

Brenda Ramos | Salsa Dancing Explained! *Written by: Les Rivera*

Few art forms can evoke such beautiful images of excitement in our minds, and for good reasons! Salsa dancing is associated with many of the things making us human creatures feel good about ourselves: Images, such as sexiness, sensuality, style, class, graciousness, beauty, fun, exercise, energy, leisure, happiness, and even proud machismo often enter our heads.

Yet, this most romantic of all dances is often shrouded in mystery and stigma, especially among the uninitiated. By some perceived as too difficult to learn, many have learned the dance to a basic “occasional having-fun-on-the-weekend” type skill level. Others have brought their dancing interest into levels of excellence. The most extreme of dancers have carried their dancing skills into a dead serious competitive level, making salsa dancing a priority in their lives.



A recognized authority on salsa dancing is New Jersey/New York area’s Brenda Ramos. Her genuine, enthusiastic, and beautiful personality is contagious, as she could easily motivate the stiffest of the stiff to dance! The superstar salsa dancing artist of today’s era is sharing her thoughts:

Les Rivera: Many different styles of salsa dancing have evolved over time. Some people dance “on-2”, “on-1”, or any other style they feel is right for them. For the uninitiated, this simply means the dancer takes the first step of the dance-steps at the second, or first, or whatever the dancer’s preference is, beat of the basic rhythm of the music. Many curiosity seekers or beginners are not even aware that there is a difference. But, from a beginner’s point of view, which style is the easiest to learn?

Brenda Ramos: “On-1” is easier to learn for most beginners. I think that’s because it’s based on the downbeat of the music, and that’s what people naturally feel; the “1” and the “5”.

What’s your style of dancing?

My style of dancing is the New York style 2 dance, which is different from the ballroom 2,3,4. But, I dance it all; I love dancing! I can dance Cuban style; I can dance 1,2,3,4. Whatever my partner is leading me into is what I’ll dance.

People often don’t pursue salsa lessons any further after feeling overwhelmed by the first lesson. The most common feedback on this is that the instructor advances too fast already on the first lesson. Yet, for others who pick up the pace right away, the advances seem just right. What advice do you have for the challenged student?

The best advice I can give, or the advice that I do give my students, is to listen to the music at all times! Learn the rules so that you can break the rules later on and make the dancing your own, whether that be “on-1”, “on-2”, or anything. And, like any new skill, practice it! Practice it when you go home. Even if you just think about it for five, ten minutes a day, even if you just listen to the music and try to hear the 1 or hear the 2, it will improve your dancing. I focus on teaching beginner level basic and beginner level. I really enjoy teaching that level, because I am opening new doors to students.

Some people are hesitant going out on the dance floor out of fear of looking terrible among the good ones out there. How do you overcome that fear?

(Laughter) That's an easy one. Just go out on the dance floor and smile! I am an experienced dancer and I love to go out to clubs. When I see people out there nervous, uptight, with serious looks on their faces, counting; they don't look like they're having fun. Go out there and have fun! If you mess up, or if you feel you don't know what you're doing, just smile and enjoy what it is that you do know. Enjoy being in that atmosphere and enjoy the whole learning process. I would rather dance with a beginner who is just starting out who is a little nervous, but is having a really great time, than to dance with someone who's been dancing for a year or so and thinks that he's got it down path. He knows the count and he knows how to do twenty million turn patterns. The fun for me is the connection between the partners.

The original Cuban mambo dance, as we can still see on the dance floor, as well as in Cachao documentaries, looks very elegant. During the New York Palladium era, this was indeed how people danced. People have commented to me that it also somewhat appears to have a slower foot movement than those of modern salsa dancing. What are the differences in the style of the "old era" from today's era of dancing?

The original Cuban Mambo Dance may not necessarily be slower than the "on-2" we are dancing today. In the "old" Cuban style I think that the difference is that there is a point in which your feet will come together during the dance. That style is also a little choppy in the movement.

In the "New York 2", or in "modern 2", if you're at a starting point before actually starting to dance, your feet are together. After that you never bring your feet together again on the "modern 2". So the "modern 2" is very fluid and it may look faster. If it is faster, it is just a millisecond faster than the "old Cuban". The old style carries that look, because your feet come together in a more choppy way.

When and how did you first become involved in dancing?

I took my first class in 1996. And it was "on-1" actually! Although I had known how to dance from the time I was a young girl. There was the family dance. My brother taught me how to dance the Latin Hustle, and that's how I became familiar with following. My brother taught me how to follow. I had started going clubbing in my brother's Latin clubs for the first time that year. And, I saw these incredible dancers and I immediately found out where they were and I started taking classes with them. I took my first class "on-1", and the class was fine. But, I met in that class Ismael Otero, from Caribbean Soul, and he said: "Why are you dancing on one?" He also said: "Why are you in that class?" I said I don't know; I just want to learn how to dance salsa. Isn't this the way you dance salsa? He said: "Well, it is one of the ways". Then he explained to me the difference between 1 and 2, and I fell in love with 2 that day! I continued the classes with Ismael Otero.

Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born and I grew up in Hoboken, New Jersey. But, I spent a month out of every summer in Puerto Rico, on the West Coast. So I got the best of both worlds.

You have been dancing all over the world as a professional dancer. The "Latin Madness" tour comes to mind. You also run the Mario B & Brenda Dancers Company in New Jersey. Tell us about that.

In the nine years I have been dancing I've worked with the best companies in the New York City and New Jersey areas. I started out with Ismael Otero. I named his group Caribbean Soul. He's proud to say that I am his first female superstar. From there I moved onto Fuerza Latina Dance Company with Luis Zegarra. That's where I actually got a lot of stage experiences and exposure. We did a lot of traveling to the European countries. He's a really amazing promoter. He was able to do that for us.

Then I worked with Descarga Latina, which is Nelson Flores' company. I had a wonderful time working with him, and that's how I was introduced to Latin Madness, which was an incredible experience. I worked with so many talented dancers and performers. It's been the highlight of my dance career so far.

I also worked with Santo Rico and Thomas Guerrero. Their spinning technique is the best on the East Coast. I work with them specifically for that reason.

After that I worked with Mario (Gonzalez). He is the comedian of the dance world on stage. With Mario anything goes. He's willing to try anything, he's willing to do anything, and his technique is definitely one of the best on the East Coast. His lead is incredible. He is an amazing teacher. I have so much fun with his class.

Oh, I am also now working as a Copacabana dancer, as a Copa Girl. I have been a Copa Girl for the last two years.

What's the number one reward you get from being an artist, teacher, and a dancer?

Well, performers are all needy for attention (laughter). That's whether we admit it or not. We all have that need. I love the experience of being in front of a live audience, feeling their energy, their admiration, and their appreciation for the art that I am sharing with them. One of my favorite experiences was on the Latin Madness stage. At the close of the Gangster number with Santo Rico we finished with such high energy. I came around my partner who swung me. I slid on the floor towards the audience and everything came together so perfectly that when the audience applauded that number, I actually felt that energy. It was the most amazing experience. It was spectacular. The energy from the audience and the applause pushed me. That's what I love!

Besides being a part of the salsa dancing celebrity world, what other interests do you have?

If I am not dancing I am with my family. My family is very important to me. That's why I am sitting here with my niece and my god-daughter. I try to spend as much time as possible with them, although I spend a lot of time dancing. My son is ten years old. So it's just family for me. I go to the movies, I love having dinner with friends with a bottle of wine. That's pretty much all I have time for.

Brenda Ramos can be contacted for dance lessons, bookings, and general artist inquiries at mambosexy@hotmail.com. Her website, which she is currently working towards getting online at the time of this interview, is www.mambosexy.com. More information on Brenda can also be found at www.salsanewyork.com.

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