

CHALYPSO

Vernacular cha-cha as danced by American teenagers in the late 1950s and 1960s

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Chalypso was late 1950s teenage cha-cha characterized by:

- 1) not touching your partner, although still facing them (most of the time).
- 2) angling the body on the two diagonals.
- 3) frequent solo turns.
- 4) danced with a swing-like body motion, and swing triple steps, instead of Latin stylizations.
- 5) extreme personal variety.
- 6) danced to pop and rock music instead of Latin cha-cha music.

THE NAME: On the American Bandstand television show, Dick Clark named this teenage-style of cha-cha "Chalypso" to differentiate it from ballroom Latin Cha-Cha. However many 1950s and 1960s teens simply called this style "Cha-Cha." This vernacular teen style began around 1957 and continued through the 1960s, but the term "Chalypso" only lasted for the first two years.

MUSIC: 1957 and later music popular with teenagers. Some of the top Chalypso tunes were "La Dee Dah" by Billie and Lillie, "Love Is Strange" by Mickey & Sylvia, "Louie Louie" by Richard Berry, all from 1957, and "Everybody Likes to Cha Cha Cha" by Sam Cooke, 1959.

Rhythm: 4/4 **Tempo:** 116 to 140 beats/minute

FORMATION: Couples, with partners facing each other, not necessarily touching. The 3 most common dance holds were, in order of prevalence: (1) Facing, not touching, (2) Holding one or two hands with one's partner, (3) Closed ballroom dance position.

STYLING: Highly individualistic, but overall it had a swing-like style, often with a somewhat bouncy motion which drops during the downbeats.

LEADING / FOLLOWING: Since most teens didn't touch their partners in Chalypso, the lead-follow connection was visual. One dancer simply began dancing, and the partner watched for a moment and synchronized. It made no difference whether the first dancer in motion was the man or woman, and girls often danced with girls in the 1950s.

Men were not always the Leader. Young women were often the better dancers and could initiate the figures. In the following descriptions "Leader" simply means the initiating role, regardless of gender.

BASIC STEP

Version A, described for the Leader:

Break Step: Step fwd L angling the body to face the R diagonal (ct1)

Shift back onto R (ct 2)

Triple Step: Rotate the body to face the L diagonal then step side L to the rear L diagonal (ct 3)

Close R to L (ct &)

Side L (ct 4)

Break Step: Rotate the body to face the R diagonal then step side R to the rear R diagonal (ct 5)

Shift back onto L (ct 6)

Triple Step: Rotate the body to face the L diagonal then step side R to the fwd R diagonal (ct 7)

Close L to R (ct &)

Side R (ct 8)

The Follower does the same but commencing on ct 5 above, Break Step back R.

Note: This timing is often referred to as "break-on-one," meaning dancers do the initial Break Step on ct 1 of the music. Many ballroom dancers at that time preferred to do the Break Step on ct 2 of the music.

Even though Version A was the most common basic, only about a third of the teens danced it in that timing. Chalypso was learned one-on-one from partners, instead of in organized classes or from dance manuals. Therefore other step timings spontaneously arose and were passed on to other partners.

Version B: Also break-on-one, but Follower begins forward L as Leader begins back R. (about 20%)

Version C: Also break-on-one, but Leader begins forward R as Follower begins back L. (about 7%)

Version D: Also break-on-one, but Follower begins forward R as Leader begins back L. (about 7%)

Version E: Leader begins with a forward R-L-R triple step on cts 1&2, then breaks fwd L on ct 3,
(about 20%, which makes this timing tied for the second most common version.)

Version F: Leader begins with a forward LRL cha-cha triple on cts 1&2. (about 7%)

Version G: Leader begins with a backward LRL cha-cha triple on cts 1&2. (about 7%)

Version H: Leader begins backward RLR on cts 1&2. (rare)

Overall, the break-on-one timings were danced by about two-thirds of the dancers. Triple-step-first was danced by about a third. Significantly, *none* of the 100 dancers Richard studied did break-on-two Cha Cha, even though break-on-two timing was being taught by many ballroom dance studios in the 1950s.

VARIATIONS (just a few of 60 variations collected from former Fifties teens)

To maintain description consistency, the following descriptions of figures and stylizations will all be based on Version A timing, even though they may have originally been done in one of the other 7 timings.

All descriptions are for the Leader's timing unless otherwise noted. So if the Leader turns CW on music cts 1-2, the Follower would do the turn on music cts 5-6.

TURNS AND SPINS

Right Turn (the most common turn): Solo CW turn in place on cts 1-2, continuing to turn on the Triple Step cts 3&4 to complete a full turn, ending facing ptrnr. Cts 5-8 continue with the Basic Step, facing partner, not turning. Note that you start turning CW on ct 1.

Left Turn: Ct 1 is basic fwd L, without any turning. Pull L shoulder back as you step back R. Turn full turn CCW on cts 3&4. Cts 5-8 continue with the Basic Step, facing partner. Note that you don't start turning CCW on ct 1, but wait until the cts 3&4 Triple Step.

Break-Away (Half Left Turn): After beginning the CCW turn above, face exactly away from W on the ct 3&4 Triple Step. Then do a Break Step forward R, facing directly away from partner, replace L, turning back to the right, then do the ct 7&8 Triple Step turning toward partner.

The Chase (Right Half-Turn): Turn halfway CW on 1-2, 3&4, to end facing away from partner; then turn halfway CCW just before ct 5, facing partner. Cts 5-8 continue with the basic, facing partner. Partner does not have to mirror this movement.

Side Breaks: On ct 5 of a Basic Step, Leader faces L and does a forward R Break Step out toward the L side. Replace L (ct 6) facing partner. Then do a sideways R-L-R Triple Step. Repeat out to the R side, with a fwd L Break Step toward the R side (ct 1), then a sideways L-R-L Triple Step facing partner.

Note: Dancers don't have to match most of partner's variations, but this one is satisfying to mirror. That's why Leader waits until ct 5 to commence this figure, when he's blocking her fwd path and therefore easier to visually lead.

Rollaway Exit: As an optional conclusion to Side Breaks, M does a full CCW turn in place (a Rollaway) on cts 5, 6, 7&8, as he leads W to turn CW in place.

CLOSED POSITION AND OTHER FIGURES

Side Door: Take closed Ballroom pos for cts 1-2, 3&4 of the Basic Step. Start to change into Closed Promenade Pos. facing toward Leader's L side on ct. 4. On ct 5 Leader breaks fwd R and Follower breaks fwd L in promenade position "out the side door" and then rock back on ct 6. Do a Triple Step backing the Follower on cts 7&8. Repeat this several times. One couple did a slightly dipping leap fwd on ct 5.

Di-Si-Do: Pass each other fwd by the R shoulder, move to your R, then back to place by the L shoulders. To lead it, break fwd L (ct 1), close R to L (ct 2), then Triple Step fwd L as partner is going forward Triple Step (cts 3&4). Side R (ct 5), cross L behind (ct 6), then back up on the R Triple Step (cts 7&8).

Paddle Turn: Turn a quarter to the right to do a side step L toward partner then rock back onto R. Turn a quarter to the right to do a side step L toward your original right side then rock back onto R. Repeat 2 more times to cover all 4 directions. One teen had a hip-sway motion toward the side steps.

INDIVIDUAL FOOTWORK VARIATIONS

Crossover: Break fwd L (ct 1), cross R tightly over L (ct 2), then continue with the backing Triple Step. One teen also did 3 small hops: before ct 1, before ct 2, and before the backing Triple Step. So the count would be "and-1-and-2-and-3&4." Counts 5-8 are an unmodified basic.

Hooked Triple Step when going fwd. This replaces the forward R-L-R Triple Step. Step fwd R, hook L tightly behind the R, step fwd R, on cts 3&4 (or cts 7&8).

The backing equivalent is to cross the second step over in front.

Bop Touch-Step when going fwd, also replacing the fwd Triple Step: After the Break step back R, twist the body diagonal toward the L and tap R toe close to the L, w/o wt (ct 3) then step side R (ct. 4).

The backing equivalent is Tap L near the R then step back diagonal L.

Twist: Some W stayed in place after their back-R break step and did the figure that would soon be called the Twist. 1) Step back R twisting the body to the R; 2) don't move the feet but twist the upper body to the L; 3) twist the lower body to the L as you twist the upper body to the R. Continue the Twist through the 8-count cha-cha phrase. Instead of a Twist motion, one teen swayed back and forth in place with feet apart.