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A South Bronx Latin Music Tale

ROBERTA L. SINGER AND ELENA MARTÍNEZ

When the story of Latin popular music (salsa) is told in popular and scholarly writings, the South Bronx is consistently overlooked despite the critical role it played in the development of that music. From the late 1940s through the early 1970s Hunts Point, Longwood, and Mott Haven were thriving Puerto Rican communities where an explosion of musical activity and creativity was taking place. This article examines the confluence of people and places that created an environment for the growth of Latin music in the South Bronx. While highlighting the sites that provided a locus for performers to adapt and reinterpret predominantly Afro-Cuban music forms and styles to express their urban South Bronx reality, the work reveals the symbiotic relationship between music, place and community; issues of identity are an underlying theme but are not the central focus of the work.

[Key words: Salsa, Bronx, place, Latin Music, mambo, New York City]

ABSTRACT

People from the Bronx would go downtown to the Palladium. That was the apex, the mecca, the place. But what was good about the Bronx is that it...developed its own clubs, so everybody wanted to go there! The Bronx was HIP, the Bronx was where you went to DANCE. The Bronx always had its own style; it’s always had its own vibrancy.

Percussionist Jim Centeno
(Martínez 1999b)

I refer to is as...maybe... I could say... mushrooms.... It’s like a growth of something that comes out of the Earth and it’s there. Well, out of the Bronx sprung forth so many Latin musicians.

Timbalero Joe Rodríguez
(Martínez 2000e)

Introduction:
Popular and scholarly writings about the development of what came to be called “salsa” in the late 1960s overlook the importance of the South Bronx. Starting in the post-WWII era and continuing through the early 1970s, the Hunts Point, Longwood, and Mott Haven neighborhoods were thriving Puerto Rican communities in the post-WWII era and continuing through the early 1970s, the Hunts Point, Longwood, and Mott Haven neighborhoods were thriving Puerto Rican communities. The work reveals a locus for performers to adopt, adapt, and reinterpret predominantly Afro-Cuban music forms and styles to express their urban South Bronx reality. The work examines the confluence of people and places that created an environment for the growth of Latin music in the South Bronx, highlighting the venues that provided so many Latin musicians.

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Timbalero Joe Rodríguez
(Martínez 2000e)
outward/upward movement can be understood in the historical context of “white flight” as Puerto Rican communities expanded. Additionally, tenements and single-family homes throughout the East and South Bronx were razed and then replaced with public housing projects. In the South Bronx the New York City Housing Authority built the “largest concentration of public housing” in the United States; the area ended up with 96 public housing buildings (Jonnes 2002: 118–9).

For Puerto Ricans from the Island and other parts of the city, the South Bronx represented upward mobility. Its attractions included wide avenues and streets and affordable housing; moreover, it was close to El Barrio; three subway lines and a host of bus routes converged in the area; there were stores where one could find all one’s needs for daily life; there were movie houses, theaters, and clubs for entertainment; and light manufacturing provided some employment. The physical infrastructure for the growth of an economically sound, socially lively, and culturally rich community was already in place.

**Place Matters**

People invest a broad range of values in places and localities. Belonging, identity, and meaning are aspects of the human experience that depend in large measure on place. Places are the physical dimension of our lives; home for our traditions and memories. Places provide us with the ability to store history and anchor cultural traditions; they bring economic, social, and cultural vitality to neighborhoods. Yet despite the critical importance of place, few among us are consciously aware that we have—and are grounded by—a sense of place. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan notes that a “sense of place is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as the sunrise and sunset, of work and play” (in Ryden 1993: 38).

Within the past decade, the relationship between place and expressive culture has been explored by scholars in ethnomusicology and folklore (Ryden 1993; Stokes 1994a). “Place” can be a specific venue, a neighborhood, or a city, state, or nation. Whatever the unit of measurement, as students of culture we are better able to understand music as social experience and grasp its meaning for the practitioners and their communities when we give locality and place equal status; when we recognize that musical events evoke and organize “collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity” (Stokes 1994a: 3). Stokes even goes so far as to assert that “social experience which is not tied to locality becomes difficult to grasp with the techniques...and analysis at our disposal” (Stokes 1994b: 98).

In investigating the “Liverpool Sound” Cohen finds that merely speaking a name is sufficient to conjure up a complex of musical styles, approaches, sights, and sounds
Avenue, was a Jewish catering hall; Teatro Puerto Rico, 490 E. 138th Street, was a boxing arena for the local Irish and Italian communities; the Tritons Club at 961 Southern Boulevard was built on the second floor of the former Spooner Theatre, named after actress Cecil Spooner, whose company was considered “the toast of the Bronx”; the Tropicana at 915 Westchester Avenue was originally Prospect Pool, which also housed a traditional Russian/Turkish svitzbud (bath); and the Hunts Point Palace at 963 Southern Boulevard was popular among the Jewish, Irish, and Italian communities that lived in the area. There was even a Swiss settlement in the Bronx, whose prominent cultural society, Schweizwe Maennerchor Winkelreid, used the immense dance hall to hold the largest, most popular masquerade ball in the Bronx.

Other ballrooms, clubs, dance halls, after-hours spots and theaters recycled from earlier times were included as the glamorous Tropicana Club; the elegant Hunts Point Palace; Club Tropicoro, which was owned by boxer Carlos Ortiz; Longwood Casino, a former social club; Public School 52, which nurtured musicians and held weekly dances; and the venues created for and by the community such as the small but jumping Tritons and Alhambra clubs and the Casalegre and Casa Amadeo record stores.

As the Puerto Rican communities in the South Bronx were cohering in the late 1940s, mambo burst onto the New York cultural scene with a force that lasted on and off for more than 20 years, transitioning from mambo to cha-cha, pachanga, Latin bugalu, and salsa. By the early 1950s “mambo mania” had struck the Americas and much of Europe. Everyone was dancing to the mambo beat. In the U.S., especially in New York’s Italian, Irish, and Jewish communities, wedding and bar mitzvah bands bad to be able to play at least one mambo. By 1954 mainstream music icons such as Rosemary Clooney and Perry Como were cutting pop versions of mambo, and one could buy mambo kits, which included a record, maracas, and a plastic sheet with foot prints that was to be placed on the floor to learn the mambo steps. This mambo phenomenon would be just the beginning of the role the Longwood-Hunts Point-Mott Haven communities would play in the creation, innovation, and dissemination of a New York Latin music sound.

A special music scene was unfolding there, different even from that continuing to take place in El Barrio, which by the 1920s had become the largest, most thriving Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York. Hundreds of Latino musicians lived in the Bronx. Most were Puerto Ricans who had either moved there from El Barrio or directly from Puerto Rico, or were born and/or raised there; a good many were or would become internationally known. Many were affected by the creative bridge through which Afro-Cuban rhythms and styles such as son, mambo, and cha-cha were transformed into the distinct New York Latin sound that was labeled salsa in the late 1960s.

Latin music legends who called the area home at one time or another included the three “Mambo Kings”—Tito Puente, Machito, and Tito Rodríguez—as well as...
and we had not even finalized an arrangement or anything. And we knew it was going to be a hit because you see the sentiment of the people (Martínez 2000c).

Another venue inextricably linked to the development and popularity of the pachanga is the Triton after-hours club where Johnny Pacheco improvised the “Bronx hop” a step that became part of the dance fad. And, just as the Palladium in mid-town Manhattan was known as the home of mambo, the Bronx’s Caravana Club became known as the home of pachanga.

Bronx venues, especially the Hunts Point Palace, are often compared with venues in Manhattan, especially the Palladium. One aspect of the Palladium that is consistently raised is that it was the one of the few places where people of all colors, nationalities, and classes came together and were accepted—as long as they could dance. Other downtown venues—clubs, hotel lounges—were not as welcoming of people of color, whether performer or audience. But all our interviewees agree that the Bronx clubs, dance halls, theaters and after-hours places were at least as egalitarian as the Palladium, and certainly more tolerant of less experienced dancers.

Bronx Venue Case Studies

THEATERS

Theaters, either for dramatic works or vaudeville-style shows, held great importance to the emerging Hispanic and Latino communities in New York City. Like other newcomers before them, the Bronx’s newly arrived Latinos both converted existing theaters for their own use and used other venues for their own affairs. In large measure the theaters helped ground the community in dealing with the unfamiliar present by presenting its familiar island past. Moreover, the shows served as an awakening for many of the Bronx’s burgeoning musicians even if they didn’t understand or appreciate it at the time. They considered many of the espectáculos, which featured Puerto Rico’s jíbaro music, as “hick,”—that is, corny and not relevant to their urban Bronx experience. Even so, going to these shows was a family and community tradition; being with one’s parents and grandparents offered an historical and cultural link to island heritage and integrated the community. Given the community’s complex and multidimensional relationship with the theaters, it is no surprise that performers and audience alike express a deep nostalgia for the theaters and their shows.

Teatro Puerto Rico

“El Puerto Rico fué un teatro que en esa época, representaba un pedazo del alma borícua y como era también el maximo centro artístico.” [Teatro Puerto Rico, in that era, represented a piece of the Puerto Rican soul and was also the greatest artistic center.]

John Castro, poet, writer, and actor, who worked as an emcee at Teatro Puerto Rico in the late 1940s and early ‘50s, speaking of la farándula at the theater. [ 185 ]

John Castro is referring to one of the most important venues for the Puerto Rican community. This theater on 138th Street in the Bronx was home to some of the most popular shows of teatro de variadades as well as musical performances. On any weekend at Teatro Puerto Rico, lines of three generations of families snaked around the corner to catch Spanish-language variety shows. It was “la familia away from la isla. This was el otro lado del charco” remembers community activist George Rodríguez (Martínez 1999c). Originally the Forum Theater, the name was changed in 1948 to Teatro Puerto Rico, reflecting the growing Puerto Rican presence in the area. The theater’s “golden era” lasted from 1947–1956, although shows were presented through the 1960s and after. Teatro Puerto Rico, seating over 2,200 people, became the center of la farándula in New York City. Mexican entertainers and cinema celebrities were major attractions. In 1949 Argentinian singer and actress Libertad LaMarque headlined at the theater, which took in more than $40,000 in one week. Cue magazine reported that in New York City that week only the Broadway shows Kiss Me Kate and As the Girls Go grossed more.

At ypical night at Teatro Puerto Rico featured one or two Spanish-language films (primarily Mexican) and a star attraction; occasionally stars featured in the film shown that day, such as Cesar Romero, Cantinflas, or Jorge Negrete, took part in some of the comedy skits or talked about their life and career. The managing director of the theater was Carlos Montalban, older brother of actor Ricardo Montalban, whose connections
in Hollywood helped attract big stars to the theater. Other performers included Juan Boria, a _declamador_ of Puerto Rico’s _poesía negrōide_, tango singers, flamenco dancers, and musicians such as Bobby Capó, Ruth Fernández, Beny Moré, and Trío Los Panchos. Shows featuring _la música jíbara_ were offered during the Christmas season. They were massive extravaganzas featuring Puerto Rico’s greatest _troadores_, including Ramito and Chuito de Bayamón. Even a burro was rented for the performances, heightening the nostalgic connection to home. Novelty acts included a bullwhip performance, Mr. Tiny—a mambo-dancing Chihuahua—and child prodigy performers. José Feliciano, whose family moved from Lares, Puerto Rico, to El Barrio in 1950, got his start when he debuted at the Teatro Puerto Rico in 1954 at the age of nine. A popular feature of the shows was the theater’s chorus line consisting of 12 women (one of whom, according to John Castro, was a former Moulin Rouge dancer) who performed between acts. And a weekly feature was _La Familia Cómica_, performing skits modeled on American burlesque.

Numerous theaters hosted Latin music events either as part of the variety show or as performances during intermission between two movies. These included Teatro Borinquen (754 Westchester Avenue), Teatro Isla (Westchester and Tiffany Street), Teatro Art (1077 Southern Boulevard), Teatro President (827 Westchester Avenue), and Teatro Prospect (671 Prospect Avenue), to name just a few. Pianist Ken Rosa remembers seeing one of his first performances at a theater:

One day as a child I went to the movies at the RKO Franklin. The first of two main features finished and the curtains closed. I didn’t know what was going on, but in front of me these teenagers start to applaud. The curtains open again and there’s a band on stage. At first I’m angry because I wanted the other movie. But here comes this fella dancing out on stage from the wings and he’s playing maracas, and everybody’s well dressed, particularly the person coming to the microphone and his piano player. And he starts to sing and I was totally speechless. Wide-eyed, enchanted, totally captivated. What a voice! And later I found out that it was Marcelino Guerra and his pianist Gilberto Ayala. They became my favorite band (Martínez 2000f).

Benny Bonilla also remembers being inspired by a theater show:

Boulevard Theater, yeah, they used to have amateur night,
During the mambo era the Hunts Point Palace became a key performance spot for some of the biggest bands, primarily because it was one of the largest venues in the Bronx, holding 2,500 people and boasting a big bandstand. Musician Ray Santos claims: “They were doing a Palladium Bronx, that was the idea” (Carp 1995). This “Palladium of the Bronx” was a popular place. “The Hunts Point Palace was my favorite place because it was where they had the biggest affairs. People dressed sharp as a tack. Beautiful women. Everybody looked great and they all came to dance. And the music was being created as you breathed” (Orlando Marín interview, Martínez 2000c). Architecturally, the Hunts Point Palace was far more beautiful than the Palladium. People remember it as a very elegant ballroom with a beautiful façade, large and polished dance floor, balconies, and elaborate ornamentation. It was at the big dance venues such as the Hunts Point Palace that promoters such as Federico Pagani began producing dances featuring as many as six bands in one night, playing one set after the other.

**Caravana Club**

The Caravana Club, located next door to the celebrated Bronx Opera House near the Hub at 145th Street, was opened in the summer of 1959 by Gil and Sonny Merced along with Federico Pagani (who produced events at the Palladium, Hunts Point Palace, and elsewhere). Almost immediately the Caravana became one of the most important dance venues in the Latin music scene, presenting major bands every week. Recorded live, Charlie Palmieri’s *Pachanga at the Caravana* (1961) increased the club’s popularity and established its reputation as “home of the pachanga.” A group of Caravana club patrons even formed a dance team—Los Pachangueros—which went on to perform at other venues in the city and Long Island. Joe Rodriguez, *timbalero* with Charlie Palmieri y La Duboney, remembers how the album came to be recorded at the Caravana: “Charlie made a new charanga [band] which wound up...being the house band there for awhile. At the time the new so-called rhythm, *pachanga*, came out. And since he was the band at the Caravana, Alberto Santiago [of Alegre Records] wanted to make an album featuring Charlie” (Martínez 2000e). In writing about the Caravana and the “new rhythm” *Ballroom Dance Magazine* stated that “As early as
it met with success in 1960, when José Fajardo recorded it and then, along with his band and dancers, played at the New York Palladium. During this time Charlie Palmieri’s La Duboney orchestra and, later, Johnny Pacheco’s charanga, were having great success at clubs such as the Caravana in the Bronx. When the pachanga dance craze hit in 1961 it was so popular that numerous articles appeared in publications such as the New York Times, Ballroom Dance Magazine, and El Diario. Though the mainstream press situated the start of the pachanga craze at the Palladium, others correctly point out the critical role of the Bronx and the Tritons and Caravana clubs in maintaining the popularity of this dance. Johnny Pacheco may not have originated the dance, but he was so closely associated with it that he was named El Rey de la Pachanga (King of the Pachanga).

In an interview in El Diario, April 3, 1961, Charlie Palmieri commented that the choreography associated with the dance started at the Tritons Club, passed on to the Caravana Club, and then was brought to the Palladium. Johnny Pacheco and other musicians such as Orlando Marín maintain that it was at the Tritons that Pacheco who, while waving his handkerchief (this act later became a common feature of the Palladium), started doing fast, jumping steps that were copied by the audience. El Diario confirms this in an article, “¿Así nació La Pachanga?” (Camacho 1961: 4):

De una cosa están todos seguros, que el estilo en que hoy los jóvenes neoyorquinos bailan la pachanga es genuino del Bronx. El “brinquito” que caracteriza a la pachanga no se exportó de ningún país. Se originó aquí. [Of one thing everyone is sure, that the style of pachanga that is danced today by the young Nuyoricans is from the Bronx. The little jump that characterizes the pachanga is not from another country. It originated here.]

This Bronx-born style soon became popular with dancers and venues throughout the city. There are stories of passers-by walking past the car showroom below the Palladium, which was located on the second floor, and seeing the glass in the storefront window flex in and out to the stomping and jumping of the dancers upstairs; or of persons watching the ceiling pulsate in Gray’s Drugstore, also located downstairs from the Palladium (Lucchese 1961: 7). “I remember in the Palladium they would dance the pachanga there and that place would shake. That chandelier, I would say, holy cow, this floor is going to give.... I remember... that chandelier had a better beat than the band” (Adolfo Maldonado interview, Martínez 2000b).
**Tropicana Club**

Prior to opening as a Latin music nightclub, the Tropicana (known as the Tropical Paradise in the Bronx), was the Prospect Pool and traditional Russian/Turkish shtetl (bath). Later, in response to the change in the neighborhood’s ethnic make-up, it was converted to a Latin music nightclub. In 1945, under the ownership of Cuban restauranteurs, the brothers Manolo and Tony Alfaro, the Tropicana became the most glamorous nightclub in the Bronx. Inspired by the glitzy Tropicana Cabaret in Havana, it was the mecca for Latinos seeking floor shows with a chorus line, first-rate dance bands, and first-class Cuban cuisine. Two memorable and influential bookings were Gilberto Valdés’ *charanga*, which played as early as 1951 and is the first known stateside *charanga* band, and Conjunto Casino, from Cuba, which played in 1953. Johnny Pacheco, who lived in Mott Haven, later played with Valdés a few blocks from his home at Puerto Rico Casino. However, he was inspired seeing Valdés perform at the Tropicana: “And it turned out that being I loved the *charanga*, I started playing with him in the club. At one point he was the house band at the Tropicana Club. I used to go there when I was very young to listen to the group. It was the only *charanga* in New York” (Carp 1997: 5). These engagements foreshadowed the *cha-cha-cha* craze of the mid-1950s and the success of Charlie Palmieri’s own *charanga* in the late 1950s.

**NEIGHBORHOOD HANGOUTS**

The commercial success and international popularity of what came to be called salsa seem to have overshadowed its community-based, grassroots beginnings. The streets, record stores, living rooms, apartment house stoops, rooftops, and candy stores were places where aspiring musicians learned from each other and from local musicians who lived in the area. Young musicians organized their own bands and performed wherever they could find a place to play. Orlando Marín describes trying to get a band together as a teenager:

So I was asking people, ‘Gee, I need somebody to play piano.’ And I said to a kid who lived on Kelly Street, which was a block from Dawson where I lived. And the kid says to me, ‘Oh there’s a young kid over there that lives down the block and his name is Eddie. He’s the brother of Charlie Palmieri. He plays piano... . Oh yeah and we were joined by a young singer that Eddie found who lived near him, Joe Quijano....Now one thing that’s important in my career was that I grew up in a neighborhood where one block (I lived on Dawson and Longwood Avenue) to the left was a great piano player by the name of Joe Loco.
The Melrose House was really a community center and they used to let people hang out during the day. Then once a week they used to let this band rehearse there. It was Al Santiago's. And that was another place where Eddie Palmieri would go. All the musicians, they would go there. That was the incubator. What I'm saying is the Melrose House was another melting pot where all the musicians would go and hang out and talk or meet. If one guy needed a guy on conga or a bongocero, you could recommend someone or you could ask for the job yourself. (Benny Bonilla interview, Martínez 1999a).
RECORD STORES

Casa Amadeo

Other important, but often overlooked sites that influenced the development of Latin music were the numerous music stores located in Latino neighborhoods. New migrants from Puerto Rico could walk past stores and hear the sounds of their island streaming from the speakers; musicians gathered at the stores looking for gigs; and record companies looking for new artists and groups to record sought advice from store proprietors. Historian Virginia Sánchez Korrol notes:

As a business venture the small music store spread quickly throughout the *colonia hispana* and came to symbolize the Latin settlements as the candy store had characterized other ethnic immigrant neighborhoods. Emanating from these establishments were the rhythms of el *Son, la Guaracha*, Puerto Rican plenas and *aguinaldos*, combined with the romantic *boleros* and *danzas* (1983: 80–1).

The Bronx had its share of record stores—Casa Hernández, Casalegre, La Cigueña—even Tito Puente’s uncle Santos owned a store on Longwood Avenue, which sold, among other things, sheet music and records. Music stores were integral elements of the burgeoning Latin music scene in the 1920s and ’30s, continuing throughout the 1950s mambo era and the salsa era of the 1960s and ’70s. Historian Ruth Glasser (1995) describes the importance of the record store for musicians who went there looking for gigs; additionally, major record companies such as Victor and Columbia depended on the store’s owners to act as “middlemen” in obtaining musicians for recordings and to gauge the community’s musical tastes.
SOCIAL CLUBS

Social organizations have historically served a variety of important functions for immigrant groups arriving in New York City. Within the Puerto Rican community the earliest organizations were mutual aid societies formed by tobacco workers (Sánchez Korrol 1983:136). Other organizations were geared toward particular activities or social services. Overall, the social clubs provided a wide range of service and support for incoming migrants.

The neighborhood clubs or hometown groups of the 1920s and ’30s evolved at a time when the survival of the individual and the community was at it most tenuous. The hometown club provided migrants with an oasis in an otherwise hostile territory, served to link the New York environment with the village or island towns they had left behind, and in general cushioned the inevitable cultural adjustment made by new immigrants (Sánchez Korrol 1983: 158).

Club Cubano Interamericano

Club Cubano Interamericano was originally situated at a small site at 914 Prospect Avenue at 162nd Street. Since there was not much room for a bandstand that could fit a charanga or conjunto, the club moved to 671–681 Prospect Avenue, the site of the former Chalet D’Or. Although it was primarily a Cuban social club, the “Interamericano” in the name was a conscious statement of the inclusion of Puerto Ricans in the club.

Much of the impetus for founding this club came from a migration of Cubans from Tampa, Florida (most of whom were of Afro-Cuban descent and worked in the cigar industry there) during the 1930s and continuing through the early 1940s. By late 1945 there was a substantial enough Tampeño community in the Bronx to form Club Cubano. It was a continuation of the Tampa Afro-Cuban concept of worker’s mutual self-help organizations. The club evolved out of a 1945 fund-raising campaign to celebrate Antonio Maceo, a national hero in the Cuban war for independence. The money was used to hire a hall and host a banquet, but the event was so successful it led to the formation of the social club.

The second site of the club had a large dance floor and regularly booked Latin music bands, including Arsenio Rodriguez and Orquesta Broadway, and Ray Barretto. Members of the club organized public dances on a regular basis. Attendees, both Cuban and Puerto Rican, formed a close-knit community, which has continued to come together annually for 30 years at a reunion dance called Baile de Mamoncillo (named after a Caribbean fruit). Since Club Cubano closed about 10 years ago, the gathering has been meeting annually at Bohemian Hall in Queens.

Conclusion

The process of systematically documenting the story of Latin music in the South Bronx has highlighted the centrality of social clubs as a critical component of the Latin music scene.


