

# Mr. George Watabe - The Salsa King of Japan

By Michelle "DJ Michelle" Tanmizi

George Watabe's quiet, unassuming demeanour and ready smile might mislead you into thinking that he is just a friendly salsa promoter. But, beneath the easy-going and gentle ways lies a powerful persona. Watabe's name is synonymous with salsa in Japan. Though, he is quick to point out that he is neither a salsa instructor nor dancer, unlike many other salsa promoters who either are, or have been in the past. He says that he became a "salsa freak" after discovering salsa 13 years ago. Watabe was originally in the music business, promoting and recording Japanese musicians and singers. But once the salsa bug bit him, he put all of his energy into his newly found love. As the promoter of Asia's largest salsa congress, he is by default the biggest salsa promoter in the region. His Japan Salsa Congress is as old as the West Coast Salsa Congress, also celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

Being a salsa promoter in Japan is not easy. Japan is still a conservative society where skin contact between the sexes and women dancing in close proximity to men are frowned upon. As such, salsa dancing is not a social activity that Japan's strict laws particularly support. Many salsa clubs run the risk of closure and it is not uncommon for clubs to be raided by the police. In addition, everything is expensive in Japan, so being a successful promoter requires tenacity and a pure passion for the dance, in addition to good business sense.

Watabe admits that there is constant risk associated with being a promoter in Japan. He has been bankrupt twice, and faces the daily threat of a third occurrence. And yet he keeps going. Why? He says that he has simply gone too far to turn back now. Being a businessman with a strong sense of responsibility, he admits that sometimes his passion for salsa overrides everything. He has given his all to salsa, promoting it in every way he can in Japan, including television interviews with CNN on Latin music, local television appearances, articles in the local press, and travelling all over the country with Albert Torres. His monthly salsa party at Tokyo's world-famous Velfarre disco --- the self-professed "largest disco in Asia" with a capacity of 1,500 people --- attracts about 1,000 salseros. Watabe has also published four salsa books in Japanese, the last one as recently as three years ago.

About 13 years ago, there were only about 30 to 40 salsa students in Tokyo and about four or five instructors. Since Japan has good diplomatic ties with Cuba, many Cubans starting going to Japan about 10 years ago, and regardless of whether they danced well or not, many of them became salsa instructors. This resulted in Cuban-style salsa becoming the predominant style among dancers. Watabe was first to realize that salsa is not limited to only Cuban style, and also includes New York and Los Angeles styles. Over the last 10 to 13 years, probably the most significant change on the Japanese salsa scene is the tremendous growth of L.A. and New York salsa styles, and a decline in popularity of Cuban style. Watabe feels that Cuban style may have lost its appeal to Tokyo club owners because many Cuban instructors refused to pay to enter the

clubs, and as their debts mounted, their Japanese supporters lost interest in them. The shift in styles continues on other fronts... According to Watabe, there is currently the impression that New York On-2 style is the "true" style. This is creating tension among instructors and dancers, which he hopes will not lead to a decline in salsa. He says salsa can only grow through cooperation and communication among promoters, instructors and dancers.

It is no coincidence that Albert Torres' West Coast Congress and the Japan Salsa Congress both started in 1999. Watabe met promoter Eli Irizarry when he attended the very first salsa congress in 1997, the Puerto Rico Salsa Congress in San Juan. The following year, Irizarry sent his vice president, Luis Delgado, to Tokyo to propose starting a Japan salsa congress with Watabe. However,

after meeting Albert Torres at the 1998 congress in San Juan, Watabe decided to work with Torres instead, and the partnership has grown from strength to strength. There were 135 paying attendees at the first Japan congress and 4,500 attendees by the ninth congress. The number of people attending and performing has grown significantly each year and Watabe expects nothing less in 2008.

For the 10th congress, taking place at the Zepp Tokyo music hall, Watabe continues the tradition of bringing in the best instructors and performers from around the world. The legendary King of Mambo, Eddie Torres, is in the line-up of world-famous performers this year. The congress also provides the means for salseros in Japan and around Asia to realize their dreams of performing on stage. Although he has great respect for salsa musicians and is a lover of live music, Watabe says bringing salsa bands to Japan is just not financially feasible. Tokyo is one of the most expensive cities in the world, and the cost of a band is about 20 times higher than L.A.

Watabe is 60 years young and has no plans to stop doing what he loves most. He plans to continue promoting salsa for as long as he can. Last year, on-stage at his congress, he revealed that he had had cancer two years before and believes that salsa and all the joy that it brings him helped his cancer to recede. It is a message he wants to bring to those going through the same ordeal --- that happiness can cure and salsa is happiness. This was the reason his congress catch phrase in 2007 was "Dance for Life!"



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