

When Mambo was King!

In the late 1940s, Perez Prado came up with the dance for the mambo music and became the first person to market his music as "mambo", meaning "conversation with the gods" in the Kongo language, spoken by Congolese. After Havana, Prado moved his music to Mexico, where his music and the dance was adopted. The original mambo dance was characterized by freedom and complicated foot-steps.

In the 1950s, various publications in New York City began to run articles on an emerging "mambo revolution" in music and dance. Recording companies began to use mambo to label their records and advertisements for mambo dance lessons were in local newspapers. New York City had made mambo a transnational popular cultural phenomenon. By the mid-1950s, mambo mania had reached fever pitch. In New York, the mambo was played in a high-strung, sophisticated way that had the Palladium Ballroom jumping. The Ballroom soon proclaimed itself the "temple of mambo", for the city's best dancers—the Mambo Aces, "Killer Joe" Piro, Augie and Margo Rodriguez, Paulito and Lilon, Louie Maquina and Pedro "Cuban Pete" Aguilar—gave mambo demonstrations there and made a reputation for their expressive use of arms, legs, head and hands. Augie and Margo were still dancing 50 years later (2006) in Las Vegas.

Some of New York's biggest mambo dancers and bands of the 1950s included: Augie & Margo, Michael Terrace & Elita, Carmen Cruz & Gene Ortiz, Larry Selon & Vera Rodríguez, Mambo Aces (Anibal Vasquez and Samson Batalla), among others.

The mambo dance that was invented by Perez Prado and was popular in the 1940s and 50s in Cuba, Mexico City, and New York is completely different from the modern dance that New Yorkers now call 'mambo' and which is also known as salsa "on 2". The Cuban dance was not accepted by many professional dance teachers. Cuban dancers would describe mambo as "feeling the music", in which sound and movement were merged through the body. Professional US dance teachers saw this as "extreme," "undisciplined," and thus, deemed it necessary to standardize the dance to present it as a salable commodity for the social and ballroom market.

The modern mambo dance from New York was popularized in the late 1960s into the 1970s by George Vascones, who continued the mambo dance tradition which started two decades earlier (Palladium era). It was followed in the 1980s by Eddie Torres, Angel Rodriguez, and others, many of whom were 2nd generation New York Puerto Ricans. This style is sometimes danced to mambo music, but more often to salsa dura (old-school salsa). [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mambo>]

