

Is Salsa dying? The state of salsa music and dance! *By Christina Colon*

Those of us growing up during the salsa era of the 1960's and 1970's can remember a time of unparalleled mass appeal in LATIN U.S.A., and especially in New York City! "Salsa" was a new word used to describe the further development of a type of music, which by many "old timers" is still being referred to as the "mambo". Outside of the Latin world the "mambo" was associated with what people watched and listened to during the hilarious episodes being shown on TV, called "I Love Lucy". The beloved Ricky Ricardo and his orchestra was perhaps the Ambassador or precursor to introducing mainstream U.S.A. to a taste of the "mambo".

Even today, when describing what salsa music sounds like to the mainstream world, some people can only associate what you are talking about if terms, such as a further development "Ricky Ricardo music" or "Cuban Buena Vista Social Club music" are used. In spite of claiming that "the salsa craze is sweeping the U.S.A.", some people think salsa is, and I quote, "Mexican Tejano type music"! Mention Hector Lavoe, or El Gran Combo to mainstream America? Forgeddaboutit! Tito Puente or Celia Cruz? Maybe!

One thing that has taken place, which is totally different from the 1960's and the 1970's, is that salsa has experienced a massive appeal and popularity outside of the Latin world. Instead of a huge confinement among Latin people and Latin places, such as in New York City, the U.S. North-East Coast, Florida, and of course Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the sparks began to spread like fireworks all over the globe. The secret weapon used to create that appeal? Salsa dancing!

This beautiful form of dancing is often thought of, and especially among females, as being such "a sexy, sensual, romantic, gracious and smooth dance". Many dance instructors would explain it this way: "We listen to the clave (beat) of salsa music to dance the mambo!"

The dance, in turn, has developed into a multitude of styles. "Ballroom style" salsa dance, known as "On-1" was developed in California. "On-2" style is another form, very popular on the East Coast. Some even still master the art of "old time mambo dancing", the way it was done in old Cuba from the 1930's, or even during the New York 1950's Palladium era. The latter is a slower but distinctly gracious foot/body movement of the dance. Just watch the first Cachao documentary "Como Su Ritmo No hay Dos" and witness actor Robert Duval demonstrate some basic old time mambo steps.

Ask a casual not-into-modern-artsy-style New York Puerto Rican, or ask a native Puerto Rican who simply "dances salsa" which style he dances. The answer is often "what do you mean about style, I just dance", while displaying those very Bronx originated NuYorican "side-to side like style dance movements". One friend of mine from Puerto Rico, who's an outstanding dancer here in New York claims that his style is dancing on-3! Regardless of dance style, they are all based on the basic beat of salsa. The difference lies in how you prefer to execute the foot/body movement to that clave. The difference is that some prefer to execute the first foot step on the first, second, or third beat of the clave, etc.

For salsa fans not into dance, the music is simply riveting, funky, rhythmic, cosmopolitan, cool, and everything else above. They snap their fingers, tap their toe, and they get into the Latin Caribbean groove big time! Salsa venues, clubs, festivals and congresses are popping up everywhere. Salsa music can be heard in public places and driving cars from California to Japan to Europe to New York and everywhere else.

Eddie Palmieri, the megastar of Latin Jazz, has capitalized on the salsa craze by turning his Latin Jazz music into salsa by making Latin Jazz danceable! Just listen to recent CD's like Masterpiece and Perfecta III! Spanish Harlem Orchestra has turned old time 1960's and 1970's salsa smash hit tunes into a remix of modern day marvels.

Okay, with all these wonderful claims that the salsa craze is sweeping the world, how can anyone question whether salsa is dying or not?

Salsarican.com has interviewed hundreds of people to get feedback on the verdict of their first one to two dance lessons of salsa. We are also looking at other factors which may influence why salsa can't gain the popularity of i.e. hip hop music in today's world.

It seems as more people who investigate salsa dancing for the first time who don't take it any further sometimes feel turned off by what they perceive as a complexity surrounding the learning process. While some pick up the pace immediately, lots of people stop after one or two attempts. The main reason for this, based on people's most commonly expressed concern, were that the lesson progressed too quick in a very short time. The beginner simply felt lost after barely starting.

Those who kept going and took their skills to the next level most often continued with lesson after lesson until getting good or better. Just a thought, but could it be that some dance instructors allow the beginner to advance into the next step before the bare bone basic clave has been repeatedly practiced and mastered? Also, if the basic lesson was taught at a very slow pace, would more people permanently get hooked on salsa dancing? Or, would going really slow on the basic lesson turn the ones who quickly adapt away from salsa?

Those not into the dance aspect of salsa are often hard core salsa music fans only. Just visit the NuYorican Poets Café in New York City during a live event night. There you can witness how the audience simply soaks up the clave by listening to the groovy beat! Another aspect of salsa music fans are from the Latin jazz audience, and naturally so. The Afro-Caribbean origin shines through in Latin jazz as well as in salsa. Or, at your next salsa event, take a moment to observe those who don't dance. Do they enjoy going to a salsa event if they don't dance? Heck yeah, you'd better believe it, they're in heaven! If you don't dance, my advice to you would be: Give salsa a chance and listen to the exotic beat!

Some people say they don't get into salsa because of its predominantly Spanish language lyrics. But, you don't have to understand a word Spanish to listen to salsa. Allow the energy and excitement of the music itself to make you fall in love!

On the issue of younger generations, many factors influence the impact of salsa. Peer pressure to listen to what the other kids listen to (i.e. hip hop), cultural backgrounds (i.e. a person's own cultural background music), lack of widespread exposure to salsa, and other things are stumbling blocks to "new recruits".

But, is salsa dying? No way! Salsa music and dance is growing by the leaps and bounds worldwide. If you don't believe me, just check out the next salsa venue in your area! If you're already into salsa, please become an ambassador and help spread the word through encouragement and motivation to experience the experience!