



Issac Delgado / Photo by Gabriel Bianchini

## Issac Delgado, Cuba's "Cool Guy of the Salsa," Brings His Blend of Salsa Music to Miami

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I'm sure I'm not the only gringa to have learned how to dance Cuban music through the sounds of Issac Delgado, one of the island's most celebrated salsa stars, but it certainly felt like it at the time. It was the late 1990s, and when President Bill Clinton created a bigger opening for US academic research to take place in Cuba, I – a master's student in cultural anthropology at Western Washington University – jumped into it with both feet (albeit clumsily.)

Through contacts at the Center for the Investigation and Development of Cuban Music, I was able to hire several private music instructors to teach me guitar, dance, and music theory. The first dance teacher I had thought I should start with all the moves you'd learn as a full-blown Tropicana Nightclub cabaret dancer. Every afternoon we'd meet on the back deck of an apartment I rented off of an old mansion in Havana's Vedado

neighborhood, and I'd make a fool of myself under a paragon covered in blue vine flowers, fully exposed to the neighbors of the apartment on the next lot over.

I'd strut my legs and flap my arms like a pink flamingo as the locals laughed and cheered. And while I certainly came to love the Cuban people's distinctive sense of humor and welcoming nature, there was something incredibly embarrassing about this scenario. They would cackle and slap their knees in amusement as my instructor told them that I had to learn "the basics." It wasn't long before I fired him and found myself a more hip replacement.

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The second guy would take it from the top, this time in a very regimented Soviet style. There was an entire class of one-two, one-two on the feet, then another on the one-two-three, and yet another on the use of hula hoops to perfect hip swiveling. When I was finally allowed to put it all together, he broke out an old cassette of Delgado's first band NG La Banda, which had send dance floors across the island spiraling in an experimental new style of Cuban salsa or casino music known as the timba just a decade earlier.

The strict training whipped me into shape, or maybe some orishas (Yoruba spirits) flew in to the rescue, because Delgado's timba was anything but regimented. Characterized by ever-changing rhythms, big horns, charging piano chords, and Delgado's own melodic vocals, NG La Banda sounded a bit like what you'd get if you put popcorn kernels into a heating device where every piece explodes to the sound of a different musical instrument.



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NG La Banda's signature song "Santa Palabra" – translated as "Holy Word" – implores listeners to "Despojate!," or in English, "Sluff off the negative!" In its jumpy, happy way, the song tells you not to shy away from forces beyond your understanding, but rather let them take over and do their thing – give you light, health, protection, joy, nobility, and dignity. Delgado's music gave me all of those things. From my training onward, every time I heard a few salsa chords clunking on a piano, hands pattering on congas or the call of a Cuban musician requesting a response from the audience, I proceeded to spread my wings and fly – as well as gyrate - all over the dance floor.



I can't say I've moved quite like that in a few years, but I'm certainly going to try when Delgado comes to the North Beach Bandshell on Saturday, November 30. And I can't say that his music sounds just as it did in the 1990s, because it's that and so much more. During Delgado's 30-year career – which included a decade spent performing and recording in the United States – he has formed multiple band and shared the stage with the likes of Celia Cruz, Cachao, Gilberto Santa Rosa, Los Van Van, and La India. Known today as El Chevere de la Salsa or Salsa's Cool Guy, Delgado's solo career is a reflection of all the qualities that make Cuban music so unique.

True to its title, Delgado's 2019 album *Lluvia y Fuego* (Rain and Fire), the 17th entry in his discography, showcases romantic pop, big band Latin jazz, and accelerated renditions of old-fashioned salsa. There's also a cha, cha, cha celebrating the late, great Benny More and a couple of tunes that sound just like America's own Fania All Stars collective. Saturday's show is bound to be a musical baptism for audience members hearing Delgado for the first time. They'll surely be showered with rain and fire when the congas start hopping, the trumpets start popping, and Delgado and his back-up vocalists lull and shake audiences out of their post-Turkey Day tryptophan trance.

**Issac Delgado.** *With DJ Melao. 7 p.m., Saturday November 30, at North Beach Bandshell, 7275 Collins Ave., Miami Beach; 305-672-5202; [northbeachbandshell.com](http://northbeachbandshell.com). Advance tickets cost \$40 via [northbeachbandshell.com](http://northbeachbandshell.com) and \$45 on day of show.*