

WHAT IS MALAMBO?

Malambo is an all-male dance form. During the 19th century Malambo was the dance of battleground for gauchos to prove their dance prowess and vigor. Pit fires, local parties and *payadas* were all good excuses for dancers to show off. Top dancers gained recognition due to the difficulty and complexity of their dance movements.

The dance itself is characterized by one dancer performing a series of foot movements in a very small area. These sequences are called *mudanzas*. While percussive footwork is seen in several other dance forms, Spanish Flamenco, Tap, and Indian Kathak, the footwork of the Malambo is the dance itself. It is a one of a kind dance form and truly Argentine.

Each *mudanza* completes a unique cycle or figure so the winner in a Malambo competition is that one who can perform the widest variety, the most complex and the most difficult *mudanzas*.

These steps are performed with background music, usually a guitar and a drum and singing.

In a small town in Cordoba called Laborde, every year Malambo dancers from all over Argentina gather together to celebrate the 'National Malambo Festival'. This has been going on for over 4 decades and is one of the most important events in Malambo.

One of the unique points of Malambo is that it gives the men the opportunity to express themselves by themselves. They have no dance partners and the expression takes place with passion and vigor.

Throughout the history of dancing there are two traditional elements always present: clapping of palms and the percussive footwork. Before musical instruments were developed it was our own hand and feet that were used to create sounds and rhythm when combined, lead to music. Among Incas, dance with percussive footwork was very common. Araucanos, Guaranies and many other natives also performed similar dances.

Everywhere in Latin America this type of dancing spread and took shape according to local idiosyncrasies and cultural influences. The surrounding environment shapes the different dances but they all resemble current Malambo in one way or another. In Argentina, Malambo is the dance that has spread the most among natives.

No one knows with certainty the reasons why Malambo became so popular although many argue that the solitude in the vast lands of the pampas, isolation and the need for self-expression played a crucial role in its popularity. Almost like a survival need and a connection to other realms beyond the material world.

By far the essence of Malambo lies in the firm strikes of the footwork. While the foot of the supporting leg might remain still, the other leg performs very energetic strikes

against the floor together with circular movements of the entire leg. These cycles and movements permit the dancer to express himself in the dance. It is the dexterity of each foot that is unique to Malambo.

While feet and legs are crucial to dancing Malambo, the rest of the body is mainly used to keep the dancer's balance. Thus, the Malambo dancer becomes his own instrument as he performs music with his lower body in unison to whatever is being played on the guitar and/or drum that accompanies him. Most of the time, there is a continuous dialogue between the dancer and the musicians who accompany him. It is the dancer who, in a way, through his movement, acts as the conductor setting the rhythm, tempo and stops the musicians should follow.

Unlike the other popular dance form of Argentina, Tango, Malambo has been shaped differently both in the north and in the south. Perhaps the landscapes and geography played an integral part in defining these differences but some believe there is more depth to this difference.

In the south, what is known as *Malambo Sureño* or *Pampeano*, is a true reflection to the isolation and solitude of the vast flatlands. It seems as though the dancers are introverted through their somewhat shy style of movement. In a way, this 'softer' Malambo tunes in with a more mystical side of Argentine native dances. Malambo from the pampas speaks to the nature of its inhabitants in a softer more philosophical tone. In most cases, the dancers perform this form of Malambo barefoot.

The northern form of Malambo which took shape in a completely different climate and geography seems more rough with a distinct virtuosic beauty. Extreme weather conditions, mountains, high altitude and the distant influence of Incan culture were all definite ingredients that made this Malambo a more energetic dance. Compared to southern Malambo, the northern one is faster, more accurate and strikes stronger. The use of larger and stronger boots also influenced the way this dance takes place and many times the strikes of the feet intentionally try to replace the strikes against the drums.