



PHOTO BY ERIKA SANABRIA

El Cantante

A Houston attorney-dance instructor puts his own spin on salsa dancing.

INTERVIEW BY ERIC QUITUGUA

Since the early 1990s, Michael Whitmire has been a unique ambassador for salsa dancing—doing it socially, performing in dozens of exhibitions, and teaching it to others. He’s become an expert in a group style known as “rueda,” in which couples form circles and trade partners. Drawing from his experience with salsa and other dance forms, he became an instructor, starting his own program, SALSA GRANDE. In Spanish, “cantante” means “singer,” but in a rueda, it is the person calling the moves and directing the dancers. At SALSA GRANDE, Whitmire calls for musicality and fun over complexity.

Houston attorney Michael Whitmire started his own dance program, SALSA GRANDE, helping turn H-Town into a salsa city. Here he is dancing at South Texas College of Law Houston, where he is also an adjunct professor.

How did you get started dancing? Where did your interest in salsa come from?

I have a vivid memory of being in Houston in the fall of 1993 and attending dinner with a group of young Hispanic lawyers at a Doneraki Mexican restaurant. A couple of ladies in the group wanted to go to a salsa club afterward, so I tagged along to a place called Extasis. I've lost touch with the attorney, but she walked me to a corner of the club, showed me some simple steps, and basically sent me down a road that I didn't imagine would become such a big part of my life.

What is it about the music that makes it so fun to dance to?

"Salsa" the condiment is a spicy mixture, and so is "salsa" as a musical genre. The music that we currently describe with the word "salsa" is rooted in traditional rhythms from Cuba, and those rhythms came from an even older mix of rhythms from the African slaves and the Spanish colonizers. When Cuban and Puerto Rican rhythms were further mixed with jazz in New York City, eventually the world became blessed in the late 1960s and 1970s with the modern version of salsa music. The best salsa songs have great energy that comes from a long rhythmical/cultural heritage, a blend of many instruments, and lots of passion in the vocals. So, there's usually something in salsa music that *feels* familiar to a wide variety of listeners at a primal level, even when they don't actually understand the lyrics.

When did you begin giving lessons on dancing and how did it begin?

In late 2000, I became part of a studio's performance/exhibition team. Eventually, the instructor asked me to teach an hour-long salsa class once or twice each week, which I started in 2007 and continued through 2012. During that time, I began to choreograph stage routines. My first full choreographed routine was performed at the Wortham Theater Center in downtown Houston in 2009, and I've choreographed many others since then. I left that studio in 2012 to start my own dance program, SALSA GRANDE. We've had five appearances on local TV, a couple of successful performances in California, and dozens of other performances in the greater Houston area. Now I focus on private lessons and periodic workshops, rather than weekly classes, although I may return to weekly dance classes at some point.

Do you get people in your classes who are really shy about dancing? How do you get them comfortable and confident on the dance floor?

It's common to have someone who was encouraged (i.e., dragged into class) by a friend or significant other, despite never having danced in public in his or her life. I try my best to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere for the class generally, and if students can't guess that I wasn't born into salsa culture just by looking at me, then I tell them. So, I become "Exhibit A" as someone who (1) didn't learn salsa dancing until becoming an adult and (2) isn't a native Spanish speaker. Then I break down the moves into easily understood chunks for

both leaders and followers. I'll always include some discussion of how to handle real-world dance situations and dance floor etiquette. My classes/workshops involve a balance of dancing to the music plus talking about ways to increase your success on the dance floor.

Have you thrown in your own personal touch to the salsa dance regimen?

I'd like to think so. From a teaching perspective, I do my best to make the dance accessible to people who may be intimidated by the complexity of the music, who can't understand Spanish lyrics, who are nervous about interacting with a person on the dance floor, or who fear that bystanders are laughing at them. From a dance perspective, I place a heavy emphasis on musicality, i.e., trying to express the nuances in the music, rather than merely stringing together fancy moves that aren't connected to a song's flow beyond just the metronome aspect of counting 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8.

Who are your go-to bands/artists for lessons?

My first priority for music is the appropriate rhythm for the level of students, so I don't focus on specific bands or singers. For beginners, I use songs with a slow-to-moderate tempo and a very clear downbeat. As the dancers increase their skill level, then I'll include faster songs to challenge them physically, plus a more complex beat to challenge their ears. Of course, regardless of the speed, I also have to pick songs that I don't mind listening to when they're repeated over and over and over.

Any favorite rueda moves?

I personally like moves that have the men spin and moves where the full circle has to physically interact (such as holding hands or switching partners), rather than each couple simply doing a synchronized move independently for several eight-counts of music. My philosophy is that I can always do complex moves with a single partner, but the rueda format is the chance to do moves that I can't do with only one person, so I want to take advantage of that unique opportunity.

Why salsa?

It allows me to blend almost everything I've learned about musical structure, dance movements, and human interaction. I can point to specific aspects of my salsa dancing to my past experience with break dancing, swing dancing, tango dancing, and just grooving to Top 40 hits. I can incorporate musical understanding from learning to play a plastic recorder in seventh grade, a classical music course in college, and years of listening to jazz. I can incorporate aspects of human interaction learned from relationships (both successes and failures) or from playing sports when it comes to motivation and/or teamwork for a group of rueda dancers. I can use dance techniques from watching Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Michael Jackson, and a host of other dancers ranging from the famous to the unknown. Honestly, at this point in human history, it's difficult to do something that *nobody* has ever done before, so even the greatest dancers constantly "borrow" from other people preceding them. **TBJ**