

In the Footsteps of Mambo Kings

By NINA SIEGAL

GROWING up in the South Bronx and East Harlem in the 1930's and 40's, Miguel Angel Amadeo witnessed the first golden age of Latin music in New York, from the imported Puerto Rican ballads known as bolero, played at house parties, to the dance and music craze that crystallized in downtown clubs as New York mambo.

As a teenager, he says, he would run down Prospect Avenue in the Bronx hoping to collect a few snippets of wisdom whenever Rafael Hernandez, one of Puerto Rico's most famous popular composers, was visiting his sister's music store, Casa Hernandez.

In 1969 he bought the store from Ms. Hernandez and renamed it Casa Amadeo. Now, from behind the glass counter at his legendary shop, he is part of a resurgence in the music's popularity, and a new set of Latin music aficionados arrive daily seeking his insight into the music and its history.

"New York-style salsa is my bread and butter," Mr. Amadeo said. "I'm 67 years old, and I've been 50 years in the same business. Most of the time when people come into the store, they can't remember the title of the song. They'll sing me a little line, and 80 percent of the time I can tell them what it is."

Turn the dial on your radio three times these days, and chances are you will tune in to at least one Latin artist, whether it's Marc Anthony, Jennifer Lopez or Carlos Santana. Each time a Ricky Martin makes it into the mainstream, scores of new converts to Latin music are born. And at least a few will become intrigued by the musical influences that shaped today's sound.

New York City has long been a crucible for the Latin-American music now known as salsa, a term that encompasses a variety of styles including mambo, merengue and rumba. The city also wins credit, in many quarters, for transforming big-band mambo, the music and dance form popularized at the Palladium in the 1950's by the Mambo Kings: Tito Puente, Machito and Tito Rodriguez. And it lays claim to Cubop, a fusion of bebop's brass and Afro-Cuban percussion, born of collaborations between jazz and Latin musicians in Harlem and downtown clubs. Some music historians say that New York is responsible for the various dance crazes that went along with Latin music forms, like the cha-cha in the 1950's and the pachanga a decade later.

This year City Lore, a nonprofit cultural group,



and the Municipal Art Society, a preservationist group, have created the South Bronx Latin Music Project to begin documenting the music's roots in New York. As part of the project, historians and ethnomusicologists working for Place Matters, a program of City Lore, are interviewing scores of Latin musicians, collecting oral histories and researching the places where salsa was forged.

They are putting together a map of Latin music landmarks in East Harlem and the South Bronx, from mambo to salsa clubs, so that future generations will know where they once stood. And this fall, in conjunction with the Point Community Development Corporation in Hunts Point, they will begin offering tours through the 92nd Street Y. The schedule for the tours, which are expected to begin in October, has not been set. But it isn't hard to explore the heritage of Latin music on your own.

Since the two neighborhoods where you will find most sites are separated by the Harlem River, the tour should be planned in two legs. The first, in East Harlem, can easily be managed on foot and takes about an hour. In the South Bronx, traveling by car can be practical; the sites are more dispersed, though most can be reached easily from three subway stops on the No. 2 and No. 5 line. It is best to plan the trip for a Saturday, since the music stores are closed on Sundays.

On a muggy summer day, Angel Rodriguez, a drummer who runs the Hunts Point Academy of Music, picked up four Latinophiles at the 92nd Street Y in a small van for a trial run of the tour through East Harlem and the South Bronx.

"This is history being made today," he said, turning backward in his seat, with a wide grin. "It took this long to document our movement."

Although the sites on the tour are grouped into two distinct areas, they represent a range of musical styles from the 1930's to the early 70's. What holds them together, said Roberta L. Singer, an ethnomusicologist and one of the two directors of the South Bronx Latin Music Project, is their contribution to the creation of a New York sound.

"Those places, over time, are where some of the best musicians from Cuba came to perform, and where New York Cubans and Puerto Ricans went to perform," she said. "And so they became the places where the New York Latino community created a sound based on the roots of the music, but relevant

Continued on Page 24

The New York Times

Weekend

In the Footsteps of Mambo Kings and Salsa Queens

Continued From Weekend Page 1

to their contemporary world." The tour begins in East Harlem, or El Barrio, where in the 1930's large numbers of new Puerto Rican immigrants created "a circuit of clubs, bars and theaters that produced the first generation of indigenous Latin band leaders playing for Latinos," John Storm Roberts wrote in "The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States" (Oxford University Press, 1979). Among them, he noted, were many "who were to be major stars of the U.S. Latin music's Golden Age."

The first stop, in East Harlem, is Machito Square, named after the singer and maracas player Frank Grillo, known as Machito, who is considered one of the inventors of Latin jazz. Machito, who grew up in a building on the southwest corner of 111th Street and Third Avenue, was known to hang out and trade musical ideas with other artists on the corner of 110th Street and Fifth Avenue, and played in many local venues. He went on to become one of the most influential and popular big-band leaders of the 1930's, and his band was a crucial link between Latin dance music and the innovations of jazz.

Houses of Worship

On the northwest corner of 110th Street and Fifth Avenue, just across the street from Central Park, is sprawling La Hermosa Church with its white stucco facade. This was once the Park Palace, one of East Harlem's hottest dance clubs, serving up boleros (romantic ballads), guaracha (a Cuban form with a chicka-chicka pulse), and charanga (Cuban-style music that accompanied the suave dance called the dancón) from the 1920's through the 50's. A large music hall upstairs could hold 1,500 people, and there was a smaller hall downstairs.

Many of Latin music's major venues in New York were converted to churches as their popularity waned. David M. Carp, a music archivist who is working with the Latin Music Project, said that when Latin music entered the mainstream with the mambo craze in the 1950's, some uptown Latin clubs lost their appeal for the young.

"Latin people who were born here wanted to find their own places and didn't want to go to the same places their parents and grandparents had gone to," he said. "There was less desire to go to an all-Spanish theater in your backyard."

Mr. Carp sees the purchases by church groups as a broad phenomenon, since many former clubs in central Harlem have also been converted into churches. He points out that many former clubs have been preserved as a result.

"Theaters turn easily into churches," he said, "and if you look at these old places now, many are remarkably similar inside to the way they were in their heyday."

Sounds of the Past

Turning back toward the center of El Barrio, you can find one of the neighborhood's oldest music stores, Casa Latina, at 151 East 116th Street. When the first Latin music recordings in New York were released on

78's, music aficionados would gather at this unassuming narrow shop on East Harlem's main street to get the first copies.

Just around the corner, at 1735 Madison Avenue, is the site where in 1927 Victoria Hernandez opened Almacenes Hernandez, which most historians believe was the first Puerto Rican-owned music and clothing store in El Barrio. Ms. Hernandez was the sister of the composer Rafael Hernandez. In the back of her tiny shop she gave piano lessons to several notable players, including the young Tito Puente and the pianist and bandleader Joe LoCo, who in the 1950's was known for Latinizing popular American tunes like "Blue Moon."

In 1939 Ms. Hernandez sold the store. (It is now a furniture store, but a sign bears the shop's old name.) Two years later, she opened Casa Hernandez, another music and clothing store, in the South Bronx.

While you're in the neighborhood, you can stop in at the Museo de la Salsa, a tiny museum devoted to the history of Puerto Rican and Nuyorican music in a bodega called Made in Puerto Rico. A small room in the back of the shop is packed with memorabilia, including a conga drum and jacket worn by Joe Cuba, a Latin jazz innovator; posters of early salsa concerts; and the trombone mouthpiece Mark Weinstein used during the recording of Eddie Palmieri's classic album "El Molestoso."

'The Entertainment Capital'

The second focus of the tour is a stretch of the South Bronx from Mott Haven to Hunts Point that became the center of Latin life in New York after World War II. With East Harlem overflowing in new immigrants, many Puerto Ricans and other Latinos began to move north to the Bronx, where landlords were offering inducements like a month of free rent to fill their vacant units. Among those who left El Barrio for the Bronx were some of the most prominent musicians of the era, including Ray Barretto and Hector Rodriguez, said Max Salazar, a music historian

and writer.

"That was the entertainment capital," Mr. Salazar said. "From the Hunts Point Palace, the Tropicana, the Caravana Club — they've seen the best performers from Puerto Rico, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic and Brazil, Peru. They would be transported here to perform for those audiences and they would always sell out."

Although many of the buildings are now shuttered or have been converted to churches or supermarkets, the facades convey a sense of their former grandeur.

The southernmost site on the tour is the former Teatro Puerto Rico, a family-oriented theater at 490 East 138th Street, at Brown Place, now the Iglesia Universal del Reino de Dios (although the sign also still says Teatro Puerto Rico). Regarded as the

Latino equivalent of the Apollo, it was once the hub of la farándula, a vaudeville-style package of Spanish-language events that began with singing, dancing and small bands or a chorus line, led into acrobatic, magic and contortionist acts, and ended with a movie double feature. The legacy of those spectacles lives on at the church, which presents Latin gospel music, with full jazz bands on its stage on Sundays.

Evolution of Salsa

The van headed northwest across the South Bronx toward the neighborhood known as the Hub, home to a group of clubs that were crucial to salsa's evolution. On 149th Street is the breathtakingly ornate Beaux-Arts Bronx Opera House, built in the 1910's, which, through various incarnations, was one of the most important Latin music sites in this neighborhood.

The terra cotta cornice and pilasters framing double-arched windows are now obscured by a meat market and the entrance to the Templo de Renovación Espiritual. But you can still get a sense of the size of the club,

which once had a magnificent auditorium with two balconies, a central skylight and a crystal chandelier.

When it was the Bronx Casino, regular performers included Tito Rodriguez, Charlie Palmieri and Johnny Pacheco. As the Caravana Club in the 1950's and 60's the theater was pivotal to the emergence of the pachanga dance craze; later it became El Cerromar, which held dances even while the Bronx was burning; then it was La Campaña. "It's where New York Nuyoricans made their mark," Mr. Rodriguez said.

To the north, up Longwood Avenue and beneath the Prospect Avenue elevated tracks, is Casa Amadeo, where the visitor might find Miguel Amadeo standing in front of painted portraits of the Puerto Rican composers Rafael Hernandez and Pedro Flores, and of Mr. Amadeo himself.

Continuing north toward Hunts Point, at 915 Westchester Avenue, you'll see the neglected former home of the Tropicana Club, originally a Turkish bathhouse named for the famous club in Havana. When Manolo and Tony Alfaro, two Cuban brothers, took over the space, they

covered the central pool with plexiglass so people could dance above the water (the pool has since been filled with cement, Mr. Rodriguez said) and put on grand floor shows accompanied by Cuban cuisine.

The final stretch of the tour includes Southern Boulevard, once known for a multitude of glamorous Latin nightclubs. There was the Tritons Club, where Al Santiago's Alegre All-Stars had a regular Tuesday night jam session; the Hunts Point Palace, the largest (with room for 2,500 people) and most famous of the South Bronx venues; and the Alhambra Supper Club, now gone.

Buying the Music

The tour doesn't offer many opportunities to venture inside the old clubs, since most are now closed, but three music stores along the way offer a sampling of the music that once filled those rooms. (You'll need cash, since Casa Amadeo doesn't accept credit cards.) Made in Puerto Rico sells only a few musical titles, but it has a good selection of music-related books in Spanish and in English that are hard to find elsewhere, and offers other nifty items direct from the island.

Casa Latina and Casa Amadeo are genuine troves of Latin music run by owners who can help a novice delve into the most obscure of obscure recordings. Mr. Amadeo's father was the popular Puerto Rican composer Alberto Amadeo, known as Titi, who played in clubs and at house parties in New York in the 1930's and 40's. Miguel followed in his father's footsteps and took up guitar and singing. As a teenager, he began writing songs, and now he has several hundred copyrights to his credit.

In the late 1950's and early 60's, he performed in trios, including Los Tres Reyes. He is received as a celebrity on his annual visits to his hometown, Bayamon, Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricans traveling in New York are known to make pilgrimages to his store, where they can buy music unavailable at home.

"He's what we call a community historian," said Ms. Singer, "someone who's of the community and an archivist of the culture.

"People go to him for ideas on a tune they want to perform or record," she said. "He's very humble and extraordinarily knowledgeable. He knew and knows everyone. So if you go in there and say, 'I don't know anything about it, but I want some of that romantic ballad music from the 50's,' he'll know what to give you."

Mr. Amadeo is one of many people whose memories offer a link to the music's past. Although many of the clubs covered by the tour no longer exist, a surprising number of East Harlem and Bronx residents still talk about them as if they closed weeks ago. As you walk the streets gazing upon the landmarks, let them regale you with tales of the old street life, their cultural lodestones and, above all, the people who made the music.



Photograph by Lázaro Romero/The New York

At Museo de la Salsa, above, Joe Cuba beats a drum, watched by a statue of the singer La India. Left the former Teatro Puerto Rico.



Latin Landmarks

A self-guided tour of Latin music landmarks in East Harlem and the South Bronx, based on the tour planned by City Lore and the Point Community Development Corporation. Information on tours to be offered this fall by the 92nd Street Y and the Point Community Development Corporation: (718) 542-4139.

East Harlem

1. **MACHITO SQUARE**, 111th Street and Third Avenue. Machito lived on the southwest corner.
2. **PARK PALACE**, now La Hermosa Church. 5 East 110th Street.
3. **CASA LATINA**, 151 East 116th Street; (212) 427-6062. Music store. Hours: Mondays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.
4. **ALMACENES HERNANDEZ SITE**, now a furniture store. 1735 Madison Avenue, between 115th and 116th Streets.
5. **MADE IN PUERTO RICO**, with Mu-

seo de la Salsa. 2127 Third Avenue, between 116th and 117th Streets; (212) 472-2652 or (212) 289-1368. Hours: Tuesdays through Sundays, noon to 7 p.m.

South Bronx

6. **TEATRO PUERTO RICO**, now Iglesia Universal del Reino de Dios. 490 East 138th Street, at Brown Place.
7. **BRONX OPERA HOUSE**, formerly the Bronx Casino, El Cerromar and La Campaña; now Templo de Renovacion Espiritual. 442 East 149th Street, near Third Avenue.
8. **CASA AMADEO**, formerly Casa Hernandez. 786 Prospect Avenue, at Longwood Avenue; (718) 328-6896. Hours: Mondays through Saturdays, 10:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.
9. **TROPICANA CLUB**, now shuttered. 915 Westchester Avenue.
10. **TRITONS CLUB**, now closed. 961 Southern Boulevard.
11. **HUNTS POINT PALACE**, now closed. 953 Southern Boulevard.
12. **ALHAMBRA SUPPER CLUB**, now closed. 936 Southern Boulevard.