



# Salsa to Hustle



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You may have seen her in the Broadway Show "Swing" or teaching or performing at some of the Swing or Hustle dance events; even a country event or two. Her passion is Hustle, but even the Salsa world is familiar with the name Maria Torres.

*By Charlie Moore*



In July of 2001 Puerto Rico hosted the first ever World Salsa Congress. The organizer flew in Torres to be a consultant and to do exhibitions. "I couldn't believe how much the people there knew about me," confesses Torres. "I had a lot of fans that I didn't know I had. Here in the states I feel like a regular person but there I was kind of famous." This past July they actually held the first World Salsa Dance Championships and Torres reports that there were several thousand dancers on hand in an auditorium to watch and compete. "They even had corporate sponsors like Heineken and the government too. It was held at Roberto Clemente Coliseum that holds 10,000 people. Even the Mayor was there and that is a really big thing," explains Torres.

This being the first competition event, the organizers had Torres help with setting up the competition and judging criteria. "I love the freedom they had," she says. "They danced on the one, the two, even the three, but no one cared. It was all about the dance and a dance that is part of Latin culture. Everyone was good, but the Europeans were the best. They could hear the clave better than the Puerto Ricans."

Her parents taught her to dance before she was 5 years old. They called it Latin dancing, not salsa, or mambo, just Latin. "They did a kind of sway thing that had a side rock and a forward or back rock and was just straight time of 1,2,3,4. It wasn't syncopated. My father was a musician and played the conga, clave, and bongos. He would start a rat tat tat on the bongos and we would dance," she explains. Her mother told her about the first time she performed. She was only a year old.

"My mom got distracted with my sister as we were both really little and when she looked around I was gone. Mom became frantic and

started searching the boardwalk and all of a sudden she heard all this laughter and applause coming from a bar. She went in and there I was, up on the bar, dancing and wiggling around to the music." From then on she was showbiz bound.

Torres has her own style of dancing that she calls Latin Jazz which combines formal Jazz and Ballet training with Latin and Ballroom. At twelve she had formal training with Alvin Ailey under the Menscoff Theater at 45th and Broadway in New York City. She would sneak away to take lessons on weekends and they really couldn't afford much at that time. Her

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mother wanted her to be a doctor as there was no money in dancing. "My mother told me that because of the color of my skin, it would not be easy to make it as a dancer. I couldn't just be good, I had to be "the best" or I didn't stand a chance." Torres did major in Physical Therapy in college and then did Occupational Therapy, dance therapy, where she worked dance in for children with Autism or Cerebral Palsey. "It was really depressing as we even worked with abused children with Autism," she explains. "I just couldn't take it so I decided to become a dancer."

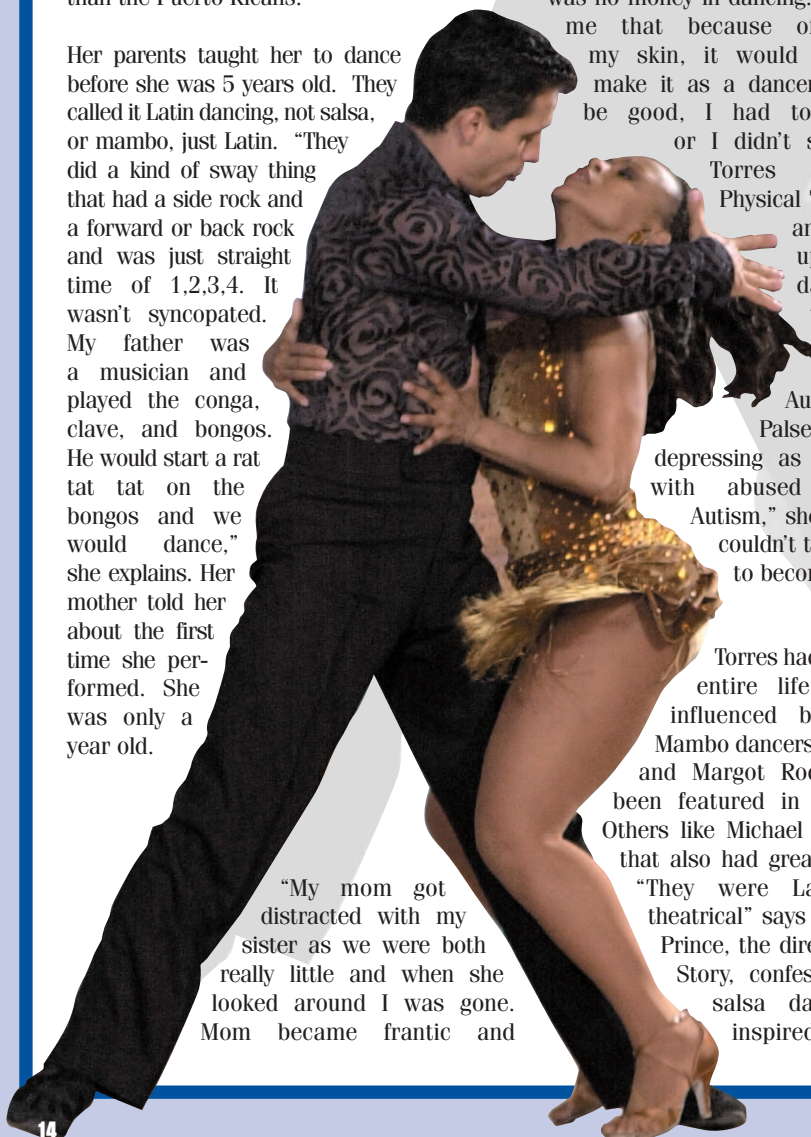
Torres had been dancing her entire life and had been influenced by the Paladium Mambo dancers. People like Augie and Margot Rodriguez that had been featured in "Life Magazine." Others like Michael and Elita Terrace that also had great Latin technique. "They were Latin, and really theatrical" says Torres. "Even Hal Prince, the director of West Side Story, confessed that the big salsa dance scene was inspired by Augie and

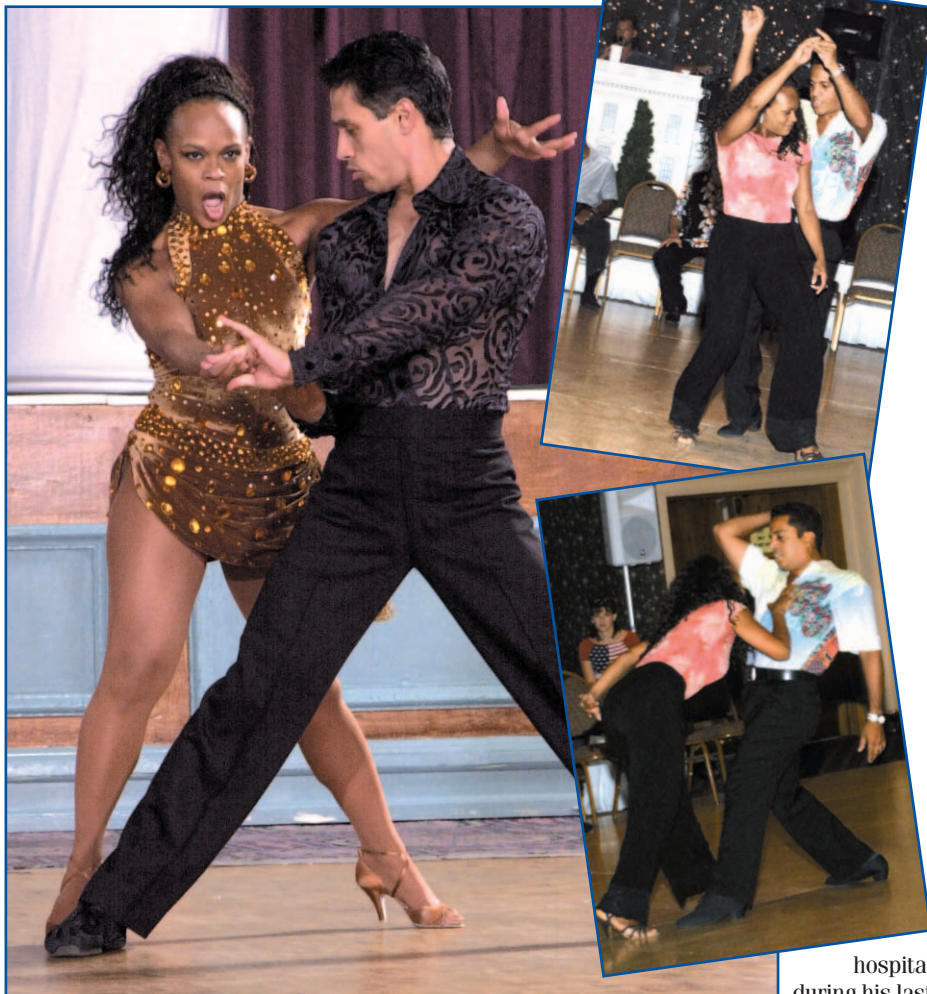
Margot who were asked to do the part but were too busy doing appearances on the Ed Sullivan show or opening for acts like Sammy Davis Jr.

Starting to compete at 15 years old, Torres danced Hustle at the world famous Harvest Moon Ball with partner Melvin Scurry. Being one of 200 couples at Roseland in New York vying for a spot in the finals was scary to say the least. It was their goal just to make it to the top 25 that they took to the finals. "I was so nervous" says Maria. "We were just one of the crowd and I told Melvin that we didn't have a chance. We were like number 115 or something so we had to wait through a lot of heats before we danced. Well, they finally called our heat and I was having trouble even standing in the 4" heels let alone heading to that big floor. We were half way through our dance when I slipped on a heel and fell into a Chinese split on the floor. My partner just scooped me up and we finished the dance to a roar from the crowd. That split helped us make it to the finals so we just added it to our routine."

Hustle was booming and so were the hot dancers in New York that were making their names on television during the Disco craze. Two of the hottest couples of the day were Eddie Vega and Lourdes Jones and Billy Fajardo and Sandra Rivera. "Billy was a disciple of Augie and Margot and brought theatrical movement and style to Hustle", she remembers. Eddie at age 12 and Lourdes age 11 started doing Latin and Hustle in a dance troupe the Latin Symbolics directed by George Vascone who loved to help kids channel their energy into something positive - dance. From that early start he kept moving and grooving. "Eddie was part of Billy Fajardo's dance team, Disco Dance Dimensions", says Torres. "I call Eddie the Barishnikov of Hustle. He was an innovator. He would see a move or a concept and push it to the edge. Plus, he could learn anything by just watching. He didn't have any formal training but I remember him telling me he took his first tap class and he showed me what he learned. It was like a time step or something.... The guy could just do anything the first time." Eddie was the inspiration for Maria to keep on Hustling.

Torres met partner Arte Phillips at Roseland and really started to dance. Arte got Maria into ballroom and Latin and they started to become a hot partnership. Fred Astaire studio sponsored them all the way to Rising Star Champions. But, what her mom had told her growing up came back to haunt them. They were told that a racially mixed team would not get very far in the Ballroom





competition world. "They tried to tell us that we both needed to get a "suitable" partner," said Maria. "You know what "suitable" meant". It was for that reason that when Artie and Maria stopped dancing together Artie went off and started to work on Broadway and left the prejudiced Ballroom world behind.

Maria was told by her friend Rufus Dustin that the color of her skin would force her to be "better than anyone else" or she wouldn't get anywhere, echoing the words of her mother years earlier. "I wasn't going to use that as a crutch. To me it was a challenge." She says. She stopped competing and left the circuit for almost 10 years. Then she came back with a vengeance inspired by Eddie Vega. She started competing in International Latin with Steven Stroud from the UK and also did exhibitions with Eddie in the Hustle circuit. Eddie then became partnered with Lourdes and they won a couple of shows on Star Search. The next year (1989) he partnered with Lisa Nunziella and went undefeated on the show winning \$100,000. "Eddie was always an inspiration to me", says Maria. "I was literally crushed when I found out he had aids." Eddie died in 1992 and Torres was visiting him in the

hospital during his last week when he calmly asked her to take care of some kids he had taken under his wing. "You are the only one that can do it Maria", said Eddie. "You are the glue that will keep everyone together." The next day he passed.

Torres was still grieving when she was invited to Switzerland for the first International Hustle competition. She asked another friend of Eddie's, Kenny Gonzales and they went in "Eddie's memory". Before the contest they were anxiously waiting backstage and decided to pray, remembering Eddie. Maria was wearing what she calls her "Eve" outfit that was mostly sheer and skin with fabric like fig leaves covering not too much of her curvaceous figure. Over the outfit she wore a full length cape to keep her outfit covered, but before praying she removed the cape and suddenly the room was flooded with flash bulbs popping and people gasping as to them she was instantly a "naked lady". This would come back to her later, but now it was time for the contest and she and Kenny who even carried a picture of Eddie in his pocket, went on to win this International championship in what they called in Europe - Disco Fox in memory of Eddie Vega. "I guess I was in a daze at the airport when the lady at the ticket counter

said.... "Are you the naked lady?" and she showed me the front page of a Swiss newspaper proclaiming "Naked Lady wins Disco Fox" and it was a picture of me!" she exclaims. "All the way home we kept Eddie's picture on the trophy we had just won. He was with us."

This experience really moved Torres. Her goal from that day on was to put Hustle back on the map. To put the people together again that had made it famous in the wake of Saturday Night Fever. Maria and Kenny danced at the Feather Awards and Deborah Hampton saw her and told her about the US Open. She competed there in her very "controversial" costume and again met with Deborah, telling her that she wanted to do something, like an event or competition to keep the memory of Eddie alive. "Let's do it", said Deborah and they started planning their now famous big daddy event of all Hustle events "Hustle USA". The first one was in 1995 and brought back some of the dancers that were there in the beginning, the birth of Hustle. Billy Fajardo, Arte Phillips, and all the oldies of the day were invited and added to the genuine feel of the event which is dedicated to Eddie Vega. Her mission was to give integrity and respect for a dance that inspired her - Hustle. Now Hustle USA is the top event of it's kind in the USA and is leading to the birth of a Hustle dance circuit including Disco America, Pacific Coast Hustle Championships, International Hustle and Salsa, and of course Hustle USA with more to come. Hustle USA is held each September at the Sheraton Meadowlands in New Jersey just outside of New York City. Come and enjoy the fun with a flair for tradition..... who ever said Disco ever died? Certainly Hustle USA is a tribute to the late great Eddie Vega and then inspiration he gave to dancers everywhere. Please visit [www.hustleusa.com](http://www.hustleusa.com) for details.

Maria Torres has been busy since her debut in the Broadway musical "Swing" three years ago. She was the choreographer of Enrique Iglesias' video "Bailamos" that appeared on MTV. Torres also choreographed the 1st US appearance of Mr "Mambo Number Five" Lou Vega in his appearance on NBC. She also has been working Off Broadway by choreographing "The Donkey Show" based on "A Mid Summer Nights Dream". She also did the Off Broadway smash "The Four Guys Named Jose" the first bilingual musical comedy produced by Enrique Iglesias. It was nominated for the Lucille Lortel for best Choreography, which is like a Tony award for Off Broadway shows. Her schedule is quite full as she also has two new projects in the works. Even one based on her life story.