

Chapter 8

While class sizes peaked during the dot-com days, the recovery after that crash was actually pretty rapid as we all realize today in 2009! This chapter covers 2004-05 and salsa was still really at a “high”. Café Cocomo continued to be the most popular place and many dancers refused to come on Saturdays due to the crowds. Thursday became “Dancer’s night” (I coined that phrase) and Mondays were popular too for people that wanted more space. It was during this time that I attended a party held by my friend Nancy Martinez and Fred Flores was there armed with not only great music, but also some Conga and Bongo drums. We sat outside and drank/ate and Fred showed me the basic pattern on Bongo and I was hooked. I joke that many salseros are “hacks” because we have no formal training, but I was not very diligent in understanding the music itself better and had really no kinship with the bands in the area at the time. I started studying the music and it opened up a whole new appreciation for both the music and the dance!

Cocomo was doing well enough to film a short commercial that was aired twice a week during the syndicated show “Latin Eyes” that still runs today. So Tech and I began to be recognized in more places my more people from that TV ad. Fred also worked out a deal with the owners for the space that used to be Pete Escovedo’s club in Berkeley, CA (and the same space where I taught my first club gig – Pasand Lounge) and had Salsa Wednesdays at the Down Low as it was now called. This actually started around 2002 (we were hurt that we were not asked to teach) and Fred also arranged for some special out-of-town musicians to do a “Tribute to Percussion”, featuring the best percussionists in salsa.

I bought more professional LP drums and began playing for fun with Fred and Frankie and taking some lessons. They were also used at our parties. During the summer of 2004 we taught along with Alex da Silva at Salsa Rhythm’s “Salsa into Summer” event in South Bay. We made another TV spot for Latin Rhythm – a show that was an offshoot of Latin Eyes, but was never aired because Latin Eye’s sued them for copyright infringement! Ivette Fuentes – “La Coqui”, a D.J. here in the area started an internet radio station on Live365.com which still operates today and brought great music to anyone with a computer for free.

In April of 2005 we had a great birthday celebration at Café Cocomo since the birthdays of me, Karl Perazzo (leader of Avance, Karabali and member of Santana) and Edgardo (leader of Candela) are all in that month. The singers from Spanish Harlem band showed up and sang too!

We tried some workshops in the hour before our regular class, but they did not work out that well. The Bay Area had many venues now including Cocomo (Thur/Sat/Mon), Roccapulco(Fri/Sat), Alberto’s(Tue/Thur), Glas Kat (Tue), Down Low (Wed), Agenda (Wed), Jellys(Sun), El Rio(Sun), Caribbean Gardens (Sun), and all the ballrooms (Metronome, Starlight, and Allegro) had salsa on Sundays, which was great for under-age aspiring dancers. (Apologies to any venues I left out)

Curiously with all of this healthy salsa activity in the Bay Area and growing worldwide with the evangelism of the L.A. traveling teachers, the scene in New York city was waning! Live music venues were starting to fade and the invasion of Reggaeton had started – stealing away young Latin people

from salsa. This condition persists today and there are actually more live music venues in California. Another phenomenon was the salsa “social”. As the L.A. people merchandised salsa so effectively, congresses were happening everywhere and more and more people wanted to teach. It was a living! And in turn there was more competition for the crowd. More and more teachers (to this day) start dance troupes to better cultivate a loyal crowd as well as their own careers. While it is effective, it decentralizes the salsa scene greatly and it has had deleterious effects, both commercially and socially.

For one, many dancers don’t feel adequate just dancing for fun in a club due to the message sent out by teachers that they can only be “good” and get enough of the teachers attention if they are in a troupe. This leads to too many performers and “professionals” on the scene (Watch out for those tax collectors “pro” dancers!), who often feel that it is beneath them to dance with a “regular” dancer in a club. There is even an acronym for it – NERDs – for “non-experienced regular dancers”. Teachers tend to segregate the crowd for financial purposes and then hold “socials” to make money outside of the financial system of the night clubs themselves. The clubs are often participants in this, unknowingly giving up their space to their very competitors, presumably to feel like they’re part of the “community” (as I imagine the teachers describing it). In New York today, there are various socials, but much less live music. This is a tragedy for the scene as a whole, for the dance as a social dance and lifestyle, and for the music side by starving great musicians and discouraging new musicians to enter the trade. While here in California, the scene is still healthy and clubs survive, I fear the driving of salsa ‘underground’ and worry that it will become like Swing – that was hugely popular for a few years around 2001 but now is back to being a basically underground dance – only held at smaller venues without much live music and only danced by aficionados.

Meanwhile, my own partnership began to enter a non-recoverable stage...

This chapter ends around December 2005.