

BY RACHEL CASSANDRA ([HTTP://SOCIALDANCECOMMUNITY.COM/AUTHOR/RACHEL/](http://socialdancecommunity.com/author/rachel/)) /  
AUGUST 19, 2015

# 5 LIES YOU'VE BEEN TOLD ABOUT ZOUK



Post Views 20,541

**Z**ouk – such a terse little word, yet so tricky to unpack. We're told it means “party” in French Creole, but what does it mean to dancers? There is so much confusion surrounding it that when someone asked, “Rachel, have you thought about writing a ‘5 Lies About Zouk’ article?” I immediately started work on this very piece. I will admit right off the bat: I am not in the zouk scene, although I have appreciated my encounters with it. I spoke to dancers from several regions and

different kinds of zouk scenes in order to put together this together. Particular thanks is due to Jerry Joseph (Montreal), Rachel Meth (North Carolina) Iliana Radneva (New York), and Kati Pan (Arizona) for their assistance.

So, let's examine some common misconceptions about zouk!

## 1. Zouk is from Brazil

First off, **zouk music is absolutely not from Brazil**. It was born in the 1970s in the French-speaking Caribbean, beginning in **Guadeloupe**. It became a musical craze that swept around the world in the 1980s, thanks in large part to innovative bands like **Kassav**(<https://myspace.com/kassav>) that played concerts internationally. Artists in several other countries were soon imitating and borrowing from the sounds of zouk – it is well beyond the scope of this article to estimate the impact of zouk on world music.

Zouk is also a Caribbean dance style that is, quite logically, danced to zouk music. This zouk usually features a belly to belly connection, with small steps and plenty of core movement. It is not a performance dance but a purely social one, and so has not received so much attention internationally. That being said, **it continues to be danced not only in its home region but in every country to which francophone Caribbean people have emigrated**, most notably in France, Canada, and the USA.

Zouk has also been used to label an entirely separate dance family that does come from Brazil, derived from their traditional dance of lambada but danced to zouk music([http://www.zouknewyork.com/?page\\_id=389](http://www.zouknewyork.com/?page_id=389)). While in early years it was called “lambada zouk,” “zouk-lambada,” or “lambazouk,” these descriptors have started to be dropped from the scene as a new identity for the dance is created. Now people attend events simply called zouk festivals, in which lambazouk is used to describe the style of zouk that is closest to its original form, in contrast to the newer Rio style. Further confusion has arisen as new artists have been making all sorts of fusion with zouk, so dancers are often not dancing to true Caribbean zouk music at all, but R&B, hip-hop, electronica, and even acoustic contemporary. Brazilian zouk dancing involves larger steps, with connection opening into handhold, and includes much showier turns and styling. As this form has gained popularity internationally, **huge numbers of people worldwide have come to associate this word “Zouk” solely with the Brazilian dancing**.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/JJP1082-LOVAZOUK-1ER-JUIN-2012.jpg>).

## 2. There are two kinds of zouk dance: Caribbean and Brazilian

All right, this is a hairy knot to untangle. In one sense, yes, we can talk about the zouk dances that come from the Caribbean, and the Brazilian dances that have also come to be known as zouk. In truth, there are more kinds of zouk than an outsider could possibly try to describe, although I will give you a quick sampling.

Zouk, the original form, is a festive dance shared with everyone in the community, first in Guadeloupe and later in other Caribbean countries. Family members old and young moved to this music, the closeness of the hold varying suitably by relationship. From this form evolved zouk love([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnaCnAS8\\_Ho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnaCnAS8_Ho)), a decidedly close dance done in nightclubs. You brought your sweetheart and danced all night with him or her, or you came solo and then found someone you hoped to make your sweetheart.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/JJP1098-LOVAZOUK-1ER-JUIN-2012.jpg>).

Brazilian zouk is far from being a cohesive form, which can also be pretty confusing, even leaving aside the problematic use of the simple term “Zouk” to describe this family. Most people in that scene separate zouk, meaning Brazilian zouk, into **two main categories: Puerto Seguro Style (now being used synonymously with lambazouk) and Rio Style, which includes many variations under its umbrella**. These are not related to the zouk danced in the Caribbean.

**Porto Seguro is the birthplace of lambada.** Lambada music and dance experienced a resurgence of popularity in the '80s and '90s with the success of the band Kaoma([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnaCnAS8\\_Ho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnaCnAS8_Ho)). Thinking back 20 years, Brazilians remember the importance of lambada to the community, with large

parties and well-attended competitions. However, the lambada music fad didn't last, and soon there were few bands playing it. Afficionados weren't so keen to lose their dance, so **certain key people started to move the scene toward dancing to zouk music**, whose popularity had proved longer-lived.

**Rio style can be summed up as a fusion of lambada-zouk with a number of other dance forms**, such as samba de gafieira, tango, contemporary, and even hip-hop. The fundamentals and technique differ some from lambada zouk, although it is the primary root. Each sub-genre within Rio style zouk (neozouk, vero zouk, mzouk, soul zouk, etc) has distinct characteristics, although few people dance only one exclusively.

### 3. Zouk is a sexual dance.

This one's easier: **no, it's not, unless you make it so**. I could easily just refer you to [my movie-watching analogy from the kizomba "5 Lies,"](http://socialdancecommunity.com/5-lies-youve-been-told-about-kizomba/)(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/5-lies-youve-been-told-about-kizomba/>), but let's consider the particular cases here. Both zouk from the Caribbean and Brazilian zouk dancing involve movement in the core and pelvic region. For many people in [non-movement cultures](http://socialdancecommunity.com/bridging-the-divide-learning-to-dance-in-a-non-movement-culture/)(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/bridging-the-divide-learning-to-dance-in-a-non-movement-culture/>), this is automatically sexually suggestive.

Zouk love is undeniably a dance done in the club with a partner to whom you are at least a little attracted. If you didn't come with your significant other, then it's **one means of flirtation**, part of getting to know each other. It should not be confused with grinding club dances, though. Escalation is slow, and both partners indicate their growing interest (or perhaps diminishing attraction) through their embrace and movement.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/JJP1083-LOVAZOUK-1ER-JUIN-2012.jpg>).

Some Brazilians complain about the foreign sexualization of lambada. I had a brief fling with ballroom dance back in 2006, and my parents gave me a book with glossy pictures and descriptions of a variety of dances. I remember finding the page on “Lambada: **the Forbidden Dance.**” Apparently this was a common association, thanks to a 1990 film([http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099595/?ref=ttsnd\\_snd\\_tt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099595/?ref=ttsnd_snd_tt)), so titled. These days, regardless of which style of Brazilian zouk you prefer, it’s up to you what sort of tone you want to bring into the dance.

#### 4. Zouk is a freestyle dance.

There is a misconception that when it comes to zouk, you just do whatever you feel. Let’s examine that for each of the two dance families.

Zouk in the Caribbean is not a codified dance. **You can’t find a syllabus setting out the accepted steps.** There are very few classes you can take. If you search for lessons on YouTube (and manage to weed out all the results related to lambada-derived zouk forms) you will only have a few relevant hits([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FVqswly\\_3o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FVqswly_3o)). Still, zouk dancers know what is and is not zouk. Growing up in a movement culture(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/bridging-the-divide-learning-to-dance-in-a-non-movement-culture/>), they learned by watching their elder siblings and friends. There is lead and follow technique, attention to rhythm and also to the meaning of the song’s lyrics.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/081815-lambazouk.png>).

Brazilian zouk sometimes gets labeled a “hippy dance,” what with the lolling heads and hair being flung around(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUjpvllkMKc>). I have to assume such detractors have never tried to dance lambada zouk! My interviews confirmed my own understanding from the few times I have taken classes in these styles – there is very specific technique for everything from body rolls to hair flicks, and it is not at all easy. Not only do you need a very sensitive lead-follow dynamic, but excellent balance and body awareness. In recent years, quite a lot of contemporary dance movement has been incorporated into Brazilian zouk. Although the range of possibilities in contemporary is enormous, I can tell you from my own semester trying to learn this dance form with a bunch of 12-year-olds that it is not just random movement – I found it very difficult to do as well as my classmates!

## 5. Zouk and kizomba are basically the same.

Although my knee-jerk reaction to this one is “Whaaaaaaat? Have you even seen them?” I do have to admit there are **several sources of confusion** for the layman.

- Zouk music helped inspire the birth of kizomba(<http://www.kizombacommunity.com/what-is-kizomba/>), with Kassav(<https://myspace.com/kassav/>),’s concert in Angola
- Kizomba was often danced to zouk music in the ’80s
- Musical artists from both genres have borrowed from one another, and plenty of songs exist in the gray area between them.
- Many people first encountered kizomba being danced to ghetto zouk music(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFWuVwiciWw>).
- When people dance tarraxinha(<http://www.kizombacommunity.com/what-is-tarraxinha/>), or insert tarraxinha breaks(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGdQHWvC4bk>) into their kizomba, there isn’t much visually in the way of steps. The close connection and

focus on isolations can resemble [zouk love](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWV9Ndvg0dM&feature=youtu.be)(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWV9Ndvg0dM&feature=youtu.be>).

- At Latin festivals, there is often a zouk/kizomba room
- Quite a number of teachers who started off with Brazilian zouk have started offering kizomba classes
- Followers from lambazouk and from kizomba talk about the delicious state of surrender they find in these dances

One beginner class from each should pretty quickly clear up the confusion, though!

**Let me know about your own misconceptions about zouk, or the questions people ask you, by leaving a comment below!**

*Credit for the first three photos goes to [Jerry](#)*

*[Joseph](https://www.facebook.com/JJ.Photographer) (<https://www.facebook.com/JJ.Photographer>) & [Melorize](#)*

*[Productions](http://www.facebook.com/pages/MELORIZE-PRODUCTION/244779932431) (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/MELORIZE-PRODUCTION/244779932431>)*

*The fourth photo belongs to [Rachel Meth](#) of [Embodied](#)*

*[Dance](http://www.embodiedance.com/) (<http://www.embodiedance.com/>).*

*Want to know more about the evolution of Brazilian zouk?*

*Check out [this article](#) by [Kim Rottier](#) ([http://www.zouknewyork.com/?page\\_id=389](http://www.zouknewyork.com/?page_id=389)) and [this](#)*

*[YouTube playlist](#) ([https://www.youtube.com/playlist?](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH_SfDwoFICvlomVStz3uzpkddZMQCAHD)*

*[list=PLH\\_SfDwoFICvlomVStz3uzpkddZMQCAHD](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH_SfDwoFICvlomVStz3uzpkddZMQCAHD)).*

---