

Hot Stuff

Salsa dancing is particularly fast, a combination of cha-cha, merengue, and charanga, and you can find it at its best in the Mission.



MY FRIEND SHEILA is a white woman who grew up in a black neighborhood in the Midwest, and she's nuts about salsa, a blend of Afro-Cuban and Spanish classical music best played by Puerto Ricans. Whenever a big-name New York band came to one of the hotels here, she would be there, plopping down \$15 or \$20 for Willie Colon, Ruben Blades, Eddie Palmieri, Joe Cuba, Hector La Voe, or Bobby Rodriguez—she danced to them all. On vacations she went to New York to dance in the all-night salsa clubs there.

At first I thought it was the rhythm she loved so much, the bursts of the timbales, one of the most exciting percussion instruments ever invented. Then I thought it was the men she loved so much, the dark lanky singers and musicians who let off a

tropical erotic steam, a Caribbean heat. Finally I realized it was the lyrics she loved. The songs spoke of longing—for Puerto Rico, for women left behind, for families left behind, for the land. Sheila, like so many who migrated to California, had left some things behind: old boyfriends, old memories, old plots of ground, playgrounds, corner stores, enchanted hallways, winter bushes, broken radio speakers, a sick relative, pictures of childhood pets.

A couple of years ago Sheila had a love affair with a salsa singer, but it didn't work out. Then we lost contact, and I began to miss the music in her house, the arguments about who was the best bandleader, the intimacies of her affair.

One midnight I drove out to the Mission in search of salsa. I had an old list of clubs

someone had given me with the promise that I could find a live orchestra in each. But some of the clubs were closed, and some had just jukeboxes. I walked into El Tenampa, a Mexican cowboy bar in the outer Mission. It was dark and there were a lot of empty tables; a dozen men drank quietly at the bar, some wearing cowboy hats and cowboy shirts.

A four-piece band was playing behind a long dance floor, on an elevated stage, in a corner so dim it was nearly invisible. The band was not playing salsa. I began asking the patrons what the music was called. One man called it *cumbia*, another called it *norteña*, and a third called it Tex-Mex. Occasionally one of the men at the bar would go to the table closest to the dance floor and ask one of the three women at the table for a dance. The women were selective, and most men returned to the bar alone and without a dance.

I too approached this table, but I wanted to ask the women about the music. The eldest was just going out for a dance as I got to the table. She had long gray hair and she looked regal and warm on the floor. Her daughter, Helen, was seated. She told me it had been a good night. "A Puerto Rican proposed to me tonight." Helen had long black hair and a full friendly face. She was sitting next to the man who had proposed to her. His arm was in a cast.

The third woman, Irene, sat closest to the wall. When I asked about salsa music, both she and Helen pivoted in their chairs and their faces lit up. Helen wanted to bring records right now, the real stuff from New York. We exchanged phone numbers, and she soon left the club with her mother and her new Puerto Rican friend.

IRENE WAS visiting from New York, where she was the vice-president of a Hispanic housing coalition. She wrote down the names of five New York clubs, all featuring salsa music. But San Francisco was another story. She said there was little salsa in San Francisco. For the most part, the Hispanics living in this city migrated from Mexico and Central America, whereas the New York Hispanics migrated from Cuba and Puerto Rico. There are now almost a million Puerto Ricans living in New York.

Irene described salsa as typical music (*musica tipica*) from Puerto Rico. She said, "There was a heavy migration of Puerto Rican people to this country in the forties and fifties because the island was robbed of its agricultural base by the petrochemical companies and American fruit companies. The people came to Chicago and New York and Baltimore because they felt they could have a better life

here that they were the lowest of the low, and they were determined to survive.

"The Puerto Rican musicians mixed the music of their homeland with the black jazz that they found in their new country. Musicians like Tito Puente and Machito [the black Cuban] and Tito Rodriguez. It came from a plight of the people. It's not just music. It's an expression of life—desires and hopes and a determination to survive. It's *cosa de alma*, a thing of the soul. It's a way to face the future, it's a very spiritual thing."

Living in New York, Irene has no trouble finding salsa music. But I later learned that her friend Helen Vargas has been carrying on her own search for salsa in the Bay Area. When we got together again, a couple of weeks after we met at El Tenampa, Helen told me, "There is one club in Oakland that plays salsa, on Tuesday only. I don't know the name. I haven't been able to find it."

"I have heard salsa played by Latin groups from this area, but there is something different about the way they play it. Salsa in its true form can be played only by Puerto Ricans. They have the talent for playing the particular kind of drums used in salsa music, the timbales."

WE MET IN HER cousin's house in Oakland. Helen described the house as "typically Spanish." The living room was red from ceiling to floor, and there were Spanish fans on the walls and pictures of flamenco dancers.

She had a piece of paper given to her by a salsa bandleader in New York, Bobby Rodriguez, that described the difference between salsa music and Mexican music.

"Basically," she said, "Puerto Ricans are a mixture of Cubans and blacks. Afro-Cuban is what salsa music is. Mexicans are great for playing *rancheras* and *boleros*, the type of music you heard in the Tenampa that night. A *bolero* is basically like a love song and a *ranchera* is like a fast polka.

"Then you have *cumbia*, a combination of cha-cha and *bolero* from Central America."

As Helen's cousin put a Bobby Rodriguez record on the turntable—it was so scratchy, she thought it might ruin her record player—Helen gave a condensed version of Bobby Rodriguez's definition of salsa and why only Puerto Ricans could play it: The groups out here from Mexico and Central America were missing the *claves*, sticks that beat out a particular rhythm played with the bongos or congas. It was a sound the slaves brought from Africa to Puerto Rico, and the slaves used the drums to talk to their gods. The Spaniards were playing classical music, and after a while someone listened to the Africans playing and said, let's combine the

two and see what happens. It's classical Spanish music combined with African chanting and beating of drums.

Helen said, "It's like cooking. Not everyone can cook certain kinds of dishes. You have to have a feeling for it. Mexicans cannot play this type of music because their music is basically slow, romantic. They don't have the feeling for salsa. You have to have a little bit of Afro-Cuban in your blood to feel this, and Puerto Ricans do."

Helen said she grew up with strict Mexican parents. She was married at 17 and has three children. Her ex-husband is Nicaraguan. She is now 33, and still, she said, her mother is concerned about her going out to clubs and was upset when she and the Puerto Rican man at El Tenampa exchanged phone numbers. After her divorce, Helen gave up on Latin men. She found them too domineering. Now she likes them again.

Later, when I met her three children, I asked them if they listened to the music their mother loves. No, they said, they preferred American rock 'n' roll.

MY SEARCH was not over. If salsa brought hope and spirituality, I needed to find it. I was feeling down and sorry for myself. I was recently divorced and experiencing a kind of mod-

ern blues—longing to see my children, who had become weekend visitors to my home.

I went back to the Mission with my list and wandered into another Mexican club, El Mariachi, at Mission and Army. It was

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crowded and warm, with two dance floors and a band playing *rancheras*. A sweet fragrance came from the kitchen, where you could buy a taco stuffed with meat, avocados, and cilantro for a dollar.

The crowd was fairly young. I turned to the man next to me and asked him about

the music. He was from Nicaragua and he said the music was "filling." His girlfriend, thinking perhaps that I was an immigration officer, did not want him to talk to me. I ordered a tequila and a taco, listened to a few exuberant songs, and left.

As I walked Mission Street that night, strolling in and out of clubs, I found all the young people out in the streets and in cars listening to loud radio music, and it wasn't Latin music. It was that strange combination of synthesizer and worked-over voice that passes for soul music these days. It's late heavy-metal, commercial punk, primitive funk. In its own way, it's expressive of modern times: harsh and crashing, nearly nonhuman.

The salsa following, I was learning, was not a youthful one. What has happened to salsa, and to Mexican music, and to other ethnic art forms—Yiddish theater, blues, flamenco—is abandonment, a rejection by children of their parents' tastes and values. Most Latin teenagers in this country do not want to hear the salsa top 40 or Tito Puente or José Fajarda; black teenagers today do not want to hear Muddy Waters or B.B. King.

As I walked to Cesar's Palace, a block up Mission from El Mariachi, I overheard two Latin teenagers talking about hot tubs. The boy asked the girl if she had ever seen one. She hadn't. He told her

how wonderful they were. It seemed so incongruous to hear Latin kids in the Mission talking about hot tubs, and so typical of cultural crosscurrents in California.

CESAR'S IS the largest Latin club in San Francisco and might be the only salsa club in the city. It's a huge room with a circular bar, long glittery tables, red chairs, and rotating mirrored balls that hang from the ceiling. The walls are covered with mirrors and murals painted by the Mission artist Miguel Rios. The heart of the room is the dance floor.

I was here once before, to talk to the owner, Cesar Ascarrunz. It was a Monday morning, and workers were sweeping Sunday evening's debris off the floor. Amid the lint and the used matches, someone found a welfare check—not an accurate reflection of Cesar's clientele, which is wealthy and white. "Rich people like tropical things," he told me.

Cesar grew up in a Bolivian revolution that killed his father. He remembers days spent hiding in sewers in La Paz. In this country, by the time he was 30 he had made a million dollars running clubs.

I asked Cesar why there weren't more Latins in his club, and with bitterness, he said, "Maybe the place is too clean for Latins. And maybe it's the music."

At one time Cesar owned five clubs in the Bay Area, but this is the only one left. His old club in North Beach, in business for ten years, seemed to draw larger crowds, but the new one is bigger, and unless a big-name salsa band comes in for a weekend, attracting a lot of Latins, the place does not seem crowded.

Cesar has had his problems in this club. One New Year's Eve someone was murdered a few doors down the street, and somehow the incident was reported to have taken place in the Palace. The club has been broken into, set on fire, and shut down for an on-premises cocaine sale. One day, Cesar said, he will have the great pleasure of telling the ABC to go ahead and revoke his liquor license; he'll just sell soft drinks.

He claims his band plays pure salsa and has included over the years some of the best musicians in the city—Hadley Caliman, Joe Henderson, Mel Martin, Jules Broussard, Luis Gasca, Jim Vincent, Julian Priester.

Though Puerto Rican musicians were heavily influenced by jazz musicians in the forties and fifties, and still are to some degree, most of the influence now goes the other way.

Just about every serious rock and jazz musician has experimented with salsa, from Paul McCartney to Stevie Winwood to Ray Charles to Stevie Wonder to John Coltrane to Dizzy Gillespie. Some Amer-

ican musicians like Wonder and the late Cal Tjader made Latin tempos a standard part of their repertoire.

THERE WERE all kinds of dancers at Cesar's this night. Smooth couples dancing in the elegant, fast-legged, close yet distanced Latin manner; hippies bouncing up and down, each to himself; and fifties-style dancers, swaying as if they were one, crushing each other, pelvis to pelvis.

Salsa dancing is particularly fast, a combination of cha-cha, merengue, and *charanga*—up and back and side to side. When I asked Cesar who was the best salsa dancer in the club, he didn't hesitate. George Howell, he said.

Howell comes here almost every Friday night. When he comes, he usually stays all night. One time when he was in New York spending the whole night dancing, everyone thought he was Puerto Rican, the supreme compliment for a salsa dancer. All around him on the dance floor people were shouting to him, wanting to know where he came from. George Howell threw his head back and yelled over the music, "I'm from the Mission, in San Francisco."

Tonight he came here with his sister and a few friends, and he came to dance. There was a kind of wild joy in his eyes, the same kind of jumpy sparkle you see in the eyes of someone about to enter a religious trance. He can propel himself all night, his shirt already out and his pants sitting crookedly on his hipbones, like a kid, grabbing a partner and racing to the floor, waiting for the beat to start like a horse waiting at the gate. Then the song starts, and his legs begin to feel for the time, and his partner's legs too begin to churn for the rhythm. And they're off, holding each other at arm's length, smiling, twisting each other like tops, shoulders popping. His vision blurs, his vision clears; he's dancing like a Cuban, dancing like a Puerto Rican.

His favorite partner looks like Rita Moreno, but he has danced with others. One time he went out dancing and did not come home for three days. It cost him his marriage. He said his ex-wife danced in a primitive, Central American, country manner, and she could not keep up with George Howell's stylish and courtly kicks, dips, and turns.

Howell was born in Nicaragua. He started dancing for coins in front of theaters when he was a small boy. He is 41 years old and still leads the summer baseball league in home runs and runs batted in. He's longlimbed and handsome, with laughing eyes and square shoulders and a narrow waist. During the day, as he hustles to make a living—he currently manages a janitorial service—he smokes fil-

tered cigarettes and talks about the dangers of communism in Nicaragua. His parents lived and died in Nicaragua. His father was brainy, Howell said, and a boat builder. Howell said the young Nicaraguans are ruining the country.

But on the dance floor, he does not think of these things. Dancing is for him a form of healing. He said if all the world's leaders could get together on the dance floor, all the world's problems could be solved. If the leaders could just dance till dawn like George, their sweat chilled on their skins, the bursts of timbales still pulsing in their heads; if they all could be flown into Corso on East 86th Street in New York, where five salsa bands play all night; or even here at Cesar's, if they could just get the beat in their legs and hold their partners in their happy eyes, then the world could be healed. This is what George Howell believes and this is what he practices. When George Howell is dancing, he's like an African with a drum; he is talking to his god.

When he was a young man he danced every night. Now it's Friday at Cesar's, Wednesday at Club Elegante.

I WALKED the few blocks to Club Elegante, entered through a curtain, and plopped down \$3 (at Cesar's the door charge was \$4). There were ten couples

on the floor, and the band was playing a combination of Mexican and Puerto Rican music that Helen Vargas once labeled *borinquain*.

The band was loud, stacked on a tiny stage near the front window. The vocal microphones were turned up so high that the voices cracked and sounded as if they were coming out of the singers' noses. The band was too big for the stage, and every time the trombone player stretched for a note, I feared for the bassist's head.

There were two vocalists, one playing maracas, the other working a hollow gourd; there was a pianist who played one repetitious groove after another, an electric upright bass player who also played strict patterns, a conga player, a bongos player, a timbales player, and a horn section that consisted of a trombone, two trumpets, and a flute. The music was a combination of hypnotic drones, wailing voices, plowing rhythms, and horn bursts.

There were couples and singles of all colors in the club. Sometimes two dancers would go back to the same table after a dance, and sometimes the man and woman would head back to separate tables—lone wolves and blue moons.

Pancho Cavala, one of the band's singers, was looking tired and sweaty. He had just finished a set and was talking to a friend in a booth by the stage. I asked him if he had to take a day job to support his singing, as so many musicians have to do.

He said he didn't. He said he had been singing for 20 years, that he was from Nicaragua, that his band played pure Latin music, and that except for this club, there was no place to play. He said every salsa band has to learn a sort of salsa top ten. "When we get abreast, then we can do our own thing. But that happens once every 20 years." He referred to people who couldn't afford to come into the club and listen to the music, and how wrong that seemed to him.

I knew there were purists who would say no Nicaraguan could play salsa, just as there were people who couldn't believe George Howell, a Nicaraguan, could dance like a Puerto Rican. Pancho's music was full of longing, a cry to return to the homeland. Though it had an angry citified tension and blaring big-city nighttime horns, it also had a sweet rural lilt, a kind of mournful refrain.

I left the club and parted the curtain into the street. Cars were screeching down Mission and loud ugly anonymous music, like factory whistles, shrieked through open windows. Big all-night neon signs announced themselves. There was a shiny black never-ending oily feeling to the night, and kids in parking lots were peddling cocaine, and I realized this was America and there was no going back. **SE**