

# harlem is... MUSIC

## *The Latin Tradition*

## Ritmos de Harlem

The sounds of Latin music have filled the streets of Harlem for many years. Going back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Puerto Rican and Cuban exiles and immigrant artisan families began settling in uptown neighborhoods, rhythms of the danzón and bolero, the son and the plena were already a soundscape familiar to residents of the area. Through the decades more and more Afro-Caribbean musicians came to live there, and to perform in the many clubs and dancehalls. Prominent Cuban and Puerto Rican composers and instrumentalists like Alberto Socarrás and Juan Tizol formed an integral part of the major orchestras of the 1930s and 40s, and even before that the foremost Latin American composer, Afro-Puerto Rican Rafael Hernández, was writing some of his classic songs while living in Harlem. His sister Victoria opened one of the first Latin music record stores on 113<sup>th</sup> Street in 1927.

It was Langston Hughes who in the 1930s spoke of “Cuban Harlem, little pockets of tropical dreams in alien tongues,” and of “Magnet Harlem, pulling an Arthur Schomburg from Puerto Rico....” Harlem has always had its Latino flavor, and popular music has been one of the key ingredients in that delicious mix of peoples and cultures. Perhaps the strongest testimony to that presence may be seen in the lives of the great Afro-Cuban bandleader Mario Bauzá and his brother-in-law Frank Grillo, known to the world as Machito. When he recalled his

arrival in the United States Bauzá would always be sure to emphasize that it was in Harlem that he felt most at home, and where he chose to live most of his adult life. He was warmly welcomed by the African American community, even more so than in his native Cuba with its own strongly racist environment. He and Machito, along with the premier female vocalist of the time, Machito’s sister Graciela Pérez, pioneered the fusion of Afro-Cuban son and mambo with jazz, especially big band and then bebop. The result came to be known as Cubop, an indisputable musical product of Harlem.

Already in those years, celebrated venues like the Cotton Club, the Savoy Ballroom, and the Apollo Theater witnessed historic performances of major Latin bands. Mario Bauzá in fact was musical director of the great Chick Webb band, and played with Fletcher Henderson and other jazz greats. Though the most heralded of all locales of the time was the Palladium Ballroom in midtown, these uptown Harlem clubs, along with the very popular Park Plaza on Fifth Avenue and 110<sup>th</sup> Streets, attested to the integral Latino musical and dance presence in Harlem in those dynamic times. And when do-wop was the rage among the country’s youth Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers made history with their biggest hit “Why Do Fools Fall In Love” composed by one of the “teenagers” Puerto Rican Herman Santiago.

But it was the subsequent genera-

tion, during the 1960s and 70s, that established a uniquely East Harlem Puerto Rican musical idiom expressive of the life of the first New York-born children of what is known as East Harlem or El Barrio. In this post-mambo era the young Nuyorican musicians living in that neighborhood went on to create new musical genres such as the Latin Boogaloo and then salsa, movements that they shared with their African American neighbors. So close was the tie that many young African Americans in Harlem came to master the musical and dance idioms of New York Latinos. Henry “Pucho” Brown, master timbales player and bandleader of his band, the Latin Soul Brothers, since the mid-1960s and still active today, is a vibrant example among many of an African American Harlemiter achieving international renown for his contagious Latin soul rhythms. When performing he never fails to mention that his supreme teacher was none other than Harlem-born legend Tito Puente.

Down to the innovations of today’s hip hop with its origins in Sugar Hill, the ongoing and lively presence of Latin music in Harlem attests irrefutably to Langston’s “Melting pot Harlem,” as he put it, “Harlem of honey and chocolate and caramel and rum and vinegar and lemon and lime and gall.”

### **By Juan Flores**

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