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The Dad as Social Dancer

A dance major finds out how her dad followed the music to add meaning to his life

by Ebett Cruz

My father loves to dance. This is a man who would wake me up at 6:30 a.m. to go to school, and the first thing he would do is lead me in a salsa routine to a song probably sung by Frankie Ruiz. I have vivid memories of me being half awake in the morning, my dad holding a toothbrush in his right hand and leading me with his left.

I am a product of the 90s Latin dance club scenes in south Los Angeles—and also a product of two people who found love at a Cumbia & Salsa club in Paramount CA called El Conejo Blanco. My mom was one of the lead singers at the club and my father never missed a weekend to dance, knowing my mom would be there. I grew up knowing that music and dance were the force that connected my parents. Although my father had some formal training here and there, he was primarily a social dancer. In his narrative, the word “social” in social dance is not used lightly. Interviewing him told me more about his social life in his early adulthood, and what dance meant to him.

My dad, Luis Cruz, was heavily present in the South L.A. Latin music club scene his early twenties, but he says he was only ten years old when he felt that dance was a part of him. “I know it sounds kind of weird to feel like dance is a part of your identity at such a young age,” he says, “and it’s not like I was an amazing dancer by the age of ten, but I felt more of a connection to music by that time.” Not surprisingly, when I asked my dad what determined the choice of club he attended—the music or what people were there—he responds without hesitation: “The music! I didn’t get too attached to people, because you come across so many people at the club who you will probably not make personal connections with. So for me, it was always an interest in the type of music they were playing.”

My father’s experience supports the research of researcher Nolan Gasser, author of *Why you love it: The Science and Culture of Musical Taste*. Gasser says that as infants we develop the ability to connect to “the syntax of any musical style” in a process called inculturation. In that process, infants can recognize when music is out of context. This is important because in our adolescence and early adulthood, the music we listen to helps us form our own identity because it is tied to specific memories in time (Schaffel 3).

Now that I understood that the music came first for my dad, I wondered how dancing was connected to the music. He rarely if ever danced alone at the clubs, saying that “it was rare to see someone dance alone,” so his dance experiences are often shared ones. I asked him what made a good empathetic connection between himself and his dance partner? What was the difference between staying with his partner for a few songs or leaving them after the first? My dad laughed at this question, because he knew this curiosity came out of my own experiences of being left after one song at the club. He said, “They had to be not too stiff, not afraid to mess up, and someone who felt the music.” This lack of desire to continue dancing with a partner who might be “too afraid” might be explained by the research of dance scholar Andrew J. Corsa, who studied connections between people in the pandemic, concluding that there is no stronger

empathetic connection than the ones that occur face to face. In his article “Kinesthetic Empathy, Dance and Technology,” Corsa says that an audience imitates the emotional experience embodied by the dancer’s movement. In my father’s case, he would be the audience who sees tension in his partner and takes on the same emotion—resulting in a desire not to keep repeating that experience with a particular dance partner.

It’s been a while since my dad has experienced tension or discomfort between himself and his dancing partner, mainly because he’s settled down with his lifelong dance partner but also because the pandemic has inevitably stalled his opportunities to go out. Still, my dad’s facebook feed is filled with bachata dance videos that he’ll frequently show me. I wonder if this is my father’s way of keeping his connection with dance despite the time when no one could gather at a club. Did his facebook feed have as many dance videos before the pandemic? According to my father, experiencing dance virtually makes you focus on the moves, the physical ability and impressiveness of the movement. “In the clubs,” he explains, “I pay more attention to how a dancer is feeling the music no matter how fast or skilled they are on their feet.” When he said that, it occurred to me that this might be proven by Hume's claim that “we are more likely to associate with objects that are close in distance” (qtd in Corsa, 12). Essentially, this idea explains that we are more likely to empathize with someone when they are closer to us in proximity. Perhaps, people who showcase their dancing on social media feel the need to compensate for the lack of proximal connection to the audience with flashy movements that can grab and keep your attention. In many ways, social media stays alive by selling us an idea of our greatest desires, the most expensive clothes, the traveling lifestyle, etc. Could it be that social dance on social media has fallen into this space where dance must rely on flashy movement to stay alive, rather than authentic connection?

My father speaks of dancing in the clubs in his twenties with so much laughter and disclosure because his journey with dance is always filled with stories of love, flirtatiousness, troublemaking, and carelessness. At the age of 50, where does dance exist in his life now? Dance was never something he tried to pursue professionally. He learned at the clubs, and when he did take lessons, he appreciated the knowledge, but it imposed hyper-awareness and self-consciousness. Today, he says, “I have been focusing on different things like moving to the new house, which has required me to work more. I don't have as much time to go out, but when I dance, it is a release, it’s a good distraction.” I realized here that dance exists in my dad’s life as therapy today. In his past life it existed as a social mechanism, a romantic mechanism, but when he does find the time to do it today, it is his therapy.

Works Cited:

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