**Rumba/Rhumba**

**Summary**

Rumba refers to a genre of Afro-Cuban dance music played on hand percussion, including the sub-genres of *rumba yambú*, *rumba guaguancó*, and *rumba columbia*. It is danced by a single couple or solo dancer in an African style with playful improvised steps featuring segmented movements of the hips, torso, and shoulders. Rumba, which evolved in late-nineteenth-century working-class, black neighbourhoods of Matanzas, Cuba, was marginalized by Cuba’s white elite until the Castro regime embraced it as a symbol of modern national identity in the 1970s. Since the 1980s, rumba increasingly became a major feature of Cuban cultural export and cultural tourism, figuring prominently in Cuba’s modernization strategy through sale of state-sponsored folklore.

Rumba also refers to a style of modern ballroom dancing that developed in the 1930s in the United States, England, and Europe that was loosely based on the Cuban music and dance form called *son*. In its early practice, ballroom rumba was characterized by a small box step incorporating swaying of the hips and partnered turns borrowed from American ballroom dances. The fidelity of ballroom rumba to Cuban dances was less important for its commercial success than symbols of its exotic difference that for North American, European, and Asian practitioners of the 1930s and 40s represented modern travel, communication, and ‘wordly’ culture. The English style of ballroom rumba was exported internationally by groups such as the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing from the 1950s onwards as part of a modernist imperial impulse to spread Western civilization. Rumba is still danced in ballroom competitions worldwide, although incorporation of ballet since the 1980s has led to an even sharper divergence from any Cuban dances upon which it was based.

**Beginnings**

The overnight success of Cuban bandleader Don Azpiazú’s ‘Peanut Vendor’ on his 1929 American tour sparked the first international rumba craze. The song was orchestrated as a *son* (not a rumba), but the word ‘rumba’ proved much more appealing to Americans. Thus throughout the 1930s, virtually any style of Cuban music (including *son*, *danzón*, guaracha, and bolero) was marketed as rumba, with the notable exception of music called rumba in Cuba, which in its exclusive reliance on percussion (*clave*, *cajón*, conga, *shekere*) was too African sounding for American and European audiences. Although intellectual and artistic fashion for black culture in the 1920s spurred the 1930s rumba craze, the idea of rumba as forbidden black dance proved more tantalizing than its actual practice. North Americans and Europeans developed a style of ballroom rumba (at times translated as rhumba) based on the Cuban son, although the rhythm and steps were simplified for the new context. Veloz and Yolanda (Frank Veloz and Yolanda Casazza) became the most successful performers and teachers of American rumba in the 1930s. The orchestra of Xavier Cugat, who fused American and Cuban music for his resident band at the Waldorf Astoria, was paramount in popularizing ballroom rumba music. Rumba as marketed and sold by the modern ballroom dance industry modelled for so-called ‘primitive’ cultures how to assimilate into Western modern society.

**Internationalization**

In 1947, England’s foremost teacher of Latin dancing, Monsieur Pierre (who did not use his surname Zurcher Margolie), travelled to Cuba to study rumba, returning several more times over the next decade with his partner Doris Lavelle. They began promoting the Cuban *son* they studied on their travels as Cuban System Rumba, which utilized a diamond rather than a square foot pattern and the contratiempo or ‘on two’ rhythm (in which dancers change direction on the second beat of each measure). Although their intention was to learn and teach the dance as it was practiced by Cubans, once the Cuban System Rumba was accepted by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing in 1955, it too became an agent of modern cultural imperialism. Rumba was incorporated into ballroom dance competitions worldwide over the next several decades. It was not until the 1970s when English competitive ballroom dancing was adopted in the United States that the Cuban System Rumba (now renamed International Rumba) became popular in the U.S., although it never displaced the American style box rumba. International Rumba and American Rumba are both danced in ballroom competitions (DanceSport) and at social ballroom dances, although the increased use of moves from ballet and their divorce from Cuban music depart drastically from the styles practiced prior to the 1980s.

**National Folklore**

For Cuba’s white elite, rumba was considered a marginal folk tradition of the poor black population until the communist Cuban government began promoting Afro-Cuban rumba as a symbol of national culture in the 1970s. State-sponsored folklore companies including the Ballet Folklórico Nacional de Cuba and the Muñequitos de Matanzas began performing rumba internationally in support of the government’s efforts to perform its modernity through spectacularized presentation of its folk traditions. These performances and renewed public social practice of rumba within Cuba focused exclusively on the folkloric styles of yambú, guaguancó, and columbia, rarely engaging in dialogue with Western ballroom styles of rumba. These national efforts to promote Cuba’s folklore found ready audiences in the new international salsa dance industry in the early 2000s, popularizing AfroCuban rumbas with salsa dancers worldwide. In particular, rumba guaguancó, with its playful *vacunao* (vaccination), a pelvic thrust in which the male partner symbolically attempts to possess his female partner who deftly thwarts his advances, became a favorite of the salsa dance industry. Increased visibility of AfroCuban rumbas as alternatives to ballroom rumbas illustrates the success of Cuba’s reclamation of folkloric rumba as a countermove to its appropriation by the modern ballroom dance industry.

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**Paratextual Material**

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