

REVIEW: SAWA SAWA KIZOMBA FESTIVAL 2016



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There's an exciting trend happening in the kizomba scene in the United States – a renewed focus on culture and authenticity. There have been many people over the last decade sharing their passion for this dance in the USA, working hard to present kizomba with respect and with cultural context. At the Sawa Sawa Kizomba Festival (<http://www.sawasawafestival.com/>), 2016 in Washington, D.C., several of them came together to present a truly wonderful kizomba experience.

Curious about what made this event stand out? Interested in a trip to the capital of the United States next year? Read on!

Oscar B.A.'s Vision

I first met Oscar (<https://www.facebook.com/oscarba2011>), at one of his regular bimonthly socials, descriptively called 3rd & 1st Fridays Kizomba Party (<https://www.facebook.com/KizombaDancingInDC>). I was so pleased to find someone running a social with nicely mixed kizomba music. In addition to running classes in DC, Oscar has traveled to several US cities to DJ and teach, inspiring ever more people to fall in love with kizomba.



(<https://www.facebook.com/NicoleGlassPhotography>),

DJ Oscar BA

What I didn't realize was that this was all part of a master plan leading to Sawa Sawa.

"I wanted a festival where I could just come and have fun doing kizomba, not as part of a Latin Festival. I did a lot of those and I didn't see that as a focus. Kizomba was like a kind of stepchild," Oscar shared with me.

I knew just what he meant. I remember my frustration at certain

salsa congresses and bachata festivals that listed kizomba as one of their dances, but offered only a small dark room, often with very little kizomba music at all. There was no real intent to share kizomba at these festivals; it seemed more like the organizers were capitalizing on kizomba as a new fad.

"So from the beginning was classes, socials, and small parties," Oscar explained. He expected that to lead to invitations to different cities and festivals – as it most certainly did – and "eventually a standalone kizomba festival. And then at the festival level for it to become a springboard for more avenues for growing kizomba and quality of kizomba itself."

I was so impressed. Something that from the outside had seemed just an organic progression, fueled by his passion for good music and dancing, proved to be a long-ranging plan orchestrated with mastery.

Of course, Oscar is not the sole organizer of Sawa Sawa. He has a great team that includes volunteers, teachers he mentors, and his amazing wife Marve (<https://www.facebook.com/marve.mb>). While he is undeniably the face of the festival, everyone with any part behind the scenes praised Marve in particular for her hard work and generosity.

The Festival

This year was the fourth iteration of Sawa Sawa. There were three days of workshops with national and local instructors, and of course three nights of partying past 5:00 AM thanks to a lovely DJ lineup. Everything was housed in the enormous





Hyatt

Regency(<http://washingtondc.regency.hyatt.com/en/hotel/home.html>), a stone's throw from the Capitol and Union Station.

There are unfortunately all too many things that can lessen your enjoyment of a dance event. The Sawa Sawa team did a great job managing several factors that matter to any festival.

- **Convenience:** Everything in one easy-to-reach location, with classrooms adjacent to each other and bathrooms a short walk down the hall.
- **Floors:** Good rented dance floors. Not the luxury of a sprung-wood floor in a hall, but the floors held together and were neither too grippy nor too slick.



(<https://www.facebook.com/DavidNavarroPhotography/>)- **Space:** There was enough room in class for everyone to be able to maneuver well, with a minimum of floorcraft. At the social dance, the room felt spacious without ever being empty. The highest turnout was of course on Saturday night, but the floor only reached comfortably packed.

- **Air-Conditioning:** The air was kept cool throughout classes and forethought was evident in getting the temperatures lowered further before the evening mass of dancers.

– **Organization:** Check-in for the event was a rapid process. There were enough volunteers working the door in the evenings to get people in quickly. There was also constantly someone on hand to answer questions or offer assistance even for trivial things like having a photo taken.

– **Schedule:** The event ran amazingly close to the schedule. There were volunteers reminding instructors when they had 10-15 minutes left, and occasionally insisting they wrap their class up on time.

– **Music:** I can't gush enough about how good the music was. DJ Guelas(<https://soundcloud.com/djguelas>), DJ EFX(https://soundcloud.com/dj_ef-x) and DJ Oscar B.A. (<https://soundcloud.com/oscarba>) consistently delivered a gorgeous flow of music, playing plenty of favorites but also sharing less-known gems. Attending an event like this makes me tell people with even more fervor that there is a huge difference between curating a playlist for a dance and actually being a DJ for dancers.



(<https://www.facebook.com/DavidNavarroPhotography>).

DJ EFX

– **Workshops:** There was a really nice caliber of instruction at this festival. Oscar chose three favorites from the international scene as well as featuring locally respected names from around the US. I didn't get a chance to take classes from every teacher, but appreciated those I did. There was also a good variety of class offerings, including Afro House, tarraxinha, and multiple levels of semba and kizomba.

As with any event, there were a few things that could have been better. Courageously, Sawa Sawa provided a forum for both positive and negative feedback in the closing Q & A session Sunday afternoon. Here are some thoughts from that discussion and from my own perspective.

– **Schedule Announcement:** It's pretty normal in our scene not to know the exact schedule of an event until a couple of weeks beforehand. However, it was personally disappointing that there wasn't at least a rough outline in advance. I had already booked my arrival in DC for mid afternoon Friday. So I was very sad to discover that there would be four classes starting early in the afternoon on Friday, followed by a

huge gap from 6:00pm to 10:00pm. I arrived in the middle of the last class, then had hours before the next chance to dance.

– **Class Levels:** This was brought up during the Q&A and I was surprised it had escaped me completely. It turned out that there were only open-level (all-level for you ballroom and tango readers!) or improver classes in the mornings, then right after lunch was always only intermediate and improver classes. Some people felt that encouraged beginner dancers to try to join intermediate classes in the afternoon, generally lowering the level of those classes. Others felt that encouraged higher level dancers not to bother coming to class in the morning, though we should all keep working on fundamentals. I have to say that 1. kizomba and semba were often both offered, so you could do some of each or all one or the other, according to your preference 2. dancers who have been in the scene longer often dance later at kizomba parties, and thus might want to be in more! Schedule are always tricky to handle, but I think it was feedback the organization will definitely keep in mind for next year. Personally I would have liked an Afro House class NOT first thing, since I get sweaty and then feel self-conscious asking ladies to be in close embrace with me (and I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling that way!)

– **Gender Equality:** I won't say that Sawa Sawa struggled with this more than other festivals. I have definitely seen far worse. However, in comparing it to an ideal, it did fall short as so many do. While a few instructors bucked the trend, most classes were taught using gendered language(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/gendered-language/>). Considering nearly every class had two or three women leading, asking "guys" to do one thing and "ladies" to do another seemed an obvious shortfall.

There was also clear favoring of men when it came to choosing instructors. I'll give Sawa Sawa this – there were two women who taught on their own. But not a single kizomba or semba class was directed by a woman. There were two American teaching couples who co-taught their classes, both partners contributing equally. But all three international instructors were men who were assisted by women not valued enough to be listed on the schedule. Out of a total of 18 classes on Saturday and Sunday, 2 were taught by women, 4 were officially co-taught, and 12 were taught by men (with or without a female assistant). Given that there is no lack of phenomenal

Sawa Sawa Kizomba Festival Workshop Schedule
July 1-3, 2016 at Hyatt Regency Capitol in DC
www.sawasawfestival.com
sawasawfestival@gmail.com

Open Level Foundation/Improvers Intermediate/Advanced (Please only experienced dancers in the class at the discretion of the instructor) At the discretion of the instructor

Please note: Workshops & Instructors subject to change, up to and including time of

FRIDAY WORKSHOP SCHEDULE	
Congressional Room CD	
1:00pm-2:00pm	Registration Open
2:00pm-3:00pm	KizoSemba - Oscar B.A.
3:00pm-4:00pm	Tarraxinha - Kimberly
4:00pm-5:00pm	Semba - Toby
5:00pm-6:00pm	Afro Pop/Afro Beats - Sylvianne
10:00pm-5:32am	Evening Party #PartyHard

SATURDAY WORKSHOP SCHEDULE	
Columbia A	Columbia B
10:00am	Registration Opens
11:00am-12:00pm	Kizomba (Foundation/Improvers) - Maren & Steve Semba (Improvers) - Karla & Eric
12:00pm-1:00pm	Semba Social (Improver+) - Edy/Vents Kizomba (Foundation+) - Oscar B.A.
1:00pm-2:00pm	Afro House (Open Level) - Nico Krump
2:00pm-3:00pm	LUNCH BREAK
3:00pm-4:00pm	Semba (Improver/Intermediate) - Benjamin/Edy/Vents
4:00pm-5:00pm	Kizomba Combinations (Improver/Intermediate) - Philip Semba (Improvers) - Karla & Eric
5:00pm-6:30pm	Semba Show (Intermediate) - Toby Tarraxinha (Open Level) - Kimberly
10:00pm-5:37am	Evening Party #PartyHarder

SUNDAY WORKSHOP SCHEDULE	
Columbia A	Columbia B
10:00am	Registration Open
11:00am-12:00pm	Afro Pop/Afro Beats (Open Level) - Sylvianne
12:00pm-1:00pm	Kizomba (Improvers+) - Miguel/Pella/Tchen Semba (Improvers+) - Philip
1:00pm-2:00pm	Kizomba - Nico Krump Semba - Maren & Steve
2:00pm-3:00pm	LUNCH BREAK
3:00pm-4:00pm	Semba (Intermediate/Advanced) - Edy/Vents
4:00pm-5:00pm	Semba - Miguel/Pella/Tchen Kizomba - Edy/Vents
5:00pm-6:30pm	The Wrap Up (Q&A & Stories from the world of Kizomba/Semba Dancing)
10:00pm-5:46am	EVENING PARTY #StillPartyHard

female talent in the world of kizomba and semba, I encourage the organizers to take action to address this inequality in future years.



(<https://www.facebook.com/NicoleGlassPhotography/>).

*Afro House with Niko Krump & Miguel Pé
Na Tchon*

A Special Event

I took some time out with the instructors on the last day to ask them what they felt made Sawa Sawa Kizomba Festival a worthwhile event. Of course people talked about how wonderful the music and the parties are, as I have above. There were three other elements mentioned repeatedly that I agree make Sawa Sawa stand out.

– Culture

There was a wide range of class offerings, including semba, kizomba, Afro House, and tarraxinha, but the whole event “stays true to the culture and the roots of the dance,” [Phillyp Chanlatte](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1650834748) said.

[Sylviane Elessie](https://www.facebook.com/sylviane.elessie) observed something similar, but coming from the participants at Sawa Sawa. “Interest in the culture itself, the dances, the way that people love the dance and love to learn about it, that is heartwarming.”

– Family Environment

[Kimberly Nicole](https://www.facebook.com/KizombaRDU/) shared: “It feels like a family festival. Everyone knows each other. I think it comes from the organizers down – especially how involved Oscar’s wife is behind the scenes, making it warm and welcoming.”

I can attest to the fact that the event had a positive and comfortable feeling, although probably those of us who have been in the US kizomba scene are at quite an advantage when it comes to knowing everyone. Like [Karla Villareal](https://www.facebook.com/karladvillarreal/) said, “It’s interesting the people that were here before are now your family. You come from strangers to ‘I know that I’ll see this group of people, I’ve been looking forward to seeing them.’ “

I only attended in 2013 and 2016, but the intervening years have offered several opportunities to get to know that core group of people well. In addition, the groups



coming from various communities did a great job of mixing and introducing new Sawa Sawa attendees to one another.

Ashby

Owens(<https://www.facebook.com/ashby.owens>) noted: “What makes it unique is the size... big enough that people are exposed to a lot of different dancers and communities, but small enough that it feels like a family. We’re able to hang out all together and have classes that are just discussion based. Everyone is able to dance together and have a good time.

Guelas Monteiro(<https://www.facebook.com/guelas>) appreciated how “the people that are involved in DJing and instructing (...) work well together. That doesn’t always happen in every festival that you come to. (...) Learning, and positive energy can happen. Those are very closely connected. If it’s not a good environment it’s hard for you to learn anything or take anything away from it.”

- Q&A

A question session or panel discussion is becoming more common at kizomba festivals, but Oscar says “I think we were the first festival to start doing the Q&A at the end. One of my goals in the beginning was to break that divide between the instructors and students so it’s not just a one way type of interactions. They get a chance to ask whatever they can’t ask in the classroom. So now the instructors aren’t necessarily teaching, it’s a conversation. It’s like at a bonfire, where you can talk with the elders. It’s not these are the authorities, you just sit and listen. Instead, you can ask, you can give opinions, and the instructors get a chance to respond. At the end of the day the instructors are there because of these people.”

What About 2017?

(<https://www.facebook.com/DavidNavarroPhotography>)Oscar revealed, “I want to go to a bigger festival for the 5th year. We believe in growing things gradually. At every level you learn something that helps you at the next level. We’ve kept it small because we are learning things about events, promoting, venues. We figure things out before

Sawa Sawa becomes a huge festival,
so we aren't drowning.

"So now for the next one we can start
growing things bigger."

Maybe you'll want to be a part of it,
too!

