



What is American Tribal Style Belly Dance?

American Tribal Style Belly Dance (ATS) is a modern style of dance created by FatChanceBellyDance director, Carolena Nericcio.

In 1974, Carolena began belly dancing with Masha Archer and the San Francisco Classic Dance Troupe. Masha's style was an eclectic blend of classic Egyptian, Folkloric and any other influence that she found enticing. Masha, a trained painter and sculptor, taught her dancers to create art through dance. In 1987, after the SF Classic Dance Troupe disbanded, Carolena began teaching in a small studio in the Noe Valley Ministry. Her only goal was to teach people to dance so she could have dance partners.

Being young and tattooed, Carolena attracted other young people living alternative lifestyles. The Modern Primitives movement was also underway. Tattoos and primitive styles of body adornment were the vogue. Carolena and her students performed at tattoo shows and conventions and became well known in the City by the Bay.



When the need for a name for the dance troupe arose, a friend suggested the playful rhyme *FatChanceBellyDance*, based on the silly question dancers often get from onlookers who think that beautiful, feminine belly dance is merely an exotic entertainment for their personal pleasure. In other words, the answer is: "Fat chance you can have a private show."

As Carolena and *FatChanceBellyDance* expanded horizons they received a mixed response. Some people loved the new style others abhorred its departure from tradition. Finally, the style was named "American Tribal

Style Belly Dance", a name that distanced ATS from classical beledi styles. The word "American" made it clear that ATS was distinctly an American invention, not a traditional dance style. "Tribal Style" described the dancers working together as a group with a "tribal" look.

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Back at the studio, a system was evolving. Because of the casual nature of FCBD's performance opportunities, the dance was largely improvisational. There simply wasn't a way, or a need, to choreograph because the dance space often changed at the last minute, and the dancers had to perform without rehearsal or any information about the performance space.

Duets, trios and quartets worked in set formations. If the stage was two-sided, or if the dance space was in the round, the dancers could flip the lead by facing the opposite direction. In other words, as long as the dancers stayed in formation, the group could face any direction and the lead could change, depending on the audience's location. Carolena developed cues for each step or combination, usually an arm or head movement that could easily be seen. She found that because all steps began with a gesture to the right, dancers tended to angle to the left. This angle allowed following dancers to clearly see the lead dancer.

Cues and formations are the brilliance of ATS. Often unnoticed because of the elaborate costumes, fancy steps, exciting music, and sheer beauty of women dancing together, formations and cues are the anchor of improvisational choreography. Even occasional formal choreography is created around the logic of the formations and cues.

The core concept remains in place: leader to the left, followers to the right. Watch for interaction among the dancers, who always have their attention trained on the lead position, looking for the cue for the next step. When the dancers face each other and make eye contact, the lead is neutral, falling to the dancer who presents the next cue. But don't think too hard!



Allow yourself to see the whole picture: women working together in cooperation; a group focused on presenting the dance as one entity.