

Name: Strictly Salsa

E-mail: webmaster@strictlysalsa.com

Date: 03 Jan 1999

Comments

Salsa is not easily defined. Though many get caught up in the age old debate as to who "invented" salsa (Cubans or Puerto Ricans), the truth of the matter is that salsa has and will always continue to have a great number of influences that have each played a large part in its evolution.

CUBAN ORIGINS

Cuba established its identity by combining the influences of its entire population -- white, black, and mulatto. Music played an important role in the formation of such an identity. The genre that was to succeed in creatively fusing equal amounts of white- and black- derived musical features was the son, which subsequently came to dominate the culture not only in Cuba, but most of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean as well.

The son originated in eastern Cuba during the first decades of the century. From the start it represented a mixture of Spanish-derived and Afro-Cuban elements. The basic two-part format of the son has remained the same from the 1920s to the present, and the vast majority of salsa songs (which Cubans would call son or guaracha) also follow this pattern.

Another development that occurred in the 1940s was the invention of the mambo. Essentially, the mambo was a fusion of the Afro-Cuban rhythms with the big-band format from Swing and Jazz. Although bands in Cuba like Orquesta Riverside were already playing Mambo-style in the 1940s, the invention of the Mambo is usually credited to Cuban bandleader Pérez Prado, who spent most of his years in Mexico and elsewhere outside the island. Bandleaders like Beny Moré combined Mambo formats with son and guaracha (a similar up-tempo dance genre). The Mambo reached its real peak in New York City in the 1950s, where bands led by Machito and the Puerto Ricans Tito Puente and Tito Rodríguez incorporated Jazz-influenced instrumental solos and more sophisticated arrangements. With Prado based chiefly in Mexico and the New York mambo bands developing their own styles, Cuban music had begun taking a life of its own outside the island and the stage was set for the salsa boom of the 1960s.

PUERTO RICAN INFLUENCES

From the early 1800s until today, Puerto Ricans have avidly borrowed and mastered various Cuban music styles, including the Cuban danzón, son, guaracha, rumba, and bolero. Indeed, the richness of Puerto Rican musical culture derives in large part from the way it has adopted much of Cuban music, while contributing its own dynamic folk and contemporary popular music. Puerto Rico should not be regarded as simply a miniature Cuba, especially since genres like the seis, bomba, and plena are distinctly Puerto Rican creations, owing little to Cuban influence in their traditional forms.

Since the 1920s Puerto Rican music has been as much a product of New York City as the island itself, due to the fundamental role the migration experience has come to play in Puerto Rican culture. As a result, Puerto Rican culture can not be conceived of as something that exists of only or even primarily in Puerto Rico; rather, it has become inseparable from "Nuyorican/Newyorican" culture, which itself overlaps with black and other Latino subcultures in New York and, for that matter, with mainland North American culture as a whole.

By the 1940s, Nuyoricans like timbalero Tito Puente and vocalist Tito Rodríguez had become the top bandleaders and innovators, and the Latin dance music scene in New York came to outstrip that on the island. (Even today, there are more salsa bands and clubs in New York than in Puerto Rico).

FANIA RECORDS

The Rise of Salsa is tied to Fania Records, which had been founded in 1964 by Johnny Pacheco, a bandleader with Dominican parentage and Cuban musical tastes. Fania started out as a fledgling independent label, with Pacheco distributing records to area stores

from the trunk of his car. From 1967, Fania, then headed by Italian-American lawyer Jerry Masucci, embarked on an aggressive and phenomenally successful program of recording and promotion.

Particularly influential was composer-arranger Willie Colón, a Bronx prodigy. Colón's early albums, with vocalists Héctor Lavoe, Ismael Miranda and Ruben Blades, epitomized the Fania style at its best and captured the fresh sound, restless energy, and aggressive dynamism of the barrio youth.

Every commercial music genre needs a catchy label, and there was a natural desire for a handier one than "recycled Cuban dance music". Hence Fania promoted the word salsa, which was already familiar as a bandstand interjection.

The 1970s were the heyday of salsa and of Fania which dominated the market. By the end of the decade, however, salsa found on the defensive against an onslaught of merengue and hip-hop and an internal creative decline.

SALSA ROMANTICA

By the late 1970s, salsa abandoned its portrayals of barrio reality in favor of sentimental love lyrics. Most of what is promoted on radio and records is the slick, sentimental salsa romantica of crooners like Eddie Santiago, Luis Enrique, and Lalo Rogriguez rather than more aggressive Afro-Caribbean salsa Caliente or Salsa Gorda. Perhaps there has been some criticism as to this new sub-genre but one cannot deny that it has managed to keep salsa alive and well. The change is also reflected in the fact that most of today's bandleaders are not trained musicians and seasoned club performers like Willie Colon or Oscar de Leon but cuddly, predominantly white singers distinguished by the pretty-boy looks and supposed sex-appeal like Giro or Salsa Kids .

Salsa remains essentially alive and well, within its limited sphere. Its market has grown in Latin America and Spain. The 1990s have seen former hip-hop/house singers La India and Marc Anthony return to latin music as part of the new wave of salsa stars, attracting new followers with their updated images. There is a glimmer of hope with stars such as Victor Manuelle and Rey Ruiz rising to fame in the current "scene" and many hope that this will lead to a resurgence of the glory years of the 50s and 70s.