

## Chapter 6

Y2K begins with more of the same and growing popularity for Café Cocomo. We were teaching at Alberto's in Mountain View on Tue, Cocomo on Saturdays and Studio J in Berkeley on Sundays, covering the Bay Area widely. Cocomo did well and began to bring out-of-town acts in occasionally as well. We added a class in downtown Oakland at Alice Arts center, but there were consistently too many women to teach partner dancing and the neighborhood failed to draw many new people.

In the time since Kimball's Carnival closed in Emeryville, Kimball himself hungered for a new club to call home. His wife Jane, who was kind of the key manager at the original club had sworn off the business! She left an aging Kimball (around 80 at the time) to his own devices and he got sucked into developing a huge space across from Jack London Square in Oakland. Oakland had courted Yoshi's Nightclub several years before, actually financing their re-construction of a great space in Jack London, but they had learned a lesson not to do that for others – the deal was just too sweet. So, while Oakland also courted Kimball to build his new palace there, Kimball had to deal with layers of bureaucracy and regulation that exists in Oakland that didn't exist in Emeryville. He once told me a story about going to Emeryville city offices with the plans for the original Kimball's in hand. The attendant said, "Would you like to leave those or wait here for them?" In other words, he got his permits within one hour and developed the night club at a low cost (< \$100K). Everything cost more and took longer in Oakland (any wonder why Oakland is void of businesses?!). It cost Kimball something like \$750K to open the new Kimball's Carnival and he took several critical shortcuts due to the stinging bill. For one, the place was like an airline hanger and could easily store a jet plane. Acoustics were abysmal! The second one was killer too – a difference in elevation between the front of the club on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and the back of the club (on 3<sup>rd</sup> St) by about 12 inches. He dealt with that by a gentle slope in the expensive \$100K worth of maple hardwood flooring he installed!

I visited Kimball every week to check progress and try to impart my knowledge of salsa clubs to him. I had no parents in the area and felt a bond with the old guy. He listened to me and also made me feel that I was making a difference. Kimball brought in a manager from another bar somewhere who seemed decent enough but certainly out of his element with respect to Latin music and dance. But the whole effort seemed to break down just before opening. Kimball's replaced the first manager with a new guy – Henry, who had been a bouncer at the ill-fated Pete Escovedo night club located in Alameda, CA. Henry was really not much more familiar with the salsa scene despite his exposure to it at Escovedo's. And worse yet, he was more of a thug – distrustful and disrespectful to us.

I always theorized that Kimball was getting ripped off by his management at the old club. This is because we were paid by check, but we would sign the check and get paid cash on the spot. If you think about the bands doing the same thing, then it was ripe for abuse by the managers. They could print a check for \$1200 for the band and then make them sign it and give them \$1000 – pocketing \$200. This did not happen with me ever, but my pay was less, leaving less room for abuse. I had the feeling that Kimball was lining himself up for another situation like that with Henry. I talked to him several times about incentivizing his employees – by letting them take a portion of the profit based on performance, but he was just too "old school" for that, and 82 years old by the time Kimball's Carnival Oakland opened.

We lasted a few months there – about 3, paying for parking at the Jack London Sq. lot and teaching in a cavernous club with less and less people coming. The woman at the front door was surly and pissed people off before they even entered the club. There was too much wrong. You know you're teaching at a loser when the other (many other now) salsa teachers aren't hovering around to get your job. The sloped dance floor was a real problem for the spinning salseros and the terrible sound was pretty terrible! Worse yet, the place was like the Titanic – about as large and even with 250 people in the place it looked empty. Combined with the feeling of being less safe in Oakland, the club just could not cut the mustard. Kimball's doubled down by buying the furniture store out next door and turning it into an expensive pool hall! We quit in disgust. Henry later brought in comedy and R&B and raised cover to \$20 and the club still operates today, but nobody Latin goes near it. I do not know if Kimball walks amongst us now... I've never gone back. The last regular salsa night was sometime around Summer 2001.

Meanwhile, Cocomo became THE place for Salsa and Glas Kat in San Francisco added Salsa on Tuesdays. Our old friend Diana, who promoted Cocomo eventually went to work full time at Glas Kat. Other teachers flourished with new club openings. Sometime around this time Fred Flores ran Club Casino in North Beach area of San Francisco (fabled to be run by the mob), which was a beautiful club but did not last long. Why? Parking. If you want to open a successful salsa club in the Bay Area, find a parking lot and then rent the place next door!

This chapter ends around December 2001.