

Chalypso

(United States)

Chalypso is a true American folk dance, in the urban folk dance category, celebrating its 50th anniversary (1957). It is a vernacular cha-cha as danced by teenagers in the late 1950s and 1960s. It evolved at the grass-roots level from a preceding dance form, was transmitted by folk process instead of through formal instruction, and contained many regional variations.

Chalypso was 1950s teenage cha-cha characterized by:

- 1) Mostly facing your partner but not touching them
- 2) Angling the body on the two diagonals
- 3) Frequent solo turns
- 4) Danced with a swing-like body motion instead of Latin stylizations
- 5) Extreme personal variety
- 6) Danced to pop and rock music instead of Latin cha-cha music

On his television show American Bandstand, 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 style began around 1957 and continued through the 1960s, but the term "Chalypso" only lasted for the first few years.

Pronunciation: chah-LIP-soh

Music: 1957 and later popular teen's music. 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 meter, 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 partner, (3) Ballroom dance position.

Styling: Highly individualistic, but overall it had a swing-like style, with a somewhat (or very) bouncy motion which drops during the downbeats.

Leading / Following: Because 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 M or W.

Note: all steps and variations take 2 meas counted 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8.

VERSION A, FOR MAN

Break Step: Step fwd on L angling the body to face R diag (ct1); shift back onto R (ct 2).

Triple Step: Rotate the body to face L diag then step sdwd to L on rear L diag (ct 3); step on R next to L (ct &); step sdwd on L (ct 4).

Break Step: Rotate the body to face R diag then step sdwd on R on rear R diag (ct 5); shift back onto L (ct 6).

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Triple Step: Rotate the body to face L diag then step sdwd on R on fwd R diag (ct 7); step on L next to R (ct 8); step sdwd on R (ct 8).

W does the same but commencing on M's ct 5, 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 the 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 ptrs, each having their own step timing.

VERSION B: Also break-on-one, but W begins fwd L as M begins back R. (about 20%)

VERSION C: Also break-on-one, but M begins fwd R as W begins back L. (about 7%)

VERSION D: Also break-on-one, but W begins fwd R as M begins back L. (about 7%)

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

VERSION F: M begins with a forward L-R-L cha-cha triple on cts 1&2. (about 7%)

VERSION G: M begins with a backward L-R-L cha-cha triple on cts 1&2. (about 7%)

VERSION H: M begins backward R-L-R 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

To maintain description consistency, the following descriptions of figures and stylizations will all be based on Version A timing. In many cases they were actually done in one of the other seven timings.

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

TURNS AND SPINS

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

CCW turn: Basic fwd L, without any turning (ct 1); pull L shldr back as you step back on R (ct 2); turn full turn CCW (cts 3,&4); continue with the Basic Step, facing ptr (cts 5-8). Note that you don't start turning CCW on ct 1, but wait until the cts 3&4 Triple Step.

Break-Away: After beginning the CCW turn above (cts 1,2); M faces exactly away from W on the Triple Step (cts 3,&4); then M does a Break Step fwd R facing directly away from W (ct 5); replaces L turning back to his R (ct 6); then does the Triple Step turning twd his ptr (ct 7,&8). W begins musical ct 5.

The Chase: Turn halfway CW on cts (1,2,3,&4) in a slow lazy turn, to end facing away from ptr; then snap-turn halfway CCW just before ct 5, facing ptr; continue with the Basic, facing ptr (cts 5-8). Ptr does not have to mirror this movement.

This can also be done with smooth turns both times (i.e., no snap turns).

Side Breaks: Beg with ct 5 of a Basic Step, M faces L and does a fwd R Break Step out twd the L side (ct 1); replace L facing ptr (ct 2); then do a sideways R-L-R Triple Step (ct 3,&4); repeat out to the R side, with a fwd L Break Step toward the R side (ct 5-6); then a sideways L-R-L Triple Step facing ptr (cts 7,&8).

Note: Dancers don't have to match most of ptr's variations, but this one is satisfying to mirror. That's why M 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 twd M's L side on ct 4; M breaks fwd R and W breaks fwd L in promenade position "out the side door" (ct 5); rock back (ct 6). Do a Triple Step backing the W on cts 7&8. Repeat this several times. One cpl did a slightly dipping leap fwd on ct 5.

Di-Si-Do: Pass each other fwd by the R shldr, move to your R, then back to place by the L shldr. To lead it, M breaks fwd L (ct 1); step on R next to L (ct 2); Triple Step fwd L as W is going fwd on her Triple Step (cts 3,&4); step sdwd on R (ct 5); step on L across behind (ct 6); back up on the R Triple Step (cts 7,&8).

INDIVIDUAL FOOTWORK VARIATIONS

These were highly individual, not intended to be copied by others.

Crossover: Break fwd L (ct 1); step on R tightly across over L (ct 2); continue with the backing Triple Step (cts 3,&4). 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 on R; step on L hooked tightly behind 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 diag twd L and tap R toe close to the L, without wt (ct 3); step sdwd R (ct 4).

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

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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.

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