

# 100 Creatives 2012: Raúl Orlando Edwards, Opera Singer and Salsa Dancer

By [Olivia Flores Alvarez](#) Wed., Dec. 12 2012 at 7:00 AM

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Raúl Orlando Edwards (right) with Endrina Guarapo

Photo by Leonel Nerio of Nerio Photography

Being a something-slash-something else is usual these days. Someone's a writer-slash-painter, or a filmmaker-slash-composer. But an opera singer-slash-salsa dancer? This is the first time we've heard of that combo. [Raúl Orlando Edwards](#), artistic director for the [Foundation for Modern Music](#) and founder of both FLAMÁRT (Featuring Latin American Music and Arts) and the Strictly Street Salsa dance studio, knows that being both a professional opera singer and a professional salsa dancer is unusual. "People always ask me, 'How do those go together?' And I tell them, 'Just fine.'" He admits it wasn't a career path he planned out, but serendipity prevailed.

While he studied at other universities, including Conservatorio Nacional de Panamá in his native Panama and the University of Houston, he credits his time at Houston Community College with

providing him with a strong musical foundation. It was there that he met voice teacher Lois Alba. Edwards continues to train with Alba and the two have since become friends.

Edwards was already singing when he tagged along with a friend to ballet class in hopes of improving his posture for the stage. Since he had a background in martial arts and soccer, he thought ballet class would be easy. "I was sore for days!" he laughs. "I thought, 'This is really hard.' After that I was hooked. I couldn't stop going to class and dancing."



photo by Elizabeth Arce

One night Edwards went salsa dancing with friends. Throughout the evening, people repeatedly asked him if he was a dance teacher. "I thought, 'Hmm, maybe I should look into that.'" Soon after that, he went to his first lesson. "I was shocked at what I saw, and I told [the teacher], 'This is *not* Latin dancing.' She told me, 'Oh, this is *international* Latin dancing.' I told her, 'Look, I'm *international* and this is *not* how we dance.' Edwards left the lesson thinking, "They're destroying my culture, they're teaching people something that has nothing to do with Latin dancing." After fuming for a bit, he decided to turn his anger into something positive and launched the Strictly Street Salsa dance studio. "It started literally out of anger. I thought, 'I want people to know that when they come to this school, they're seeing how we dance in Latin America.'" And his career as an opera singer-slash-salsa dancer was born.

**What he does:** "A lot of people that have seen me dance don't know that I sing. And a lot of people that have heard me sing don't know that I dance. So when they find out about the other, they are always very surprised. So if someone asks me what I do, I just tell them I'm a performing artist. Once they find out I do both, they always ask me which I like better, singing opera or dancing salsa, and I can't ever say. I really love them both."

**Why he likes it:** "Dancing is a marriage between your body and the music. You take your body and express the meaning of the music. Also, you have your partnership with the person you're dancing with, how the two of you communicate and move together. That fascinates me in dancing. In singing, what fascinates me is how I can tell a story, how I can include the audience in the experience without their getting out of their chairs. One is physical, one is more mental."

**What inspires him:** "For me, the passion for what I do keeps me inspired. Also, changing and learning. Through all of the different things that I do, I learn about people, about life, about myself. And for me, as a teacher, it's exciting to see my students get it. That moment when they understand something for the first time, it's a wonderful moment."

**If not this, then what:** "I love public relations. A former neighbor told me once, 'You know, Raúl, you're a PR whore.' I just said, 'Thank you, dear neighbor.' And it's true, I am. So if I wasn't doing this, I would be doing something in marketing, in public relations."

**If not here, then where:** "There are three places I would want to live. One is New York, obviously. The city fascinates me. Another one is Paris, and then Spain. Either Madrid, Barcelona or Valencia. I want to be near the water. Growing up, the ocean was just ten minutes away. I miss that. And I miss not driving. If I could just drop my [car] keys, I would never drive again. You can't do that here, but you can in New York, in other big cities."

**What's next:** Edwards started professionally dancing at 26, an age he admits is "old" for a dancer. Now in his mid-forties, he's still able to do 95 percent of the things he did in his twenties, but he knows that won't last forever. As a singer, he has much more time left in his career. For an opera singer, 45 isn't old.

Edwards has had to cut down on his singing schedule because of his producing and organizing duties. He hopes to start performing more as a singer after the new year. "I'm pushing hard to get these events and organizations set up and training other people to do them so that I can dedicate myself to singing."

He hopes to concentrate on rarely performed Latin American classical music. "You know, there's this little country called Spain. And there are 15 other countries in Latin America. All of them have rich, diverse musical histories that are for the most part overlooked, ignored. Every time I do some Latin American music in a concert, people ask me why it isn't performed more often. I want to change that."

*Raúl Orlando Edwards appears at the Foundation for Modern Music's holiday concert, Navidad Latina: An Evening of Spanish and Latin Carols and Dance at 7 p.m. on December 20 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet. For information, visit the Foundation's [website](#) or call 713-529-3928. This is a free event, but tickets are required.*

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