



Excerpt from:

Dancing Feat: One Man's Mission to Dance Like a Colombian

by Neil Bennion

All four windows are wound-down partway, blasting me with lukewarm air. It dilutes the smells of the vehicle's interior: that of gasoline, aged-dustiness and the worn-out faux-leather seats that I'm sliding about on. I'm in Latin America alright – I could tell that with my eyes closed. Especially since I've just taken a flight there.

In the distance, a green chain of mountains rears up, corpulent and wrinkled; giant white loofahs in the sky for company. Somewhere between us and the mountains lies the city; behind us the airport is already just a memory.

We whistle along the concrete-sectioned highway, the radio filling the air with local rhythms. Some songs burst with rapid-fire beat clusters, whilst others are more lilting and gentle. Some sound bouncy and poppy, whilst others are slow and romantic. I can even tell some of them are cheesy, despite most of the lyrics being beyond the grasp of my so-so Spanish. What I can't tell about any of the tracks is what type of music they are. They all just sound 'Latin'.

I adore music, which makes it all the more frustrating not being able to dance. You hear some music you love, and you feel that deep urge within to just... do... something. But for me this is where it all falls apart. I lack even the most basic vocabulary required for the interaction – I'm like a Labrador trying to discuss semiotics. So the great music plays on, and I just standing there barking. No, really.

A major part of this problem is the style of dancing I've grown up with. My parents, and their parents before them, used to go out and dance 'with' each other, which translated to some kind of physical contact. But I've grown up with the idea that dancing 'with' somebody else really means dancing 'at' them.

I feel like my generation has been kind of cheated: the only chance you have of a developing a real connection is by copying each other's actions, which can only be done ironically, or perhaps throwing in the odd wrestling hold. Okay, you can also make eye contact, though strangely enough women don't tend to give me much of that when I'm dancing.

So it would be great to learn how to dance properly.

That said, if I never managed it, it wouldn't be the end of the world, would it? In fact, it's entirely possible that I could just carry through my life as many other Englishmen have done, without ever learning to distinguish myself in that respect.

But there's another issue – I don't drink. It's been four years since I stopped – a consequence of a health problem I developed.

At first it was hellish. It was only when it was taken away that I realised how deeply ingrained alcohol had been into my life. Parties, dates and dinners; Birthdays, weddings and barbecues; Bonding with my dad; Watching sport; Lying in the gutter mumbling incoherently – every social activity, big or small, had alcohol at its core. And every single one was now awkward.

Even the pub, so long an amber-toned refuge from the harshness of life, was transformed into a land of sodden beer mats and shouty people. Whilst nightclubs suddenly seemed pointless.

But you can get used to pretty much anything given enough time. I became comfortable – happy even – going out at night, weaving non-judgementally around the pavement vomit of Manchester, giving the staggerers and fight-starters a respectful distance.

More than just getting used to it, I began to flourish. Not drinking forced me to seek out all sorts of alternatives to fill the vacated space. I learnt how to meditate and I learnt how to massage (well, how to pay for a massage). I took a greater interest in cultural events, cinema and scientific scepticism. I found myself seeking new and interesting things to do of an evening instead of always reaching for a glass. In short, it enriched me.

But despite all I've gained, there is still something missing from my evenings. Out-and-out, mind-blowing hedonism is probably always going to be out of reach, but I need something else. I need a way of letting go. I need fun, excitement and anticipation. I need a focus for the evening other than

just the repeated pouring of liquids in the general direction of the oesophagus.

None of the alternatives I've tried have matched up. Joining language clubs, going bowling, stealing cars – they're all good social activities, but none of them quite hits the mark. And there are only so many games of naked Twister you can propose before people stop answering your calls.

And that's where we come back to dance. For here is an activity which allows people to reach great heights of self-expression and make them feel alive. An activity which, at its extreme, is nothing less than an exploration of ecstasy and a baring of the soul, yet which can be done casually with friends, too.

(You're right, that's begging for a joke.)

It's something that's actually good for you if you know what you're doing, and something which previous girlfriends have complained I couldn't do properly. Something that doing in a state of sobriety seems like madness (indeed there are those who claim they've never done it sober).

(Okay, I'll stop now.)

I need dance in my life.

There's another potential upside to this. Due to a mixture of incompetence, too much time at the writing desk and the side-effects of not drinking, I've somehow found myself in my mid-thirties and without a woman in my life to call my long-term partner. It's disappointing – I thought I'd have been trapped in a loveless marriage for years by now.

Dance seems like a great way for men to meet women. Not least because if we've agreed to clasp onto each other for three to five minutes then at least I've got some kind of a sales window. Actually forget meeting women – I'm just going to use it to sell conservatories to strangers.

Back in the here and now, the cityscape at the base of the mountains begins to loom, and soon we're on its fringes, joined at a distance by commercial new-builds and modern apartment blocks. The scent of cut grass blows in from well-maintained reservations – the smell of investment – and soon we've reached the outer limits of a spanking-new guided bus system.

Spanish is everywhere, streaming out of the radio, directing traffic and selling products. Not that it's always necessary: as the road changes from highway to street, shops appear with images of their wares hand-painted directly on the wall. Hardware stores have images of hammers and bed shops have images of beds. I wonder what they paint on the outside of brothels.

I saw a lot of this kind of thing (hand-painted signs more than brothels) on my previous journey to Latin America, so I know this is quite normal here.

I must admit, though, I'm still seduced by the idea we are sold in the UK of what Latin America, or at least Latin spirit, looks like. I'm thinking specifically of those white rum adverts with their compelling narratives of open-air partying and sultry Latin *chicas*. But then I've seen some of the reality of nights out in this part of the world, too, and it's still pretty impressive.

I've stood periscope-like on a dance floor full of Bolivians wondering how they all just seemed to know what to do – public information films, perhaps? I've been to bars in South America and seen even the stiffest-looking office worker soften their shoulders at the merest hint of Latin music and begin casually gyrating where they stood. And I've seen dancing on the Caribbean coast of Central America that looked closer to sex than, well, sex.

But some countries have stronger dance cultures than others. Indeed, there's one in particular that I've heard a lot about over the years – a country that would probably be famous for its dance and music were it not famous for other things first. It's a country whose reputation precedes it. It's also a country I've never been to. Until today, that is.

The taxi driver has his seat pushed right forward to compensate for his own lack of height, creating masses of space in front of me and making him look really eager. I'm willing to bet he could not only name every type of music coming out of his radio, but could also dance to each one of them without a second thought, too.

The traffic thickens and the buildings begin to close in and rise up. Some look only a few decades old, but are already beyond tired, whilst others, I'm guessing from the 1920s and 30s, have a semi-modern elegance, redolent of rolodexes and yellowing memos. They're not ancient, but they've certainly been around a while.

Not unlike myself, really. I'm still relatively young, but time is marching on. The years are speeding up. Blink and I'll be 40 (I don't know what'll happen if I wink). At some point you start to realise that all those things that you thought you would get round to at some point ... well you really

might want to start getting round to them. And dance is one of those things.

I've put this off far too long already. I don't want to dance self-consciously anymore, nor over-expressively. I don't want to dance any variation on a theme of 'twat'. I want to dance well. I want people to look at me and say "He might be a twat in many and varied ways, but you wouldn't know it to watch him dance."

I want to be able to dance *with* a partner instead of *at* her; to share that thing; to connect in that way. I want to be able to say "Shall we dance" without an unsaid "individually, but relatively near" appended to the end.

I want women to be attracted to the way I dance; to find it appealing; to smile at me out of a sense of connection rather than pity. I don't want to be a solitary old man, sat all alone growing more and more right wing. I want to grow more and more right wing with someone I love.

I want a way of socialising with people beyond just a shared inability to form coherent sentences. I want something to look forward to at weekends; a reason to get out from behind my writing desk; a way of letting go and actually having some fun.

I want to have the guts to get on the dance floor at all, instead of having a dance confidence that's so brittle that I'd rather pretend to be deaf and charge out of the club under instruction from my younger sister than actually lay some moves down.

I want to be able to dance, dammit. That's where I'm at. Is that really too much to ask?

The rough green fabric of the mountains is closing in now, the city gently rising on its hem. We're nearly there. The driver takes a turn crosstown and the buildings take a turn for the historic. Squat, colonial-style edifices with rendered walls and red roof tiles suddenly dominate. They look like a mashed-up packet of crayons: bright green with pink mouldings; orange with blue mouldings; yellow with red mouldings. Back home, if you painted your house a bright colour you'd be considered an idiot. Here, you could be as expressive as you like and you'd be lucky if anyone noticed.

As for my own expressive shortcomings, if I'm going to address them then I want to do it properly. You can take dance classes everywhere these days. But I have a need for adventure to fulfil, too. Travel is in my blood (and, as a result, parasites are often in my intestines). I need to move, explore, discover; to go to places that excite me; to yield to that part of the soul that can only be sated by having one's photo taken in front of foreign landmarks.

The thought of taking the odd class once a week with – I don't know – 'Salsa Dave' doesn't inspire or motivate me. Forget the substitute: I want to go straight to the source.

I want a piece of the life that rum adverts push – a real slice of hot Latin action. I want to go where rhythm is in the blood, where the street is a dance floor, and where you can get into trouble for the ownership of powdered milk (like British politician Michael Fabricant).

I want to go to a place I've never been before, in search of something I've never had.

I want to dance like a Colombian.