

## Cha-Cha Hits New Orleans

The *danzón*, which evolved from the *habanera*, or Havana dance (also known as the Cuban *contradanza*), is the official musical genre and dance of Cuba, not to mention its active musical presence in Mexico and other Latin American countries. The *contradanza* is a wonderful fusion of European and African rhythms with the addition of its own unique Creole syncopations.

The 1930s saw the introduction of a new subgenre of Cuban dance music, the *danzón-mambo* (also known as *danzón de nuevo ritmo*), which marked the transition from the classical *danzón* first to the *mambo* and later to the *cha-cha-chá*.



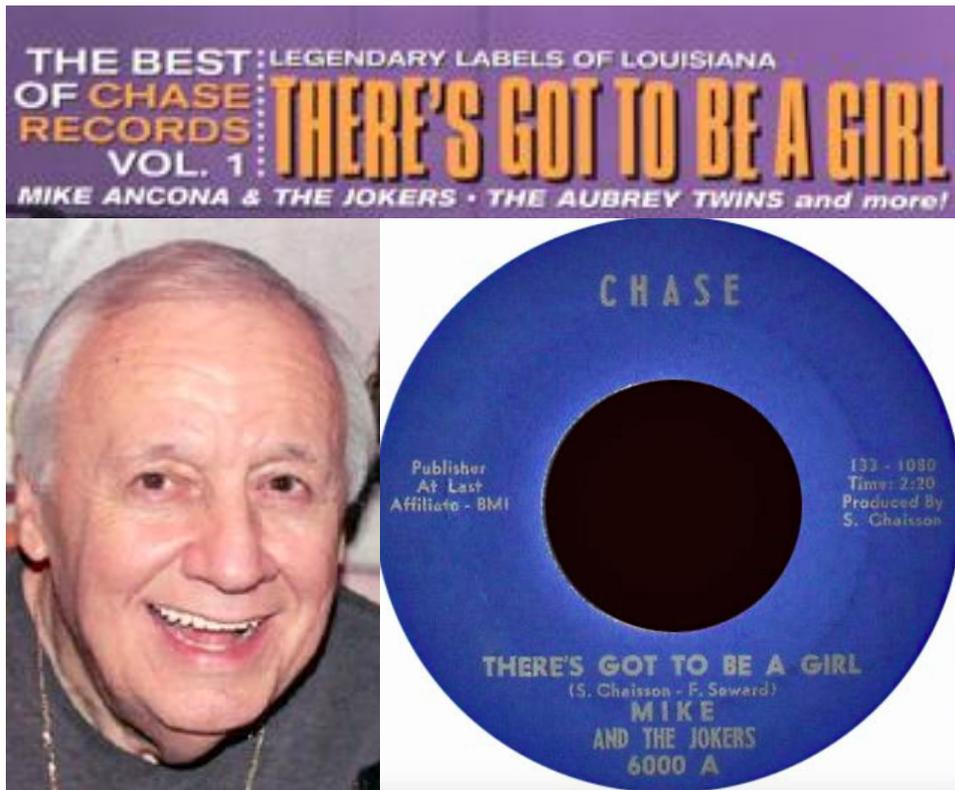
Introduced by Cuban composer and violinist Enrique Jorrín in the early 1950s, the *cha-cha-chá*, informally called the *cha-cha*, has the perfect “onomatopoeia” name. The popular dance’s moniker is derived from the shuffling sound made by the dancers’ feet as they move in those three rapid consecutive steps (one, two, *cha-cha-chá*), which define the dance’s rhythm (developed from the *danzón-mambo*).

It all began at the Silver Star Club in Havana, where Enrique Jorrín

was performing with the *Orquesta América*. He observed that many of the dancers had difficulty with the syncopated rhythms of the *danzón-mambo*, so he began composing songs where the melody was marked strongly on the first downbeat and the rhythm was less syncopated. To these new compositions, the dancers had improvised a triple step to their footwork (inspired by Afro-Cuban tribal-religious rhythms already familiar to many Cubans at that time), and so produced that distinctive *cha-cha-chá* sound. In 1953, the first *cha-cha-chá* songs ever recorded were *Orquesta América's* release of two of Jorrín's works: "*La Engañadora*" and "*Silver Star*" on the Cuban record label *Panart*. From Havana's dance halls a new international musical genre and its associated dance craze was on its way.



By 1955, the music and dance of the *cha-cha-chá* had spread across Latin America, the United States, Western Europe and beyond, following in the footsteps of the mambo, which had been a worldwide dance phenomenon a few years earlier. Tommy Dorsey recorded the huge hit "*Tea For Two Cha Cha*" in 1958, which reached number seven on the U.S. *Billboard* chart and stayed there for twenty weeks. And, it wasn't long before the *cha-cha-chá* hit New Orleans.

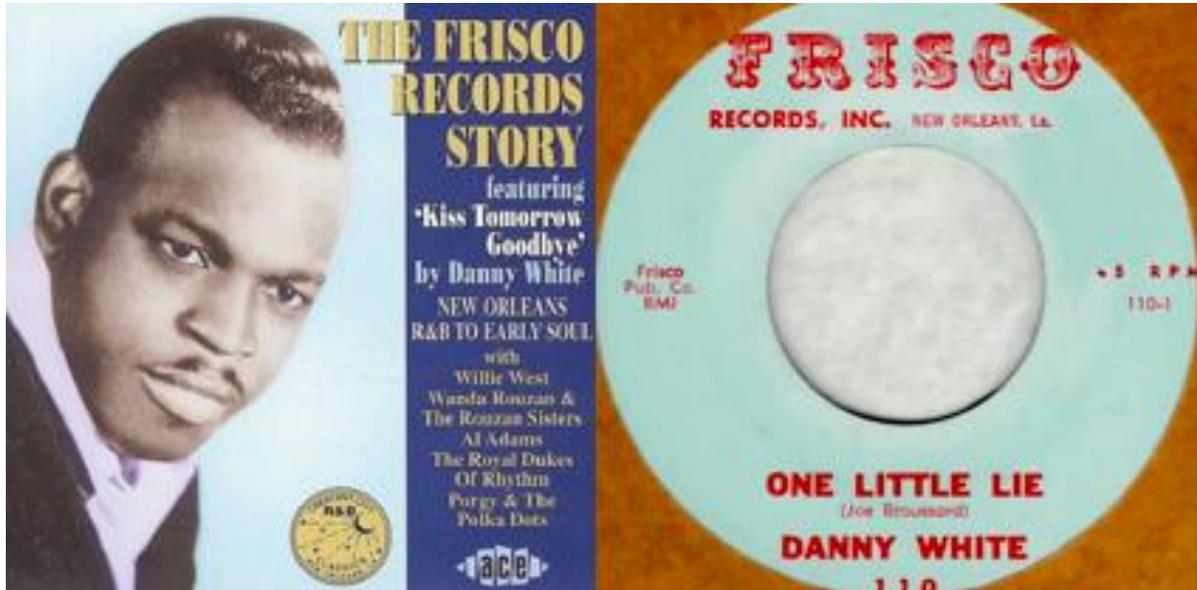


*Mike Ancona of the Jokers and his New Orleans cha-cha hit*

The Crescent City enjoyed *cha-cha* songs popular throughout the United States, such as Sam Cooke's "Everybody Loves To Cha Cha Cha" in 1959; Dave "Baby" Cortez's *cha-cha* instrumental "Rinky Dink", Dean Martin's "Cha Cha de Amour" and Bobby Rydell's "The Cha-Cha-Cha" (all in 1962); "Laugh It Off" by the Tams in 1963; and Junior Walker's Motown sax groove "Hot Cha" (1965). While these hits were happening, New Orleans had a few *cha-cha* songs of its own.

In 1964, Mike and the Jokers released the infectuous sax-infused "There's Got To Be A Girl", featuring Mike Ancona. Formed in 1957, The Jokers were the quintessential 1950s and '60s rock 'n' roll band appearing at Catholic high school auditoriums, union halls, teen clubs, bowling alleys and Masonic lodges around the city. Founding members Eddie Roth, Herman Gilmore, Roland "Stone" LeBlanc and Jerry Marque were joined by other successful performers through the decades: Chuck Cavet (who recorded "Bells In My Heart" as "Chuck Como"; Mike Ancona (1960-65); Stark Whiteman ("Graduation Day"); Art "Sir" Van ("Cross My Heart"); and Harvey Jesus (today the leader of Harvey Jesus and Fire). Mike Ancona died October 17, 2017.

New Orleans-born R&B great Danny White (1931-1966) led the group Danny White and the Cavaliers and had popular local hits in the 1960s, such as "Loan Me Your Handkerchief" and "Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye" (produced by the late Wardell Quezergue, the "Creole Beethoven", for FRISCO Records). White also recorded with Huey 'Piano' Smith & The Clowns. But in 1963, he released a wonderful *cha-cha* tune, entitled "One Little Lie".



*Danny White and his cha-cha lament, "One Little Lie"*



*"Blues Cha Cha" by Edgar Blanchard & The Gondoliers on New Orleans' RIC Label*

How, you might ask, did FRISCO Records become the name of a New Orleans record label? Owned by Connie LaRocca and disc jockey Hal Atkins, FRISCO was so named because San Francisco was LaRocca's home town. She came to New Orleans in 1947 and met her husband Pete, who managed Jim's Fried Chicken on South Carrollton Avenue. FRISCO used and recorded great local musicians, such as Art Neville and Mac Rebennack (Dr. John), giants of the industry, both of whom we lost in 2019.

Music historian Jeff Hannusch described guitarist Edgar Blanchard (of Edgar Blanchard & The Gondoliers) as "one of the most talented, but sadly underrated rhythm and blues musicians in New Orleans." "Blanchard," he explained, "played and arranged hundreds of recordings, working with artists like Roy Brown, Little Richard, Eddie Bo, Johnny Adams, Ray Charles and Big Joe Turner."

Born in 1924 at Grosse Tete, Louisiana, near Baton Rouge, Blanchard was a veteran of New Orleans' historic Dew Drop Inn in the 1950s. His band's name was inspired by a trip to Venice during the war. An important behind-the-scenes musician, Blanchard played on Roy Brown's "Good Rocking Tonight" in 1947 and provided the "brilliant intro" on Joe Turner's hit, "Honey Hush" in 1953. Sans the Gondoliers, Blanchard "played on Professor Longhair's iconic hit 'Tipitina', along with Earl Palmer and Lee Allen." The Gondoliers also accompanied him on a session with Ray Charles. Blanchard's playing can be heard on several Specialty recordings, including Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally," "Ready Teddy" and "Slippin' and Slidin'". For the local RIC and RON labels, Blanchard was an adroit A&R man, working with numerous great local artists.

Edgar Blanchard & The Gondoliers recorded "Blues Cha Cha", a great blending of New Orleans and Latin rhythms, on a local RIC session. It was un-released when first recorded circa 1958, but appeared on a later Rounder compilation CD from the 1980s entitled "Troubles, Troubles". The talented Blanchard was only 48 years old when he died of a heart attack in 1972.

To give you an idea how popular the *cha-cha* was in New Orleans, local enthusiasts, young and old, decided to take lessons. My parents took *cha-cha* lessons with a group of their friends at a dance studio on Fleur de Lis Drive in West Lakeview. At the time, the street's name was

"Avenue C". Teens were learning the various steps plus a swivel to each side, not to mention the moves where your partner turned around, you followed, then you turned around and she followed. Uptown teen club *Valencia* was a great place to learn these and the myriad of other dance crazes of the 50s and 60s. One Friday night in the early 60s, I received some rudimentary *cha-cha* moves from the Romano Dance Studio on Canal Boulevard. To become more proficient, however, I had to spend the necessary hours in front of a mirror repeating "one, two, *cha-cha-chá*" until my brain and my feet were one - permanently connected.

*Cha-cha* made its way to the Caribbean, where in 1959 Jamaican singer Count Lasher (real name Terence Parkins) recorded the lively "Calypso Cha Cha Cha", a *cha-cha* especially for Jamaica. So much so that seven years later Bob Marley and the Wailers adapted Count Lasher's song into "Rocking Steady", which changed the beat and the focus of celebration from the *cha-cha* to the rocksteady genre.

We learn from a *Times-Picayune* article dated September 17, 1960, that the *cha-cha* was extremely popular in Africa, the Congo to be specific.

## **'Cha Cha' Songs as Beer Flows Keep Congo Masses Grinning**

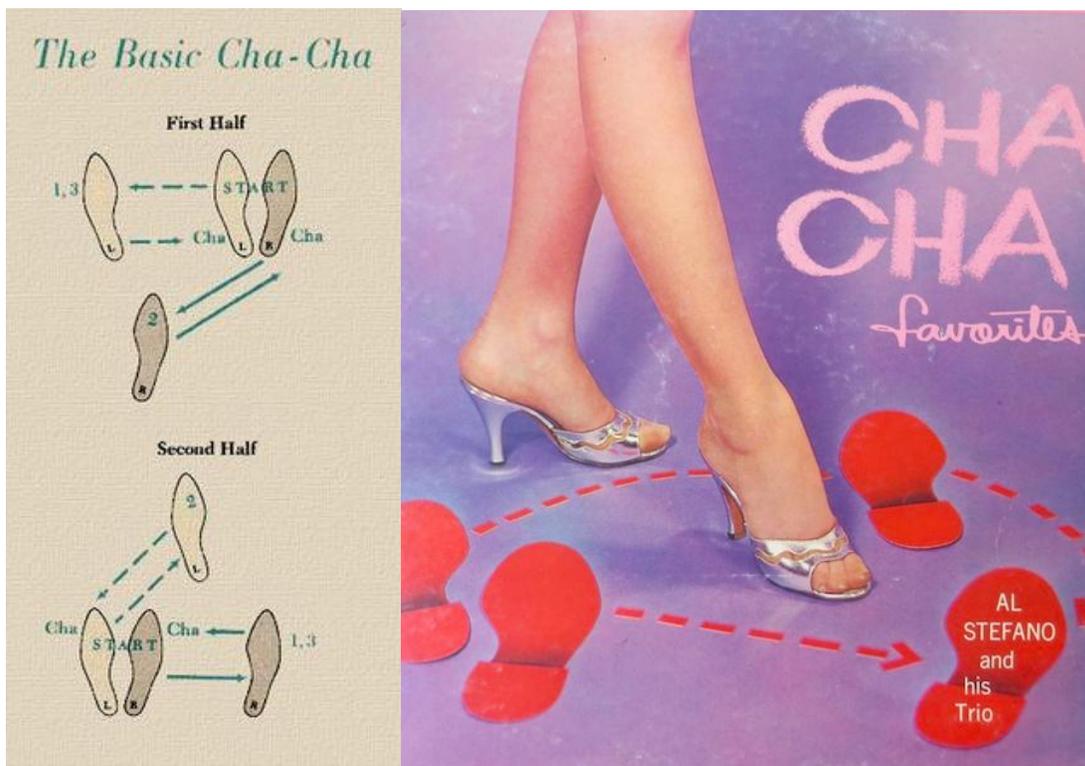
"Political leaders come and go and coup follows coup," reported the paper, but the Congolese continue to enjoy and "wiggle to its tune." The people found delight in the "Independence Cha Cha" regardless of their party affiliation. If supporters of the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba became upset because the band roared "Kasavubu cha cha cha", they were soon happy again when, while playing the same song, the bongo drummers changed their chorus to "Lumumba cha cha cha". Beer drinking with "strikingly colorful robes" swaying to the music, the *cha-cha* in Leopoldville must have lifted the spirits of many dancers.

Armchair historians might recall that Lumumba served as the first Prime Minister of the independent Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Republic of the Congo) from June until September 1960. Joseph Kasavubu was the republic's first President (1960-1965).

Fast forward to the 21st Century and a new incarnation of the *cha-cha* known as the "Cha Cha Slide". Released as a single in August 2000 by Chicago-born recording artist DJ Casper (aka Mr. C The Slide Man), the song spent only five weeks on the *Billboard Hot 100* chart but had a much longer shelf life. It continued to find a home on the charts throughout the world for the next four years, topping the UK singles chart in 2004.

A great line dance for aerobic exercise sessions and nightclubs alike, the "Cha Cha Slide" is often played at dance clubs, New Orleans Mardi Gras yard parties, weddings, school dances, proms and all manner of other soirées in the United States and the United Kingdom.

And for all you novices out there, and old-timers as well, who'd like to learn or re-learn the basic steps to a dance that is so incredibly fun to master, I include a dance step chart below.



I'll leave it to you to decipher the footprints on the left and to figure out which foot goes where, and when. A number of *cha-cha* albums in the 50s and 60s featured some sort of foot chart with dotted lines and arrows as the one shown above on the right. Very few of these instructions were particularly easy to follow.

But don't get caught up in these confusing diagrams, just feel the love of *el nuevo ritmo*, or the new rhythm, and do it. And if you want a *cha-cha* experience with a New Orleans flavor, perhaps you can locate the album below, "A MARDI GRAS OF CHA•CHA•CHA HITS".



And remember the lyrics from Sam Cooke:

"Everybody loves to cha cha cha,  
Little children like to cha cha cha,  
They like to cha cha cha, they like to cha cha cha;  
Ooo everybody likes to cha cha cha."

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Cha-Cha Hits New Orleans"  
Ned Hémard  
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