

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED SALSA?

Have you ever wondered what does the word "Salsa" mean and where did it come from? Renowned Latin music historian Max Salazar has written one of the most concise and comprehensive chronicles about the evolution of the word "Salsa." This article in its entirety was first published in the November 1991 issue of Latin Beat Magazine. Much thanks to Max Salazar and the publishers of Latin Beat magazine for allowing this article to be reproduced in www.SalsaRoots.com.

SALSA ORIGINS

By Max Salazar

The popular usage of the word "salsa" for danceable Latin music began in 1933 when Cuban song composer Ignacio Piñero wrote the song *Échale Salsita*. According to the late Alfredo Valdés Sr. whom I interviewed in 1974, he said "On July 6, 1933, I married Anita Purmuy, guitarist for the all-female band La Anacaona. I didn't have a honeymoon because hours later I was on a boat with Nacional (Septeto) headed toward Miami...then on to the Chicago World's Fair. On the train I rehearsed Ignacio's new work *Échale Salsita*. He got the idea after tasting food which lacked the Cuban spices. It was a protest against tasteless food.

During the late 30's while the Hispanic community was sprouting in Spanish Harlem, Gabriel Oller, proprietor of Tatay's Spanish Music Center on the corner of 110th Street and 5th Avenue remembers shouts of "échale pique, caliéntalo, menealo que se empelota..." used to describe the thrilling Afro-Cuban dance rhythms of rumbas and guarachas. **Salsa** remained dormant until 1962 when Secco Records released Joe Cuba's *Stepping Out* LP. In Jimmy Sabater's tune *Salsa y Bembé*, vocalist Cheo Feliciano wants his main squeeze to add **salsa** to the bembé (dance) when she dances. The lyrics suggest that there is a request for the dancer to liven up or spice up her performance. "When I wrote this tune," said Sabater, "I was labeling the music as **salsa**...you know exciting. When musicians were asked to spice up the music there were shouts of "guataca". When the band executed the mambo part, I heard shouts of "wapachosa". These were labels which never caught on. My use of **salsa** was to describe the music, not the food."

A year later Alegre Records released Charlie Palmieri's charanga LP *Salsa Na Ma*. In the Henry Alvarez tune *Salsa Na Ma*, the chorus of Victor Velasquez and Willie Torres suggest that when they dance with their partners it is Salsa na ma...Que cosa rica (a joy)." However, Al Santiago's liner notes described the music as salsa when he wrote "La Duboney (Palmieri's band) is a musical aggregation that functions as an individual unit and possesses that all important 'sauce' necessary for satisfying the most demanding of musical tastes. It is for this reason that this LP album offering is titled *Salsa Na Ma*.

On November 20, 1964, the Cal Tjader Quintet plus 5 had just finished recording a long version of Guachi Guaro, another version of Tjader's first hit recording in 1954, Wachi Wara. After hearing it back, Tjader was unsatisfied, it lacked something, but he did not know what. Creed Taylor, producer of the album (which had no title at that moment) suggested a shorter version and a new title in that Guachi Guaro would be difficult to pronounce and it meant nothing. Tjader invited Willie Bobo to dub the jawbone (quijada). While doing so, his

inspirations of *Sabor, Sabor, Salsa Ahi Na Ma*, not only satisfied Tjader, but gave Tjader the idea for the album's name *Soul Sauce (Salsa del Alma)*. Bobo explained to Tjader that this track and the others: Pantano, Maramoor, Tanya and Leyte, were fiery, exciting like a well seasoned sauce. Thus the album *Soul Sauce* exhibits a fork on a plate of red beans and chili alongside an opened bottle of Tabasco sauce with a label on it, *Cal Tjader Soul Sauce*. This is the third time music is described as **salsa** and the Mexican Tjader fans of San Francisco began using the word to describe Tjader's brand of music. It spread to Los Angeles and other cities and its way east via the Spanish, rhythm and blues and jazz programs across the United States which helped Cal Tjader sell 150,000 albums. Prior to this, Latin music had never been aired over stations with different music formats.

In 1965 while the west coast Mexican population was using salsa for uptempo Latin music, the Afro-American population of New York started another trend. What was salsa on the west coast was a-zoo-ka in New York City. "Please, Eddie (Palmieri), sweeten it...give it a little sugar," a request to spice up the music with a unique Palmieri montuno. Palmieri composed and recorded the blockbuster *Azucar* but the word never caught on outside of New York. Four years later, Carlos Santana's *Oye Como Va* attracted youths of all ethnic backgrounds to his music, and conga drums were sold like never before across the United States.

On August 26, 1971, the Fania artists congregated at El Cheetah nightclub in midtown Manhattan for a concert and dance which resulted in the movie "Our Latin Thing." In the movie, salsa is never mentioned. The movie premiered July 19, 1972 at the Line 2 theatre at 48th and 7th Avenue, NYC. It received favorable reviews from the Daily News and the New York Times. But nowhere in the review was salsa mentioned. In the 1972 Mexicana LP *Rey Roig Aqui Llegó*, vocalist Julian Llano's lyrics were about the sauce for his attractive female neighbor in the bomba-son *Triago Salsa*.

In January 1973, Peter Rios gave artist/illustrator Izzy Sanabria the right to use the Latin New York magazine title which Rios owned in 1967-68. LNY issue number four dated April 16, 1973 had an ad for Alegre LP cover of Roberto Angelero's *Guaya Salsa*. In issue number five, May 28, 1973, there are photo ads of the Mexicana LP's *Salsa Hits from Orq Power* and *Tempo 70*, and Louie Colon's United Artists *Mas Salsa que Pescao*. In the issue number eight, Sept/Oct 1973, there are photo ads of "Cheetah, Home of the Salsa" and Vicentico Valdés new Tico label release *Amor con Salsa*. In issue number nine, November 1973, there is a photo ad of vocalist Roberto Torres' Mexicana LP, *El Castigador is the New Salsa Sensation Roberto Torres*. There is also an illustration of Izzy Sanabria in a cartoon form with an announcement "a new Salsa music TV show on WXTU channel 41, premiering Saturday, November 17, 1973 at 6:30 pm." In the same issue is a photo ad of the DJ Polito Vega which reads "100% Salsa WBNX Mon-Fri 7:30 to 9:30 p.m." In issue number 12, February, 1974, there is a full page ad of the Latin Music Festival Musical number five, with the names Celia Cruz, Ray Barretto, Johnny Pacheco, Tipica 73, Machito Orquesta and the Apollo Sound. Not once was salsa mentioned.

In March, 1974, Mexicana Records released Rey Roig's LP *Otra Vez* in which Julian Llano sings *Pescao en Salsa*. During the same month, Fania Records released Larry Harlow's *Salsa*, recorded November 26 and 27, 1973. This album placed Harlow among the top five most popular bandleaders and the LP enjoyed enormous sales. After this, mostly every recording of Afro-Cuban rhythms and anything that was exciting in Latin music was labeled salsa and the anglo market which had abandoned the music went the cha cha cha followed the

mambo popularity in 1956, came back into the fold. In Billboard's magazine June 12, 1976 issue dedicated to Latin music, there was a 24 page supplement magazine called "Salsa Explosion."...

If what is written here is accepted as its best evidence, then it appears that Jimmy Sabater coined the word salsa to mean uptempo Latin music. Cal Tjader's *Soul Sauce* and Santana's *Oye Como Va* gave the salsa movement thrust and its beginning was with the Mexicans in San Francisco. But it did not become popular usage until after Latin New York magazine used it over and over in its ads and stories and the Fania All Stars used it to describe its music outside New York. After that kid kicked the can in the opening scene of the movie *Our Latin Thing* and the wow wow synthesizer of Luis Cruz Jr. to Ray Barretto's *Cocinando Suave* began to sound and raise goose bumps on flesh, did the Salsa explosion detonate. The mushroom cloud fallout has been felt around the world.