

“The rhythm of the universe, like the rhythm of our pulses, determines the rhythm of the dance.”—Helen Plotz

The Many Sides of Salsa BY KRISTINE KNIPP

I have been in the dance business for 25 years and now own and direct Ballroom Dance Clubs of Atlanta, so I have a lot of experience and knowledge of all the partnership dances. But what is great about dancing is that it defies being put in a box—pun intended. It is an expression of the music and the culture from which it springs.

Salsa, a Latin dance like Cha Cha or Merengue, is a spot dance and does not travel the floor. It features intricate footwork while the upper body is held level and up, helping create the well-known “Cuban hip motion.” The word *salsa* is the Spanish word for sauce and in American Spanish suggests spicy flavor. Spicy is certainly a good description of this dance, but Salsa also suggests a mixture of ingredients and I think that is even more accurate.

The origin is essentially Cuban with deep Afro-Cuban beats. It borrows from other Latin dances that you have probably never heard of—Son, Guaguanco, Rumba, Bomba and Pechanga to name a few. Because of this, Salsa is open to improvisation and the dance styles are associated with their original geographic region.

The Latin American expanded from Cuba to Colombia, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico among others. Miami is one of the places in which this style immigrated, and it is called *Casino*. This style is characterized by a rotating basic as well as the cross body lead. This cross body lead is essential for Rueda de Casino or the wheel dance. In this, couples form a circle and carry out moves and change partners synchronized by a “caller.” Now I have done this before with a group of professional dancers, and it is big fun. It is not for the new dancer, but if you have a group and a little experience, go for

it. From these beginnings the Salsa spread through North America and now mostly consists of Los Angeles style and New York style.

The Mambo era was introduced to New York in the 1960s with an influx of Cuban dissidents and migrants. Cuban music was introduced and then fused with Jazz and Swing to create a new Salsa genre. New York Salsa, also called Mambo, has small tight steps and subtle leads. It is danced in a “slot,” and very compact. But the most distinctive thing about NY Salsa is in the musicality. This is where the great divide in Salsa happens. NY Salsa is danced on the “two” like the ballroom Mambo. The difficulty in this is for those who are not familiar with musical beats and bars. It is more challenging to pick out the second beat rather than start at the beginning of the measure. Due to this, in NY Salsa they still step on one but break on two.

New York-style dancers are typically very particular about the timing and musicality of their Salsa. The tempo is much slower than Miami or LA Salsa. To satisfy these tastes, socials are held catering almost exclusively to the mid-tempo “Salsa dua” or hard Salsa. The longest running social in New York is the Jimmy Anton social, which is held twice a month. New York-style Salsa can be seen at salsa congresses all around the world and finds favor with dancers and instructors in many countries.

The Salsa dancers on the West Coast have a different take on the style and timing of this dance. Los Angeles Salsa is heavily influenced by Mambo, Swing, and Argentine Tango. LA style is danced “on one,” therefore the music has its strong beats on one and three. This style is very theatrical and

emphasizes sensuousness aerobics, and show dancing. It is not unusual to see splits, drops, and lifts in a LA Salsa demonstration. The leads are bigger, the steps are bigger and the tempo of the music is much faster. This is also where the *very* sexy dresses are prominent in the costuming for the women.

To delve into the Atlanta Salsa scene my “go-to guy” is Jimmy Rumba. Jimmy is a Salsa expert and holds a social at the downtown location of Ballroom Dance Clubs on the second Saturday of every month. This social is called Mambo Nights and caters to both “on one” and “on two” crowd.

According to Jimmy the Salsa scene in Atlanta is not as developed a club scene as LA, nor a dance school/ dance social scene like in NY, but it is definitely grown in the past few years. Atlanta is home to NY, LA, and Casino-style dancing. Due to an influx of LA-style instructors, this style is predominant in the ATL. Yet, Jimmy assures me that the Salsa has not stopped evolving. Salseros around the country, as well as here in Atlanta, are starting to cross train their Salsa with other styles like modern dance, ballroom dance and ballet. Even with these expansions of movements and techniques, the devotees are careful to never lose the “sabor” of their Salsa so it is always distinctive and recognizable.

It will be interesting to see what will come out of this dynamic mix of flavors next. Maybe there is an Atlanta-style Salsa in our near future.

For more information on Ballroom Dance Clubs of Atlanta go to www.myballroomdanceclub.com or in Atlanta call 404-897-5556 and Duluth call 678-417-7555.

