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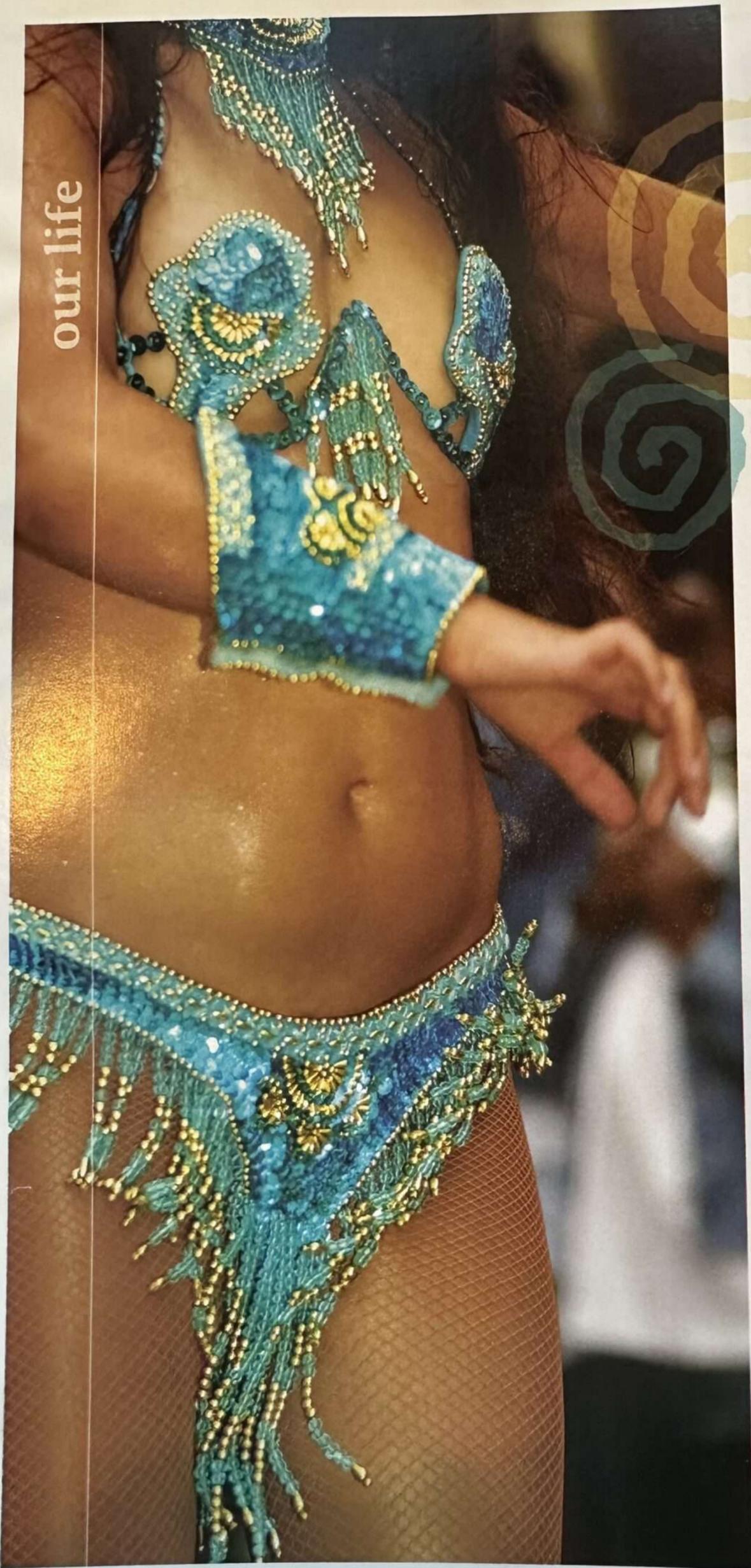
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Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On

the sultry rhythm of samba

by Marci Johnson

Humor me if you will and picture this: 1) a chicken trying to fly; 2) a dog doing a full body shake after a bath; 3) and an octopus doing jumping jacks. Now, meld those three images together. Got it? If so, you have a pretty good idea of what I looked like at samba class the other night. I am a professional dancer, but dancing the samba is like learning a Scandinavian language—some of these movements are not even in my alphabet! Brazilian women make it look so easy, and their athletic bodies are made for it. My body, on the other hand, is ideal for something a little gentler, like lying in bed. My attempts at moving gracefully were completely thwarted at every turn. This is not the samba seen on ballroom dance floors. This is wild, raw, racy and full-out fun.

Dance history reveals all sambas are Brazilian with African roots, even though several different kinds of samba exist. Think “Bossa Nova,” “The Girl from Ipanema,” ballroom samba, and the wild upbeat relative Carnevale samba. To some, samba is not just a form of music and dance, it is a religion. For example, the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé views samba as prayer, thereby giving its adherents a way to invoke their personal orixa (gods/saints). The African rhythms of the music came from West African people transported to Brazil as slaves from places like

"You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent."

Psalm 30: 11-12

Yoruba and the Congo. In Africa, the rhythms called forth the gods. For me, dancing has always been my way of praying. I love the scene in Nikos Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek* where Zorba is speaking about the death of his three-year-old son, but he has to quit talking and dance his grief because no words can describe his pain. I have always loved Psalm 30: 11-12, "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent." Dancing always expresses what I cannot say.

A professional dance company called Casa Samba teaches the samba class I go to in New Orleans. The dancers wear the full regalia—high heels, glittering G-strings, feathered headdresses—and perform at a multitude of festivities. They also open rehearsals to the public as a dance class accompanied by a large group of live drummers. The building practically jumps up and down with drum vibrations. Grandmas and babies fill the room, watching their moms and daughters dance. Children shriek in excitement but cannot be heard over the drums.

These dancers take their samba very seriously. I walk in with my baby daughter in a sling on my chest. I go with the beat. Alas, it is truly hopeless. I cannot move my feet and derriere that fast while baby-free; I certainly cannot shake it with 20 pounds of love strapped to my chest. But I am determined to try. I love to dance and am most willing to make a fool of myself. As the Japanese proverb says, "We are fools whether we dance or not, so we may as well dance."

The teacher demonstrates a move; then the student dancers do it two at a time while everyone watches. Not the best method for learning, unless public humiliation is the teacher - but when in Rome... So I do it. I can shimmy with the best of them, but this is a whole new ballgame. I hop; I jump; I let my belly quiver like a bowl full of jelly. I move my two left feet forward, backward and sideways, but I skip the cartwheel. Their feet move so fast! How do they do this in high heels? By the time I leave, I am drenched in sweat and can barely move, nevermind that I can barely hear anymore. "That was fun!" I comment to one of the other students. Strangely enough, I mean it. I feel invigorated, wild, inspired, primitive. I feel like donning some feathers and dancing down the streets (I think I will skip the G-string). The great thing is, though, wild street dancers are not uncommon at any given time in New Orleans. The streets showcase dancing fools throughout the year. So, if you feel like letting your hair down and getting wild, communing with your personal god, or just shaking parts of your body you did not know existed, try samba. You will not be disappointed! ♦

Marci Johnson is a master Middle Eastern dancer. She has danced around the world and performed with many top artists, most recently with Paul McCartney. She lives in New Orleans, and holds degrees from UCLA and Harvard.

Casa Samba Brazilian Drum & Dance Troop

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