

## Chapter 1

I never danced more than a step or two (or “white boy hip hip”) until I was in graduate school at Berkeley, where I took several ballroom classes to meet girls. It worked in that I met my girlfriend there at a ballroom party at the Hyatt Regency, SF to celebrate the end of the semester of dance classes. I didn’t really enjoy dancing at all until about a year later when, almost simultaneously with our breakup, I decided it actually was fun. Years later, when things mended between us, I went to visit her in NY city and we danced at a ballroom supper club. But the next day, we just happened upon the Puerto Rican Day parade in Manhattan and it was infectious! I returned to the Bay Area determined to find salsa classes. I had visited Caribe Dance Center a few times and taken a few classes with Cese Cheverez when in school, but I was too intimidated to dance then. I used to just watch the crowd and marvel at the coming together of many different people, races, etc. to dance to this hot music. I don’t recall seeing my teacher Alex in those days, but I heard later that he started there too and worked around the corner. I do remember seeing Luis Conjura and a few other faces in those early Caribe days... When I got back, I found Kimball’s Carnival.

I stumbled into Kimball’s Carnival in Emeryville, CA (East Bay) on a Sunday. I had seen the place a few times with loud music coming out but never knew what it was until I looked for Salsa in the local weekly. Alex da Silva taught there in the afternoon, but he wasn’t there. Instead a substitute teacher was attempting to cover for him and told me about his other classes, one of which was at Studio J (now The Beat) in Berkeley on Sunday evening.

I tried that class and started to get hooked. Alex had much charisma and the place was packed with people! He would do impromptu shows for us with his beautiful partner Vivian and the class was mesmerized. He taught also on Wednesdays at his house in SF on Harrison Street, and then the whole class would follow Alex to Sol y Luna on Sacramento St where he would dance a floor show, backed up by live music with the Sol y Luna band (led by Edgardo Cambon who now leads a band named Candela).

Men wanted to be like Alex and women seemed to want Alex. We were all in a spell of learning something new and exciting and so very different than any traditional dance classes.

I didn’t collect much paraphernalia at the start of course. I didn’t know that it would take me on such a long journey. So, Chapter 1 picks up more steam in 1994. I was a dedicated student and often helped by following if there were not enough leaders and Alex even let me teach a few patterns 5 months into my studies.

In January 1994, Alex told me to contact a guy in Berkeley who was going to do salsa at a basement club under Pasand Restaurant on Shattuck Ave. Hector was his name and he also ran a Mexican restaurant

on the corner of University and Shattuck. Alex didn't want the job and put in a word for me and my teaching career began on Jan 27, 1994, some 7 months after starting to dance salsa!

I was not very good, but had enough courage to give it a shot. And I promoted it with flyers to get enough people to come. I remember Gabriel Romero coming to check out the classes. And Isabel Rodriguez, whom I had met at Alex's class. We dated during 1994.

Hector fired me after about 4 mos., stating that he wanted someone Latino to take over! The club went under a short time later. As fate would have it, sometimes bad news leads to other opportunities. And in my case, Alex decided that the big time was not here in the Bay Area, but Los Angeles – where people become real stars. He was able to land a job teaching salsa at the Shark Club in L.A. every Saturday night.

These were different times. I traveled down with Alex one weekend to check it out and there was a salsa scene at Sportsman's Lodge that had probably the most hardcore salseros down there. At Shark club, there didn't seem to be much in the way of the style Alex was teaching and that style being so visually appealing, it generated a lot of attention. I remember him dancing with one of the teachers living there and just blowing her away. Alex later went down to compete in the Sportsman's Lodge competition. He and Vivian came in 2<sup>nd</sup> place but people were all throwing garbage on the floor when the results were announced, because they were clearly the popular favorite and the winners happened to be very much ballroom style dance AND worked at the studio of one of the judges! Corruption strikes. I have video (VHS) of the near riot. Of course, Alex's style was not so developed then either, but it was different and attractive. We stayed at the house of Brad Gluckstein during that weekend and he later went on to open the Conga Room with funding from major stars.

Those were indeed different times. When Alex went to L.A., he would leave on Friday sometimes. This was a very fateful act for me. By then he trusted my ability to run a class and asked me to substitute for him (Friday Kimball's class), which in turn allowed me to meet the Kimball's management and eventually meet my future wife. There was no teacher on Saturdays then! This is at the hottest club in the Bay Area – the center for Salsa. In September of 1994, just after losing Isabel to the lure of competing with another partner (Gary) and losing my job at Pasand Lounge, I landed Saturdays at Kimball's Carnival.

Kimball's was a special place. It was owned by Kimball Allen, who owned the Jazz club upstairs. He was quite wealthy, making a fortune off of a patent on the coin operated washer (!) as I understand it. The club was his pastime and not so much an important source of income. It was managed, I believe corruptly, by several younger guys and Alex was the star. The volume was kept fairly reasonable in the club since the Jazz club was upstairs. And also great was the fact that Kimball's wife hated smoke, so she banned smoking inside the club (only allowed on the patio outside) years before the California smoking ban went into effect! They even had a decent chef and kitchen. I was in heaven. My own personal playground, out late working into the night like my father, a musician, had done while I was growing up. (He passed away the month I started dancing salsa)

DJ Jose Ruiz worked on Saturday and his music was great. Alex brought in big crowds on Friday and my classes flourished on Saturday, growing steadily each year by about 15-20%. I was dancing with my friend Jeannine and training for performances with the daughter of Pete Escovedo – Zena. And going out

with my future wife, who through a lot of determination, dancing with everyone in the club, became a talented dancer and my dance partner in around 1995/96.

During the year 1995, I went to London for business and was shocked to find a much under-developed salsa scene there. It was a great opportunity that I completely missed – traveling and teaching/performing. But this was really just a pastime for me and I never took it so seriously as a career. I greatly underestimated that! One night I met Edie Lewis, now known as SalsaFreak, and the ambassador of salsa worldwide from the L.A. area. She had just started. The scene was getting stronger and stronger and a wide variety of bands played at Kimball's. Other teachers came onto the scene. Audrianna, Gary and Isabel, Joseph Pineda, DJ Fab Fred was a regular dancer (not DJ at the time). Most were taught by Alex. Ava Apple was already a teacher before Alex as I understand it. She brought students to the club on "field trips" occasionally too. Marge Gabbert taught somewhere on the peninsula.

Eventually, Kimball's decided (wisely) that the salsa crowd was dependable. They griped as all club owners do about "not enough drinks sold" but when the crowd feels comfortable in a venue, they come back week after week! Alex had teamed up with a talented Tango dancer from Argentina – Mariella and was incorporating tango moves in his shows, and he competed and won at Sportsman's with her. Kimball's made a go for it by adding another salsa night: Thursdays, and they gave me the job!

Eventually, before the end of 1995, they added on Wednesdays as well, although that was a bit less successful since it started to dilute their own crowd. There was not enough growth to support the addition of night after night of salsa. But they tried. Nicole Wong, another old partner of Alex taught on Wed.

When I started, a popular band was named Romance, led by Karl Perazzo. I didn't really know the musicians back then. I was a foolish visitor in the culture and treated it as my playground, which in turn was less than ideal for really learning the music, dance and culture. But we had fun. Everyone danced with everyone else and due to the limited number of teachers (and performers) we all were comfortable with the dominant single style of dance at Kimball's! Romance eventually changed their name to Avance, and continues to be a top band in the Bay Area today. Many of the bands soldiered on through the years and some broke up. But the richness of the music in this area was a great benefit.

Somewhere during the summer of 1995, Alex did what he often did – he started becoming too big for his shoes. He was the star but started abusing guest privileges and acting more as if he owned the place. His star quality did not transfer well to the lugs managing the place, who didn't really care too much for him or even the profitability of the club (Kimball never agreed to do any profit sharing type of plan with his employees. He was 'old school'). During that summer there was some incident and Alex was fired flat out, told to leave. He was my mentor and friend but when he called to tell me I "had to" quit also – to force their hand by presumably ruining business so badly they'd hire us both back, I balked – since it was my only teaching job. He had others. He sent an ex-con friend of his to threaten me then! The club helped to protect me, but Alex was out for good. That was the beginning of the end for him in his home town.

Alex was replaced by a couple named George and Allison Harris. They taught at Kimball's for a period of time afterwards, and then disappeared. They split up as most dance couples do and I did run into George in 2009 again!

Chapter 1 ends in Dec 1995...