



PO Box 1910  
Hornsby Westfield, NSW 1635  
Ph/Fax +61 2 9980 1404  
Mob: +61 (0)425 250 265  
E: [dance@auslatin.com.au](mailto:dance@auslatin.com.au)  
[www.auslatin.com.au](http://www.auslatin.com.au)

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## Salsa Music for Dancers Seminar

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### Introduction

**Some of us are blessed with natural rhythm**, or have been brought up around so much music that it has become part of us. Some of us come from cultures that are so rich with music, rhythms and drumming that it's almost impossible NOT to hear the rhythm in everything, let alone music.

However, for **those of us for whom music and rhythm presents a little more of a challenge, Salsa Music in particular presents quite a mystery**. Even those who feel quite comfortable with regular commercial music are stumped when it comes to Salsa Music. Like the music genre of Jazz, it is an acquired taste in which one's passion and fascination grows to quite an intensity, the more you understand it.

It has also been an interesting observation of mine over the last 20 years or so, that when a person has difficulty hearing Salsa, that in general their ear cannot really discern regular commercially recognisable rhythm either!!! That may sound odd, but it's not that Salsa music is so very confusing, it is more that **what we are doing within the music and how we are using it to create salsa dance is a little more complex than bobbing around to a general downbeat**, which is what is commonly done when dancing to western commercial music. Salsa dance requires that you can hear not only the down beat, but the upbeat as well and be aware of where the bar begins and ends in order to stay in time with your partner.

To become a salsa dancer of note, one MUST really get into salsa music to the extent where it is lived and breathed, as the nuances within this musical genre provide the most sublime opportunities for self expression, and that's really what set one dancer apart from the next.

For those of us who would just like to be able to get through a dance and accomplish a reasonable proficiency, all we need do identify and recognise the fundamental structure of music in general, then learn to set our internal metronomes to keep time and try to keep our footwork in synchrony with this.

### The Structure of Music - in layman's terms.

To understand the structure of salsa one must understand music in general – not in vast detail, just in terms of identifying the following.

- **Tempo**
- **Timing**
- **Rhythm**

#### Tempo

This is simply the amount of time it takes between one beat and the next. This gets measured in beats per minute and all it will tell you is **how fast or slow** the tempo is.

Once the second beat occurs the tempo is decided and CONTINUES CONSISTENTLY throughout most music unless specially altered to produce a particular effect. The important word here is CONSISTENT. Tempo does not have differing intervals between beats – each is the same; except where artistic license is taken.

It can be quite a **challenge to maintain** the consistency of the tempo without increasing or losing speed. This is because the brain has **difficulty measuring/remembering the amount of time between** beats without a pattern to follow.

This becomes much easier to do when the beats are divided into smaller chunks with an emphasis at the beginning of the chunk. This then creates a pattern we recognise as timing.



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### Timing

Most music that is familiar in the western world uses 'chunks' of 2, 3 or 4 beats at a time.

Those 'chunks' are known as 'bars' of music.

The waltz uses a bar of 3 beats, but the vast majority of music today uses a bar of 4 beats.

Salsa falls into the category of 4 beats to a bar. However as it takes 2 of those bars for us to complete 1 salsa basic step, we refer to bars of 8.

This means that what you will be measuring is a repetitive cycle of 8 beats all following each other at regular intervals.

Identifying where that cycle of 8 begins and ends can sometimes be a challenge, especially if you are looking for one repetitive and unchanging pattern or sound that continuously hits the 1<sup>st</sup> beat of the bar for the whole song. If you try to do this you will most certainly be unsuccessful.

What you need to do is identify an overall pattern or phrase in the music. Once you have done so, you then need to set your internal metronome, so that you subconsciously are able to anticipate the repetition of the cycle, checking in now and then to ensure that your internal metronome is still synchronised with the music you're listening to.

### Rhythm

Once your tempo and timing have been decided, there is generally a rhythmic pattern established, around which the music will be created.

Now with quite a lot of western music this is a fairly straightforward pattern, often not too far removed from the basic timing. The instruments, lyrics or the song as a whole may deviate in sections from this pattern but will often return to it, creating a certain repetitive, predictable, familiarity. Often it is this familiarity which creates a 'hit' as it usually coincides with a catchy melody or chorus or phrase that is enjoyable to join in singing or humming to.

Now, with Salsa, the same premises exist, but besides the overall pattern each instrument has its own pattern from which the musician will often deviate and return for effect. This creates a certain amount of unpredictability to the novice listener as there appears to be an absence of repetition and is one of the key elements of the *'true flavour'* of Salsa Music. However one doesn't really need to understand all of those patterns unless you intend to delve quite deeply into salsa and achieve a very high standard of musical interpretation in your dance.

### What Pattern am I looking for?

Most people who have difficulty hearing the rhythm in Salsa music, assume that they are listening out for specific sound or instrument that will continuously and repetitively hit the beats, 1 2 3...5 6 7 **THIS IS NOT SO!!!!** Nothing is pounding out a relentless and repetitive beat. That exists in an English march or in nightclub dance music, but not many other types of music.

There are several patterns that you can listen for. Firstly try the exercises below with already familiar western commercial music then try to apply the same principles to salsa music.

### Vocals

Listen for a chorus or a melody. You will find that melodies have a few things in common and one of those things is a certain repetitiveness like one would hear in a refrain, or variations on a single line like one often hears in a verse.

You may not be aware that you can actually do this, but your subconscious automatically predicts when the next line is going to start, based on how long it took the last line to be completed! It's an entirely natural human reaction that occurs without your trying most of the time.

### Instrumental patterns

Sometimes the pattern is a little melody played by the keyboards or strings or brass, but it will follow a pattern nonetheless and it will either be repetitive or have variations on a theme.



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### **But it keeps changing!!**

Yes it does! It's meant to. If it didn't no one would buy the music – it would be boring – like a stuck record. The trick is to set your internal metronome as early as you can and hold on to that so that even when the pattern changes to a new verse or chorus or section of the music you are still sync with it. You must still keep listening to the music to adjust your metronome should it increase or decrease tempo, but overall it should be fairly accurate quite naturally.

### **An alternate pattern to try and hear.**

Most people will be able to tap their foot repetitively to an overall 'feel' in a piece of music. I like to call this the 'pulse'.

It is my observation that with very few exceptions most people can hear this quite easily. Try it with your favouring music.

What you have just done is identify the 1, 3, 5, & 7 of the bar! These are known as 'up beats' Now, in between each of those beats there is a space – those spaces are actually beats as well. These are known as 'down beats'. If you now tap or clap along to both up beats and down beats what you will wind up with is the overall tempo.

**Sounding out the Pulse of the music on 1,3,5&7 and filling in the blanks can also be an easy way of hearing your rhythm**

#### **Timing bar diagram**

<b>Beat</b>	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	5	&	6	&	7	&	8	&
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Once you have identified this all you need to do is listen for patterns which will help you identify the beginning of the bar! Easy!!!

***Good Luck – Happy listening!!!!***