

Eileen Torres

D.C.'s Salsa Ambassador

By Nick Walker



Eileen Torres with a USPS award for presenting The Origins and Development of Salsa for Hispanic Heritage Month 2005.

The series of four stamps issued featured illustrations of Merengue, Salsa, Cha Cha Cha and Mambo.

Growing up in a Mexican-American family in Lorain, Ohio, Torres discovered salsa at an early age. According to Torres, Lorain had the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans—outside of the island or New York—and the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities lived in the same neighborhoods.

“During the 70s, the golden age of salsa, three businessmen formed Salsa Productions and brought top salsa artists each month,” said Torres. “I went to every dance even if I never heard of the artists. I concluded if these men were paying lots of money to bring the orchestras, they were probably worth experiencing. I was right and thus began my salsa education in earnest.”

When Torres moved to D.C. in 1987 to take a job with the National Council of La Raza, she found a small, but dedicated salsa community.

“The scene was terrific. Everyone went to Chelsea’s all dressed up. Half of the people didn’t know how to dance to salsa, so they just danced. But everyone had a great appreciation for the music,” said Torres.

Torres began hosting her own events at Zanzibar in the late 1990s. One of the first DJs to play there was DJ Bruno, who since has worked with Torres at numerous other clubs in the area.

“Eileen wants to help everyone. She’s very conscientious,” said Bruno. “She likes to showcase local talent and give everyone a chance to shine. She’s always doing stuff for children,

Many know Eileen Torres for running Thursday salsa nights at Zanzibar nightclub for nearly 10 years, but she also has been instrumental in building D.C.’s salsa community for much longer. Words like “promoter” fall short in describing her efforts to introduce newcomers to salsa and educate them about the dance and culture.

giving gifts to people, giving animals to people in other countries.”

“She’s an advocate for women because she’s doing something that’s not typical for women to do,” said Nancy Alonso, one of the hosts of *Latin Flavor* on 89.3 WPFW and a longtime friend of Torres. “So she tries to attract other women to be around her circle, like the annual night for Women in Salsa at Zanzibar. Lots of people come out and she invites local dance troupes for women to showcase their salsa dancing habits.”

One of these tributes featured the all-female Japanese salsa band *Son Reinas*, whose members sing in Spanish even though they don’t speak it. Another female performer brought to D.C. by Torres is DJ Cookie, whom she met in Philadelphia.

“The music was playing and I thought, that’s a good song, and then another, and another. I said, I need to congratulate the DJ, and I was surprised to see it was a woman, and she was of my generation. She knew music and knew how to read the crowd. Guys sometimes get surprised when females make an impact as this is still a male-dominated industry,” said Torres.

Torres also hosted a tribute to men in salsa, featuring all male dance teams.

“The funniest part was when the men started stripping,” said Torres. “Of course the stripping was not in the rehearsal, so it came as a total surprise. Unlike men who just smile when they see a stripper, the women went batty. They were jumping up and down and screaming. Security came up to see what was going on. It was hilarious, absolutely hilarious.”

Torres has brought some of the biggest names in salsa to play in D.C. over the years, including Johnny Polanco, La Orquesta Guayacán, Larry Harlow, Orquesta de la Luz, the Spanish Harlem Orchestra, Congo Mulence, Willie Colón, Oscar D’León, Frankie Vasquez, Jimmy Bosch and many, many more, she said.

However, Torres’ personal favorite musician is her good friend Alfredo de la Fé. Torres met de la Fé in the 1970s, when his band *Típica ‘73* was on tour.

“I fell in love with his style,” said Torres. “I stopped dancing and just listened because I had never experienced anything like it.”

Years later, de la Fé was charged with drug trafficking and left the country. He spent 16 years in Colombia, and later lived in Italy. For awhile it seemed as though de la Fé would never be allowed to return to the U.S., but Torres had other plans.

“It’s not that I have a lot of power, which I don’t, but I have a lot of connections,” said Torres, who helped to get letters of support for de la Fé from community members, and arranged a meeting with the Brooklyn District Attorney. She and the attorney negotiated a deal in which de la Fé would perform a series of concerts over two years for a government anti-drug program,

in addition to paying a fine and performing community service.

“Eileen is a very special person,” said de la Fé. “She helped me out when I really needed it. I have a lot of gratitude for that. Not too many people do that for you, you know. Eileen does things without any ulterior motives. She does it out of her heart.”

“It was purely for selfish reasons,” said Torres, downplaying her own involvement. “I just wanted to see Alfredo again, and now I get to see him all the time.”

Torres also focuses her efforts on the history and culture of salsa. Jim Byers, another host on WPFW, has worked with Torres on salsa presentations at the Smithsonian and around D.C.



"I think our first interaction was when she asked me for some information about [1950s Mambo musician] Pérez Prado, and asked me to speak to a small group of people," said Byers. "She has really made a heroic effort to include both the history of music and dance, because most teachers, most promoters today really do not come at salsa from that standpoint. She has really made it a part of her agenda."

Looking back over the last two decades, Byers reflected on Torres' impact on the Washington area.

"There was a salsa scene here, but most people generally didn't know about it," said Byers. "What Eileen has done is really help craft that feeling. Now if you go to New York or to L.A., people do understand there's a salsa scene in Washington."

Though the scene is certainly bigger, Torres doesn't feel all of the changes are necessarily positive.

"It used to be people had a reverence for salsa and didn't go out dressed like they were going to wash their car," said Torres. "Men would escort women to and from the dance floor, not just walk away after the song ends. Dancers knew how to pace themselves. Nobody complained about a long song, unless you had someone who couldn't dance," Torres said, laughing at this last sentence.

"When the band isn't even done with the introduction, you've already seen everything some dancers know how to do. I'm more impressed with a man who will dance on time, and do the minimal turns rather than someone who will try to do a five-part turn combination, throw in some footwork that's off-time, and push and pull you around the whole song," said Torres.

Though she's going to keep promoting salsa for some time, Torres has plenty of other plans in the works. She intends to write a book on about a dozen of her salsa friends, exploring their lives and careers. Torres also wants to focus more on public speaking. In the past, she's spoken on issues such as success factors for Latino



Eileen Torres and Alfredo de la Fé, 2004

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women, the intersections between dance and race, gender and ethnicity, and has offered diversity training for corporations.

A self-described "student of spiritual enlightenment" for the past 35 years, Torres is contemplating a speaking tour tentatively titled "Why are we here on earth.... What if?" In the meantime, she's working on a salsa dance theater project featuring a lifetime tribute to Larry Harlow.

And in case that's not enough, she promises to re-establish another salsa night in D.C. similar to that at Zanzibar.