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The World Canine Freestyle Organization
High Artistic Impression Score
Challenge Trophy

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The World Canine Freestyle Organization
High Technical Merit Score
Challenge Trophy

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The New York Times

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Where Everybody, and Every Dog, Loves Dancing

Oct. 15, 2015

Correction appended below.

These are photos of humans dancing with their dogs. Or are they photos of dogs dancing with their humans? Either way, the spirit is the same: Everybody, it seems, loves to cha-cha-cha.

In search of a story about animals, the Spanish photographer **Bego Antón** stumbled onto a YouTube video showing a woman and a golden retriever dancing to music from the musical “Grease.” A little bit of online sleuthing led her to an organization known as the **World Canine Freestyle Organization**. Ms. Antón quickly got lost in the world of musical canine freestyle, which she described as “a choreographed performance in which a dog and a human move to music together.”

On the first of three road trips across various states, she traveled to West Virginia and spent three days with the first pair she photographed, Barb and her dog, Rex.

“It was the first time I could see with my own eyes what freestyle is,” Ms. Antón said.

A canine tango is not, after all, the easiest thing to picture.

“You can’t imagine what a dog can do when he’s dancing,” she said. “Big dogs and small dogs, of course, have different moves.”

Freestyle isn’t about using a dog as a stand-in for a human dance partner. There is no dancing cheek-to-cheek — and no cha-cha, in the traditional sense. Instead, freestyle is made up of a

series of jumps, leaps and twirls. Dogs weave between the legs of their humans. Humans bow to their dogs. There is motivational chattering, some barking and the occasional doggie treat. Many of the canine performers have a background in obedience, which tends to be a more serious pursuit.

While men are a part of the musical canine freestyle world, all but one of those Ms. Antón photographed were female freestylers. For most of the women she met, freestyle wasn't about competition, but performance.

"These women, what they enjoy about freestyle is precisely that — that they can do what they want," Ms. Antón said. "It's not like everything has to be perfect. That's why they like it. It's very free."

Her project, "Everybody Loves to Cha Cha Cha," includes medium-format portraits, still-life photos and a short documentary, which Ms. Antón has not finished. She didn't want to photograph meet-ups or competitions, instead focusing on how the freestylers live at home. She hoped it would provide more insight about their personalities. She wanted her subjects — of both species — to feel comfortable as she documented the bond between dog and human.

"For me, it was really important not only to show what they can do together on a team, because it's amazing," Ms. Antón said. "But it was also important for me to show their relationship."

The choreography is a team effort. The humans choose a song they can listen to again and again. But the dog must also enjoy the tune. The often-elaborate costumes are just as important as the music and lyrics. These, too, must flatter both canine and companion.

Ms. Antón, who tends to seek out stories about people with unique perspectives on life, said she respected the women she met for their passion and their bravery. "They give me something that is very private," she said. "Now I'm making this whole thing not private at all."

Ms. Antón, 32, was born in the north of Spain. As she dived into the world of musical canine freestyle, she learned that the hobby extends beyond American borders. Ms. Antón hopes to travel to other countries where the movement has caught on. (Spain, where she lives, is not among them.)

"It's a sport that is not possible without the human and it's not possible without the animal, either. I think that is beautiful," she said. "If you think of it in a poetic way, the human is not above the animal."

In an earlier caption for slide 10, the image was referred to as taken in Phoenix. It was taken in Albuquerque, N.M. The post has been updated to reflect this change.

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