

**SOBRIELO PHILIP  
GENE MICHAEL**

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**24 YEARS**

**SOUL DANCERS**

'I was into Michael Jackson', says Philip, 'at the age of 16' His mother asked him to choreograph a dance to the song, Smooth Criminal, his first, and it became a rage. Michael Jackson himself would be impressed. It is easy to be a fan of Sobrielo Philip MICHAEL Gene too, right Mr. MJ?

Hear this story now. Philip's mother taught line dance when step sheets were unheard of and music had to be rewinded repeatedly till the right beat and notes were traced for the danceto begin. With an uncle who played country western pop, an aunt who danced with him since he was 5, and a mother who was the pioneer of line dance in Singapore, Philip inhaled music and dance from an early age. Enviably initiation into the art. The floor and him have a unique bond.

He has worked with the Salvation Army, been employed with food chains, owned a hotel, been with a cleaning agency, and gainfully so. A potpourri of engagements add to the uniqueness of his journey through all of which, he continued improving himself as a dancer. He has believed in working his way up, from cleaning rubbish bins to owning stores. Desk jobs do not appeal to him. He struggles to keep line dance afloat amidst changing tastes in his country, and maintains part time involvement with other jobs to keep his sanity.

*Ever heard of the axiom, mixed race marriages produce multi talented children? Indian and Eurasian genes come down from the Grandparents.*

We know the 'Michael' in him. But wait. 'Dress to be a celebrity' was the theme for an evening at the Dance Explosion at Vegas. An event where he was expected to walk in as Michael Jackson, as Jackie too expected him to, he did the unexpected and of course no one recognised him. He found a pretty dress with peacock feathers in his Salvation army box, a hairpiece from a mannequin. Emily, sister of Amy Glass, worked her magic with make up. There was a Christina Aguilera that evening, meeting and moving around freely and what a charming masquerade. Another time in a Streamline class, he taught Dildaara and substituted for Alison, as her sister Phillison.

He talks about an embarrassing moment he can laugh about in retrospect. He remembers that he was in his Michael Jackson avatar at a big event. The switching of costumes had to be in a snap second and he forgot to zip up his pants before he entered stage. He soon knew what was amiss, continued to put up a great show, and after the performance, when people asked him off stage, he pretended to be surprised. What would you do?

Everything and everybody, good or bad, that he met with, has been a part of his growth. 'Every fall that I took, every friend who pulled me up, every home I was invited to' helped. He feels blessed to be

where he is and it has not been the most equable ride.

He speaks of countries where line dance has transitioned immensely to take on the local folk flavour and sometimes cannot be recognised as line dance. This worries him.

His heart fills with pride when anyone and everyone dances to sequences written by him. Who does not want every dance floor to know their dances, he asks. Understanding a greater range of responses helps him with his compositions. He is particular about maintaining loyalty to the form of music. Borrowing hip hop dance steps, for country music, is being promiscuous for instance and an inappropriate mix.

He is firm in his belief that just as his predecessors knew when to take the backseat and push young talent ahead, all in the industry must be sensitive to this. He likes to encourage relatively fresh and unknown talent. Not expecting anything in return, is part of his mental furniture.

'Don't doubt it, believe it', he speaks convincingly about how our line dance instructors across countries have benefitted from the LDF. 'I tell my students often that the love of dance keeps them mentally and physically healthy'. The LDF Reach Out programme of Mental Health Awareness is here to tell you, you do not have to 'suffer in silence'.

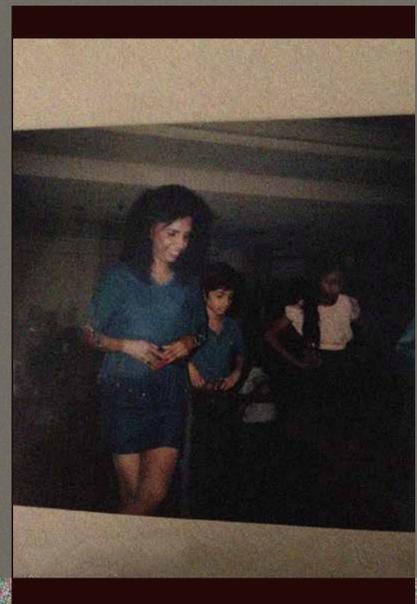
Trust me, do not judge me, says Philip with humility. This makes him happy. His dances have participated in competitions, he has had his share of recognition and nominations, he has traveled far and wide, and when his young friends were partying, to his mother's disbelief, he adopted two boys. The older of the two, now 25, has started working after completing his graduation.

He says he could retire any time, and this year he celebrates his 40th Sorry, but your line dancer friends would like to dance with you, a little longer.



Guyton Mundy and Max Perry are stars he looks up to for inspiration. Under them, other genres like hip hop and ballroom influenced line dance in such a way that the sanctity of the form was maintained. For a long time it was hard for people to comprehend that this was a variation in line dance. For them it was not country enough in essence.

Guyton's style had a lasting impression on him and he felt committed to this variant in his classes back home. Though people might not remember this, he says, he tried to follow in his footsteps and be the Guyton Mundy of Singapore. Criticism hindered him, and his students' method of working for some years. He speaks admiringly of leading edge work done by pioneers like Rob Fowler and others, Jo Thomson, Rachael Mceknaney and Shane McKeever in this big wide world of dance.



Once upon a Time

BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER  
BY MONICA BHASIN

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