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HOLIDAY 2009

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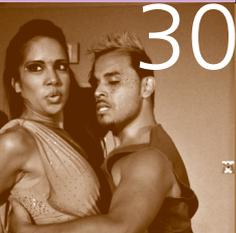
*Leon Harris:  
It's Personal,  
Not Just Business*

Also in this issue: Bachata | Abdul Al-Ali | Bio Ritmo | DJ Hercules  
Ramiro Parada | Rubén Blades | Lucky Bar | Santería | Why We Dance

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Cover Photo: Enrique Bravo



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# Editor's Note:

While this is not our one year anniversary issue, we have worked diligently for you for over a year now. I am proud of the growth of our staff and our readership, and thank you again for your support. We have received a lot of feedback, both positive and constructive, and hope you continue to send us your thoughts and ideas.

Each issue I fight to avoid charging a cover price for the magazines we distribute. To help offset the costs we will hold a fundraiser event (socials, performances, concerts) before each issue release party. I hope you will support us by attending the fundraising events, and help us alleviate costs of magazine production.

Finally, we have a couple of people working on website reconstruction, so stay tuned for some great improvements. In the meantime, please visit [www.thescenemagdc.com](http://www.thescenemagdc.com) for information on when and where you can find The Scene staff handing out free magazines and to stay informed about upcoming events.

Thanks again for your continued support.

LoRENZO Haire  
Editor in Chief, Founder



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# Salsa pa' mi Santo

By Rosy Valenzuela

*"Aguanilé, Aguanilé mai mai.... Aguanilé, Aguanilé mai mai.... Santo Dios, Santo Fuerte, Santo Inmortal...."*

Recently re-popularized by Marc Anthony, *Aguanilé* was first sung by Héctor Lavoe in the 1970s. The song he performed with such passion was released following Lavoe's visit to a santero, a Santería priest, for advice in the hopes of dealing with a drug problem and getting back on the right track. The lyrics for *Aguanilé*, and many other salsa songs, were strongly

influenced by Santería, a mystical polytheistic religion that originated in Cuba during slavery and later spread to the U.S. and Latin America.

Santería was born out of necessity when slaves, who were brought from West Africa to Cuba, combined their Yoruban religion with Catholicism in order to mask their continued veneration of their deities, or *santos*, when faced with pressure to convert to the Catholic church. While other forms of religious syncretism developed – Brazilian Condomblé and Haitian Vodún – it is Cuban Santería that influenced salsa.

*Aguanilé mai mai* is a chant used in Santería to honor Oggún, one of the seven major orishas or deities of Santería. *Aguanilé* comes from *Agguan*, which means cleansing, and *ilé*, which means your home."

Like Lavoe, other salsa artists over time have turned to Santería for strength and inspiration in both their personal life and professional career. Many of the artists

under the Fania record label sang about Santería. However, not all of them were santeros, and "many probably did not know what they were singing about," says Larry Harlow who became a santero 33 years ago.

"I was the only santero in Fania at that time," he explains. The other salsaeros sang it because it was popular among Cuban musicians. "They weren't santeros but they were *spiritistas*." They had general knowledge of Santería culture by default because they grew up around it. When

asked about Lavoe's familiarity with Santería, Harlow says when Lavoe sang *rompe saragüey* – "he knew it was a *hierba*, or herb, but he probably didn't know the power the grass had."

Even among Cubans, there isn't a complete understanding of some of the Yoruban words used in salsa lyrics. Orlando "Maraca"

Valle, a Cuban musician and composer,

admits that although Santería plays a huge role in every day Cuban culture, there are some Yoruban words that have been handed down through generations of which the meaning has been lost. His album "Descarga Total" includes *Yoruba Song* with an introduction which captures original Yoruban chants. Valle explains that to his complete amazement, while performing this Yoruban introduction in the West African country of Ivory Coast, the audience spontaneously began to respond in Yoruban. "We got scared," he exclaims, "because we didn't know what we were singing and what they were saying." After the performance, he learned the words they recited were apparently part of an ancient war chant.

**"Aguanilé, Aguanilé  
mai mai... Aguanilé,  
Aguanilé mai mai...  
Santo Dios, Santo  
Fuerte, Santo  
Inmortal..."**



D.C.'s Alafia Drum and Dance Company performs folkloric dances depicting orishas Yemaya, Elegua and Ochún (left to right)

Why then do many salseros turn to Santería-influenced lyrics? According to Harlow Santería offers protection. "I did it to protect myself from outside influences, so nothing outside could mess with us." He recounts how Ismael Miranda, a Puerto Rican-born salsa singer, first introduced him to Santería. Harlow's orchestra released the album "Abran Paso" in 1970, a few years before Harlow became a santero. On the album, Miranda sings *Abran Paso*, the cover song, which means to remove from a person's path all dangers or obstacles that may have been placed there by an enemy through a *maldición* or curse. Miranda sings, "Yo traigo las Siete Potencias," an allusion to the seven major orishas (Oggún, Obatala, Elegua, Orula, Changó, Yemaya, and Ochún) of the Santería religion and the strength it gives him to overcome life's obstacles. Shortly thereafter, Miranda introduced Harlow to Diego, his original *padrino*, an experienced santero that initiates someone into Santería and is tied to that person for life.

Many Fania era salsa musicians eventually became santeros, probably for many of the same reasons as Harlow. Tito Puente *se hizo* (became) Obatalá, and Adalberto Santiago, Elegua. Nelson González, Roberto

Roena and later Alfredo de la Fe also became santeros, Harlow reports. In Cuba, Valle got his start playing with the popular group Irakere, which had strong roots in Santería. One of Irakere's directors, the legendary pianist Chucho Valdés, was a santero and a believer. "*La brujería estaba dura*," says Valle, explaining how intensely the group practiced Santería.

Valle, who was born and raised in Párraga, a Havana neighborhood with a strong connection to Santería, is not himself religious, but does sing about it and he occasionally consults on life matters with his father who is an *espiritista* and healer. "A santero cannot solve someone's problems or perform miracles," he explains. "People need to help themselves and *lo que sucede, conviene*," things happen for a reason.

Santería references in Latin music is not new. In the 1940s, Cuban performer Desi Arnaz explored ways to break into the Hollywood scene with something that would appeal to the American audience and still remain true to his Cuban traditions. Traditionally coming from the black slave culture, some white Cubans adopted it, even if they failed to admit it publicly.

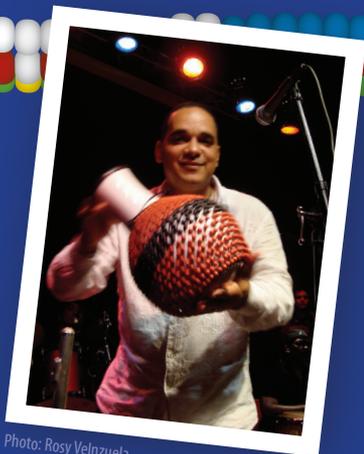
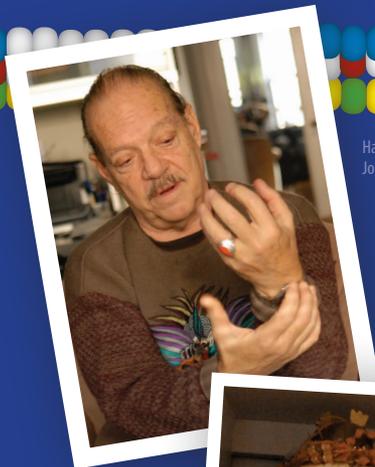


Photo: Rosy Velzueta

Orlando "Maraca" Valle holding a *shekere*, a percussion instrument used in religious ceremonies.



Harlow photos: Jon Trevino

Top: Larry Harlow shows the ring representing his orisha Ochún.



Right: Ceremonial items honoring Ochún in Harlow's house.

It was just part of Cuban life to seek a cleansing from a Santero who could liberate your spirit from bad influences. Desi Arnaz released an album and song called *Babalú*, a name for a *santo*, and played it for American audiences with his big dance band.

The song was written by Miguelito Valdéz, a well-known Cuban singer from the 1930s. According to Larry Harlow, Valdéz was a santero, and Babalú was his *santo*.

Arnaz was a rich white kid who was able to market the song and make it hugely popular.

In her pre-Fania days and before the Queen of Salsa Celia Cruz's music became known as salsa, she sang and recorded authentic *toques*, honoring Changó and Babalu Ayé also in the 1940s. They are traditional Afro-Cuban chants to various orishas and typically only previously heard in a *bembé*, a party where believers dance and sing in honor of the orishas. Throughout her career, Celia Cruz continued to infuse Santería references with her lyrics in such songs as *Yerbero Moderno*, *Quimbara*, *Burundanga*, *Pun Pun Cantalú*. Despite her

apparent affinity toward santeros, Harlow says that she never actually became one.

Santería has provided a rich source for creative expression because behind every orisha there are several stories that personify the *santo's* realm.

"Each Orisha has his/her own colors, rituals, ways and attributes" says Ezekiel Torres, a Cuban santero and batá instructor in Miami. Through their problems, humans learn life lessons.

"Morality and ethics are derived from their *atakinés* or parables," Torres explains. Whether a musician is a practicing santero or not,

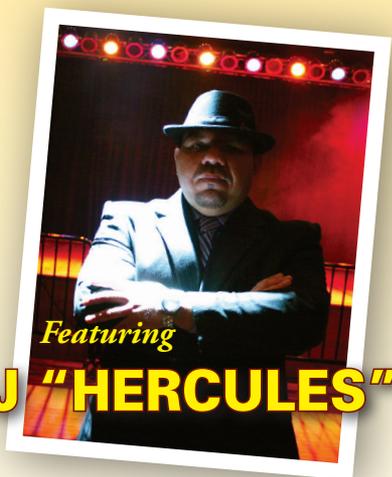
Santería has touched salsa, inspired the dancer and nourished the soul.

"Santería continues to strongly influence salsa music," says Valle. "Santería evokes strong feelings — people feel inspired and then go to Cuba to initiate themselves into the religion." Santería and its Afro-Cuban roots is also what gives salsa its *sabor*, or flavor, says Valle. "If the music does not have *sabor*, it's no good."

**"Santería continues to strongly influence salsa music."**



## THE DJ'S Corner



Featuring

## DJ "HERCULES"



Interviewed by Lorenzo Haire

**W**illiam Sánchez, Jr. is from the Bronx, New York, but it was during his deejaying days in Orlando, Florida that he acquired the name DJ Hercules, because he "carried all types of music." After relocating to D.C. in 2007, he also acquired the motto, "The Strongest Man in Salsa." Less than a year later, Sánchez was hired as the house DJ for The Salsa Room, the D.C.'s largest salsa venue.

**Q: What inspired you to become a DJ?**

**A:** I have been around music for as long as I can remember. I have always been inspired by how music engulfs people's emotions and how the energy drives them. I wanted to be the force behind that energy.

**Q: What do you do if you are in a groove and someone asks you to play something you are not comfortable with?**

**A:** I will play requests if I have it, but will let them know it will be played when the timing is right or I'll see if it is even right for the venue.

**Q: What music moves you?**

**A:** New York salsa. My top artists are Fania All-Stars, El Gran Combo De Puerto Rico, Joe Cuba Sextet, Orquesta La Conspiración, and Apollo Sound.

**Q: One complaint heard in D.C. is that some DJs don't cater to multiple genres, just mainstream salsa. What is your response to this?**

**A:** Being at The Salsa Room, I cater to all genres of salsa. Deejaying in New York City has taught me to be very diverse. I am currently learning a lot about Timba and have started collecting it, with much help from the members of SAOCO and fellow DJs.

**Q: What's a common mistake you see salsa DJs make?**

**A:** DJs that play for themselves. They play the songs they love and forget who they are there for.

**Q: What amazes you as you watch from the DJ booth?**

**A:** The passion of the dancers and how the music overtakes their emotions.

**Q: What gives you a rush as a salsa DJ?**

**A:** When I play a song everyone is into and is enjoying dancing. Then they applaud. You get a great rush!

**Q: Tell us something about DJ Hercules that we may not know.**

**A:** I am a Certified Medical Assistant, currently working for the American Red Cross collecting blood donations. Save a life, donate blood!



# Do You Feel **LUCKY** ?

By Angelina Paniagua



**A**n untrained eye may peer into Lucky Bar on a Monday night and only see the typical dive bar - patrons sipping on cheap beer and munching on bar food (50 cent tacos, the weekly special). But walk further back and onto the crowded dance floor, and you'll find an unlikely salsa spot that has been a staple of the D.C. salsa community every Monday night for 13 years.

The décor near the entrance consists of horseshoes, Bingo wheels, black-and-white sports framed photographs, and even a giant 8-ball. Colorful scarves representing soccer teams from around the world adorn the wall behind the bar – most were gifts from patrons. The goal of 15-year venue owner, Paul Lusty, was to make Lucky Bar “cozy and fun.” The regulars tend to make their first social stop at the bar to greet six-year veteran bartender, Rafiq Jennings, then head to area to find the house salsa DJ, Roberto “Silenzio” Araya, up in the DJ booth, overlooking the huge cement dance floor.

Lucky Bar is a sports bar that morphs into a lively salsa attraction once a week. A handful of Lucky Bar’s 22-plus television sets broadcast the major sports games of the evening—competing for attention with sounds of Oscar de Leon’s “Llorarás” and the sight of spinning couples. Weekly regulars know the subtle traditions of a Lucky Bar Monday night, including the typical timeline. There are amenities – the pub food menu and the pool table – that are easier to access before the dancing really takes over after 10p.m.

Regulars agree it’s the free cover, cheap drinks (\$12.75 for a bucket of Sol), and never-ending free water that attracts them to the sports bar as a salsa venue. The spacious dance floor and the well-known and loved salsa records that Araya plays every Monday keep them coming back.

When Lusty opened the bar in 1994 – then named Planet Fred – a friend suggested the idea of salsa night on Mondays. It was mildly successful until 1996 when instructor Ricardo Loaiza began promoting salsa night heavily and propelled the venue to phenomenal success. Loaiza had bizarre teaching methods – he asked his first-time students to pretend they were standing on a tiny island dipping their feet into water. He earned a following and, many admit, helped Lucky Bar’s salsa night find the success it enjoys today. People come to Lucky Bar for the casual, fun atmosphere, and Loaiza’s lessons played no small part. His goal was for it to be fun and “not too technical,” he says. “A relaxed place to meet other people,” explains Loaiza. A laid-back happy-hour salsa night was then born and developed into a success story over a decade.



“Ricardo had a well-known repertoire of salsa songs, every song better than the last,” says Freddy Caceras, who has been dancing salsa at Lucky bar for eight years. “It was contagious and difficult to stop dancing.”

Even as the house promoter, emcee, DJ, host and instructor, Loaiza was never too busy to hand out shots of aguardiente, shake hands, and make sure every guest was having a good time. “It was all about the ambience,” Loaiza explained. “I was always on the dance floor, too.”

According to multiple sources, tensions with management caused Loaiza to leave Lucky Bar in 2007.

Jennings, who has been bartending here since 2003, has his own view of Lucky Bar’s salsa evolution – he believes it needed to mature, grow and become different than it had been before.

When the success of salsa night seemed grim following Loaizo’s departure, the new DJ, Araya, was determined to create a fresh start. He reached out to the patrons, asking people of many different dance backgrounds what music they wanted to hear. “That’s when a whole new world opened up to me,” says Araya. Slowly but surely Araya rebuilt Lucky Bar’s salsa night into a hit.



"If you like consistency and salsa, this is the place for you," explains Demonta Whiting, a Lucky Bar regular for three years.

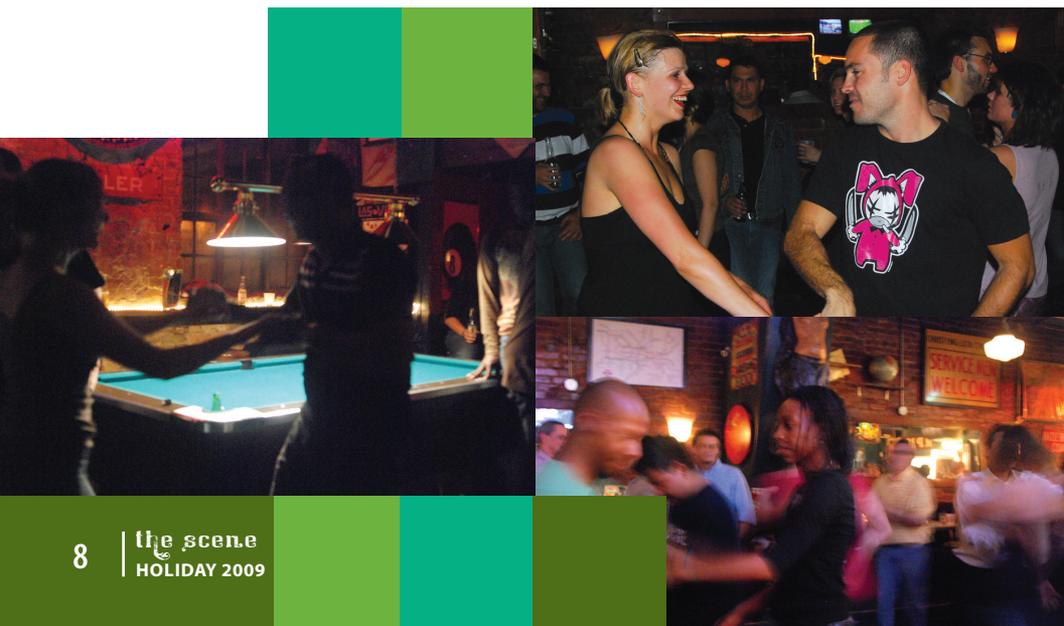
Late into the dance night, Araya reenergizes the dance floor by shouting into the microphone, "La familia está reunida!" ("The family is reunited!") He has learned from which countries his dancers come and calls out the names, a move that Jennings says has created a "diverse" but homey feel in the room.

Lucky Bar fills the house most salsa nights by word-of-mouth rather than direct promotion.

Oftentimes city dwellers will haphazardly stumble upon the venue thinking it's only a dive bar. They tend

to be surprised by what they find inside and seem excited to have discovered something unique and different – eager to take it all in. Lucky Bar's casual atmosphere brings in a great variety of backgrounds and cultures, unleashing the world of salsa on any willing student in its vicinity. Until recently, the bar featured free salsa lessons, converting many of the accidental salsa night participants into hardcore regulars.

Judging by the consistently crowded venue on the first work night of the week, Lucky Bar is one of the top salsa attractions in D.C. Just don't be surprised if Monday Night Football is playing on a big screen behind you while you dance.



# dancer spotlight



**carlos g. torres**

**Place of birth:** Villalba, Puerto Rico  
**Day job:** Mechanical Engineer  
**Representing:** Lexington Park, MD  
**Dancing salsa:** 6 years  
**Likely to be found:** Everywhere

**On1 or On2?**

"Both."

**Dance Shoes or regular shoes?**

"Regular shoes."

**Where did you discover salsa?**

"Listening to radio stations in my hometown in Puerto Rico."

**What makes a good dance?**

"Both partners connecting with each other in the rhythm of the music."

**What makes a bad dance?**

"When I have to worry about oncoming elbows, feet, and other hazards."

**A favorite song to dance to?**

"*El Matrimonio* by El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico."

**Are you addicted?**

"What else would explain me dancing by myself on the linoleum kitchen floor?"

**What do you drink when you dance?**

"Scotch and tonic, rum and coke, water."



**márgie rustin**

**Place of birth:** Great Falls, MT  
**Day job:** Federal Aviation Administration  
**Representing:** Burke, VA  
**Dancing salsa:** 5.5 years  
**Likely to be found:** eCite

**On1 or On2?**

"Both. And On3, On4, On5..."

**Dance Shoes or regular shoes?**

"Dance sneakers."

**Where did you discover salsa?**

"San Diego."

**What makes a good dance?**

"When the lead challenges me with new moves."

**What makes a bad dance?**

"There's no such thing as a bad dance. Even the most inexperienced dancer can teach me something."

**A favorite song to dance to?**

"*Corazon Espinado* by Santana."

**Are you addicted?**

"Yes, because even after 5.5 years I still go out dancing 3-5 nights a week. And I get withdrawals when I go to visit family."

**What do you drink when you dance?**

"As much water as I can find."

# Salsa as Salvation

By Emily Goulding



It's 1:15 a.m., and Conga Beat company director **Abdul Al-Ali** is, yet again, dancing. It's his favorite time to put his records on, turn up the volume, and let loose. He invents new moves, and practices old ones.

But Al-Ali is also awake at 1:15 a.m. for a reason that doesn't involve dance. Enjoying the late hours of the night is a way of life he grew accustomed to as a young adult in the war refugee camps of northern Saudi Arabia.

In the camps, the middle of the night was when the air was cool, but not cold; it was when camp residents would play soccer, read the Koran, and talk and laugh together. With daytime temperatures of up to 135 degrees, night was the only comfortable time for the residents to do the things they loved.

And avoid the nightmares they hated.

"Everyone knows me here as a dancer, choreographer, but no one really knows me as Abdul the Iraqi. I used to be angry all the time. There was always something missing," he said.

"Salsa changed all that."

Al-Ali's story begins in 1968 in Basra, southern Iraq. Basra sits at the edge of the Persian Gulf and at the intersection of three regional powers: Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. The Iran-Iraq war broke out when Al-Ali was 12-years-old, and at 22, he participated in a local uprising against Saddam Hussein. Staying in Hussein's Iraq would have been a death sentence, so at 2:20 p.m. on February 27th, 1991, Al-Ali set out on foot. He was leaving behind his country, as well as 15 corpses of his cousins and friends strewn across the battle field.

He walked 170 miles in 11 days to reach a U.N.-administered refugee camp. The camp was filled with 90,000 other Iraqis who lived in valleys that would flood when it rained. Unable to sleep until the water drained out of their water-logged tents, residents would stay up and just watch the water drip.

After nearly three years, Al-Ali became so depressed he lost his senses. Everything looked to be the color of sand, and food had lost its flavor. In one psychosomatic move, the left side of his body froze in a temporary paralysis.

A camp doctor examined him and told him if he did not lift his spirits, he would die. Al-Ali looked up listlessly at him; he had fought so hard to save his own life, yet had ceased to care about it.

Al-Ali eventually found a way out of the camp. U.S. immigration officials came to conduct amnesty interviews, and in 1996, approved Al-Ali's visa. They asked him where in the U.S. he would like to be placed, and because Al-Ali didn't have a specific answer, the officers sent him to the only non-state in the country: the District of Columbia.

Feeling lost in the U.S., and consumed by a deepening depression, Al-Ali would get home from the graveyard shift he worked at his job, sit along the banks of the Potomac River, and stare into space. He wasn't in a tent anymore, but emotionally he felt just as trapped.

One day, to cheer him up, a friend took him to Bravo Bravo dance club on its "International Night." A salsa

Photos: Kira Zalan



song by Willy Cherino played, and Al-Ali's face lit up. His friend, witnessing the transformation, suggested he go to clubs that specifically played salsa music. "There's such a

place?" he asked in joyful disbelief.

From that point on, he told himself, "You know what? I'm going to do it. I'm going to dance salsa."

Al-Ali's whole world changed when salsa became a part of it. He threw himself completely and feverishly into the hobby. He began taking lessons with Cecilia Villalobos, the founding director of Salsa Fuego dance company. He was a fast learner, and while Villalobos remembers that he did have a temper at times, she generally recalls him being a kind and eager student. Al-Ali would go to Habana Village in Adams Morgan intending to practice, but often found himself standing against the wall, staring in delight. There, amongst the twirling bodies, was the first time he completely forgot the pain of war. Al-Ali abandoned what he calls "the culture of war," and started thinking of having fun, and not just winning, as an end goal.

When he started going salsa dancing regularly, he felt he had something to look forward to. "I started counting time," he explained. For the first time he wasn't counting down towards death, and was counting time well-spent. Al-Ali went out every night, and eventually to the Salsa Congresses, annual conventions that draw salsa lovers from all over the world. Soon, he himself was attracting attention on the Habana Village dance floor.

"He was the guy who did the splits," remembers instructor Shaka Brown, a friend of Al-Ali. Although he doesn't do the splits anymore, Al-Ali does work just as hard as he used to. "I don't know how he does it," says Brown. "He'll be out dancing 'til like 11:45 p.m., then jump

in the car and go to work." As a far beckon from his desert days, Al-Ali is now in the business of temperature control, working as a heater and air conditioner repair technician for the Hilton Hotel chain.

On the side, Al-Ali also teaches salsa at Born to Dance

studio in Vienna, VA. The studio is owned by Rami Shalam, and his fiancée, Azim Mahoozi. Like Al-Ali, Mahoozi has an engineering background, but really loves to do one thing: dance.

Al-Ali is considered a natural at teaching. He greets his students enthusiastically, asking them, "How you doin', my man?" His stride is so joyful that he practically bounces off the floor as he crosses the room.

He turns on the instructional CD, which features a genteel voice counting, "Ah 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8" over an instrumental loop, and starts to dance. He teaches his students how to count the beat and feel the music.

"Music goes straight to your heart, to your soul," he tells them. "It cannot go to your mind." His students struggle to step on the right beats, and

fumble awkwardly in their K-Swiss tennis shoes. "Don't look down," he reminds them. "You want to always maintain your vision."

Noticing the confused faces, he gives them an example: "See, turn like me. You start one, two, and woosh! . . . Here I am!"

As class ends, he hands out thumb drives to his students loaded with 600 mp3 songs. "I made these for you," he says to them, beaming.

One dancer in class, Mike, shows particular talent. Mike is a tall hip-hop dancer, who, with training, could become a strong salsa dancer.

"I've got to take care of him," Al-Ali mutters under his breath. "He's going to be good."

"I have high expectations."

The foyer on the first floor of the Born to Dance studio contains an enclosed glass case showing the achievements of the local Vienna Optimist Club.

They might soon have a new member. Upstairs, Abdul Al-Ali is counting time, and smiling.





# CARIBBEAN BREEZE

LATIN CUISINE



Photos: Enrique Bravo

# Ramiro Parada:

## One Thousand and One Latin Nights

*By Mathina Calliope*

**R**amiro “El Padrino” Parada recently celebrated his birthday. Because he’s a promoter, and because he hosts a Latin night at Arlington’s Caribbean Breeze on Saturdays, and because his birthday fell on a Saturday this year, he decided to mix business with pleasure.



His girlfriend advised against it. She knew he would work too hard, so she suggested instead that he kick back and relax. But “The Godfather” turned 39 this year.

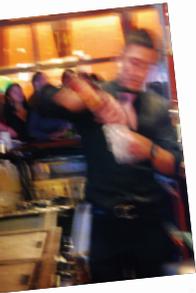
For his present to himself, he wanted to do something that would make his friends happy.

The party he threw was a lot of work, he admitted. For example, managing the models for the Brazilian bikini fashion show. “I have to go and meet every model and make sure they get fitted,” he said. He had to hire makeup and hair people. He had to ensure the models could safely saunter down the 36-foot-long runway erected in the center of Caribbean Breeze’s dance floor and to sashay around the shiny strip pole. He had to ask himself, “How the hell are we gonna make this pole sturdy enough for people not to break their head?”

It’s not easy to host a Latin night on a weekend. One club manager calls doing so a “desperate move,” a last resort taken only if the owners of the club or restaurant would otherwise go under. Typically, clubs hold their specialty nights (Latin, urban, gay) on Wednesdays or Sundays. Fridays and Saturdays are referred to as “regular” or “international” nights, with formats aimed at attracting a more diverse crowd.

But Ramiro Parada has been involved with successful weekend Latin nights in restaurants and clubs in the D.C. metropolitan area for more than 20 years. It started before he was even old enough to gain legal admittance. Mixing music was a passion that could occupy him for ten hours a day starting when he got home from high school at 2 p.m. At the time, despite his recent arrival from Bolivia, he hadn’t developed a taste for Latin music. It was the late 1980s; he mixed American music — house music. But one Friday afternoon found him deejaying at a house party in Manassas, playing salsa and merengue, playing to the crowd. Someone at the party knew the owner of Connections, a Latin club on Twentieth and K Streets. Connections’s DJ was in jail. Did Ramiro want a job that night?

That night turned into the next night, and the next night turned into a regular thing. His name got around. He did some homework: collected addresses and printed up flyers and put them in the physical mail. Soon he was working Latin nights at Opera, Chicago’s, The Spy Club. Before he knew it, the skinny, hyper Ramiro Parada, age 17, was deejaying seven nights a week and driving a Porsche.



Anyone who has been around for a while will remember Yuca, which used to be Ooh-La-La, which used to be Relish, which used to be Fellini's. From 1999 to 2005, Parada promoted a Latin night there at the corner of Eighteenth and M Streets, in the Dupont area of D.C. When the restaurant finally went out of business, he took his Saturday night crowd to Arlington.

So there is no confusion, here are a few definitions courtesy of Parada: a salsa night turns the club into a gymnasium. It's "like one big salsa class," he said. A salsa night is a gathering of Americans decked out "like you're going to come and wash my car." By way of contrast, a Latin night (which features some salsa music and salsa dancing) has "that energy," he said. His Latin nights attract women who dress sexy and does not attract excessive numbers of dancers who bring "their little shoes." Latinos "dance on the pavement," he said. "We dance on the gravel." No one gets bent out of shape when the DJ plays one too many merengue.

A final and notable distinction: "My salseros drink," he noted. Meaning? Latin nights make money.

His Caribbean Breeze Saturdays – where the format is 40 percent salsa with the rest comprising merengue, reggaeton, and the odd bachata or American top 40 song – are successful. Less well established is his newest venture, Rumba Fridays at Paper Moon in Georgetown. On his second Friday promoting there, between 10 p.m. and 1:30 a.m., the number of guests did not exceed 50 at one time. Parada, who wore a white shirt and dark slacks and several times interrupted a conversation he was having as people approached him to say goodbye, was philo-

sophical. This was, after all, only the second week. "Come back next Friday," he said. Two petite women – models – approached him then to ask him something, and he gestured at the bartender, who produced two bottles of water and held them out for the women to take. He himself was drinking Grand Marnier, neat. It was perhaps 11:30 at this time and the DJ, who had been pumping an unrelenting pulse of house music out over the barren dance floor, slipped in a set of merengue.

The following week, Paper Moon was packed.

Promoting Latin nights in D.C. and Virginia puts play money in Parada's pocket. To pay his bills, by day he runs an advertising company, QuéCreative!, out of an office in Annandale. The company specializes in creating campaigns targeting the Latin market. His clients are often small, American-owned businesses who want to extend their reach beyond the English-only-speaking demographic.

He provides flyers, car wraps, Web design, direct mail campaigns – or he can recommend the time of day (between which soap operas) to run a television commercial.

Weekend nights, however, he can be found at the club. On his birthday, he would have been found at Caribbean Breeze, ringed by models (including his beautiful girlfriend), or blindfolded and swinging a stick at the Grand Marnier-shaped "adult" piñata (Its filling? Lube, thongs, "all kinds of candies shaped like . . . whatever," and 700 condoms courtesy Whitman-Walker Clinic), or onstage introducing MAFU crew, the reggaeton band that came to play.

"We didn't get to do the actual strip pole contest," he lamented. "We got shut down by our good friends, the fire marshalls."

Stay tuned. Ramiro Parada turns 40 next year.

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# Leon Harris:

## It's Personal, Not

By Hildi Pardo

Leon Harris, 63, loves dancing so much that he tailored his house to be a multi-purpose dance studio. Two levels of Casa de Baile, as it has been dubbed, are red oak wood floors, which Harris himself installed. There are a few easily moveable chairs in the corner, but anything beyond that would take up dance space and is considered unnecessary. Large artwork depicting dancers in various positions adorn the red brick walls of the 1895 Mt. Vernon row home. Some may find this décor to be borderline obsessive, but Harris lives for dance. He keeps a low profile, but this legendary dance instructor is quietly referred to as the Godfather of salsa in D.C.

Harris started his life of dance in the early 1990s, after retiring from a career in public health administration. "Working in a conservative profession, I found that dance gave me a chance to be expressive and passionate about something," he explains. He was a regular at Brazil Tropical where they taught lambada lessons. When that ended, he moved onto ballroom dance, which was where he discovered salsa.

Harris started teaching salsa at Habana Village in 1991, while it was still in its original location on Columbia Road and one of the only places in D.C. to offer salsa lessons. "I was one lesson ahead of the students," explains the humble Harris, with a laugh. Harris's students were a diverse bunch, many coming straight from work at the World Bank for a mojito and a salsa lesson.

"Leon is responsible for getting gringos into the salsa scene," says Jeri Dembrak, a D.C. salsa instructor whose

first salsa teacher was Harris himself. More than just spreading the salsa exposure, Harris's style also began altering the unspoken dress code of the salsa world in D.C. salsa. "At Habana Village, it was a t-shirts and jeans crowd," Dembrak said, noting that before Harris, salsa events had previously expected, if not required, dressy attire.

The soft-spoken, mild-mannered Harris continued to change the salsa scene without great fanfare. "The Birthday Dance," a circle dance with the guest of honor in the middle, which is now featured in most salsa venues in D.C., originated from Harris. At a going away party for one of Harris's students, he had an idea, and proposed it to the group: "Why don't I start dancing with her, you cut in, and then we'll have another gentleman cut in?" As each man danced with the honored guest, he gave her a warm, personal, farewell message, Harris explains. The idea caught on. "[We did it at] birthdays or any special event... someone was highlighted for something significant in their life," he says.

Although Harris's contributions to D.C. salsa club traditions are numerous, he is most commonly associated with his famous house parties, which fill up his dance studio-modeled row home and even the permanently installed hardwood dance floor in the backyard.

On fall nights, guests will crowd his outdoor creation to dance salsa, tango, and other Latin dances. Originally the backyard patio was concrete, but it would tear the bottoms of the leather dance shoes, explained Harris's neighbor of 35 years, Barbara Peoples. Harris decided to build an impressive 20-by-24-foot red oak dance floor. He regularly buffs and

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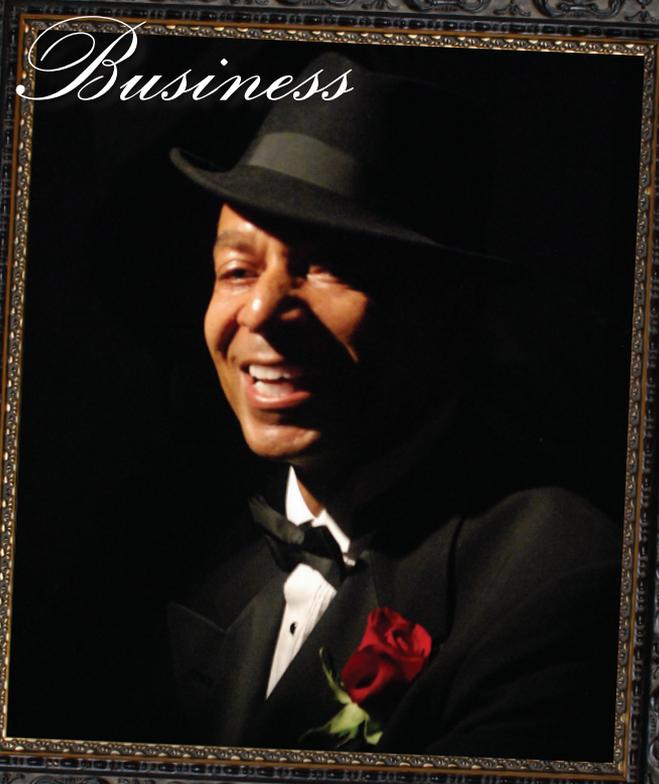


Photo: Enrique Bravo

*"He is just about everybody's first teacher," says Dembrak. "And he doesn't get involved in politics."*



sands his masterpiece, and after each party painstakingly places a structure of 2x4's with a roof-like cover to protect the wood from the elements. Peoples says, "[When it's covered], most people think it's a swimming pool."

Surrounding the edges of the dance floor are sizeable, potted plants, which are brought out to the backyard in the spring to add ambiance to the parties. "All the plants that are outside have to come back in at the end of fall. Inside becomes a jungle. You don't realize how big the plants are until you see them inside," explains Harris.

But planks of wood and vegetation can only go so far. At the end of the day, the parties are unique because of Harris's creativity. Each party has a theme that dictates his décor, the menu and beverages, entertainment, song selection, and attire.

The most recent party, in October, was called *Carnaval Escándalo*, the Spanish word for "scandal," which clearly leaves a lot up to the imagination. Walls were adorned with feathered Brazilian Carnavál masques and risqué images of nude dancers embracing, blown up and mounted in Harris-built custom frames. Brazilian samba dancers performed, and guests were invited to dress in tropical clothing. Some guests

dressed more flamboyant than others: sequined bra tops, feathers, masks, leather, and even a boa of dollar bills. Others stepped out slightly from the theme and wore scarves, batik, turbans; one guest wore a two-piece Carmen Miranda dress, another dressed as a Roman soldier.

The theme party formula works, explains Harris, because, like dance, dress is also a form of expression that will translate into more creativity on the dance floor. "Ladies like it when men are dressed up. There is a more positive atmosphere in the air," he adds. Harris is known to design and sew his own costumes. "He always has the best outfit," says Cindy Ventura, a friend and a regular party guest.

The music requires just as much attention to detail, so Harris creates CDs tailored for each party. Although he has a wide range of music, he doesn't fancy himself an expert or a DJ. "I often will like a song, but I don't know the artist or the name of the song. I just know I like it," says Harris.

Sipping Kool-Aid, Harris sits back and recalls the greatest events at Casa de Baile. One favorite was The Wedding Reception, where people came dressed as members of a wedding party. In attendance were at least five brides, a few priests, and even one drunk uncle. "Some people go to thrift shops for their costumes," explains Harris, clearly proud of his guests'



# Casa de Baile

effort. Another memorable, albeit controversial, party was the *Tango Desnudo*—the nude tango party—where the house was decorated like an Argentine bordello. “It was very nasty. You couldn’t bring your mother in there,” remembers Peoples, shaking her head.

When Harris isn’t organizing ornate parties, or taking groups of students on dance trips to Cuba and Nicaragua, he’s teaching specialized, private and small group tango and salsa lessons in his home. On Thursday and Friday nights, Harris can still be found teaching at Habana Village — almost 20 years later.

What sets Harris apart in the D.C. scene is his lack of aggressive advertising, which makes his events feel more exclusive, though they hardly are. Parties are advertised by an email that goes out to students, friends and

fans, which Harris keeps on his distribution list. His lessons are mostly advertised by word of mouth.

Harris cares little about the “who’s who” on his invite list, and he never mentions which salsa superstars he has taught. “He is just about everybody’s first teacher,” says Dembrak. “And he doesn’t get involved in politics.”

Harris explains that despite the fact that his house, life, and travel revolve around dance, he manages to keep it all in perspective. “My heart goes out to those that make dance just one aspect of their life, and they know they have other things going for themselves.”

# Why We Dance

By Mathina Calliope

One recent Monday at Clarendon Grill I noticed someone new. He was dancing on the concrete by the booths near the front door and he was hitting the second and sixth beats with a fair amount of skill. Huh, I thought. I moved in for a closer look. I moved where he could see me, the better to induce him to ask me to dance.

The song ended and he stepped near. "You dance on 2?" he asked. Standing there with his palm flipped upward but not held out; he seemed indifferent to the answer.

"Yes," I said.

His hand remained suspended for a moment while he cocked his head and stared past me for a beat. He squinted, nodded as if to himself, and then looked at me again, his eyes widened. He lowered his hand and I hooked my fingers over his.

If I had the ability to raise just one eyebrow I would have. Instead, I made a trying-but-failing-to-contain-a-smile face and raised both eyebrows. Two parts gentle admonishment, one part flirt.

"Are you asking me to dance?" I asked him.

"Yes."

We stepped into the song together. We had some early fumbles, such as when he held out his left hand fingers up but I grasped automatically from beneath, expecting them to be hanging down like fruits on a tree, in the Frankie Martinez manner. I was thrown for a moment; he had New York on 2 moves but he offered me a D.C. on 1 connection. I glanced up to see if we could share a smile over the misconnection, but his face was fixed. I adjusted.

His lead was rhythmically correct if mechanical. His mood was impenetrable. We danced on. The song, Ray Barretto's *Swing La Moderna*, was an unreasonably hot number with brass bleeding all over it like a heartbreak and a rhythm only a Puritan wouldn't move to.

I'll be honest: I had a drink or two in me, and I'm a fool for Ray Barretto. I was feeling good. The trumpet in that song? Undoes me utterly. It's a wonder I don't melt right into the concrete when Bruno plays a joint like that. So I tried not to let my partner's gravity bring me down.

Except I couldn't seem to shrug the notion that he should be smiling. Fania, horn, and margaritas notwithstanding, he got to me. I saw his stony mug and I read it as an indictment of my dancing. Of course on some level I knew that was silly. Concentration, not condescension, furrowed his brow. I could practically see the YouTube shine sequence projected in his mind (he stopped short of mouthing the count). On another level, though, yes—I was unnerved. I tried to shake it off and sink into the song, letting my gaze drift downward and doing my own thing. But I found myself glancing up for affirmation more often than I like to admit.

I was not receiving it. Which begs a really important question: Was I seeking an objective appraisal of my skills? If so, why seek it from this person? Why not simply pay an instructor for a proper evaluation?

We all show up at the club looking for something. There's a reason we go dancing. It isn't the same for all of us and it isn't the same each time we go. On the surface, what we're after might be as basic as practice, time with friends, exercise. On another level, maybe we're hoping to nudge up the thermostat between ourselves

“We stepped into the song together. We had some early fumbles, such as when he held out his left hand fingers up but I grasped automatically from beneath, expecting them to be hanging down like fruits on a tree, in the Frankie Martinez manner.”

and that super cute person we shared three (all three) bachatas with last week.

It isn't conscious or intentional, but if I am really honest with myself, I see that one insidious and ruthless little aim of mine in engaging with salsa is to reach some verdict of my okayness. Because I often do feel validated by dance partners' attention and approval, I presume the salsa scene overall is a reliable source of affirmation. It isn't such an unreasonable hypothesis; it just turns out to be wrong.

I began to understand how wrong while I was mentally preparing for this year's New York congress. It was

my third NY congress, and the first two had been fun, but they could have been better.

You have to bring your 'A' game to a congress, as everyone knows. Nowhere else do the externals matter

more. With thousands of potential partners, everyone is scoping out everyone else and making split-second decisions about whom to ask to dance. You

don't always get to display your skills before someone has summed you up on the basis of factors independent of your actual promise as a partner. So how do I get summed up? Well, here are a few of my external attributes: I am tall. I am white. I am 37 years old.

Pursuing approval in a context so unlikely to grant it seems kind of foolish, doesn't it?

Enter Ego (close friend of Pride). Remember when a baby beginner asked you to dance and you said yes, but you made sure she knew, from the stank look on your

face, that you were doing her a favor? Or what about the time you saw that guy—the one who's nice but who never seems to improve (and would it kill him to eat a breath mint?)—and you looked right past him because, mercy, you danced with him last week?

In salsa, my ego shows up with his hat overturned and his hand held out. He's collecting. He wants deposits in the form of smiles from dance partners, invitations from good dancers, and admiration from onlookers. Tall orders to fill at New York's Ninth Annual International Salsa Congress. So why even go with the odds stacked like that?

Just before the congress, a friend helped me break it down: I could stand around and wait to be asked in the small hope of seeing a few coins twinkling into the hat. Or, I could focus on another aspect of the salsa scene—dancing.

If I wasn't optimistic about my ego's prospects, I could leave him behind, ask people to dance, and spend my weekend twirling and sweating and smiling. Easier said than done? Amazingly, it wasn't. The hardest part had been seeing it. Once I did, it was as simple as deciding what mattered more. Happily, it turns out that at the deepest level of all, what I most want out of salsa is something that is certainly magical—a confluence of music, partner, mood, and me—but also dependably obtainable. A dance.

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Nick Walker

Bathed in the glow of the rotating light displays and the merciful breeze of several wall fans, hundreds of salseros and salseras filed into The Salsa Room on a hot fall night to hear Bio Ritmo, the Virginia band that likes to put their own twist on Nuyorican salsa.

At first, the effect was subtle.

Bio Ritmo's show sounded classic 60s and 70s salsa, but then there were elements of other genres gently emerging from deep within the music. Sometimes, it was almost subliminal, and the original rhythm would return later on. Other times, the music would change suddenly, with new melodies jumping out and forcing the dancers to adapt.

"It all comes down to the core passion in our music," says Rei Alvarez, wearing his signature fedora atop his shaved head and sporting a full beard and mustache. Alvarez is Bio Ritmo's lead vocalist and percussionist who also writes all of the lyrics. "The melodic progression, the set of chords that establish the melody... that's what matters to me. A good melodic progression can evoke emotions," he says.

Based in Richmond, VA, Bio Ritmo is known for its creativity, originality and experimentation. But, they say, they never lose track of their traditional salsa roots. "We're always looking for the roots of the music, because you need to know the rules before you break them," says Alvarez. "The inspiration to be creative comes from that confidence. Our music has evolved, but we're still a salsa band."

Alvarez takes pride in Bio Ritmo's unique blend of salsa with musical styles from around the world, including punk rock, pop, jazz, swing, disco, classical and samba music. This variety gives Bio Ritmo an edge Alvarez feels is lacking in many contemporary salsa bands. "Modern salsa has become very formulaic. We're not into Top 40 salsa at all. We're into music that has character," he says.

"As a music critic, I really love the band's last production, all the way," says Yannis Ruel of Paris, who describes Bio Ritmo as one of the most original contemporary salsa bands. "It is retro and futuristic, funky but always *'en clave'*, nice lyrics and unorthodox *sonero*," says Ruel, and adds, "plus they have their own compositions."

Formed in 1991, Bio Ritmo is essentially in its third iteration.

The band started as a percussion and brass ensemble, first providing music for an IMAX documentary and playing at local parties and clubs in Richmond. They later incorporated salsa into their repertoire under the leadership of Puerto Rican vocalist and percussionist Jorge Negrón, and in 1993, released their first single. Bio Ritmo's debut album, "Que Siga la Musica," followed in early 1995.

In 1996, Negrón returned to Puerto Rico and the band went in a different direction, led by Cuban trombonist and vocalist René Herrera, who favored a more contemporary Cuban sound heard on the group's next two albums. When Herrera left in 2000, the band broke up, only to get back together a couple of years later under the leadership of Alvarez.

Bio Ritmo returned to their Nuyorican roots, releasing a self-titled album on their own label, "Locutor," in 2003. That same year, the band won the Northeast Showcase Finals of the Independent Music World competition in New York City, earning the title "Best Independent Band in the Northeast."

It was Bio Ritmo's innovation and reinvention of classical salsa that attracted pianist Marlysse Simmons, who once played with D.C.'s Orquesta La Romana.

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"I definitely learned the salsa 'ropes' with Romana," says Simmons. "I especially owe a lot to the bass player, Tony, who guided and showed me a lot of tricks." But Simmons was also interested in composing and playing her own music when she joined Bio Ritmo in 2002.

"I actually had a song that I had started to write while I was still with Romana, and when I joined Bio Ritmo and met Rei, I passed it along. A week later, he had lyrics and revamped it into what became the song *Atrévete*," she says.

Besides recording, performing, and touring with Bio Ritmo, each band member has several other musical projects on the side, in addition to their full-time day jobs. Alvarez, Simmons and percussionist Giustino Riccio each play in a classic-style bolero band, while bassist Eddie Prendergast leads an electronica/drum & bass "Miami" funk project, which features Bio Ritmo members Bob Miller



and Toby Whitaker on trombone and trumpet.

Simmons also has her own project influenced by Brazilian samba, rock and jazz styles. Riccio himself is part of a duo project called "Fuzzy Baby," which he describes as a "two-member, one-man band" with each partner singing and playing multiple instruments simultaneously.

"One of the things that make this band stand out are how integrated this diverse group of individuals are. They seem hip to other genres as well, and these influences make for a lot of creative musical endeavors, particularly in their arrangements, says John Sullivan, a fan from Cincinnati, OH. "Bio Ritmo has everything you would want in a great Latin Band: chops, creativity, musical savvy, danceability," he adds.

Bio Ritmo's most recent album, *Bionico*, was one of the top ten Latin albums on iTunes in 2008. The cover of "*Bionico*" features a *vejigante* mask drawn by Alvarez, an illustration that also appears on Bio Ritmo's t-shirts and records.

"It's a folkloric tradition from the French *Carnaval* part of our [Puerto Rican] heritage," Alvarez explains. "It's an illustrative element of my art, and a good way to convey a feeling of mystery and poetic romance. It's also one of my hometown's (Ponce) great traditions, both in carnavales and in the art of making the actual masks."

Bio Ritmo recently finished recording their latest album, this time with the help of Aaron Levinson, best known for putting together the Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

Simmons says this album will sound similar to their previous efforts, but notes that "as we're evolving all the time, it'll always be a little different." Listeners can expect to hear around 8-10 tracks of salsa dura, chachacha, descarga, and other styles that can't be easily categorized.

The album itself won't be available until fall 2010, though eager fans may be able to get a few songs digitally from their label's website. Bio Ritmo is also planning their next tour, with stops around Puerto Rico, Europe and the U.S.



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# Embracing Bachata

By Cristina Martinez

A crowd of bachata lovers – from aficionados to first-timers – watch Jorge Elizondo and his partner Sao Mai engage in a mesmerizing tango-infused bachata dance. The two are showcasing a version of modern bachata called bachatango. This fusion brings together two dances from very different places – the Dominican Republic and Argentina – and is just one of the many new styles of bachata presented in the workshops of D.C.'s first Bachata Congress. Held in August at the Arlington Hyatt, the Bachata Congress included many participants from the salsa scene who recognized each other across the jam-packed ballroom.



of the island's other popular music, merengue, with heavy influences from several Afro-Latino music genres such as cumbia and plena. Bachata was initially stigmatized as vulgar, low-class music because of its origins, as well as the blunt approach to subjects such as sex, women, drinking and relationships found in its lyrics.

Around 1990, popular Dominican singer Juan Luis Guerra introduced the Grammy-winning bachata ballad *Bachata Rosa*, and the genre became more accepted by an upper-class audience. The music found its way to the radio and eventually off the island.

The D.C. Bachata Congress was the first of its kind on the East Coast and the third in the United States. Instructors and performers from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and San Francisco attended the Congress, thrilled to finally have an outlet to show the D.C. dance community the evolutionary transformation of bachata. The dance has come a long way from its traditional roots to modern fusions of genres and words like "bachasalsa."

The organizer of the D.C. Congress, Lee "El Gringuito" Smith, fell in love with bachata when he visited the Dominican Republic in 2004. He says he couldn't resist the intricate moves, teasing hip movements, and the passionate nature of the dance. When Smith returned home, he tried to enhance the basic bachata moves with the salsa turn patterns that he already knew, but decided that it didn't quite match. He started experimenting and developing his own style, which he now teaches.

Bachata music and dance formed out of a culture of informal social gatherings with music, drink, and food in the backyards and living rooms of rural neighborhoods in the Dominican Republic. It emerged in the 1960s as a fusion of Spanish guitar and the rhythms

"Some people take one or two classes of salsa or bachata and think that it's enough," Smith says. "Bachata is bachata and salsa is salsa. They are fundamentally different. Many can start by converting salsa moves into bachata but ultimately they are two different dances."

Smith had planned on organizing an event that would be centered around bachata for some time. He chose D.C. when he realized the strong interest in bachata here. The D.C. Bachata Meetup began in 2007 and is reportedly the largest in the country with 1,284 members as of October 2009.

It is also the second largest Latin Dance Meetup in the metro area, second only to D.C. Salsa Meetup. Many members are active in both groups.

Susan Leiter, owner of the company AliveWithDance who teaches bachata in the Baltimore area, agrees that bachata has “grown leaps and bounds since 2006.” She says the dance is going through major growth spurts because, she explains, “the level of dancing has improved, so beginners see people dancing with better control.” She goes on, “The more comfortable they feel on the dance floor, the more they dance. In the beginning only two or three couples would dance when a bachata song came on. Now, couples fill the floor.”

Smith attributes bachata’s popularity in D.C. to the DJ. When Smith deejays, he plays a heavy mix of bachata in addition to promoting bachata events around the city.

Leiter agrees that DJs play a significant role in exposing dancers, usually salseros, to the music; however, she insists that people must become comfortable with the dance movements as well.

Another factor contributing to the bachata trend is the frequency of bachata artists visiting the area, such as Extreme, Bachata Heights, Monchy and Alexandra, and Aventura.



The attendees of the D.C. Bachata Congress included D.C. salseros as well as bachata enthusiasts from as far away as Georgia, Florida, and the West Coast. Those who took advantage of the workshops gained a full array of modern bachata techniques.

Worldwide, the constant reinvention of bachata music and dance has made it a wide-spread phenomenon.

Congress instructors such as San Francisco-based Rodney “Rodchata” Aquino and bachatango’s Elizondo have taught bachata in places as far away as Asia and Europe. Both instructors agree that bachata is presently one of the fastest-growing Latin dances in the world and is constantly being fused with different dance forms. Considering that bachata originated in the backyards of los barrios in the Dominican Republic, this is a great feat.

“Bachata gives people an opportunity to discover a more sensual side of dance,” Smith said. “It’s about the essence of connecting with your partner, freedom of sexuality and movement that you can embody in the dance.” He emphasized that dancers who forgo learning more about the dance could be “missing the inner passion which makes bachata unique.”

Leiter speaks from experience that bachata can move you as much as salsa music, given the chance.

“I hated the dance, I hated the music – the only bachata I heard was island music, with a twang. I have satellite radio, and one day in July of 2006, I heard an amazing bachata. His voice was amazing. It was Domenic Marte’s *La Quiero* off his first album “Intimamente,” recalls Leiter. “And I fell in love.”





## Too Sexy?

by Grace Badillo

The Etiquette of sensuality can be a touchy subject that some people involved in the salsa scene prefer not to discuss.

I am not one of those people. When couples, student groups and professional dance teams interpret salsa music with various dance styles, in my opinion, it does not always showcase the good side of the genre. More often, instead of taking advantage of the talent of each dancer, and how beautifully movement can interpret the artistic side of music and rhythm, salsa becomes overly sexualized. Here is an example of what I have long considered a pitfall in the salsa world: dancing “too sexy.”

An instructor recorded a recent salsa performance where the theme of the song was about how a man wanted to cheat on his wife with another woman in the club. In salsa congresses across the United States, where the routine was performed, talented couples danced with remarkably advanced choreography. However, when the dance became highly sexual, the audience was visibly stunned. Partners tore the clothing off the female dancers more than once. Costumes were so small that when the men ripped off the tops of the ladies, people gasped, mostly surprised that the female dancer had been able to wear anything on underneath their scantily clad outfits. The male dancers then dropped to their knees and their shirts were ripped open by the ladies.

On the sidelines watching the provocative dance were sets of couples, aged 11-15 years old, waiting to perform. Their parents were in the audience watching. One of the parents took their child out of the room during the performance. If this dance number had a rating, it certainly wouldn't have been PG. While watching the video, I felt embarrassed to be in the salsa scene today. Should parents allow their children to learn from professionals that do this kind of dancing? What kind of example is this setting for the new crop of salsa youth? Moreover, the issue of child performers aside, how crass is salsa willing to become?

Here are some suggestions of how to less crudely represent the Latin dance scene:

1. A social dancer should use their footwork and beautiful arm styling to accentuate the music. Avoid touching areas of the body people might consider private, your own and your partners.
2. A performer should wear costumes that are dazzling but modest, and think twice about your choreography when it is intended to be sexual. Is it fun or does it cross the line? Do the lyrics, for example, promote adultery?
3. Avoid adding moves that tear off or rip open your partner's clothing.

Salsa is one of the most exciting and attractive partner dances to watch. But it doesn't have to simulate pornography to be worth watching. Performers should be wary of joining this trend, and onlookers in the audience shouldn't be afraid to raise questions when they're offended. Doing so could help the salsa scene stay classy.

# Dear Salsa Professional,

By Shaka Brown

I try to avoid mixing my hobby (salsa) and dating. But I find that people I date outside of the salsa world misunderstand the sensuality involved in salsa and often get jealous. Any advice?

If you are dating someone who can't handle the sensuality of partner dancing, then it's likely they will not be able to handle the sensuality of the bowling club. Any hobby you have has the potential to cause difficulties in a relationship with someone who doesn't understand how the passion you have for that hobby far exceeds the passion they may have for anything else. Salseros are strange animals, a species to themselves. They stay awake during the day because that's when most of them have jobs, but they truly come alive at night in dark, sweaty clubs. They fly around the world to pack themselves into hot, poorly lit spaces and hold onto each other, and they have to do it at least four times a week to truly maintain their habit.

Finding a non-dancing mate is not impossible, but the best advice I can give would be not to exclude the salsero from your selection of potential partners. Luckily, they come in as many varieties as normal human beings, with the additional quality of being able to dance. People often are reluctant to date within the dance world, but I believe that their fear of losing their passion for dance should things not go well is unfounded. In over a decade of dancing and teaching, I have seen relationships come and go. People date for awhile, breakup, become enemies, become friends again, sometimes reproduce. What they never do, however, is stop dancing.

What makes you ask a lady, whom you don't know, to dance?

If a lady looks like she wants to dance, I will ask her to dance. As the lead, it's your job to make your partner feel good and enjoy the time she spends with you. What better way to do this than by asking her to dance? If you see a woman wearing dance shoes, a "Salsera for life!" shirt, doing Suzy-Qs on the side of the floor and looking at you and smiling, then in all likelihood she is not going to shoot you down when you ask her to dance. As you dance with her you will find out her dance level and, more importantly, you will meet someone new to dance with.

Is it better to take lessons from an instructor that is the same or the opposite gender as you?

As a general rule, you can learn the basics from either a male or female instructor, and as you improve you will want to learn from someone who walked the same path. However it's important to first understand what you want to learn from your instructor. If you want to improve at following, then dancing with someone who can lead and offer you pointers is the way to go. If you want to learn styling, it's not going to be helpful to work with an instructor who can't demonstrate the movements.



Send your *Dear Salsa Professional* questions to [info@shakabrown.com](mailto:info@shakabrown.com)



# HOW TO HANDLE YOUR PARTNER

By Barbara Bernstein

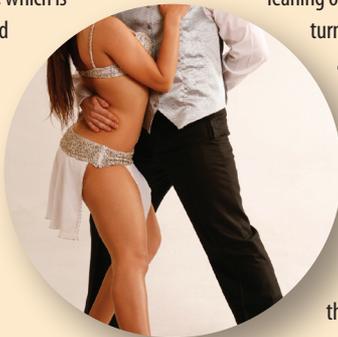
KEY TO A COMFORTABLE DANCE IS THE CORRECT HOLD ON, AND MOVEMENT OF, YOUR PARTNER.

When leading a move, think of the gentleness with which you would handle a baby. Your movements should be soft and gradual, as opposed to sharp and sudden. Besides the issue of comfort, constant and repetitive movement can cause injury, which is another reason that your moves should be gentle. This requires appropriate practice and training.

A man has several options to prep a lady for a basic right turn. If he preps by moving her arm in an arc, as if tracing the numbers on a clock from 6:00 to 12:00, she knows where the arm is heading and is clear on the lead of the move. If he merely lifts the arm up on the third beat, she will still follow the lead but his movement is more likely to be sudden. Adding arcs to your arm movements will make your lead more gradual and therefore more comfortable.

Ladies can be gentle in return by learning to carry their own weight. That's a simple idea but it makes a big difference. More often than not, those not holding their

own weight don't realize it. Test yourself by walking through your footwork by yourself without tipping off balance. If you tip right or left, then your partner feels this in the form of tugging and pressure with you leaning on him. When you can complete your turns and moves without losing your balance, you will be able to keep a very gentle connection with your leader without "using" him. In dance, as in life, you do your own work. No one should help you keep your balance.



With all this in place, the lead and the follow should be able to maintain a very soft connection. The lady shouldn't need to be moved with any force at all; the lead should be a "suggestion."

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Barbara Bernstein is the Director of DancelnTimeProductions ([www.DancelnTime](http://www.DancelnTime)), a Salsa School in the DC/VA/MD area, where she teaches Rueda de Casino.

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# "Say What?"

Salseros weigh in



By Cathy Freeman

**Q:** Sometimes it's the simple question that provides an insightful glimpse into what motivates us. D.C. area salseros were asked, "Why do you dance salsa?"



Stacey

**Stacey Winn - Ashburn, VA**

It's a social outlet for me. I meet a lot of vibrant and interesting people who are quickly becoming good friends.

**Christine Conforti - Washington, D.C.**

It's a passion and a form of expression.

**Hirby Biggs - Alexandria, VA**

My girlfriend has been dancing for a number of years and I would like to become as good as she is.

**Jeanette Abellera - Alexandria, VA**

Exercise. And I love the music.



Christine



Hirby

**Keith Barton - Waldorf, MD**

I was shown the dance only once while in Latin America and I was immediately hooked.

**Francesca Johnson - Washington, DC**

Because salsa is sexy.

**Luis Herrera - Arlington, VA**

It's in my blood.

**Ana López - Centreville, VA**

Dancing attracts friendly people for me to meet.



Jeanette



Keith



Francesca



Luis

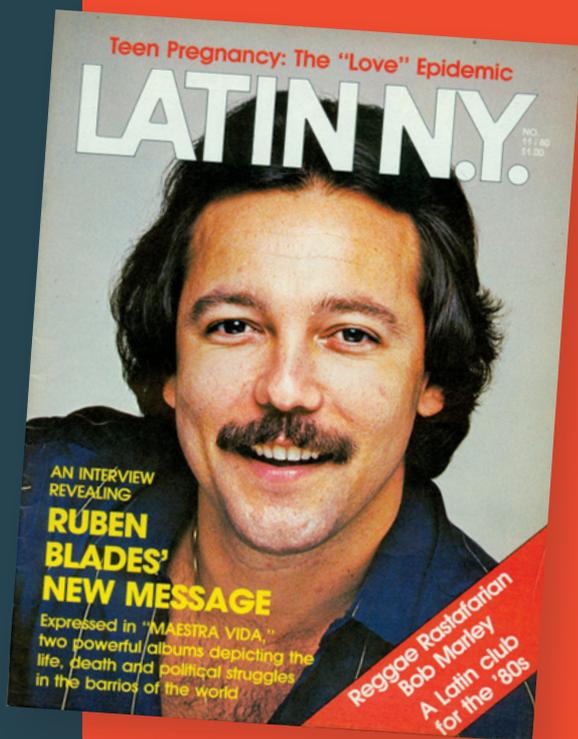


Ana

RUBÉN BLADES

The Conscientious Musician

By Karina Hurley



**B**EHIND RUBÉN BLADES'S EXTENSIVE AND INFLUENTIAL MUSICAL CAREER IS A FORMER LAWYER WHO WORKED IN THE MAIL ROOM OF A RECORD LABEL, HOPING TO MAKE HIS WAY INTO THE MUSIC INDUSTRY. THE YOUNG BLADES (PRONOUNCED BLEIDS) – WHO WOULD ALSO BECOME AN ACTOR, A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, A HARVARD LAWYER, AND A MINISTER OF TOURISM – IS WIDELY RESPECTED FOR HIS IMPACT ON THE LYRICAL SOPHISTICATION OF POPULAR SALSA MUSIC.

Born in Panama City in 1948 to a Cuban musician and actress, and to a Panamanian percussionist and athlete, it could be said that Blades's passion for the arts was in his blood. But so was his passion for politics and, as he would describe on his radio show in 2008, "giving a voice to the voiceless." He found a way to fuse the two passions in his music.

His mother's great-uncle was active in the Cuban revolutionary movement against Spain and was later a writer and publisher in New York. The Blades family followed him to the U.S. two years after Blades completed a bachelor's degree in political science and law at Panama's Universidad Nacional. Blades, a lawyer by profession, had dreams of joining the Fania salsa phenomenon after seeing Willie Colón in concert in Panama. In New York, he was told that the only opening that Fania had was in the mail room. The twenty-six year-old Blades took the job. "They wouldn't record me. I had to push a cart full of mail from 57th and Broadway to 52nd Street every day," he would later recall. The job gave him access to the best Latin musicians, who would use Blades's compositions and lyrics on their own records.

Blades's opportunity to sing came when a Fania bandleader, Ray Barretto, needed a new vocalist, and auditioned Blades right in the mailroom. The album they recorded together in 1975 was a huge success and featured a Grammy-nominated hit. But Blades wanted to record his own songs that addressed Latin American issues. He soon replaced the legendary Héctor Lavoe as the lead singer for trombonist Willie Colón, who gave Blades the long-awaited opportunity to express himself.

One of Blades's first hits came from his sixth album "Metiendo Mano," in which he wrote *Pablo Pueblo*, the story of a working-class man and his constant struggle to provide for his family.

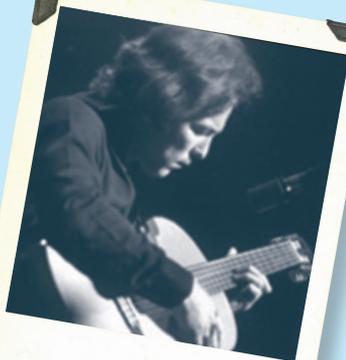
Blades was influenced by *nueva canción*, a Latin American music sub-genre that combined traditional folk music with politicized lyrics. The music,

utilized by revolutionary movements in Cuba, Chile and Argentina, became a political weapon used to attack the government. The movement spread to Central America, including Blades's native Panama, during times of social and political changes. Blades wrote hits such as *Tiburón* (Shark) and *Camaleón* (Chameleon), criticizing U.S. intervention in Latin American conflicts and foreign policy.

The lyrics stirred controversy in the wider conservative music industry of the time, and some radio stations chose to ban Blades's music. It went both ways, as Blades was not eager to be affiliated with an industry that he felt was attempting to silence political opinion. He refused to show up to most of the major award ceremonies he

was nominated for, such as the Grammys. He later changed his mind when he realized he was turning down a great platform to communicate his messages. He has been awarded a total of seven Grammys throughout his career.

But not all of Blades's lyrics were politically focused. Only four years after he got the mail room job at Fania Records, Blades wrote *El Cantante*. But, unlike the 2007 film with the same name, starring Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez, suggests—the song was not originally intended for the late salsa superstar Héctor Lavoe.



Blades offered his song to Lavoe, who was adoringly called El Cantante (the singer), in order to help boost the former star out of a tragic drug-tainted career decline. The song was, in fact, about the lonely life of a performer behind all the fame. The song became an instant hit, second only to Blades's composition *Patria* (homeland), which most Panamanians consider a second national anthem.

*Patria is so many beautiful things and what one carries in his soul when one goes away.*

Despite the fast success of his music, Blades returned to school to earn a master's degree in international law at Harvard University, but never practiced law in the U.S. His education complimented his musical talent and helped him write the lyrics for his progressive ideas. Blades emphasized the responsibility that came with power and how it should be applied to music with a social conscience.

"I believe in music. I believe it contributes to create a better world. I believe it is the most universal means of popular communication on all levels," said Blades during a 2005 ceremony at Berkeley University's School of Music, upon receiving an honorary doctorate degree. "I believe the creativeness of artists is fundamental to the positive development of world's societies."

A self-declared liberal – considered too leftist by many – Blades took his passion for politics to the next level and ran for president of Panama in 1994. Instead of joining an already existing party, he created one called Papa

Egoró, an Indian term for "Mother Earth."

During a year-long campaign, Blades helped create a new environmental conscientiousness among Panamanians. He used a tree as the main symbol and highlighted the importance of being green-savvy and protecting the environment. His biggest supporters in politics were younger generations.

Blades lost the election but continued to do what he is best at – conveying a complex social message and delivering criticism through the arts.

"He helps people express themselves," says Roberto Arjona, 27, a Washington, D.C. resident and native Panamanian. "His music helps a lot of people understand [social issues] in an easy way."

Arjona applauds Blades's innovation and creativeness.

"Who would dare to talk about women in such a way?" asks Arjona, referring to the song *Plástica*, which takes jabs at what he considers the superficial, vain and selfish Latin American female elite.

"Many women don't find [the song] offensive – they see it as a joke. Yet, it really is a criticism of Panama's high society."

After serving as Panama's Minister of Tourism for the last five years, Blades reunited with his band, Seis Del Solar, for a 25-year anniversary "Buscando America" tour. The album, which means "looking for America," won him huge acclaim in 1984.

When not touring, Blades, now 61, can be found in his three-story Spanish colonial house in Casco Viejo, which used to be a poor Panama City neighborhood when he moved there. His house serves as an everyday reminder and demonstration of his faith and confidence in the country he calls *Patria*.





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