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"BOBBY DISCOVERS SALSA"

AN EXCERPT FROM *SALSA NIGHTS* BY MARCO KATZ MONTIEL

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"Bobby Discovers Salsa" An excerpt from *Salsa Nights* by Marco Katz Montiel¹

In times to come, Bobby Fiorentino would have good cause to remember the precise moment in which he fell in love with salsa. It happened at an unexpected venue, Barney Google's on East Eighty-Sixth Street, where cover band musicians mustered up as much enthusiasm as their need to pay personal bills could generate while copying the latest hit songs they were obliged to perform for hard-drinking junior executives who thanked God weekly for the arrival of Friday and two days of oblivion. As lead guitarist for the Astorians, a group of guys from Long Island City, Bobby's enthusiasm level was mezza-mezza that evening, his current need for immediate cash somewhat lower than his distaste for playing top-forty hits that everyone in the audience could have heard fifty times on the radio that day. It did not help that the club's manager took pains to make sure that every musician who appeared on his stage knew how much he despised them.

"Ya can't wear that hat on stage," he barked out at Bobby as soon as the guitarist had started to unpack his equipment.

"Okay."

"I don't allow no one to wear a hat while performing in my club," the manager added, not seeming to notice that his target had already taken off his headgear.

"Sure, no problem."

"Sometimes youse guys try to refuse, but I always enforce this rule."

Bobby nodded vaguely, not knowing what other response would get this creep to leave him alone.

¹ "Bobby Discovers Salsa" is the first chapter of *Salsa Sensations*, Marco Katz Montiel's current novel project. Marco also writes short stories, song lyrics, music for literary song cycles, and essays about literature. One of his stories, "El disco 45," which appears in the anthology *Cartas del desamor y otras adicciones* (Universidad de Alcalá de Henares), can also be heard on this [YouTube video](#).

“I’ve even had guys say it’s a religious thing, but I don’t care. Ya gotta leave your religion and your hat behind when you get on my stage.”

“No religious problem here,” mumbled Bobby as he decided that he might go over and help the bass player with his amplifier.

“Oh yeah?” whined the manager, apparently interested in taking up this potential topic for debate—but at that point the guitarist had started hauling the bass amp and thus gotten out of reach.

Once the band members had gotten set up, Bobby sat in a corner watching as the club began to fill. Most of the guys still had their business suits on, having just opened the top button on their white shirts and pulled away the knot of their ties. *Why don’t they just take them off*, he wondered, and then recalled that this uniform had a purpose: potential mates could see that those dressed this way had their feet firmly placed on the corporate ladder, with a house in the suburbs and happy weekend trips to shopping malls well within reach.

Without a business suit, a guy might have been any old shlub, a bartender, porter, or even a musician, all potentially exciting for women interested in a one-night stand, but not marriage material by any stretch of the imagination. It thrilled Bobby to think that some young lady might find him useful for a quickie. More than anything, the young man wanted to be desired—for his body, his brains, his music, whatever—and that, even though he never realized it, caused him to seek out any opportunity to appear on a stage. In this setting, though, he suspected that his image lacked the charm required for the fulfilment of secretarial fantasies, even if he could play some of the fastest licks anyone had ever heard on an electric guitar. With a decent haircut and dressed up in a blue suit and tie, he reflected ruefully, he would probably fit right in and eventually find a housewife of his own in the club’s secretarial pool. Frankie, the drummer, had a much cooler look, as did Sal, the band’s lead singer. *Damn*, he thought, *Sal never left any club with less than three babes in tow*.

Following his cheerless exchange with the manager and his gloomy thoughts about the evening’s romantic possibilities, Bobby felt even less inclined than usual to smilingly belt out

top-forty pablum for babes and their suitors. Still, he always did love to play his guitar, even when the situation didn't allow for the heavy metal renditions he favored, and sometimes his pyrotechnic guitar solos would momentarily catch the audience's attention. Whatever the style of music involved, he lived for that recognition! Also, the other musicians in this band played well, making the sound professional if not entirely satisfying. Nothing like a group of guys from Queens to harmonize, instrumentally as well as vocally, and provide a smooth sound for the onset of oblivion.

During the first break, Bobby had a rum and Coke—half price courtesy of the club's manager, who made it clear that he was doing a special favor that the musicians in no way deserved—and chatted with bandmates Joey and Victor while Frankie and Sal headed out on their perpetual search for new conquests. With the club's sound system blaring out the original recordings of "Close to You," "Bridge Over Troubled Water," "Raindrops Keep Falling on My head," and other current hit songs that the band had just played, time seemed to revolve in on itself like water going down a toilet and before he could give it another thought Bobby found himself back on stage.

When the band stopped for a second break, something incredible happened. Before the sound system had a chance to launch more hits, one of the most gorgeous women Bobby had ever seen stepped onstage. Sandy Mayes looked beautiful in a way that the aspiring secretaries would never comprehend. Although clearly as interested as other young women in clothing and cosmetics, she managed them differently, in a way that Bobby couldn't quite place; perhaps the stage lights helped, as they so often do with makeup, but she looked more mature than her sisters at the bar. Her understated makeup and perfectly fitted dress announced that she intended to be her own woman and would never settle for turning into anyone's kept creature. After pausing to smile and take in the audience, Sandy walked over to the microphone and called for the crowd's attention.

"Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, Barney Google's proudly presents a special musical treat as part of a fundraiser for a great cause," she announced, artfully brushing back her long jet-black hair. "Somos, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing textbooks to schoolchildren in East Harlem, has gratefully accepted the club owner's offer of one set of our music for your enjoyment.

We hope that this special performance will get you to pull out your wallets and donate to the cause. We have a basket by the bar for contributions and our volunteers will be in the audience collecting funds from anyone wishing to participate.”

“Yeah, of course,” muttered the club’s manager, sitting in a corner near Bobby. “The phony jerk that owns this joint will do anything to make himself look like a guy who cares about the downtrodden. Even better when it’s trendy. It’s just a waste, anyhow; at least he ought’ve taken this set out of the pay of those lazy musicians.”

As Sandy spoke, the band quickly prepared for a set Bobby had never seen on a rock club stage: no drum set or guitars but instead a pair of bongos and a conga along with a set of paired drums that he would later learn to call timbales. An electric piano and the strangest upright bass Bobby had ever seen completed the ensemble’s equipment. Once everyone was in place, Sandy, who turned out to be one of the singers, wrapped up her spiel.

“For now, we just hope you enjoy the music and get out on the dance floor and try some new steps while listening to a great new band, named after the organization we support, that we have put together for this occasion. Damas y caballeros, please put your hands together and welcome *Ssooomos!*”

An incredible set of rhythm patterns started sounding under that first long syllable. Finding a seat near the stage, the guitarist sat entranced by the most beautiful sounds he had ever heard. Trained by his uncle as a classical violinist and later dedicated to developing a jazz guitar style, Bobby noted a rhythmic complexity rarely heard in jazz and unknown to rock or any other popular music he had ever heard. Somehow, he observed with surprise, the extreme syncopations did not make the music less accessible; instead, they drew listeners in, probably even those (he thought to himself) who would have no understanding of the techniques involved.

Harmonically, the music differed little from the rock that had blasted throughout the evening, but the chords kept drifting off to odd places. Floating on top of this sumptuously inviting cacophony, Sandy, along with a man and another woman, sang melodies so beautiful that they would have sounded saccharine in a more complacent rhythmic setting. Altogether, it made

Bobby feel as though he had been magically transported to an inviting shore alongside the sparkling waves of a blue ocean, where he was enjoying the happiest day of his life, which was odd because the young guitarist had always hated any outing that involved going to a beach.

While listening to the entire ensemble, the young guitarist had his eyes fixed on Sandy. She and the other woman mostly sang backups for the male lead singer, and their voices sounded wonderfully polished and professional. Bobby had never dated a musician before, not even a singer, but he felt as though this would be a great time to start, with someone who appeared at once intense and approachable. Maybe he could get a word in with her during the break.

Oh well, thought Sandy, looking vaguely in Bobby's direction, at least I can still belt out the coros en español; contrary to Larry's warnings, those rock 'n roll sessions have not entirely ruined my native tongue. Now if only I can figure out a way to get into these rock clubs singing songs in English.

Larry played trumpet in a rock band with Sandy, and somehow thought that his cautionary statements would make her interested in him, which they did although not nearly as much as he hoped. It didn't matter much anyhow; like her, he ended up playing mambos for the old folks most weekends because most of the time that was all the paying work they could get. With that small income and some bread he made playing in white bands downtown, he had decided to "go professional." Unlike her, he did not have to play receptionist at a medical clinic or do any other dopey thing during weekdays.

Keeping an eye on the singer out of the corner of his eye, Bobby stepped up to the bar and grabbed another drink, knowing that two would not ruin his performance but might help him relax a bit and speak more fluidly while addressing his latest love at first sight. Her choreographed steps, perfectly matching those of the other backup singer, greatly increased his interest in Sandy; a determined, if not always graceful, devotee of rock 'n' roll steps, he decided that he would enjoy learning the Latin dancing now practiced onstage and, by more of the audience than he would have expected, on the dance floor at Barney Google's. He remembered how his Uncle Vito and Aunt Sally used to have similar moves many years ago while listening to Pérez Prado hits on the radio.

Although eager for an opportunity to talk with his newfound heartthrob, Bobby felt as though the music ended too quickly. He had never heard anything like this and didn't yet realize how pervasive it had already become.

Rushing over to the stage with his best imitation of a casual saunter, the guitarist located Sandy, who was having a conversation with one of the trumpet players.

"Excuse me," he interjected, smiling at the other man. "I hate to interrupt, but I just wanted to tell you how much I loved hearing your music."

The trumpet player mumbled thanks and turned back to packing up his instrument, while the singer lingered for a moment to take in this newcomer.

"Thanks for the kind words," she replied gracefully. "Are you in the regular band tonight?"

"Yes, but I'm not really into commercial rock. I play metal...when I can...and I would love to know more about the music you do."

"Really? That's just the past, still haunting us. What I want to do is get into a good rock band. English is like my first language."

This conversation, which wasn't taking either interlocutor anywhere interesting, petered out as one band headed for the door while the club manager came over and insisted that the regular group get right back to work, hopefully removing any sonic traces left behind by the foreign interlopers.

Catching a six train at Eighty-Sixth Street and Lexington Avenue, Sandy headed home to Soundview. For once, the train showed up without too much waiting, and that, along with the relatively short engagement at the club, got her back earlier than usual, although never early enough for her mother.

"Ay, Alejandra. ¿A estas horas?" exclaimed señora Sotomayor, standing at the door as if she had been there holding it open all evening.

"Leave me alone, Ma. Nobody plays music from nine to five."

"Lo entiendo m'hija, pero me preocupa."

"What, Ma? What bothers you?"

"No debes salir sola por la noche. Ni tienes novio ni—"

“¡Otra vez!” replied the daughter, slipping back into old patterns of familial argumentation. *Every time I get poised to cross over and make it into the fashionable scene downtown my mom turns me back into a Puerto Rican from the Bronx.*

Lying in bed with visions of swirling lights in her head, Sandy reflected on the results of a hard day at the clinic followed by an unsatisfying appearance at the club. As a receptionist, she had to deal with sick people, mentally more than physically it seemed to her, who wouldn't stop bothering her. When she went to sing, she felt as though everyone was ignoring her; yeah, there was one guy who came over to talk, but he was just eyeing her, not really interested in her music or anything she had to say. Overall, it was just another wasted day. Nothing useful. Nada.

Hours later, Bobby sat with Joey and Victor, digging into a plate of steamed dumplings and beef chow fun at Wo Hop, a filthy basement lately favored by famous Hollywood types. *Maybe I'll get discovered there some day*, he once told his friends, who responded, *Doing what?*

The food was delicious, as usual, and the young guitarist liked nothing better than eating and hanging out with friends until sunrise, his normal bedtime. This evening, more like four o'clock in the morning, Joey and Victor noticed that he was less animated than usual, and not talking the way he often did while hanging out after making music for most of the night. Most nights, or early mornings, he spoke a lot; it seemed to be the one way he could bring himself down from the crazy energy produced while focused on playing.

Sandy Maze, he loved the sound of that name, although he figured that she might have had another one and then changed it. Probably something Spanish and extraordinarily beautiful, he thought. He would love calling her Sandy when they went out on the town and then whispering her real name when they were alone together. *She must know so much that I never imagined*, he told himself. *I could learn so much from her. I just hope that I have anything useful to share.* And then the music came back up on his internal soundtrack.

Bobby spent much of that meal creating scenes of times to come, the maze that would magically turn into their life together. They might even form a band together, with her looks and great singing attracting an audience that would come to embrace some exciting new mixture of

their styles. Latin Metal came to mind; yeah, it sounded silly but the more he thought about it the more he could imagine some awesome possibilities! In this their differences would help them create something distinctive. A few years ago, he had heard some Latin rock ensembles and recalled admiring their music.

Grabbing the last dumpling, after having waited to make sure that no one else wanted it, Bobby decided that he would have to run in to Sandy again, he didn't know where or how, but he knew it had to happen. He knew that he was never good at first impressions, but with more time he would be able to make it clear to her that he found her interesting, not just for her looks but as a complete person, and he felt sure, or at least had high hopes, that he could make himself interesting to her.

The lousy evening at Barney Google's, he reflected, had turned out well after all.