



SALSA IN THE CITY



10 years of Brasil's with Jay Rockwell

Photos by Paul Evans & Stephen W.N Choo Quan

There is a 10 year anniversary upon us here in Philadelphia. It isn't any date you'd remember unless you have been an active enthusiast of the changing salsa movement that has invaded Philadelphia in the last 10 years. Don't know what it is? Let me give you a hint. It has been that since Brasil's on Chestnut St. in Philadelphia's Old City neighborhood opened its doors and left complete control of entertainment to one man. Anyone who has been to Brazil's for some hardcore dancing on a Wednesday, Friday or Saturday night may not know the name, Jay Rockwell, but they know the music.

In the early 90's the Philadelphia club scene was rocked by New York's bad boy of the beat Jay Rockwell. "When I came to Philly there was no Salsa or Meringue scene" says Jay. "Sure there were small parties here and there but nothing on the scale that I had been used to in NY. My vision was to change all that."



But before we get into the present, we have to start from the beginning. Hailing from Brooklyn, NY Jay came from a family strong in their faith as well as work ethic. "I had a strong desire to be involved in anything thing that had to do with music" recalls Jay. "I sang in the church choir and I even started my own band when I was 15 called 'the 128th St. boys.'" By age 19, Jay's interest was captivated by a new form of musical expression. DJ'ing. Modern DJ'ing was in it's infancy in the late 70's but had such an impact on Jay that it changed his life forever. On weekdays in the early 80's you could find Jay out buying the latest dance records, taking them home and practicing till the wee hours of the morning. All this hard work and dedication paid off when he was asked to be a guest DJ at a block party called "Mista Magic's Rap Attack" thrown by WBLS NY and hosted by the legendary Spoonie G. "Thousands of New Yorkers rocked out to my set that day" says Jay. "After that day I knew my life was never going to be the same." Jay was right. After his set he was approached by radio personality "The prime minister of reggae" Ken Williams and two weeks later Youth and Action Radio in NY was born with Jay sitting comfortably behind the decks. This was the start of an



illustrious DJ career which spanned for over 5 years. "I was spinning everywhere in New York" Explains Jay. On any given Friday you could find Jay sweating behind the decks at The Funhouse, Crisco Disco, The Roxy, Studio 54, Galaxy and Bassline he even had the privilege of spinning at the world renowned block party which at the time was being hosted at The Saint.

"The only downside to all of this was my home life. DJ'ing and raising a family don't mix very well" explains Jay. "I wanted more for me and my family so I retired the decks and returned to school. The decks didn't stay in retirement for long. Jay's reputation had preceded him in his newest state of residence, New Jersey and before long he was being asked to Host shows at places like Fire Island and The Monster. While Jay was pleased with these accomplishments, there was a bigger prize he had his eye on, the Philly club scene. "My career was flourishing in 1994" says Jay who battled 15 other DJ's to land a much coveted gig at Philly hottest new club, Gotham. But overshadowing all this success came the tragic death of his daughter Jessica and wife Jackie, both who passed in 1995 from difficulties with cancer. "I was beside myself and I still tear up every time I think about that time in my life." says Jay, "But the tragedy and adversity in my life have made me a much stronger person, I love you Jackie, I love you Jessica" whispers Jay as he looks up into heaven as if to see his two angels looking back at him.



Jay's Philadelphia reputation continued to grow and soon he was hosting salsa shows at the club South Beach when in 1998 was approached by Waseem Kalla. Waseem liked Jay's sound and energy and offered him an opportunity to come to Brasil's, a club struggling to create a salsa night in the newest Philly scene. Jay was more than happy to help and within a few months, had lines out of Brasil's waiting to get in and check out this hot New York DJ. "I had a blast" says Jay. "Waseem gave me complete control of the sound, entertainment and music of the club and I took complete advantage of that."

Jay wasted no time in renovating the sound system, lighting and décor. Jay's unique New York style was very apparent in the club and the crowd loved it. Jim & Leah from Rittenhouse Dance Academy used to teach on Wednesday night at Brasil's 4 years prior. Wasseem, the previous owner approached **Sonya Elmore** and asked if she wanted to teach on Friday nights and then eventually on Wednesday nights. Sonya and Jay began a night which soon became the hottest salsa night in Philly and, after 8 years shows no signs of slowing down. "The success of Brasil's is no accident" explains Jay. "I worked my butt off to make all my nights the best they could possibly be"



To look at his long list of accomplishments you'd think that Jay would be a man content with his present state but you'd be wrong. "Music is my life" says Jay "I want to be involved in all elements of it; production, performance and management, and I am" Now working in the same studio where Fat Joe cut his latest album, Jay seems at home behind the sound board orchestrating his latest creation. He won't tell me what it is but whatever it is it's sure to grip the salsa scene with the kind of force that only Jay Rockwell could provide.

"My ten years here in Philly have been really fun. I've had good and bad times but in the end I'm still here doing what I've always done. Make people dance and have a good time." Beginning this Memorial Day till the end of 2006 Jay and Brasil's will be celebrating a decade of Salsa in Philly and cordially invites everyone to come out and mingle with the many of Brasil's patrons who have helped make this scene what it is today.

