stay in tempo; I can stay in rhythm; I know where my beats are in the music so if I ever exit out of a movement, I know where I should be and where my weight should be. I know how to follow my partner and I can play with the music and that’s all that matters to me.

I have experienced dance classes, instructional videos, and online teaching videos in on-2 contexts that aimed to teach dancers the music theory of salsa in order to guide their musicality. For Marc, and many other dance teachers, music theory included an ability to identify the instruments of the band (by timbre and, sometimes, visually), the different layers of rhythm these instruments create, their interactions, and the formal structure of the songs. These classes often left the participants more confused than when they arrived, or, at the very least, overwhelmed with the complexity of the music. Many dance students, particularly beginners, were surprised at the amount of information being thrown at them in varying degrees of coherence.\textsuperscript{47} The online

\textsuperscript{47} Magna Gopal’s workshops on musicality are taught in a manner strikingly different than the majority of workshops and tutorials I studied for this dissertation. She emphasizes five elements of musicality: music (I analyze her theory in Chapter 3; it is enough to say here that it is not the concept of music theory that on-2 teachers utilize), self, partner, environment, and fundamentals (techniques of the dance). In order to be musical, “you need a connection with all five.” Her musicality is not marketed solely to on-2 dancers or valued as an on-2 phenomenon.
tutorial/video is helpful because students can stop, start, and review material at their leisure. The classroom situation is helpful because students can immediately receive answers to their questions. The main difficulty, however, arises in understanding the varying vocabulary that dancers use. In an online workshop, Joel Dominguez of JoelSalsa refers to both the basic denomination of steps for a dancer and the different rhythms that the instruments create as “beats,” although he clearly knows they are two different entities (Salsa Timing and Musicality Hangout #1 2013). Later in the video, he employs “beat” and “pulse” synonymously. Despite challenges such as these, there is steady interest in the topic of musicality—one that extends beyond the on-2 community and likely one whose audience had been there long before on-2 dancers claimed the realm as their own.

A bit later in our interview, Marc again told me that on-1 dancers “don’t want to go into the theory of the music” but that even his on-2 students, “people of this generation[,] just want what they want yesterday. If they can get on the dance floor and be an advanced dancer yesterday, they’re happy.” So I pointed out to him that it takes most students quite a while to master even the basics of any dancing, and many require more time to learn on-2 dancing. “Yes!” he replied. I pointed out, then, that a student spends more time listening to the music, regardless of whether said student is learning theory or not. Apparently, Marc did not consider implicit learning an acceptable manner of learning. He explained the culture of on-2 to me:

Marc: Amongst dancers in the on-2 world, we strive for more knowledge of the music in the dance. For example, when a good friend of mine and I sit down and have conversations about dance, we blow people’s minds because of our understanding of the music. I would say that he’s very knowledgeable of the music, very knowledgeable of the dance. When we talk, we’re at the point of pioneering things. Did you ever think about doing this, this, and this? Yeah, but I did this, this, and this instead on the dance floor. And no one knows what the hell we’re talking about.

j: Would musicians know what you’re talking about?
Marc: Yes, I think. Again, musicians that are aware or knowledgeable, yes. But just like any other art form, some musicians are not… [On-1 dancers] don’t sit around talking about the theory of the music. I think the culture of the on-2 world pushes in that direction, if you’re at that level.

The important issue here, and one he implicitly raised, is that most of his students are not at this level. This is the level of old schoolers (people who have been dancing for twenty years or more, in any style of salsa) that, at this point, enjoy watching others, reading about salsa and dance, and learning away from the dance floor just as much as dancing—a valued position, to be certain. For the masses that populate the social dance floors, however, theory does not interest them because the social dance is the main objective. Another objective is performance. For many young or new students, the main objective is to land a coveted space in a dance troupe, either as professional or student, though the latter is more frequent these days. On-2 dancers do spend more time with the music as they learn, due to the length of time it often takes to entrain to the stepping patterns and master the leading skills (on-2 followers, to make a generalization, have gained a reputation for snobbery), but most on-2 dancers don’t “sit around talking about the theory of the music” any more than on-1 dancers.

“Theorizing is best left to theorists,” as one of my participants told me when he expressed initial hesitance to participate in the project. When I brought up the matter of clave in interviews, if it had not already been brought up by the participant, some on-2 dancers became noticeably tense. Some participants nervously asked if I was going to test them (I did), while others offered grand, but confusing and/or essentialized, narratives about on-2 dancing and the history of the clave. My main concerns, however, were understanding what clave meant to participants and how their knowledge of clave informed, or didn’t inform, their listening.
How On-2 Dancers Listen (and Don’t Listen) to Salsa Music

Another common trope of on-2 dancers is that they dance en clave [in clave]. The story usually begins like this: If Eddie Torres was influenced by Palladium mambos, then his dance style is closer to the mythical fount of salsa’s roots. The issue with a narrative such as this is that there is never one fount—mythical or real. New York on-2 dancers even go so far as to refer to their style of salsa as mambo—something the old timers I interviewed decidedly stated these young people were not dancing, except at moments when partner choreographies were styled with side by side shines. On-2 dancers continually connect their style to the past and how this proves its deeper connection to the music. Marc, the teacher I spoke with above, told me that

the Palladium style was dancing on clave, where your feet were matching that specific sound … There’s one step in between, which is the 1, where [the stepping pattern] will repeat itself … You just match that and you’re fine. The on-2 style tries to do that, but keeps also the on-1 idea of the cycle. It’s a hybrid, the way I see it.

Remember that, above, Marc denigrated on-1 dancers for simply keeping to the cycle of the music and here he states that the on-2 style maintains the cycle in a hybrid form. That a cyclical conception of the form can be denigrating to one style of salsa, but praised when integrated into another, seems hypocritical; the main concern regarding his quotation, however, is addressing how on-2 dancers dance en clave. Even the mambo step was arguably not en clave. David Garcia and his informants claim that mambo is farther removed from the clave than more traditional Cuban forms such as son montuno. One informant even told Garcia that mambo dancers were dancing “outside of the clave” (2009:169), a slight often reserved for on-1 dancers in today’s partisan dance world. The connection between on-2’s basic stepping pattern and either clave pattern is the eight-beat framework, which is necessary for any style of salsa dance. None of the basic stepping patterns of modern salsa styles fit with the clave pattern any more than the others, although individual dancers can step to the clave pattern when they choose—Videos 5.1 and 5.2
show instances where dancers chose to alter their basic stepping pattern to highlight the clave rhythm in their feet.

Video 5.1 shows Rachel dancing with Juan in midtown Manhattan in 2015. In our interview, Rachel thanked me when I pointed out that she seemed to be paying attention to the clave beginning at 0:17 in the video, and even a bit prior to this moment. We laughed a bit about how people who pick up the clave sticks to play along with prerecorded songs at this particular social often play the clave incorrectly and how it can be very challenging and even distracting to our dances. She seems confident in her improvisations. In this song, however, Rachel pointed out to me that “sometimes it takes a little while of the song to be sure that you have it right.”

Video 5.2 shows Joe and me dancing to a live band, Orquesta Salsa con Conciencia, at a social in midtown Manhattan in 2015. At 0:06 and 0:08, my steps correspond to the clave rhythm and at 0:20 his do. In our interview, Joe was quick to point out how his steps correspond to the clave, showing me how he connects to this important aspect in the music. “I'm not dancing on-2 there. I'm dancing on the full clave.” He pointed out that the person watching our dance may have been Cuban because she seemed interested in this particular portion of our dance. Interestingly, he didn’t notice that my steps corresponded to the clave rhythm prior to, and after, his as well. We, among many experienced dancers, are not alone in occasionally matching our steps to the clave rhythm, especially when the clave sticks articulate clearly over the other instruments in moments of decreased rhythmic density and/or connecting portions between solos in live music.

Joe, and the teachers that he’s trained, introduce clave to beginners’ in their first class, but do not teach the students to match their dance steps to the clave rhythm. In the second, and following classes, they encourage students to listen to other particular instruments, but still focus
on the basic stepping pattern and other steps relating to that pattern. Most on-2 teachers attempt to inculcate the importance of clave early in the learning process (often in students’ first class or workshop) although most leave their students guessing as to exactly what they mean when they say “that clave is essential to salsa” or “that you need to know where the clave is in order to dance.” A student of a rigorous on-2 studio, and tasteful dancer (in my personal opinion), put it to me this way:

The clave is a sound I think you hear in the music. I can’t express it and I don’t know the definition of it. I know it’s a sound. The rhythm of that particular song. It could be the bottom, where the bass is. I think it’s the drum. I think it is. But I’m not an expert in this...I think it’s the bass of the drum. I believe that’s what it is. I could be totally wrong. It could be the horn. No, it’s not. That’s a good question! How do you know? I don’t know.

This dancer was not alone in her confusion. She knew that the term was important and that the clave was one of the many rhythms embedded in the musical framework, but beyond that she was only concerned with “finding the 1” so she could begin her stepping pattern and “get into the dance.” Surprisingly (for me), on-2 dancers sometimes use the phrase “finding the clave,” to mean that they are listening for beat 1 (Shaw 2000). Many participants indicated that their teachers emphasized that “this clave thing” was important, but that they “found it confusing,” or “didn’t understand what they were talking about.”

Although it is true that many New York salsa clásica songs are written in 2-3 clave, listening for the 2 side of the clave wouldn’t help beginner students to find their first step since the basic stepping pattern for the Eddie Torres on-2 style, the most popular form of on-2, begins on beat 1. If their students started their stepping patterns on beat 2, they’d begin the pattern on the wrong beat. What if the song began, or was entirely, in 3-2 clave? What if the song doesn’t have clave sticks indicating any clave pattern? How does one learn to listen to all of the instruments so as to gauge which direction the clave may be in or if clave license is at play? As
stated above, clave ambiguity is one of the characteristic features of the first section of many salsa clásica songs. Telling students to listen for a musical clue that may or may not be present in the music is not very helpful. Immediately, students are presented with higher-level learning skills that cannot be mastered during the first several lessons, perhaps not for years. No wonder it takes so long to learn this style.

Joe’s comments about dancing on the clave rhythm itself (from Video 5.2), however, did extend beyond this one rhythmic pattern to others he heard in the music:

…I’m drawing emphasis to the clave, but within the on-2 dance style, sometimes I draw emphasis on different instruments within the music and I don’t just stay on that [the on-2 basic] count. It gives a unique different look. People get curious about that.

The tasteful, but clave-confused dancer above touched upon similar musical concerns in her interview as well. While speaking about clave (though really she was speaking about the basic stepping pattern), she told me that from there she could “go in and out of the music,” meaning that she could change from dancing a basic stepping pattern to other stepping patterns, either improvised or stock (learned in studio classes as shines). The clearest examples she offered of “in and out of the music” were of two improvisatory moments during one of her dances. Video 5.3 shows an excerpt of their dance where the woman’s partner moves “into the music” as his rhythmic density increases with the piano solo. Although she blocks the view of him in the video, you can glimpse that his steps correspond to the three side of the clave rhythm at 0:14 and then his rhythmic density increases, along with the piano line (0:16), as he initiates movement to his right. He then turns (on his heel) at 0:19 to correspond with the long-held note of the piano phrase, then “moves out of the music” at 0:21, executes an uncharacteristic, for New York, on-top-of-the-beat basic back step (beats 2, 3, 4) without staggered foot placement, forcing his motion to stop (end of 0:22), although the melodic phrase keeps moving. He moves forward into
beat 6, again right on top of the beat. (Her following is impeccable, considering he switches between the Eddie Torres and Palladium styles of on-2, and interprets the beat in a malleable manner—sometimes on top, sometimes behind.) Later in the dance, at the end of 1:10, she pointed out to me where she was “playing in and out of the music. Instead of just going forward and doing that turn, I'm stopping and [she wiggles slightly indicating her motions in the dance].” I asked if she was not responding to his lead. “I wasn’t. And that’s why he went around me and now we’re doing this together.” He certainly utilizes the moment she initiates at 1:10 to get into the music by tapping right into the triplet groupings of the piano line with a similar stepping pattern that she initiated, but at double the rate (1:12). Given that he begins just before the piano triplets begin, and from other clues throughout the video (especially later dips), it is my guess that he knows the song. (I did not interview him, nor ask him after the song was over.) The dance they shared, however, is decidedly not a choreography of opportune times to showcase musicality or “being in the music.” The dancers play with each other and the music—something she stated repeatedly when we discussed this video. She thought it the best dance of the night.

Denise, daughter of the famed mambo duo Pedro “Cuban Pete” Aguilar and Millie Donay, told me that her father would change his focus from one instrument to another within a song, drawing attention to different lines in the music with movement(s) in his body, in essence playing with the music. Most of the skilled dancers whom I interviewed illustrated this sort of behavior, consciously or not, in the videos I recorded. Several made statements that drawing attention to different instruments in the music is an important aspect of musicality, and this, I argue, is what on-2 dancers are trying to say when they state that they dance en clave. They aim to dance in the music; in other words, they aim to attend to the different lines of music as they are being performed and improvised. If the clave is the “organizing principle” for the music, then
a band that plays well is attentive to the “rules” of the clave (rules are learned so that they can be broken, no?) and can build upon them to make music moving enough to inspire dance. A dance style that is en clave, with its accompanying cadre of ethnicity, identity, and authenticity issues, implies that the dancer who dances in this style is attentive enough to the music—capable of being in the music—thereby thinking, I daresay feeling, like a musician.

Musicians play instruments with each other; salsa dancers play with each other. Within the framework of the arrangement, musicians can improvise musical phrases and interpretations. Similarly, dancers understand the framework of the arrangement and improvise physical phrases, sometimes repeating them or variations of them within a section of the form. Physical motions of any part, or parts, of the body can interpret a line in the music, either by accompanying it or predicting it (see Chapter 3). The dancer is attentive to the rules of the dance (how a body can move and still fit the conventions of salsa) and can build upon them to make the dance moving enough to inspire the people around him or her. Dancers speak in terms of playfulness—of their partner with them, of their own connection with the music, and how their partner connects with the music. Playfulness, in fact, was one of the most valuable traits in a dancer to most of the participants I interviewed.

Video 5.4 shows Lindsay (seen earlier in Chapter 1) and I having a very playful social dance to Tito Rodríguez, Jr.’s “Reflexiones” in midtown Manhattan in 2015. Participants in the project described Lindsay’s dance style as “experimental” and “non-traditional,” and said that he was a sort of dancer who could “draw something out of you.” I would not categorize him as an on-2 dancer; he follows his followers to such an extent (see Chapter 1) that he can dance any salsa stepping pattern his partners prefer, even switching between them within a single dance. The video begins just before the montuno. In this video, you can see that we laugh and share
words or joke occasionally when in close contact with each other. He ducks and dips under my arm, not sloting in the 180-degree line that most New York dancers strive to maintain. At 0:19 he kicks up his right leg in a theatrical manner, playing to the camera (something I had repeatedly asked him not to focus upon, to no avail). You can see me shake my head at him at 0:20. At 0:25 the final verse closes with a long note followed by a clearly articulated bloque (which fits neatly into an eight-beat measure)—the end of which, 0:29, I sink into. It’s time to get a little serious now. The montuno begins at 0:30. I rise up and play with the melodic line’s syncopation with movements such as foot pivots and crossing legs. I place my 2 toward the back, indicating that I’m not ready to come out of my self-led hesitation (although Lindsay wouldn’t analyze these motions in this manner). My final pivot, without a weight change, is on beat 8 to place my torso to face him but I hang on beat 1, drawing back any on-top-of-the-beat energy to wait for the musicians to give the accent of beat 2 so that I can slap my left foot down on it (toward the middle of the beat). Lindsay voices his approval. Then we play a game of I-lift-my-leg-you-lift-your-leg at 0:38 and 0:41, where I attempt to grab his leg. In the interview, we discussed how I felt bad about messing up the flow of the dance, whereas he pointed out how the flow was anything but disrupted because:

we were in Show Mode. Because in a show, if something like that happened, no one knew that it was a mistake but you. Watch how we played it off. You picked up my leg, so now I'm playing with you…Spontaneous. Spontaneity. We didn’t miss a beat.

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48 A hesitation is a move in which the leader holds the follower by both hands (in this case Lindsay holds only one of my hands) for balance and the follower executes solo footwork (shines) and body movements utilizing the leader’s hand for support. There is some disagreement as to who decides the end of the move. Some on-2 dancers have been taught that a “mambo jazz” movement initiated by the follower indicates the end of the hesitation, while other leaders will take a follower out when they decide they want to. Rarely, a leader will let the follower dictate the end of the hesitation—as occurs in Video 5.4 with me and Lindsay.
At 0:50 he pulls my hands up above my head. I decide to turn, but choose to take nearly three measures, closing off the turn with a backwards whip of my upper body to my head (0:59-1:00), which he complements in his upper body and head. At the end of the sonero/coro alternation, the horns accent off beats on the three side of the clave until rhythmically resolving on beat 8. The first mambo comes in at 1:12, but we’re too busy laughing at something Lindsay just joked about. He lets go of me entirely after a cross body turn behind his back at 1:17. The first group of mambos are layered successively; the first is laid down by the low horns (baritone saxophones) in a repeated pair of measures. When the next layer enters (higher saxophones and trombones), I “grab” that line and consciously style the motion of my left leg (which was previously improvising to the lowest pitch layer) to match this new melodic line. Our eyes lock. We play. I lift and drag my legs and feet with the melodic line. Lindsay clicks into his own improvisation. We reconnect to a closed frame just before the next (tutti) mambo; we glow with pleasure at having shared such a connected moment in the music. Video 5.5 shows a split screen of Lindsay and me during our feedback interview discussing the moment just prior to the layered mambo until the beginning of the next (tutti) mambo. The right side of the screen shows Video 5.4 matched to how we watched it during the interview.

Although I may have heard “Reflexiones” in passing before, I had never paid much attention to it before this moment. It has a very 1990s feel/sound to the production, something that makes me want to find an on-1 dancer, although I didn’t lead Lindsay into that style this time. I likely sat this song out and watched other dancers when I heard it at this social prior to dancing this day with Lindsay. Most dancers do not give me as much freedom as Lindsay does for interpretation of the music; his single-handed leads and apart dancing allow me to interpret the music however I wish. On this day I took full advantage of the opportunity.
Lindsay told me in our interview that:

L: You are capturing me at my best. This is it. We’re having fun. The song is slamming. You’re on it. We can’t do no wrong. This is it right here. This is the dance. This is the essence right here. This is it. On it. You’re right there. You notice, we’re not going crazy. We’re in there [in the music]. We’re in the groove.

j: Going crazy like turn patterns?

L: Lalalalalalalala. [gesturing crazy turn patterns with his arms] No, because now we’re enjoying. This is what the old-time salseros appreciate. They don’t care [gestures turn patterns]. Even Eddie Torres, you could [gestures turn patterns again] all day long. Can you feel [sings the coro and moves]? These guys [the musicians] are sending you a message. They’re throwing it at you. What are you doing with it? [gestures fast turns with sound effects] You’re not taking the time out to [gestures trumpets playing and sings, gestures percussion players playing and scats]. You’re not taking the time to really feel [gestures toward his torso] what’s going on there. That’s it.

j: and put it in your body.

L: Put it in your body.

j: To feel it, you have to put it in your body.

L: And that’s exactly what you did right here. This right here [gestures at the screen], if you don’t save anything, save that right there. This is it.

j: But you even knew when the moment was over. A moment can’t last forever.

L: Right. But the thing is because we were so into it, you can feel, you literally connect with these guys that are playing when the song is that good.

Another participant in the project said to me that “every dance with Lindsay is a good dance because he opens up and leaves me room to do what I feel.” The notion of feel is the notion of *en clave*/in the music. There is a misconception that dancers react to music, that they hear the music and then make movement choices. This is not the case for an *en clave* salsa dancer. A dancer that is *in the music* is a dancer that is so connected to the music, be it live or recorded, that he or she is *playing with* the musicians.
Is on-2 the only style of salsa that enables a dancer to dance *en clave*? No. As a contributor to an online forum put it: “My opinion here is that if you’re dancing to the music rather than just to a beat, you’re going to be influenced by the Clave regardless of what you intend. The Clave afterall is the underlying structure on which the song[’]s rhythm is hung. It affects the rhythm of all the instruments and the song structure as well.” Skilled on-1 dancers are aware of the clave and its relationship to the musical structure, although their technical vocabulary, if they have one at all, varies depending on the literature that they have read and/or the people with whom they have discussed the matter. Dancers that have spent time with the musical genre, and have been sensitive to music (regardless of genre) for the majority of their lives, exhibit a deeper connection with the music than dancers who don’t listen to the music away from the dance floor or have not danced to other styles of music. It is love of the music and the dance—the interaction between the people on the dance floor and the music driving them—that decides how much someone can and does *get into* the music. Dancing the on-2 style does not automatically grant a dancer membership in a secret society where the music’s mysteries become unlocked upon initiation. Instead, it is on-2 dancers’ habit of becoming obsessed with the dance and the dance culture that drives them to learn more about the music—something that any dancer of any style (or all styles) could attain, given their own ambition and curiosity.

There is one argument remaining that on-2 dancers could make against me. Some on-2 dancers will say that because the break (change of direction) occurs on beats 2 and 6 for the on-2 dance style, that it more closely adheres to the clave rhythm. Steve Shaw (DJ “Doc Salsa”), a stalwart of the on-2 style, writes:

> It is in the nature of the clave rhythmic structure that the 2 beats always stand out more emphatically than the 3 beats. That is, they feel stronger in the rhythm. Partly this is because the 2 beats resolve the syncopated unevenness or tension of the 3 beats. When we are breaking on-2 and 6, we are actually changing our body direction in conjunction
with the strongest rhythmic emphasis in the clave’s beat [rhythm]. So although we don’t literally step on every clave beat, we do make a major body movement (a change of direction) on the major beat of the clave, the 2 beat which resolves the tension. It is in this sense that we “dance on clave” (Shaw 2000).

Shaw states that one of the two breaks that the dancers make in the course of the basic stepping pattern accentuates the two side of the clave pattern, which he considers “in the nature of the clave rhythmic structure” the stronger side of the pair. Culturally, however, Peñalosa explains that “musics governed by clave express either explicitly or implicitly, the three part countapuntal foundation” (105) that is formed when tension is generated by the syncopated three side where the clave, tresillo, and primary beats (what I have referred to as corebeats in this dissertation) align on beat 1, the downbeat, and tension is resolved in the second half—the two side. The three side is considered “‘strong,’ (‘fuerte’), ‘positive,’ and ‘round’” because of its tension-creating syncopation while the two side is referred to as “‘weak,’ (‘débil’), ‘negative,’ and ‘square’” (2009:104). Shaw’s assertion of the “nature of the clave” is characteristic of the rhetorical language commonly utilized by on-2 dancers. Indeed, the two side of the clave is easily identifiably from the rhythmic figures that differentiate it from the three-side (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2), but that does not automatically grant someone (who?) the power to bequeath it a nature that is culturally removed from its history.

Parting from tradition, the major motion for on-2 dancers at the beginning of the dance is for the female dancer, usually the follower, to move forward at the beginning of the measure. Traditionally, and all styles besides on-2, men lead the measure by their movement forward into the woman’s dancing space. Many outsiders view the on-2 leader’s movement at the beginning of the measure as backward and incorrect.

Most importantly, to claim that there is a single “major beat of the clave,” sounds dubious at best (especially if teachers want to correctly honor the music’s African roots) and reaching for
music-theoretical mumbojumbo at its worst. Remember Peñalosa’s axiom: Harmony trumps rhythm. Most dancers I interviewed, and many I have spoken with on the dance floor, use harmony or the singer to decide where the strong beat in the measure, regardless of the song’s clave direction. The dancers’ change of direction is only one of many rhythmic and harmonic components of the tension/release constructions that characterize salsa dance/music.

This leaves the question of connection of movement to music. Does the on-2 style connect more with the New York-style music? Many on-2 dancers think so, and I find myself agreeing with them. That argument is best left for a separate analytical study—one that delves into why particular body movements work well with particular musical movements to get closer to explaining why dance styles are found in relation to particular musics. To dance in the music, however, need not be confined to one particular substyle of salsa. The clave exists, in one form or another, in all subgenres of salsa, so if dancers want to delve into the wonders of clave, they have that choice. Dancers that are skilled enough to listen, predict, lead, and be led—i.e., play with the music—can dance in the music, clave awareness or not, if they are attending to the multiple streams of information that the music provides.

Salsa music’s complex layering presents challenges to many people new to the genre, and even to those who are familiar with the genre but new to the concept of studio-imposed counting or conforming to partnered dancing. Since the majority of on-2 dancers now learn in a studio environment, the discourse that accompanies dance lessons is practically unavoidable. The clave is prevalent throughout salsa music (even when the rhythmic pattern itself is absent), so dancers who feel the music know, aesthetically speaking, that some songs feel different than others (for reasons beyond the clave that depend on how the music is composed, arranged, and performed). True, the clave is an important aspect of salsa music, but one that need not be articulated to be
understood. Clave is a part of the theoretical foundation of salsa that is based on listening skills—a foundation that may take a person years of listening practice to master. A dancer need not utilize particular vocabulary or rhetoric in order to feel the music, or for others to see that he or she is feeling the music. The ability to articulate the music-theoretical foundations of clave does require extracurricular—off-the-dance-floor—study, and is somewhat extraneous to the act of social dancing and music making, both of which are real-time improvisatory skills. Knowing the clave is not a requirement of dancing salsa; both teachers and dancers stated this to me throughout the project, but dancers who were aware of it did evidence a greater physical understanding of the music. These dancers were not beginners and had practiced both listening and physical competencies to the point where “thinking” was transferred to corporeal knowledge—the feel that both dancers and musicians know so well. It is this sense of the music, of dancing in the music, not the discourse and/or rhetoric surrounding a particular dance style, that marks a dancer as “good,” “skillful,” or “talented.” As a contributor to an online forum wrote, “In general, I don’t worry about dancing ‘on clave,’” I just do what I feel like according to the song and within the parameters set by the leader.” The old timers who dance on “whatever” and embody a (clave) sensitivity have never, and will likely never, open a book about the musicality of salsa dancing. If it were not for them, however, I would have never been inspired to understand how dancers’ knowledge of salsa music originates from within one’s self, not from some vaulted treasure of (clave) knowledge whose keys are held by teachers and whose books are printed in a language only understood by scholars. Salsa dance/music is a living practice embodied by many different musicians, dancers, and music appreciators (such as DJs) whose knowledge spans many realms, not just clave, and all of them share two important traits: listening to and loving the music.
CONCLUSION

The Musicality of Salsa Dancers

I contribute this dissertation to the growing field of academic literature on social dance music that in the past twenty years has included the voices of dancers. Dancers are often omitted from, or otherwise considered ancillary to, discussions of the transformative agents that constitute musical experiences, yet dance music genres make up the majority of popular music genres throughout the world. The main reason that dance may be ignored is the sheer difficulty of explaining dancers’ intricate movements as they move through timespace in conjunction with music’s own complexities. Choreographed, or formalized, dance has been tackled to some extent, but improvisatory dance is rarely discussed in academic discourse on music, even dance music; perhaps dance is rarely considered in musical analysis because so many musicians do not consider dancers to be musical.

Scholars have studied the cultural phenomena of social dance, but the magic that I found time and time again on the dance floor delved into musical domains; strangers that had never danced together before could play with each other as they danced. During a particularly good song, with a particularly good partner (on a particularly good day), something seemed to occur. Dancers repeatedly told me that there was something in the music that drew them back to the dance floor. And so I set forth trying to answer challenging questions such as, what is that something, what is it that you feel when you dance?

Music has been more successfully tied down to transcription and traditionally musico-theoretical analyses than dance has been in academic literature. Studies in the musicality of dance choreography have focused on western European ballet and modern dance, although other “classical dances,” such as Hindustani kathak, may easily lend themselves to similar analytical
procedures due to standardization within the art form. The improvisation of social dancers challenges the common, and erroneous, perception that these dancers are merely reacting to musical features. Arguments such as these bring to mind the low value that jazz music once held in the eyes of academic institutions and continue to falsely substantiate a mind/body division.

The connections that dancers construct between music, self, and partner make evident a complex engagement with musicality. Dancers’ sensitivity to the music and their conveyance of musical expression to their partner and audience is finite, yet feels magical—nearly ineffable. I have analyzed dancers’ corporeal knowledge of themselves, their partners, and the music in this study to show that the more attentive a dancer is to these variables and the environment, the more rewarding the dance experience is for both themselves and their partners. The varying degrees to which individual dancers attend to the music can be seen through their physical movements such as those demonstrating kinesthetic entrainment, structural feeling of hypermetric conventions, enactment of expressive microtiming within beat and metric structures, as well as how dancers refer to issues of feel, flow, and play. The flexibility and adaptability of dancers to follow and lead each other, regardless of their role in the leader/follower relationship of the partner dance, demonstrates an attention to other people, an attention that extends beyond the partnership of two dancers.

Thomas Csordas offers the notion of “somatic modes of attention” (1993:137), in which one’s experiences are culturally influenced: we attend to our surroundings at the same time that we make up a part of them. Salsa dancers feed off the energy of a packed dance floor. One participant told me that he “feels more comfortable when more people are dancing” and another spoke about the feeling of “all those dancers getting into it at the same time.” Csordas “suggests that embodiment need not be restricted to the personal…but is relevant as well to social
collectivities” (1993:137). The dancers with whom I spoke loved the music and the moments they created with their partners, but noted that these moments were created in a community of dancers who valued similar dancing priorities and found connection to the energy that particular events seemed to encompass. For example, I recorded many participants dancing at a social that some people described as “low key.” Dancers who enjoyed the bi-monthly event valued the older crowd and the laid-back atmosphere; dancers who did not enjoy the event told me that it lacked the vitality (i.e., “sexual energy” and/or “young people”) that characterized other events in the area. Dancers also chose events based on the repertoire preferred by DJs, or bands, at particular events. “The music makes all the difference,” one old-timer told me at a nightclub. “Now that they’re playing all this other stuff [contorting his face as if in great pain] instead of good music, I have little interest in coming here.” 49 Shortly thereafter, the old-timers began attending a club in the Bronx where a big band performs every Tuesday night—“Palladium Mambo Night.” The dancers whom I interviewed for this project rarely intermingled between social groups, but their modes of attention shared similarities in musicality with other groups. The getting into it that all the dancers I spoke with mentioned occurred when dancers were listening to, attending to, and enjoying the music and dance.

Salsa music thrives in New York City, and in other urban areas, due in part to the popularity of the dance form. Despite claims (mainly from musicians with whom I have spoken) that the genre is “dying,” events that feature live bands are made possible by dancers willing to

49 This dancer preferred New York/Puerto Rico-style salsa (and mambo) music. The music to which he was having an acute reaction was Colombian-style salsa. In the summer and autumn of 2015, the DJ who chose tunes between the band’s sets at the Taj Nightclub in Chelsea was playing much more Colombian salsa than any DJ had in the past year or so when I had joined the old-timers for their early Monday evening gatherings.
pay for the experience of dancing to live music. If there is any “dying” in this genre, it comes from an increasing lack of connection between musicians and dancers. Scholars, dance teachers, musicians, and laypeople have all spoken and/or written about the decline in interaction between musicians and dancers since the mambo era, despite the ongoing presence of salsa/mambo bands in many cities. Juliet McMains, herself a dancer and scholar, feels similarly: “…modern salsa has sacrificed much of the connection to live music that defined mambo” (2015:74). While dancing, I have myself experienced the challenges of interacting directly with a live band. The cell-phone paparazzi and abundance of videographers (complete with bright lights) unabashedly stand between the dancers and band—effectively creating a wall of adoration for the band and a wall of exclusion from the music-making experience for the dancers. When I have broken through the wall, physically demanding inclusion as a dancer and her partner in front of the band, the moment felt exceptional instead of magical. The ineffable experiences where musicians and dancers connect with each other and play together are not imagined nostalgia from my early days of salsa. Cell phone cameras were highly uncommon in 1999, and clubs did not allow non-dancers to stand around on the dance floor—this behavior was inconsiderate to the dancers. I have fond recollections of connecting with percussionists as they soloed in the montuno, locking eyes with the members of the band as they shifted through the form, and sharing smiles with the soneros as both they and I improvised in our respective manners. The scene has changed a great deal over these past couple of decades and expansion of this study would reveal more insight into the interactions (and lack thereof) between musicians and dancers.

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50 The on-2 dancers with whom I spoke specified their preference for shorter songs, and their discontent that many live bands did not adhere to this tacit rule when performing for dancers. Tensions and musical compromises between dancers and musicians deserve a separate study.
Events where DJs play salsa recordings are widely popular as well, and contribute to the familiarization with songs and genre characteristics that experienced dancers value in the music they love. The communities that are built around salsa are important to its dancers, even if everyone cannot recall each other’s name or know what our lives are like away from the dance floor. The moments that we share on the dance floor bind us together with an intimacy reserved for close friends—dancing friends. We truly love to see each other and to share another dance, another evening, another smile, another laugh—all to another great song. We have our favorite songs, our favorite bands, and our favorite partners similar to the way musicians form their preferences for the people they work with on the salsa scene.

This dissertation aims to bridge the divide between musicians and dancers in offering a common vocabulary and common understanding for what they both may see, feel, and refer to as musicality in the dance/music experience. How dancers play with the music and each other takes musical shape and follows musical rules. The multivalent experience of salsa requires a total body experience, even for the musician. A musician who is into the music will often appear to be dancing, moving his or her body in such a way as to convey to others that there is something occurring besides the mere function of playing the instrument at hand. Building a common terminology of how we speak about these somethings will connect the realms of feeling that both dancers and musicians experience in relation to the music we both love. The experience of dance is itself a conglomeration of discrete elements that must be negotiated simultaneously. The music pulls everything together.

I have struggled with the semantic division often thrust at me when I tell other musicians, or academics, that I have focused on dancing as my main instrument for the past twenty years: they tell me, or somehow imply, that musicians play music and dancers dance to music. True,
indeed, that dancers do not make the music to which they dance, but the relationship between music and dance is symbiotic and rich. Musicians draw the crowd, yes, but the crowd is there because they want to dance. Dancers pay musicians (indirectly through the event’s organizer) for their time and energy—the gig. Dancers want music with which they can play, interact, and make connections. Salsa musicians often view themselves as socially more valuable than dancers because they create the music to which dancers dance. Similar rhetorical one-upmanship is likely why on-2 dancers defend their style with their credo: On-1 dancers dance to the music; On-2 dancers dance in the music. For me, such rhetoric reifies the lofty positions that some musicians and dancers want to hold over others—an issue, perhaps, that affects some people regardless of their musical, or dance, ability. The intimate relationship that all dancers can have with music if they attend to its nuances, levels, and interactions is open and available to dancers of any, and all, styles of salsa. The relationship lives in the movement and the exploration of one’s self, one’s partner, and the salsa community. It lives in the wonder and joy of finding new songs and new partners, while hearing and rehearing the old songs, while dancing yet again with favorite partners. The relationship comes with time and experience social dancing. There is no need to fight this war of words or styles when we understand that the something that draws us all onto the dance floor can be found by connecting to the music and dance. Musicality is something that we create, anew every time, through improvisation and love.
GLOSSARY

The definitions in this glossary pertain my use of the term with respect to salsa, although some of the terms can be utilized in other genres of dance/music with great success. Names of moves and/or turns vary depending on geographic locale, e.g., what I learned as a “flag” or “flagging” in Connecticut by a Bronx dancer was called a “hesitation” in New York City.

**Accent:** An emphasized sonority. An accent usually occurs by means of a dynamic increase in volume, a timbral change, increase in the number instruments playing at that moment, and/or movement made by a dancer that differentiates said movements from the others in the context of those in the timespace near it.

**Backbeat:** See off beat. In rock or pop music, the constant presence of accents on even beats in a duple meter, usually 4/4 or 8/4.

**Beat:** A higher-level grouping of pulses, most often the equally-spaced, referent hierarchical level in the meter where you would place a basic stepping pattern for dance. In salsa, the quarter-note level made audible by a compound rhythm consisting of all the instruments’ patterns and accents.

**Clave:** An asymmetric timeline pattern that “functions as a rhythmic organizing principle for the entire ensemble” (Singer, quoted in Washburne 2008:180). The clave rhythm is contained within an eight-beat cycle, as is the basic stepping pattern of the salsa dance (see Chapters 1 and 5).

**Check:** A stoppage of movement made by a leader to a follower in the middle of her motion, usually a turn or a forward or back motion. Checks are conveyed by a leader’s offered hand resisting motion where the follower expected it to be pliant, or a firm palm on the follower’s shoulder or hip, usually placed suddenly while she is faced away from her partner. The name check explicates the feeling of the follower having to suddenly reevaluate a motion—what was going to be a motion through timespace is cut short. The protentive options immediately change.

**Closed frame:** See Frame.

**Corebeat:** Beats 1, 3, 5, and 7 in the measure. I heard this term used by on-2 dancer and teacher Joel Domínguez in his musicality “hang outs” posted on Youtube. The concept was also articulated by pianist/percussionist Eliud Davis when he explained to me that arrangers in the 1990s began notating salsa charts in 2/2 to encourage sight readers, a.k.a. “gringos,” to feel the music in a more broad sense that 4/4 notation implied. This half-note level is gestured by spectators on the sides of dance floors through the motions of head nodding and/or foot tapping.

**Cross-body lead:** A partner move in which the leader opens the frame perpendicularly to the follower and cues her to walk across the path he opens in front of him. Embellishments such as single or double turns are sometimes added to the motion for variety.
**Cross step**: Any stepping motion where a dancer’s foot is placed directly in front of or directly behind the other foot and weight distribution is shifted onto the crossed foot. This motion requires the dancer to cross his or her legs as well, usually by lifting the foot up toward the knees. The “step” in the designation refers to a weight change, although this motion can be executed as a cross tap or touch where the dancer’s weight does not redistribute.

**Cruzao (cruzado)**: (Literally, crossed.) When the two sides of a clave measure are incorrectly reversed, with regard to the musical context, e.g., when the percussion section patterns all align with a 3-2 clave and the trumpet player’s solo accents a 2-3 clave, the trumpet player is said to be playing cruzao.

**Downbeat**: Musicians consider the first beat in the measure to be the downbeat, beat 1. Most Western metrical schemes are front accented, meaning they emphasize the first beat of the measure. Some dancers refer to every quarter-note beat as a downbeat, “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8,” and other dancers refer to beats 1, 3, 5, and 7 as downbeats.

**Frame**: The dancers’ usual position while dancing this partner dance. In a “traditional” western-style ballroom frame, the leader embraces the follower by placing his right arm under hers with his hand somewhere on her back near her left shoulder blade and his left hand clasped with her right hand in the space between them at about her eye level. This is considered to be a closed hold or closed frame.

**Hesitation**: A move in which the leader holds the follower with both hands for balance and the follower executes solo footwork (shines) and body movements utilizing the leader’s hand for support. There is some disagreement as to who decides the end of the move. Some on-2 dancers have been taught that a “mambo jazz” movement initiated by the follower indicates the end of the hesitation, while other leaders will take a follower out when they decide they want to. Rarely, a leader will let the follower dictate the end of the hesitation.

**Front hesitation**: Often referred to simply as hesitation, although I have heard this motion referred to as flagging by other teachers, this motion is a hesitation where the partners face each other, as in a normal frame, but with the follower supported by the leader holding both of her hands around torso height slightly outward from her body as she improvises her shines.

**Side hesitation**: This variation holds the follower at the accent point of beat 6 of the mambo jazz and encourages her to improvise shines from this position.

**Back hesitation**: This variation is a hesitation where the follower’s back is presented to the leader’s front, although their hands are held in the same position as a front hesitation. The follower then shines facing away from her partner. This variation is rare; one leader said that he reserved this move for advanced dancers, usually professionals. It is challenging for leaders to clearly lead the follower into this position and the follower to understand that this is what is being asked. Occasionally, a follower will place herself in this position, if she can get the leader to follow her.
**Lapiz:** Literally “pencil,” this movement of the leg is borrowed from tango, but adapted for salsa. The man leads a spot turn and the woman extends her right leg to the side, dragging it slightly behind her as she is spun around the spot for beats 5, 6, and 7. The man also has the option of extending his left leg likewise on beats 1, 2, and 3.

**Mambo Jazz:** A move where the follower accents her upper body, usually with a sharp head motion to her back on beat 6 and then returning to face front on beat 7, while simultaneously sharply accenting her back break and forward motion respective beats. It is usually executed in one of two positions; either with the follower perpendicular to the leader, in the same manner as beats 6, 7 of a cross-body lead or at the end of a front hesitation (as a signal to the leader that the follower is done shining).

**Meter:** A cyclical grouping of beats. The most common forms of Western-influenced music today are duple, cycles of 4 or 8.

**Offbeat:** Correctly paired as a complement to the term *onbeat*, offbeat describes the timespace between quarter-note beats. If subdivided equally, as in the case with the conga’s tumbao and the bongo’s martillo pattern’s (see Figure 2.1), an eighth-note pulse will be heard on the offbeat. An offbeat can be subdivided in any number of ways, according to the dancer’s and/or musician’s preference. Other ways of evenly subdividing the beat are by sixteenths, “1, e, and, a”; and triplets, “1, trip-, -let.” A dancer or musician may create or follow a rhythmic line that is dotted, or weighted, to land with more timespace on one side of an offbeat pulse grouping and less on another. Dancers often use the term offbeat synonymously with upbeat.

**Onbeat:** Correctly paired as a complement to the term *offbeat*, onbeat describes the quarter-note level.

**One-handed connection:** The connection of the frame is maintained by the leader’s left hand holding the follower’s right. The hands can be switched, leader’s right to follower’s left, or in a diagonal, cross-handed variation as well.

**Open/crossed hold:** Partners face each other and hold hands—either left to right and right to left, or crossed, left to left and right to right—in front of each other.

**Pachanga:** A style of Cuban dance (“fast and syncopated”) music made popular in the U.S. in the early 1960s by charanga bands (that featured violins, a flute player, and a distinct timbale sound) fused with New York-style brass and saxophone sound (Roberts 1999:160-3). The dance accents beats 1, 3, 5, and 7.

**Pulse:** A stream of equally spaced, enunciated units that serve as a basic referent to find the beat level. Ethnomusicologist Richard Waterman [1952], referred to this sense of time as the “metronome sense,” perceivable to participants regardless of whether an instrument was sounding out the pulse level. In salsa, the pulse level is nearly constantly indicated with the conga’s tumbao pattern, and, in the verse section, with the bongo’s martillo pattern.
**Rhythm**: In metric-based music, the relative lengths, or durations, of sounds as patterns in time. In salsa, rhythms are built on, and interact with, the foundation of equally-spaced, referent beat levels in the musical structure.

**Sabor**: A culturally specific aesthetic concept, commonly (and incorrectly) translated into the English word *flavor* (savor would be a closer translation, but the word—in my opinion—is best kept untranslated), that is used to express ineffable affects associated with shared music experiences.

**Shines** are solo footwork executed while separated from your partner. Shine can also be performed with support, as when a leader holds both of the follower’s hands in a hesitation. Shines be improvised, stock/choreography learned in classes, or a combination thereof.

**Spot turn**: A closed-frame partner turn in which the couple moves around an imaginary point in the middle of the frame. The centrifugal force of this turn is exciting and allows the partners eye contact, if desired.

**Step**: Putting one’s weight down, often as a weight change from one foot to another.

**Suzie Q**: For most on-2 dancers, the suzie Q is a cross step forward with the left leg on beat 2, followed by a simultaneous weight change and pivot on both balls of the feet on beat 3 (akin to the motion of the popular fifties dance “The Twist”), while starkly contraposturing the hips and shoulders against each other. Into beat 6, the right leg crosses forward and the twisting motion continues.

**Syncopation**: To musicians, a syncopation is an off-beat or weak beat accent. In jazz dance, to syncopate a step is to step on an unexpected part of the beat, often the end of a strong beat.

**Triplet**: A triplet subdivides a normally duply-divided time span (as salsa is commonly divided—see Figures 2.1 and 2.2) into three equal durations. An example of this can be heard in Sakina’s partner’s improvisations with the piano line in Video 5.3 at time point 1:11. Some musical passages can be simultaneously divided into duple and triple feels, a common feel for African and African-influenced musics.

**Upbeat**: Musically associated with *downbeat*, an upbeat is one, or several, note(s) that occur(s) before the first bar line (before the first metrically accented beat) in a piece of music. The term is synonymous with anacrusis. I have heard dance teachers refer to beats 2, 4, 6, and 8 as upbeats (the same teachers referred to downbeats as 1, 3, 5, and 7). Dancers’ use of this terminology likely originates in proprioception; their body is moving slightly vertical, or is accenting offbeats with vertical motions, hence an understanding of the beat as “up.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


**Discography**


