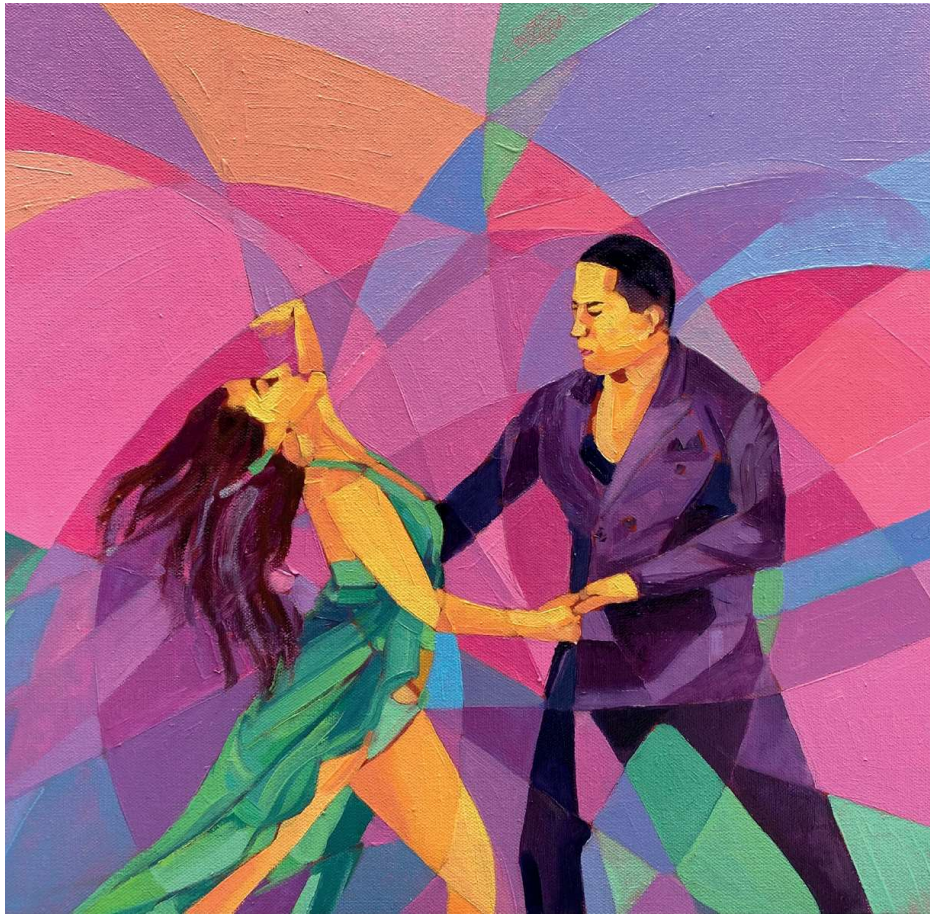


50 Salsa Stories:

AN IMMERSIVE JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY,
STRUGGLE, AND JUBILATION



By DAVID PARIS

Artwork by ANDRES GIRALDO

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50 Salsa Stories: An immersive journey of discovery, struggle, and jubilation

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Timeline

- 1993: My first salsa dance
- 1994–1998: Salsa classes with Eddie Torres, the Mambo King
- 1998–2001: Taught and performed for Razz M'Tazz Dance Company
- 2001: Created instructional salsa dance video series “Salsa For Gringos”
- 2002–2004: Created Salsa Lifts and Aerials instructional videos
- 2003: Joined the Bacardi Congreso Mundial de Salsa with Ava Apple
- 2003: Won first salsa dance competition with Jamie Matos
- 2006: Joined David Melendez Salsa Congress Tour with Zoë Klein
- 2007: Created a salsa syllabus for NYC Department of Education
- 2008: Formed Acrobatic Salsa Kids team at Middle School 88
- 2008–2012: Won of seven cabaret championships with Zoë Klein
- 2009: Semi-finalists on America’s Got Talent with Zoë Klein
- 2009–2012: Featured dance team for Albert Torres’ worldwide salsa conventions

- 2010–2018:** Taught weekly acrobatic salsa classes at Piel Canela Dance School
- 2011:** Performed for Felix “Pupy” Insua’s Afro-Cuban showcase in NYC
- 2015:** Led first salsa acrobatic team and performance
- 2016:** Taught first communication class for dance couples at DC Bachata New Years Festival
- 2018:** Created dips and tricks syllabus for SalsaGo app with Nieves Studio
- 2020:** Hospitalized with COVID-19 for three months
- 2022:** Taught at NYC Salsa Congress after two years of recovery from COVID-19

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Preface



THE KICK

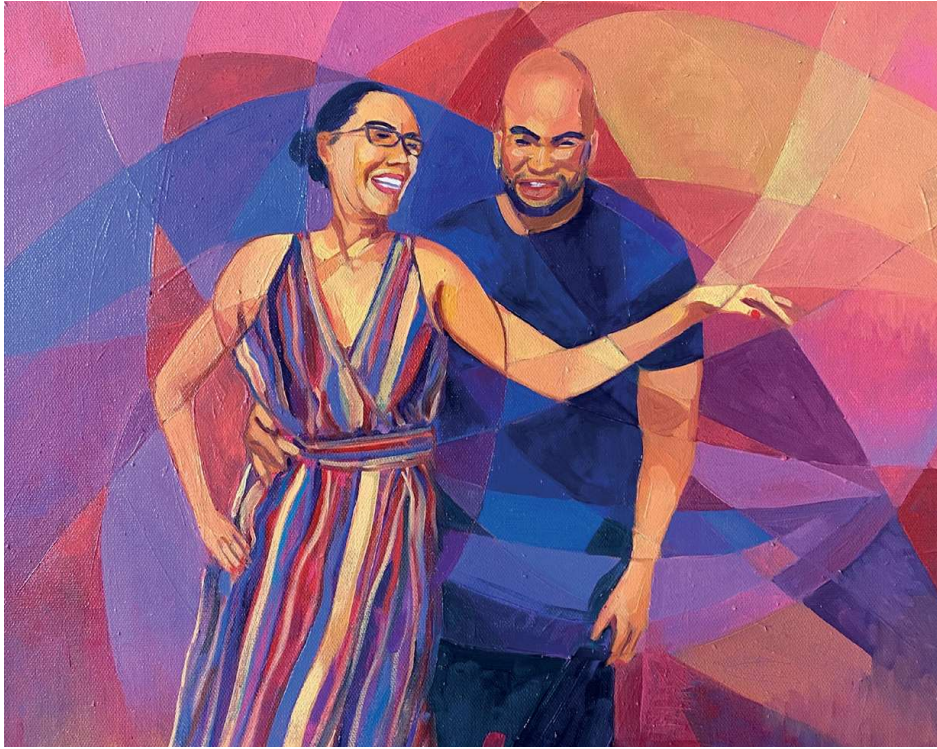
The head of security in my middle school found out that I danced salsa. He told me that every Tuesday for years, he was at the Copacabana, where he would unleash his secret dance weapon: the kick. He demonstrated it to me, and it was neither high nor graceful, but it was unique. Neither he nor I had ever seen anyone do it on the dance floor and so it was “his.” He only decided to stop dancing, he laughed, when one day his shoe came off after a kick and flew across the dance floor. No matter

where he looked, he couldn't find his shoe anywhere. He went home lopsided and that was when this move was retired. But the significance of the kick never died. I know because whenever he saw me for the next few years, he always greeted me with his signature kick.

I was greeted similarly by many of my Latinx co-workers. My school custodian, who is Cuban, would shout "Azúcar!" when we were in earshot, irregardless of whether I was teaching or not. My co-teacher, who is Venezuelan, would greet me with a shoulder shimmy and a wink. The school secretary, who is Puerto Rican, would grab my hand, spin herself, and in a moment of passion, yell, "Wepa!"

While the rest of the school was mired in the drudgery of work, we had a reminder about what was important. And if you looked carefully, we were not at work. We were teleported to the dance floor and were partying as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Introduction



What stories do you tell again and again?
What stories will you never share?
Which of your stories reveal who you are?
What story haunts you still?
Which of your stories reveal a universal truth?

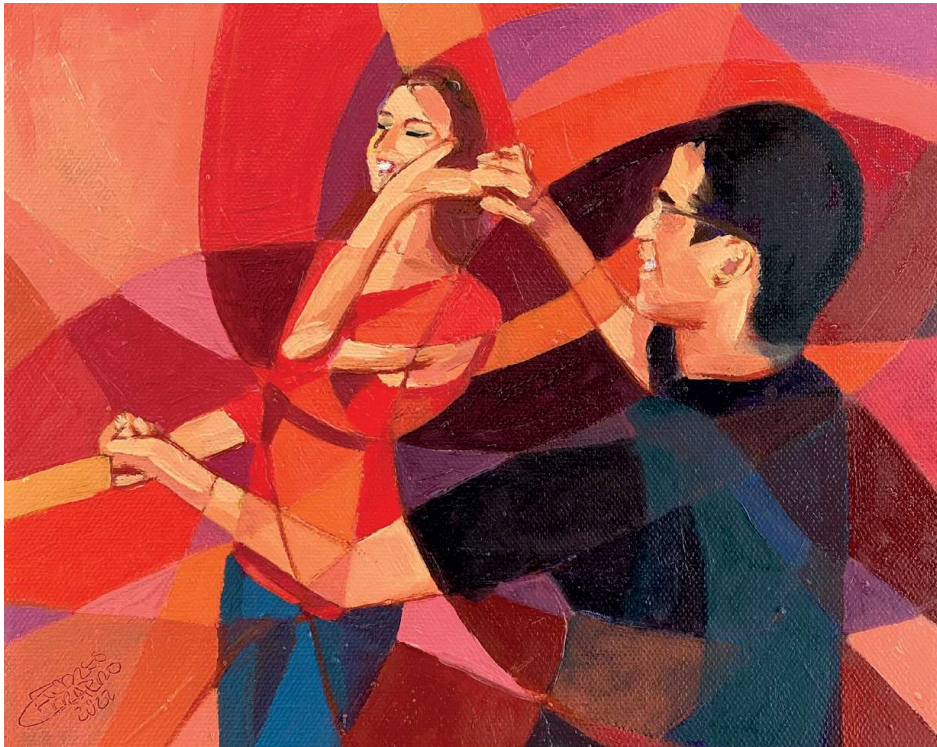
“50 Salsa Stories” shares my journey from being the worst student in dance class to closing shows with the best salsa dancers in the world. I was part of an underground salsa dance revolution that became a worldwide phenomenon in the late ‘90s. Thousands of people gathered every weekend to showcase, learn, and share our love of salsa music and dance. And I was there, fighting for relevance and space on a crowded dance floor in New York City, the epicenter of salsa dance in the world.

My place in the community is unique. I am white, learn slowly, and lack natural grace. But I eventually became a featured performer on the worldwide salsa circuit as an acrobatic dancer, a teacher to tens of thousands of students, and a coach to hundreds of salsa performers. The experience was rich with elation, heartbreak, and challenges. This book is my attempt to capture that experience with 50 of my best salsa stories.

The book is divided into ten thematic sections that span moments of struggling at the bottom to moments of struggling at the top. It is my hope that by telling these stories, I honor the vital culture of passionate dancers, spectacular performers, and legendary teachers that welcomed me into their family.

Firsts

(1993–2000)



What small step changed your life forever?

Who embraced you?

What sound awakens your soul?

What home awaits your arrival?

What community wants you to shine?

First Salsa Dance (1993)

A friend I met pulled me onto the dance floor at a Latin dance party. She wrapped my arms around her and I assumed we were getting married. It turned out, though, that she didn't like me, she just wanted to dance. Or maybe the way I danced made her not like me; I am not sure. What I did know is that I was quickly leaving bruises on this woman's feet and if I were to ever have this opportunity again, I had better learn how to dance. I enrolled in salsa classes the next day.

First Dance School (1994)

My first salsa teacher told me to try to feel the music. My second teacher told me to stop trying because I had no feeling. My third teacher was too busy admiring himself to notice my feelings. Then I met the Mambo King, Eddie Torres.

Eddie revealed to me that the center of the universe was the dance floor. His instructional superhighway created a path for everyone, even those of us with two left feet. He was never satisfied until every question was answered and all of his students looked good. To him, a salsa lesson was a crucial mission and we were all aboard his ship.

I was tougher to teach than most of his students because my idea of partnering never included anyone else. Previously, I had only moved people by tackling them. And I looked like I was far more interested in eating salsa rather than dancing it. Fortunately, Eddie offered me a pass for unlimited classes, which meant six nights a week with the world's best teacher and a front seat to a salsa dance revolution that was incubating in NYC and was about to explode around the world.

First Musical Experience (1995)

I danced salsa for a year before I experienced the music. I didn't understand that the conga was talking to my feet. I didn't realize the horns were celestial expressions of eternity. To me, the music was just an opportunity to dance with attractive women and maybe get a phone number. And that is what I did, until Willie Colón changed my life.

On a Monday night at a small club in New York, the salsa icon Willie Colón addressed the crowd and said, "White people, you can share my music, but you can't have my women." These words were not an inspiration, but an invitation to finally understand something I was missing. That night, I finally heard the percussion and my rib cage responded. My hips partnered with the clave, to no one's satisfaction but my own. My heart opened to a rhythm that pulsated through my body. And salsa dancing became not just a partner dance, but a pathway to expressing divinity.

This moment didn't happen suddenly. New Yorkers were blessed to have world class level salsa bands every night of the week. When you hear great music enough times, it penetrates your body in a way that defies conscious thought. And when you attune to that musicality, you have a dance partner for the rest of your life.

First Dance Team (1998)

I thought I had reached the mountaintop by learning all of Eddie's advanced moves, but then I saw his dance team perform at a club. Eddie's dancers moved with *sabor* and flash. Their costumes were a Las Vegas-level spectacle. Their synchronized perfection as a team was hypnotizing. And his acrobatic dancers dazzled the crowd and gave me a vision for my future. I wanted all of it.



Eddie Torres Dancers & Tito Puente @ Manhattan Center, NYC 1999

To reach the next level, I had many dance teams to choose from. Unfortunately, none of them chose me. I was finally accepted at a different salsa dance school called Razz M'Tazz, on a training team. And it turns out, I found the perfect place to nurture a future acrobatic headliner.

As a native New Yorker, I have been surrounded by attitude, cutthroat competition, and a collective neurotic desire for status my whole life. I bought into the rat race with an elusive feeling that respect was just around the corner. It never was. Angel and Addie, the leaders of Razz M'Tazz, changed that. They welcomed people unconditionally. Angel and Addie encouraged a spiritual awakening in your body and freedom to express yourself, breaking every rule of the prevailing style of dance in New York. Mistakes were accepted as a part of learning and when I failed, Angel and Addie always picked me up off the floor, even if I was buried in the ground. And they introduced me to lifts and tricks, a lifeline that eventually catapulted me to the top of the performance scene.

Lifts and tricks were taboo for New York dancers because they were considered too flashy at the time. Angel and Addie loved them, though, and with their support, I studied the cranes at construction sites while listening to Tito Puente. I could be caught watching an escalator for hours as I danced to Eddie Palmieri. And I made weekly trips to the airport looking for Tito Rodriguez in the sky. It wasn't long before I was able to meld these worlds together and make a unique mark in the community as an acrobatic salsa dancer. I owe my success to my mentors, who nurtured every one of their students to find their own inner expression, regardless of what the rest of the world thought. That is how you create a dancer.

First Standing Ovation (2000)

The original salsa congress was in Puerto Rico and drew the best dancers from around the world. It was prestigious and exclusive, but I had started working with Addie Rodriguez (of Razz M'Tazz) on an ambitious acrobatic salsa routine and she used her clout to get us on the Saturday night showcase. At the time, one well-executed acrobatic move could immortalize you forever. Our routine had ten of those moves.

Beforehand, I felt panic worse than any performing experience I had ever had. It seemed absurd that I chose to subject myself to potential humiliation in front of hundreds of the world's best dancers. If I could have backed out, I would have, but I had already spent way too much money on the costume to turn back.

Fortunately, once on stage, the nerves were gone and the first half of our routine was perfect. The crowd buzzed with every lift and trick. There is nothing better than crowd approval and it fulfilled a burning desire to be the center of a spectacle. But after one move in the middle of the routine, Addie went around my back and there was a collective gasp followed by a painful silence. Why? Well, when I reached for Addie on the other side of my back, she wasn't there. She had fallen to the floor.

After eight years of battling my way to the top, I felt the colossal crash. Everyone knew that a small mistake on stage stained your reputation forever. I had just dropped the Salsa Diva on the biggest stage that existed. I looked at Addie's face preparing to walk away in shame, but she had a very different reaction to failure. Turns out that ten years earlier, Addie was dropped by her partner at a salsa concert at Madison

Square Garden in front of 15,000 people. This time around, it was only 500. The first time, she blacked out and permanently hurt her neck. This time, she was conscious, laughing, and found the predicament amusing.

Addie gave me her hand to pick her up and the spirit to embrace the moment. We ended the routine flawlessly, having shed any pretension of trying to be perfect. We were joyous because we weren't trying anymore. We basked in the absurdity of doing spectacular acrobatics after a massive crash. At the end of our show, we received the only full standing ovation of the weekend, not because of the show-stopping lifts, but because we didn't stop the show.

For my entire life, I was elusively chasing respect. In high school I was captain of the football team and it was not enough. In college I was part of a group of spiritual seekers, but I never found anything. As a school teacher, I wanted to transform children's lives, but barely kept the classroom from falling apart. But in that moment in Puerto Rico, my salsa community freed me from the shackles of chasing respect because my imperfection was finally enough.

Social Dance Moments



What surprisingly precarious situation have you found yourself in?

What is your anxiety treatment plan?

When has light rescued you from darkness?

What do you fight?

When do you give up?

The Mambo King's Niece (1996)

Dance socials were rare in the mid '90s and were a welcome respite from the competitive energy of the clubs. For me, it was a chance to dance with people who were much better than me and who wouldn't even respond if I had asked them to dance at a club. At the top of my dance wish list was Eddie Torres' niece and top company member, Duplessey Walker. She was the best spinner in the world and I had just learned how to lead a double turn.

There have been many times in my life when I didn't know what I didn't know until it was too late. I didn't know that accelerating as you turn a street corner during a rainstorm might lead to a crash. And it did. I didn't know that having an unauthorized party on a street gang's territory might lead to a painful misunderstanding. And it did. And I didn't know that when you wind up a tornado, you had better know how to get it to stop or there might be a problem. And that's what happened with Duplessey.

Within seconds of starting our dance, I led Duplessey's hand over her head and initiated a double turn. When she didn't stop after spinning twice, I realized my predicament. I had learned how to start a multiple turn, but not how to end it. And the longer I waited, the worse the situation got.

As Duplessey kept turning, I kept guessing when to drop my hand to finish the turn, but she turned so fast, my mind couldn't keep up with her spinning. There's a carnival game in which a light flashes around a circle of light bulbs and you try to guess when the light will hit your

target. It was like that. And the longer I waited, the more I knew I was ruining my reputation and the opportunity to ever dance with someone this accomplished again.

So finally, I just dropped my hand randomly. There was a stumble, a teetering, and a look of total surprise as I landed a rocketship with a huge explosion on earth. Fortunately, Duplessey was a pro, made the best of it, and danced her way into the next move. I was so relieved, but that was it for double turns for a very long time.

Dying on the Dance Floor (1997)

One Thursday night at the Latin Quarter, a man had a heart attack and died on the dance floor. There was no sentimentality as this was NYC, just a little unease about when it would be appropriate to start dancing again. There was some debate about whether that was how we would want to leave this world. If we are going to have to die, better to be dancing, which is a pretty good metaphor for getting the most out of life. It was agreed upon, though, at the very least, that we should wait until his body was removed before returning to the floor.

I was curiously calm, which was surprising because I have had panic attacks about death my entire life. I asked my dancer friend what he thought about death and he said he didn't think about it. He gazed at all the beautiful women in the room one by one and shared, "Why should I be thinking about death?"

His answer may have seemed a bit shallow, but from that night forward, my panic attacks went away. Therapists recommend counteracting panic by being aware of your surroundings and being present in the body. Who knew that going to the Latin Quarter was going to be part of my treatment plan?

Presence (1998)

On the low end of the spectrum of partner dance experiences, your partner may begrudgingly dance with you, never look you in the eye, and treat you like she's doing you a favor. She might yank you and set off a power struggle not too dissimilar to a bad marriage. She might dance a different style, not adjust to yours, and not accept your attempt to accommodate her.

On the other end of the spectrum is ecstasy. It's greater than drugs and way less expensive, (although arguably slightly more difficult to obtain). It's what makes dancers change their entire lives so that they can return to the floor again and again. And sometimes, there is just one dancer who reliably brings you there every time. For me, Priscilla was the one.

When I first danced with Priscilla, she was a good dancer, but not special. There was a scent of mild attraction, but nothing romantic. Our connection was effective, but not electric. However, somewhere in the middle of the song, we looked into each other's eyes and I felt eternity. It's not easy to put words to something that transcends reality, but it's like that consciousness you feel when you awaken to a loving presence of someone next to you. It's like that moment in the dream when the impossible becomes possible and you know magic exists. It's awe, it's magnetic, and the feeling is magnified by the acknowledgement that you are experiencing it with someone else.

Priscilla and I always found each other for three dances every night and never more. We knew that no matter how our night was going, no matter how our lives were going, we were there for each other, a guarantee of celestial dance bliss.

The Brawl (2002)

I was always surprised that there weren't more fights at dance events. There were a lot of menacing looks, invasions of space, and frequent battles, but never more than that, with one exception.

In the late '90s, two salsa dance styles were at war for cultural dominance at the congresses. L.A. was flashy and full of tricks, dominated the stage, and danced on the first beat in the music. N.Y. style was sophisticated and classy, owned the social dance floor, and danced on the second beat.

L.A. dancers were also famous for holding the audience hostage by grabbing the mic after their shows to talk about their greatness. And they would do it again late at night on the social dance floor. And in the hotel lobby, and in the bathroom. This behavior went unchecked because they were stars and they only stopped when they were bored with their self-adulation, which could take a while. The L.A. dancers' grandstanding completely reflected the cultural self-promotion and self-absorption of L.A. culture. New Yorkers hated that.

In 2002, I was on the undercard of a show in Torino, Italy, headlined by the L.A. dancers Johnny Vazquez, his brother Francisco Vasquez, and Rogelio Moreno. There were a few New York area dancers there, but this event was definitely L.A.-dominant. After my show, I headed to my room, so I wouldn't get frustrated by the ego-stroking antics of the L.A. dancers and I missed out on the biggest brawl in salsa history.

At one in the morning, on the social dance floor, one of the L.A. dancers grabbed the mic to talk about himself. The DJ, from Jersey City, at some point had had enough and cut the mic. No one knew who threw the first punch, but a decade of coastal frustration was released. Punches were thrown, chairs were tossed, tables were overturned, and security was nowhere to be found.

A long brawl broke out, and thank goodness, none of the L.A. dancers' bravado translated into fighting skills. Two women from Caribbean Soul and their DJ fought off the entire L.A. crew all while I was snoring in my room dreaming about paninis. Francisco Vasquez roamed the salsa corridors daring anybody to fight him or dance On 2, as everyone cleared the venue. \$10,000 of damage was done that night, security would forever be hired for all events, and most importantly, the L.A. crew never monopolized the mic again, not while an On 2 crew was around.