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Street scene gets deliciously dirty

Since Johnny rescued Baby from the corner and Ricky started shaking his bonbons, more and more people are seeking some of that salsa sensuality

WORDS

Malcolm Rock

PICTURES

Paul Loughnan

SOMEWHERE between a salsa basic, cucaracha, cross-body and sombrero turn, Gabby Torrise and Frank Barbagallo fell in love.

The pair met in 1999 at the Bullring, a popular Melbourne Latin dance venue, and were married this year.

The Bullring is long gone, but the dance and romance remain, with the couple making a living teaching wannabe Latinos street salsa sensuality.

"Until now street salsa has been very underground," Torrise says.

"But it's coming out of dark, dingy clubs and into mainstream culture."

Torrise, who with her husband runs Melbourne Salsa at BluPols in Prahran, says interest in street Latin is soaring, thanks to recent media attention.

"There are so many dancing TV programs at the moment, and films and shows like *Dirty Dancing*," she says. "Everyone wants a piece of the action."

She says a Melbourne Salsa evening event in June had more than 1300 people shimmy through the doors, less than a third of them of Latin background.

"The turn-up is mixed ethnically (and) we have lots of young people aged 20 to 35."

The Sicilian-born newlywed says she took up dancing aged 26 and immediately fell for Melbourne's Fitzroy-concentrated Latin scene.

At the time, her husband-to-be was a dancer and theatre artist equally new to hot-blooded hip-grinding.

"We both wanted to be part of the Latin scene and hit it off straight away," Torrise says.

"We went overseas and took dance courses in Cuba and Puerto Rico and life has never been the same since.

"If I have children, I'm sure they'll be little salsa dancers."

Fabio and Gilsun Isik, who run City Salsa Club at Punt Rd's Coppin Hall, are well on their way to forging the next generation of salsa specialists.

"We've had at least five couples get together during our dance classes," Isik says.

"Some have married and are having what Gilsun calls City Salsa Club babies."

A former ballroom dancer, Isik has been teaching street Latin for more than 12 years.

"I've been dancing for as long as I can remember," he says.

"My father was a guitarist and my mother was encouraging."

He says he left the ballroom world after growing weary of its competitive aspect.

"Street Latin is social and not regimented and can be danced in many different places."

Born in Melbourne, but of South American descent, Isik met his professional and personal partner Gilsun during a visit to Sydney.

Together the pair have run City Salsa Club for five years.

"She had no dancing experience when we met and would do beginners and social dancing while I taught," Isik reminisces.

He credits the dance form's recent popularity to hype surrounding the likes of Ricky Martin, Mark Anthony and Jennifer Lopez.

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Leader
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From the Bullring to the altar, Gabby Torrise and Frank Barbagallo are dancing their way through life together.

N15MP601

“It’s one of only a few forms of dance that is supported by a really strong social scene . . . you’ll find a Latin salsa bar in every city of the world

– Gabby Torrise

“(Street Latin) was always in the background, but they brought it forward,” he says.

“And then, when you see someone like Pauline Hanson dancing on television (in *Dancing With The Stars*), people begin to realise it’s achievable.”

With many venues across Melbourne catering for social street-Latin enthusiasts, Isik says that by dancing once or twice a week, a beginner can reach a competent level within six months.

“After three months things start falling into place,” he says.

“Within six most people are able to approach an advanced student and have a great dance.”

But Torrise says it is important to realise there is more to street Latin than just attending classes.

“The whole point of classes is so you can show what you’ve learnt at a funky Latin bar,” she says.

“It’s one of only a few forms of dance that

is supported by a really strong social scene . . . you’ll find a Latin salsa bar in every city of the world.

“Where else can a guy ask a girl to dance and she jumps at the chance?”

» Dance classes in Prahran happen on Tuesdays from 7pm at Coppin Hall, 313 Punt Rd, and Thursdays from 7.30pm at BluPols, 142 Greville St. Salsa can also be found in South Yarra at Lotus Bar, 172 Toorak Rd, every Wednesday from 8.30pm



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Marcus Graham at Hoyts Chadstone

Visit Hoyts Chadstone on Tues 8 Nov at 8.30pm for an advanced screening of *Josh Jarman*, all tickets just \$7, and meet Australian actor Marcus Graham and writer/director Pip Mushin. The Australian comedy, also starring Kym Gyngell, tells of a man driven by passion and integrity.

Kostya Tszu Fighting in the ABC Corner

Meet Australian boxing legend, Kostya Tszu, at the ABC Shop Chadstone on Thurs 10 Nov from 7.30pm. He will be signing copies of his paperback, *Kostya: From Russia With Gloves*, offering fans an intimate insight into his life.

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