



# The More You Shake, the Better You Feel:

DEFYING CULTURE, INC., WITH MAMBO

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hey call him the “Mambo King,” even though Eddie Torres shows up to teach his dance class in baggy sweats, tennis shoes with no laces and chunky glasses that slide down his nose. He’s put on a lot of weight since his glory days as a performer. But when he gets up to mambo, you forget about all that. Eddie inhabits rhythm like a master drummer. One hundred feet follow him through steps like the “Slave,” the “Cuban Side Charge” and “Mambo Around the World.” By the end of the first hour of class, when Eddie calls a break, people have sweat through their shirts. They’re wiping their faces with towels, eating Power Bars and taking long gulps from their water bottles. Or they’re sprawled on the floor, stretching and trying to catch their breath. Eddie whips his Sunday class through a grueling four-hour workout designed to train dancers with *sabor*—flavor.

Eddie’s dance school is successful, and he’s trained some of the top teachers in New York. But he’s been around long enough to see the dance he loves go through a roller coaster of changes. His story is an object lesson in what it’s like on the fringes of American culture, where people struggle to keep

their art forms alive in the face of a fickle public and the Culture Trust—the consolidation of companies that sell culture.

Eddie began dancing when he was 12, when mambo was like today’s hip-hop, he says, for Puerto Rican kids growing up in Spanish Harlem. Passionate, inarticulate, but expressive on the dance floor, he soon decided he wanted to be a professional. Back in the early 1960s, people thought he was crazy. Mambo had always been a dance that folks just picked up from their families or in neighborhood clubs.

“Even my mother said, ‘There’s no money and no market. You better go out there like your father and learn a trade,’” he says. “And I told her, ‘Momma, I’m not going to earn my living with my hands.’ And she said, ‘Oh yeah, what are you going to do, earn your living with your feet?’”

The story may be apocryphal, but that’s exactly what he did.

The mambo rhythm was invented in the late 1930s by Cuban bass player Israel “Cachao” Lopez and his brother, Orestes. It spread quickly around the world, influencing musicians in New York, Puerto Rico, and parts of Latin America and Africa. In the early 1940s, Dizzy Gillespie and Machito (Frank Grillo) were the first to incorporate it into jazz. Music historian John Storm Roberts writes that by 1954, “the mambo’s audience was the entire country.” A character in the 1957 Fellini movie *Nights of Cabiria* jokes that “the whole world turns around mambo.” The Palladium Dance Hall became the hottest Latin club in New York. Tito Puente, who has more than 100 albums to his credit, claimed the title of the rhythm’s ambassador, playing at the Palladium and helping ignite the craze as far away as Japan.

By the early 1970s, mambo was reinterpreted by New York musicians and renamed salsa. Fania, salsa’s main record label, recorded dozens of artists and helped spread the sound around the world. A group called the Fania All-Stars drew 44,000 people to a concert at Yankee Stadium in 1973. But that was a last gasp before the dance went underground. Like almost every other social dance fad—tango in the 1910s, lindy hop in the 1920s, rumba in the

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1930s—the mambo had reached its peak. Latin clubs like the Corso still existed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the dance audience was shrinking.

So by the time Eddie was a professional dancer with shiny two-tone shoes, his dance was dying. “I was just at the point where I was developing my own technique and learning how to choreograph,” he says. “I was upset because here was my chance to become a professional Latin dancer and there wasn’t going to be a market for it.”

Dancers resist...with the one thing  
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takeover: their bodies.

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He was right. Disco and punk began to rule the dance floors, and partner dancing was considered passé. Cultural norms stressed “doing your own thing.” Feminists lashed out at partner dancing, saying it stereotyped men and women into “leader” and “follower” roles. Many young Latinos even stopped listening to the music. Eddie got a hospital job to support himself through those lean years.

Why do dance fads come and go? I don’t think anyone can entirely explain the alchemy that makes a hula-hoop or a type of dance so desirable one day and so passé the next. Eddie thinks movies like *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Salsa* (1988) and *The Mambo Kings* (1992) (and much more recently, *The Tango Lesson*, *Shall We Dance?* and *Dance With Me*) spurred new interest in partner dancing. Suddenly it was exciting for couples to get dressed up and dance. Mambo came back in a big way, and so did other partner dances like swing. By the late 1980s, it seemed like dancers longed to be able to touch each other again.

Now Eddie could fulfill his dreams of professionalizing the “street” version of mambo. He wanted new dancers to be able to learn the steps more

quickly than by watching hotshots in a dark club, and he wanted his professionals to be as well trained as jazz or tap dancers. Eddie, who is 48, opened a dance studio with his wife Maria, and he has ridden the dance boom ever since. His pioneering list of 180 solo dance steps helped codify the dance and is freely borrowed by other teachers. It’s a real vindication for a kid who was told he ought to learn a trade.

As a child, Eddie was shy, tongue-tied and unable to say what he felt. Dancing was a place where he could show what he felt, whether good or bad. “I have used this dance to survive the hardships of my life,” he says. “I come from a place where the dance is more to me than just fun. I look to express what I have inside—whether it be sheer joy or sorrow or pain. And where I go, I think my students go with me.”

Eddie is finally making a decent living from his classes. But it hasn’t been an easy road. In fact, Eddie’s insistence on preserving the dance form, even when it was no longer popular, was a profoundly anti-commercial thing to do. He didn’t stick around for years because he expected to make the big bucks. And neither do most of his dancers. I think it’s fair to say that hardcore mambo dancers have quietly seceded from the mainstream culture of the Culture Trust. Like the voguers in Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* or the Cajun dancers in Les Blank’s *J'ai EtÈ Au Bal*, fans of the fringe move in their own ways.

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I first noticed Al because Eddie kept calling him out to the middle of the dance floor to display his partner moves. “Let’s watch Mr. Smooth,” Eddie would say, “because he’s Cuban!” And after Al demonstrated the move, he’d say to the class: “Now do it like that.”

Al is not Cuban. He’s a tall, intense, 43-year-old bookkeeper for a cable channel who attends Eddie’s classes six times a week. He often wears either a Krispy Kreme or a Dr. Seuss T-shirt and ties a bandanna of the Puerto Rican flag around his head. One day, I ask Al why he loves mambo. He replies, “I’m a Latin woman trapped in a Jewish man’s body.”

I give him what is probably a skeptical look. “A Latin . . . woman?” I ask, thinking he probably means man.

In answer, Al slides the sides of his hands up his body, caressing his waist, chest and head. Then he opens his arms in a wide V, framing his face. He poses there, shaking his hips. I can only smile; I know exactly how he feels.

Most of us sit in offices all day, pushing words or numbers around on a screen. Dancing is not about such abstractions. It’s “a physical conversation,” “a way of being social that fills a gap in our culture,” “a form of safe sex,” dancers tell me. It’s a chance to loosen up, overcome inhibitions, and express your feelings without language. A friend says, “My greatest revelation about dance is that you can’t do it and be depressed. There’s a mind-body integration that happens that prevents you from separating yourself from the world.”

For Al, mambo is a way of relaxing his physical inhibitions. When he looks at videos of himself taken a year ago, he’s pleased to be “1/10 as uptight” as before. Describing himself as “judgmental, analytical, and prone to worry, to the point where vacations with me are a total drag,” Al says the dance has helped boost his sense of fun. In fact, he once told his therapist that if it came down to a choice between seeing her and going to mambo class, he would choose mambo. Was he using the dance as a substitute for “real” human relationships? she asked.

“I guess I’m involved with mambo the way other people are involved with families, hobbies and all the other normal things that Americans do,” says Al. “But when I consider the other people involved with mambo, everybody seems equally deranged and obsessed.” The feeling Al gets after a therapy session is great, he says, but it doesn’t compare with the euphoria of a mambo class. He thinks there’s something about shaking your hips that releases endorphins and makes you feel good. “The more you shake,” says Al, “the better you feel.”

Al is not the only one who feels that way. One day during a break in our mambo class, a dancer named Ruby tells me she was offered a job in Santo Domingo with big perks: a free car, an apartment and a good salary. “I won’t

go,” says Ruby. “My mom says, ‘Are you crazy?’ But I don’t want to be away from this.”

A good friend of Ruby’s named Sofia turned her life upside down after discovering mambo. Though she had a good job as an emergency room nurse in Germany, Sofia ditched it to move to New York and attend Eddie’s classes. She stayed on even after her visa expired and the Immigration and Naturalization Service ordered her to leave the country. She ran out of money, scrambled for under-the-table-jobs, and shivered through the winter because she couldn’t afford clothes. But she just couldn’t tear herself away. “Sometimes I don’t believe it myself, really,” she says.

My own obsession with the dance began eight years ago after an aerobics class, when I happened to peer into a studio window at my California gym. I saw a teacher whirling his partner through turns, slithering underneath his own arms, and shaking his shoulders brazenly, sexually, with a huge self-satisfied grin. I stood there watching for a long, long time, and the next week I was back: not for aerobics, but for mambo.

It's possible that mambo's time is coming.

That was the beginning of a long love affair. I took a year of conga lessons to understand the rhythms that underpin the music, studied Latin music history, learned religious santeria songs, listened to music from Africa, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Latin America and the United States, trained in the ballroom versions of Latin dances, dated a musician, traveled to Cuba to immerse myself in the music’s roots, and socialized mostly with dancers. In New York, I took Eddie’s classes five times a week.

Most mambo dancers probably don’t see themselves as taking an active stand against the Culture Trust, or what I call “Entertainment, Inc.” But I believe that

dodging the dominant forms of culture is in itself a subversive act. Think of it: Most hardcore mambo fans ignore the Top Ten hits that dictate radio airplay and instead, seek out little-known radio shows and small-label CDs. Most are more likely to patronize small venues than spend money at big-name rock concerts. Most will go out dancing rather than stay home watching the last episode of *Seinfeld*.

"I'm a Latin woman trapped in a Jewish man's body."

Dancers resist the Culture Trust with the one thing that hasn't suffered a corporate takeover: their bodies. As any dancer will tell you, partner dancing is fun. There's an exuberance and a raw sensuality to doing it on the dance floor. But I'd like to suggest that it's also a form of resistance. When you're dancing, you can't buy anything. You can't be deluged with ads like when you're watching TV, listening to the radio or watching a movie (through "product placements"). As a friend of mine says, "Dancing is one of the few kinds of entertainment where you're not just a passive consumer. You participate and immerse yourself in it, instead of standing outside and watching it." You're an active creator of your own fun.

It's a typical Tuesday night at the Copacabana, the Latin dance club on 57th St. Many of Eddie's students come here to show off their moves. The main room is huge, with the biggest disco ball I've ever seen. White palm trees bathed in blue and green lights fringe the dance floor. The band is in full swing, with four horns, three singers and the irresistible syncopations between piano, congas and bass that make mambo such an infectious groove.

So how do you mambo? Here's the simple part: You take three steps within four beats of music: quick-quick-slow. That's assuming that you've got a good ear and can hear the rhythm. Then comes the hard part: sinking all

your weight into your hips. In the ballrooms, this action is called "Cuban motion." You step on your right foot, thrusting the weight into your right hip. Then you alternate with the left side. Your upper body moves in opposition to your hips. Once you've mastered the basics, you can add turns or your own solo movements. The sign of a great improviser is someone who can accent the syncopated beats with their arms and feet, all the while keeping true to the underlying rhythm.

My feet start to move and I'm ready to dance. But inside, I feel odd. I realize I am standing around waiting...and waiting...and waiting. Almost no one dances alone here, and almost no women ask men to dance. The days when women used to wait around for guys are over...right?

I move around the club, positioning myself at different spots and trying to find someone I know. I can certainly ask a man to dance, but in the past I've gotten strange looks and anxious rejections: "Maybe later," they say, flicking their eyes away and quickly taking a walk. I know that men don't have it easy, either: They often get rejected. But at least they can ask. The inequity, and my role in it, bothers me. I leave quickly.

Later I share these concerns with Priscilla Renta, a 28-year-old dancer of Puerto Rican descent. Am I crazy? In response, she hoots with laughter and tells me her own story. When she first started dancing, she says, she only liked to do the solo moves.

"I grew up very independent and was used to being a leader," she says. "I went to college at Bryn Mawr, where there's a strong feminist perspective. When I began dancing, all of a sudden I had to follow somebody and it freaked the heck out of me. Even though I'm 4 feet 10 and I don't weigh very much, I was very stiff and hard to move. It was awful. I hated every second of it."

What particularly irked Priscilla was when guys would instruct her to "just follow." She hated those words. She wouldn't dance with people who treated her like a child. One man actually slapped her hand when he felt she was ignoring his lead. She had to control herself to keep from smacking him in the head.

Today, Priscilla can dance with her partners as lightly as a feather. Her determination to be independent is probably one of the reasons she's such a good improviser. Even within someone's lead, she throws in plenty of extra moves that make it clear she's controlling her own flow. Priscilla decided to "let go" of her concerns about the male-female dynamic—but only when she's dancing.

Like other members of Eddie's student dance group, Priscilla spends long hours in rehearsals and performs for free. As a teenager, she didn't grow up listening to her own culture's music. Learning how to mambo has allowed Priscilla to affirm her cultural ties as a Latina. When you work for an investment banking company run by white males, she says, that's a critical thing to be able to do.

Mambo (or salsa) is at a fascinating crossroads. On the one hand, new converts have revived the dance in the U.S. About 70 percent of Eddie's classes are composed of non-Latinos, he says, who come from as far away as Europe and Japan. They help fill the dance clubs every night in cities like Miami, Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York.

On the other hand, salsa music hasn't exactly "crossed over." Even the most popular albums sell peanuts by mainstream standards. One recent example is Ry Cooder's 1997 "Buena Vista Social Club," a Grammy-winning collaboration with older Cuban musicians which has sold less than half a million copies in the U.S. Bruce Polin, who runs Descarga, a comprehensive Latin mail-order music catalog in Brooklyn, says that "100,000 units is big in Latin music, and 500,000 units is really big." But not exactly mainstream.

What this means for Eddie (and for dozens of Latino dancers and musicians like him) is that gigs are scarce and often poorly paid. Eddie's two professional dance companies are tiny, and all his dancers have to work day jobs to make ends meet. But Eddie has big dreams: He'd like to put an authentic mambo show on Broadway or in a major film. To date, Hollywood just hasn't been very accurate when it comes to portraying things Latin.

Earlier this year, Disney held a mambo marathon contest in New York

to promote the video release of their movie, *Flubber*. There's a dance sequence in the middle of the film that Disney calls a mambo. As charming as it is to see bits of green goo doing a dance number, we're not talking about real mambo. "I think producers are afraid that if they show the American public the rawness of this dance, it's not going to be successful. But I think they're missing the mark," says Eddie. "The American public wants to see the nitty gritty."

But what would that do for mambo? What if it were to be seized on as the Next Big Thing? At the moment, it's thriving in its own little niche, with devoted dancers and musicians huddling around its flame. There isn't an art form in the world that's completely noncommercial, of course, but as yet it hasn't gotten as co-opted as grunge, hip-hop, punk, or anything else smacking of "alternative." It's possible that mambo's time is coming. But maybe, just maybe, the current state of benign neglect is a blessing. Because that way, the art form can't be dumbed-down and exploited by "Entertainment, Inc." That way, it stays firmly in the hands (and hips) of its devotees.

Al fantasizes about forming a mambo marching band that would travel the world. A group like that, he feels, could do more than just dance: It could create peace on earth. Instead of just sending troops into troubled areas, says Al, the U.S. Defense Department and the United Nations should send in a mambo band. Because when you're dancing, you can't really hate anybody.

Al admits that his wife, from whom he is separated, thinks he's crazy. But that's not stopping him. "I wouldn't be surprised if before the turn of the millennium, I abandon my apartment and my possessions, strap on a backpack and tuba, and start doing it," he says. He wants to literally walk around the world: down the East coast and the gulf coast of Mexico, around the tip of South America, up the West coast, on to Alaska, across the Aleutian islands to Russia, and all the way back again. "I guess some would call it a cult," he says.

I call it commercial-free mambo. And I've told Al I'll be dancing right beside him.