

**Salsa Crazy's
Insider Report
on
Salsa Dance History
and
Music**

**Interview
with
Rita Hargrave
of
SalsaRoots.com**





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Part One

Evan Margolin: Hello, this is Evan Margolin of SalsaCrazy.com. We're here today with Rita Hargrave of SalsaRoots.com. She's going to share with us a little bit about Salsa history and give us a little background on the history of the music and the dance.

Hello, Rita! How are you?

Rita Hargrave: Great! Good to be with you this morning!

Evan: I was interested in getting started with probably a broad topic. I'd like to know what is Salsa music? When you go into the clubs and hear it, what are you hearing?

Rita: Of course, what we are listening to in the clubs is a contemporary merged version of many different styles of music. A lot of people will argue whether or not Salsa exists as a separate music form. But what people commonly think of as Salsa in most of the world right now is a combination of music styles, primarily from Afro-Caribbean countries, primarily Puerto Rico and Cuba. That's where things actually started.

But increasingly, there have been influences from Venezuela and Colombia. But we are thinking that everything is based on Afro-Cuban rhythms, drum rhythms that were brought over by many different tribal groups from Africa over the years.

That music was both for sacred ceremonies and for common sorts of festivals that music grew and also was influenced to a great degree by American music because even as early as the 1800's Cuban musicians were in New Orleans interacting with American musicians.



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So there is also a contribution in terms of the sound of the music, and composition of the orchestras and the band. There is an influence from American music too.

Evan: Now, the common thing that I keep on hearing over and over is, “New York in the Sixties!” Obviously you are talking about something far, far deeper and farther back than that. How does this entire “New York in the Sixties” argument play in? Or Fifties, even?

Rita: Let me go back to Salsa music. Salsa music and mainly Afro-Cuban music has many different styles and forms. People might be familiar with Cha-Cha-Cha, they may have heard of some of the more common music like Rumba.

As it happened a lot of those musicians found their way into New York as they were traveling. And New York has always been a mecca for people from all over the world, particularly the Caribbean. So when those Afro-Cubans found their way into jazz bands like Duke Ellington’s bands and the earlier bands. They merged with what was going on in the jazz scene, and New York was a mecca for that.

So what came out of that is a mixture of horn sections and melodies that were very familiar to American audiences. But also underneath that were the Afro-Cuban rhythms. When Afro-Cubans play music, they play it to dance, so it immediately caught on as a dance style that people embellished and promoted while they were in New York.

So the Palladium, of course, was where it caught on big time. Mambo was one of the first popular music styles that hit New York back in the Fifties. It just sort of swept over the American public, and worldwide interest was really developed in Mambo. Cha-Cha-Cha also was very, very popular.



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So New York and the fact that people from the Caribbean lived there, that they lived next door to each other, that they interacted in a lot of different social levels, and the fact that there were so many trained dancers who had backgrounds in tap and jazz, all of that made for the melting pot that is the sound of Salsa music today.

Evan: You mentioned Mambo in the Fifties. We'll cover this in a separate interview, but what is the difference between Mambo in the Fifties and what we hear currently today? What is the difference between Mambo and Salsa, even?

Rita: Again, how you use Mambo, when I'm thinking Mambo it's what many people in parts of the world say "dancing on two". It's very quick, staccato, and there are a lot of turn patterns to really bright, bright music. You would think of Tito Puente or Tito Rodriguez, currently the Spanish Harlem Orchestra would be another mambo based, New York based sound.

Now, that's a little different than what we think of Salsa in the San Francisco Bay area where you are dancing on one with a primary driving rhythm is based on one. There are also differences in the footwork and also how people use the space.

Another big thing about Mambo, particularly in the Fifties, there were lots of spaces in time where the couples did not dance together where they separated. They did a lot of freestyle dancing or what people are calling shines now.

So there was an opportunity for each individual to express themselves as a couple but to also break apart and do a lot of improvisational work as the man and woman. So they were both jamming to themselves and jamming separately.



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Evan: And that would be the difference between how they danced Mambo in the Fifties versus how they dance Mambo today. The way you would probably classify the difference between Mambo dance and Salsa dance is the difference between dancing on the beat of one and dancing on the beat of two.

Rita: And many New Yorkers would also say that dancing on one is much more driven by patterns that the leader determines ahead of time. But classic Mambo allows more improvisation and more freestyle dancing than dancing on one generally does.

Evan: That's interesting. Let me actually return to the music for a second and ask you what are the classic...

You mentioned Sog and you mentioned Rumba. What are the classic other styles of dance that have led to Salsa, the way we dance it currently?

Rita: From Cuba in addition to Sog there are different styles of Rumba; Gugguanco is a very interesting dance, a couple's dance. It's a sort of a chaste dance where the man is pursuing the woman, almost like a rooster in a hen house.

There are a lot of African, Afro-Caribbean body movements, the use of shoulders and the use of the hips that are intercommunication between the couple. You'll see it used a lot in freestyle dancing.

Cha-Cha-Cha, which is a sort of speeded up section of Dancon, was another Afro-Cuban music style and dance style that had influences from Haiti and France. The Dancon was much more formal, an upright sort of couples' dance, very simple moves. But there was a section in it that was a little bit faster, and that ultimately became Cha-Cha-Cha.



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Moving on from Cuba, there are also contributions from Puerto Rico. Afro-Puerto Ricans had the same African influences as were present in Cuba. So the drums in Puerto Rico are a little different. Bomba drums are bigger and have a more of a bass depth sound.

But the body moves and the improvisation of the dancer in response to the drum that's present in African music is also present in bomba. Bands now have started to take those bomba rhythms and incorporate them in modern day Salsa.

And the last, hidden, less well publicized aspect of Salsa dancing is the American contribution. I said before that back in the Fifties that Mambo was big in New York and the influence of that music, that Caribbean music.

At the same time people were still dancing Lindy Hop, or swing. A lot of the turn patterns, the flips, and a lot of the acrobatics that you see in Salsa are purely derived from Lindy Hop dances. There is also a lot of improvisational footwork that was derived from tap dancers like the Nicolas Brothers back in the Forties and Fifties.

And finally, Hustle, a line dance that was popular, a slot dance. It was a couple's dance that was very popular in the Seventies. You can see aspects of that in current day Salsa. So even American music and American dance styles have had an impact on the character of Salsa today.

I think that's another distinctive thing about Salsa, even though it does have ancient roots, it continues to morph, change and be transformed by other music styles and other dance styles.



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Evan:

So, we are going to take a quick break here, and come back and do Part 2 of the interview. We're interviewing Rita Hargrave of SalsaRoots.com. We'll be back and do a few more really fantastic questions, right after this break.



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Part Two

Evan: Hello, this is Evan Margolin from SalsaCrazy.com. We're here on Part 2 of our interview with Rita Hargrave of SalsaRoots.com. We're going to get right to it. We've got a few more big questions that we would like to ask.

We were talking about the history of Salsa. The next thing I'm interested in is that I want people to make sure they have a take away. They will have some solid, concrete things that they can take away from the interview and hopefully it will help not only in their benefits of understanding the history of Salsa but also in their dancing and stuff like that.

The next question I would ask is what are the two most important things to learn about Salsa? You don't have to limit it to two, it can be more than two, I suppose.

Rita: I'd say for me the two most important things are the music and communication. Many people tell me they have a hard time hearing the beat or understanding how the patterns are put together, and that it's unfamiliar. They often get lost in the music. The only way that you can feel comfortable in the music, understand how the music is constructed and connect your dancing to that music is to hear that music, to listen to it all the time.

Be as knowledgeable as you can about different bands and different styles of music. We're very fortunate; we have all sorts of Internet Radio stations such as Sabor Boricua, one of the Internet Radio stations that we sponsor, plus local programming where people will talk with you about what are the different styles of music.



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There are even audio tapes that help you learn how to count, how to find out where the one is. That's one of the most important things. It also gives you more of an appreciation of how the mood in the music can change and how you can get better connected to it.

Again, in Afro-Caribbean cultures, the dance is a physical expression of what's going on in the music. So they are intimately connected. The dancers need to know what the musicians are doing, and the musicians need to have a feel for what the dancers are doing.

So it's a dialog back and forth. I see often people will have in their minds particular turn patterns, styles and footwork that they are doing in a vacuum. They aren't hearing what's happening in the music, to really stay present.

Evan: That's such a great tip. It really is about the music and the dancer's connection to the music more than anything else. So I agree. You did mention Sabor Boricua and I would like you to tell people where they can find that. That's an Internet Radio station.

Rita: Yes, it's an Internet Radio station that is hosted by Ivette Fuentes, one of the Bay Area's top DJs. You can go to Live365.com and put in their keywords, Sabor Boricua she's got 24 hour, 7 day a week Salsa music happening.

It's a great way to learn. She gets some of the top music from Cuba and Puerto Rico, she loves to have brand new hot CDs, but she also reflects back on the older stuff, so you get a sense of the past and the present in the evolution of Salsa.

Evan: That's great. And the audio tapes for counting, I'll actually deal with that at the end. But all members of the DanceSF and SalsaDanceDVD mailing lists will be offered some great products on how to count the



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music and how to understand the music. That's highly recommended for all dancers. When you come across a dancer that either has a natural or learned understanding of the rhythm it can make an enormous difference. I'm sure you agree with that!

Rita:

Things suddenly make a lot of sense. That's one of the things that both people are responsible for. The leader is considered the person who choreographs what's going on in the dance. But if the follower isn't on the same page, all the best leading in the world will go for naught. The follower is also responsible for keeping time and for keeping everybody going down the same track.

If there are discussions, debates or disagreements, it's something that the follower and the leader need to work out. They need to be able to communicate openly with each other to really wait and be patient on both ends. A lot of times leaders will have a new partner and they will want to get started with her. They will have a bunch of complicated turn patterns in their mind, or they may be inspired by the music.

So they may start off doing some very complicated stuff at the beginning of the dance. But, that's almost like asking someone to marry you when you've only talked with them for about 15 seconds. You need to take time to get to know your partner, to not break into your fancier stuff, but to feel where her body rhythms are, how she connects with you, and then move into things that you can both share, that you both have an opportunity for adventure.

The other piece of it is that the follower is the other piece of communication. The follower has to have the patience and the trust in herself and in her leader that they both can speak to each other. She has to be able to wait, to be able to give herself time to understand his interpretation of the music, his style of leading, what step he's going to



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start on. Sometimes, it may take you half of the first song to actually get into each other's rhythm. But that's natural.

Evan: Let me ask you to backtrack a little bit. There are a variety of styles of Salsa music. There is Cuban Salsa and there is Timba. What else is there? What are the different styles of Salsa?

Rita: There are so many. You mentioned the romantica Salsa that was popular ten years ago, that was very melodic and lyric and didn't have the hard driving percussion that you find in other styles of Salsa.

Evan: Give a few different styles for people to understand. If you could give a band that might play that style or something like that, that would be great.

Rita: Okay, say your hardcore old school New York style, you would think about Tito Puente. If you think about Cuban music, specifically timba music that has a lot of influences from hip hop and reggae, you might think about Charanga Habanera.

If you want to think about elegant, older style of Salsa called Charanga music and one of our local bands, Anthony Blea.

Evan: He's on our DVDs.

Rita: He's on our DVDs. Something that's called Salsa Dura, New York based, hard edged Salsa; we'd be talking about music from Jimmy Bosch. So those are a couple of different possibilities.

Evan: Let me kind of open it up a little bit. I want to know, why do you think Salsa is so popular?



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Rita:

I think for a number of reasons. For me it boils down to several things. One, there is a community that develops around Salsa dancing that is addicting. Now, the dance itself is fun, it's sexy, it's exciting, it gives you an opportunity to express yourself creatively. The music is gripping, partly because it comes from a culture that really cherishes spirituality and religion that is embodied in those drums.

So there is no accident that those drum patterns, those drum rhythms are so evocative of people's emotions, that's the way it's always been. There is no difference whether you are Latin or not. There's something, largely I think it's the drum rhythms that grab people. The dance itself is fun and sexy but there is a community, because this is a communal dance. It always has been a communal dance.

So people who are Salsa dancers develop a personal connection, even if you don't know someone's name, you have shared an experience with them over the years. Many occasions where people, I know them by sight but if I see them outside the Salsa clubs, it's like we're part of one big community. We're part of one big fraternity. You nod to people, you ask how they are doing no matter you find them.

Anywhere in the world, if I meet Salsa dancers we will all know that we have a passion for this music. And there are not many things where people can come together from all different ages, ethnic backgrounds and nationalities and feel as if they speak a common language, both in terms of music and in terms of dance. We're so separated these days that it's hard to find some sort of common ground.

So I think that's another thing that's connected with why Salsa is so popular. And as I mentioned before, the spiritual connections that are the root of this music touch people in a way that it's hard to duplicate. Even though there is commercial Salsa, the Salsa that is there, that's



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gone through the large recording industries, the core of Salsa is very personal and intimate.

Evan: And hopefully it always stays that way. Now, we may have to go to part three of the interview.



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Part Three

Evan: Hello, this is Evan Margolin interviewing Rita Hargrave of SalsaRoots and we're going strong, that last little break snuck up on us. We won't let that happen again, this is part 3 of the interview series with Rita Hargrave of SalsaRoots.com. I actually wanted to ask, where do you see Salsa music going? It's really changed. Let me ask you to backtrack for one second. How long has timba been around? What is timba music?

Rita: Timba music, now people will say that timba got really popular in the U.S. in the mid-Nineties, but in Cuba it got started in the Eighties. People actually say it goes back farther than that, that it started with some of the early Charanga based music of Los Van Van.

It's a specific rhythm pattern called songo, that's kind of the underlying structure for timba. Timba was an effort by the Afro-Cubans to incorporate music from outside the traditional Cuban music. They heavily pulled on R&B, they pulled on jazz, and they pulled on music outside of Cuba per se, and then did wild things with their own rhythms to incorporate that stuff.

So, the first time I was really struck by timba, I was listening to dance music with a lot of different rhythms. There may be two keyboards, a horn. In the midst of all this, sometimes it's difficult to get to that, I heard these horn lines that sounded exactly like Earth, Wind & Fire. And I said, "Wait a minute! What are they doing?" That was no accident; they were inspired by a lot of popular, contemporary American R&B in addition to jazz and classical.



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Evan: Is that a popular form right now? What is it? What sets it truly apart? How would a typical Salsa student know that they are listening to timba, or Salsa romantica, or anything else?

Rita: If they have never heard timba music before, they would find themselves completely lost because it's very deep rhythmically. It might be hard to find the one. There may be more rhythm changes in timba music. Right now, it's probably not as popular as it was some years ago.

It's gotten more commercialized and a little simpler now. But I'd say if you want to hear the best of timba music, you would go back to the mid-Nineties, the early 2000s, bands like Bambalayo, Issac Delgado is a popular timba artist.

Evan: Bambalayo, that's one of my favorite bands, ever!

Rita: One of the top ones, and Charanga Habanera, the early recordings of the Nineties, they will give you really classic timba.

Evan: And there was that person that we saw at Slim's that one time...

Rita: Oh, Adalberto Alvarez!

Evan: He's phenomenally good. As long as we are on it, you did mention everything. The only thing we didn't cover, Salsa romantica, why don't you name a few bands that would fall into that category?

Rita: I'm thinking that Victor Manuel is one that sort of comes to mind, I guess you could also say Marc Anthony to some degree fits into that category. La India have a little more of an edge, a little more R&B flavor to what they do. But that's very accessible music, it's very clean. It has a lot of melodic clarity that people would be able to



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identify with more easily. And the themes are “lost my girlfriend” and “my heart is pining away”, “come back”, so...

Evan: Good topics! Okay! Why don't we cover where would people go if they wanted to learn more about Salsa history?

Rita: Of course, the first place, the best place to learn about Salsa history would be <http://www.SalsaRoots.com>. That's the site that I have that captures a lot of the information and expands more on the different styles of Salsa, some of the places that you could find books and other resources. We have older artists, newer artists, snippets from an upcoming book on the evolution of Salsa in the Bay area.

One other place to look would be, a book that I believe is still in print that is called *Salseology*. It was written back in the early Nineties. That's a sociological and historical view of not only the music per se but the people that created the music. It has some wonderful interviews there.

Latin Beat Magazine, that's a monthly publication out of Los Angeles, has a lot of information about current Salsa artists, the history of Salsa, and wonderful pictures. They really give a great overview of Salsa all over the world.

I believe there is a relatively new book out, well, there is an older book *Salsa*, by a Sue Stuart. That book came out about seven years ago. Wonderful pictures, I think there is a brand new book called *Salsa Talks* that came out this year.

Evan: I hadn't even heard of that.



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Rita: Wonderful photos, the writer just had a huge book signing party in New York, probably about two or three weeks ago. It's got some beautiful photographs and a lot of information.

But there are also the resources on SalsaRoots.com; we will also give you an updated list on what is out there.

Evan: Well, Rita, I wanted to say thank you for coming on and telling us a little bit about Salsa history, and you covered a whole lot more information than that! It was a pleasure doing the interview. We look forward to having you back on so we can talk a little more about Salsa and its history, and Salsa Roots!

Rita: Thanks again.

Evan: A pleasure, we look forward to seeing you soon!

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