

The New York Times

From Street to Club, Moving to a Latin Beat

By LARRY ROHTER

THE PALLADIUM BALLROOM at Broadway and 53rd Street, once a mecca for fans of Latin dance, closed its doors long ago. The summer resorts in the Catskills, where a mambo circuit once flourished, have faded. But that doesn't mean today's New Yorkers don't have plenty of places where they can dance to Latin music.

On the contrary: these days the Latin dance scene is truly a moveable feast that offers dedicated fans — and curious beginners — the possibility of stepping out seven nights a week. If anything, the number of places featuring Latin dance seems to be growing, and this summer includes such seemingly unlikely locations as the Taj Lounge, an Indian restaurant on West 21st Street in Chelsea (Mondays); B. B. King's Blues Club & Grill near Times Square (Thursdays); and Water Taxi Beach at the South Street Seaport (Fridays).

Then there's the outdoor Sunset Salsa series, held every Thursday on the traffic island on Ninth Avenue at the north side of 14th Street, just outside an Apple store. The evening there begins with a free salsa lesson from 6:30 to 7:30, followed by dancing until 9, all against the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline, and with envious, gawking passengers in passing buses and taxis as an audience.

"Anybody can try it," said Talia Castro-Pozo, the chief instructor, who leads the lesson and often stays on to advise dancers on how to improve their performance or just to dance. "Just look around and you'll see: there are not just Latinos here, but people of all ages and ethnicities and backgrounds and levels of experience, all of them dancing happily with each other." The series,

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Ron Prokopez, with microphone, and Talia Castro-Pozo, center in blue top, teach a free salsa lesson at Sunset Salsa, on Ninth Avenue at 14th Street.

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organized by the Chelsea Improvement Company, a local business group, is in its second year, features a pair of D.J.'s and runs through Aug. 26. It has proven so popular that company officials say they would like it to continue for "as many years as possible." If sponsors agree, the program will be back next summer.

The dominant Latin dance style at most of these events, of course, is salsa and its cousins from the Caribbean, which include merengue, cha-cha, bachata, mambo and rumba. But Argentine tango and Brazilian samba also have their followings and gathering spots, and in the category of whowouldathunkit?, even the Latin hustle, that relic of the "Saturday Night Fever" days of the 1970s, is making a comeback.

The salsa dance scene is divided between "parties," which generally take place in nightclubs, restaurants and bars like S.O.B.'s in the South Village on Friday or the Iguana on West 54th Street, and "socials," which are held in dance studios. That difference may seem small, but it is important.

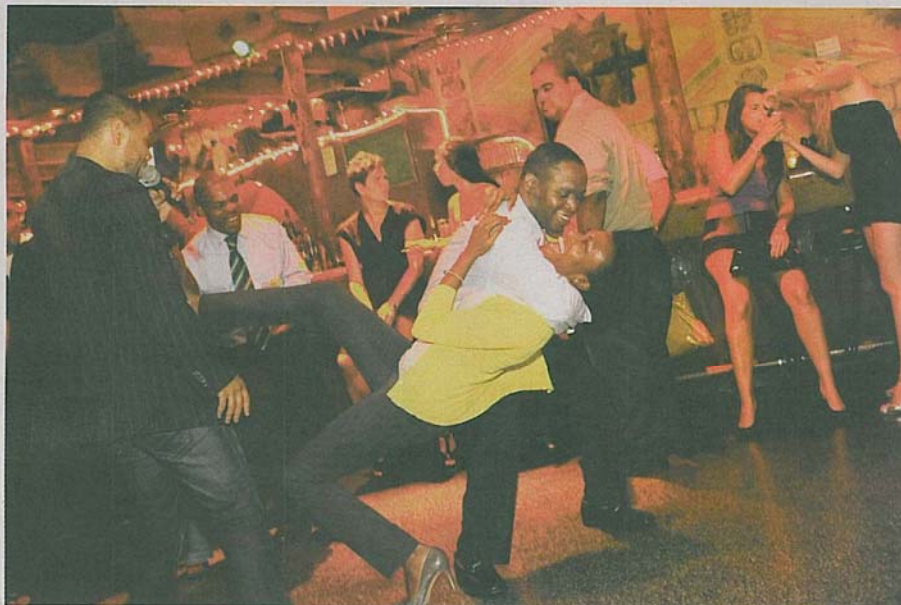
"In my mind socials are for people who want to dance, not to drink," said Steve Shaw, co-founder of SalsaNewYork.com, a Web site that offers a comprehensive guide to all aspects of the local dance scene. "Most serious dancers are the same way. The clubs see them not drinking, and the managers want that income and feel that they can't get enough people drinking. So one solution is the dance studio, where people can go to dance, and there are drinks, but they are not alcoholic."

Of the socials, the oldest and probably the most popular is the one held by Jimmy Anton, a vet-

Salsa, samba, tango: Choose your rhythm and move your feet.

eran dance instructor. It takes place in Chelsea two Sunday evenings a month, as do two other popular socials in the Fashion District: La Vieja Guardia (or the Old Guard) Social and Carlos König's Mambo Sundays Party. The dress code is casual, in contrast to some clubs, but schedules fluctuate, so dancers should check by phone or at Mr. Shaw's Web site.

The advantage of nightclubs and restaurants, even for those not at all interested in drinking, is that many of them offer free dance lessons as a lure at the beginning of the evening. At Gonzalez y Gonzalez, a Mexican restaurant in SoHo that features live salsa bands Thursday through Saturday, Patrick Patterson; his



Joey Corsica, left with microphone, teaches Nicky and Patrick Patterson how to dip during Salsa Night at Gonzalez y Gonzalez.

wife, Nicky; and a group of friends showed up on July 15 to celebrate his 32nd birthday and couldn't resist the temptation.

"We're Jamaicans, so we're used to dancing to reggae," Mr. Patterson said after the lesson, which ended with him and his wife performing a dip. "But everything from the Caribbean is related in one way or another, so this wasn't too hard. It was fun, and we plan to come back."

Some clubs, however, are clearly not for beginners. The Thursday night Salsa Party at Club Cache, just off Broadway in the Theater District, offers the usual free lesson, but the floor is soon crowded with accomplished dancers eager to show just how good they are. Cache attracts a lot of dance instructors looking for a place to kick back after work, as well as dedicated salsaeros either visiting from out of town or who have moved to New York to live a salsa lifestyle. One especially skilled female dancer admitted to being Russian, and her preferred dance partners turned out to be French and Peruvian.

"I used to be a social worker, but it made me really stressed out," said Kevin Lee, a salsa instructor originally from South Korea, explaining the influx of dancers not from the Caribbean. "This is a great way to relax and meet people."

It's a wonderful spectacle to watch, and, for beginning dancers, informative too. But seeing such proficiency can also be



Karina Romero, right, working with Helen Wallack, 73, at the monthly Saturday night tango event at the 92nd Street Y.

daunting, even depressing, leading to thoughts along the lines of "There's no way I can ever be that good, so what's the point?" and a fear of venturing out onto the dance floor. Joey Salsa, the D.J. who runs the show, which goes from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., put it this way, "This is for the dancers, it's underground, and I want to keep it that way."

The Uptown Salsa Wednesday sessions at the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center in East Harlem, on the other hand, offer a disarmingly hospitable environment. The crowd is older and predominantly Latino, the show starts at 5:30 p.m. and ends around 11, and nobody seems to feel a need to show off newly acquired skills. These are people who have been

cause many local fans are even more interested in learning to play the percussion instruments used in Rio de Janeiro's annual Carnival than in mastering the dance style itself. But S.O.B.'s features Brazilian music most Saturday nights, and the Nublu club in the East Village has a Brazilian night most Wednesdays, showcasing both samba and forro, a rural accordion-based style.

In addition Samba New York, which trains percussionists, periodically offers samba dancing classes and participates in samba shows at clubs. Philip Galinsky, the group's director, said one such series of events is scheduled to begin in early September and will continue through October.

There are also regular Wednesday samba boat cruises called "Fogo nas Aguas" ("Fire on the Waters"), with live and recorded Brazilian music. One is scheduled for next week.

For tango, which is all about controlled intensity rather than the exuberance that salsa stresses, a good place to start is at the 92nd Street Y, which sponsors an Argentine Tango Party on the first Saturday of every month. As at many salsa parties, the evening begins with a group lesson and then becomes a dance session that lasts deep into the night, 2 a.m. in this case. (Dress is more formal than at a typical salsa event.)

"Every day there are two or three places where you can

Short Trips To Hot Climes

TAJ LOUNGE 48 West 21st Street, Chelsea; (212) 620-3033; tajlounge.com.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL 237 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; (212) 997-4144; bbkingblues.com.

WATER TAXI BEACH Pier 17, South Street Seaport, Lower Manhattan; (877) 974-6998; watertaxibeach.com.

SUNSET SALSA Chelsea Triangle, Ninth Avenue at 14th Street; (212) 584-1019.

S.O.B.'S 204 Varick Street, South Village; (212) 243-4940; sobs.com.

IGUANA 240 West 54th Street, Manhattan; (212) 765-5454; iguananyc.com.

JIMMY ANTON SOCIAL Dance Manhattan, 39 West 19th Street, fifth floor, Chelsea; (212) 807-0802; jimmyanton.com.

LA VIEJA GUARDIA SALSA SOCIAL Basic Ballroom NY, 335 West 35th Street, fifth floor, Manhattan; (718) 924-9425; laviejaguardiasalsanyc.com.

CARLOS KÖNIG'S MAMBO SOCIAL Ripley Grier Studios, 820 Eighth Street, at 36th Street, 16th Floor, Manhattan; (212) 978-0091; carloskonig.com.

GONZALEZ Y GONZALEZ 625 Broadway, near Houston Street, SoHo; (212) 473-8787; gonzaleznyc.com.

CLUB CACHE'S SALSA PARTY 221 West 46th Street, Manhattan; (347) 385-6745; clubcache.nyc.com.

JULIA DE BURGOS CULTURAL CENTER 1680 Lexington Avenue, at 105th Street, East Harlem; (212) 831-4333.

NUBLU CLUB 56 Avenue C, at Fourth Street, ground floor, East Village; (646) 546-5206; nublu.net.

SAMBA NEW YORK Classes and events at various locations; (917) 684-9447; newyorksambaschool.org.

FOGO NAS AGUAS Pier 40, West Side Highway at West Houston Street, West Village; (212) 987-9200; fогonasaguas.com.

92ND STREET Y 1395 Lexington Avenue; (212) 415-5440; 92y.org.

dance tango in New York," said Karina Romero, who conducts the Y's program with her husband and dance partner, Dardo Galletto, and recommended newyorktango.com as a guide to the local scene: "There are studios, restaurants and clubs, some with live music. This city has become almost like Buenos Aires."

Or San Juan, Havana or Santo Domingo, for that matter.