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How New Yorkers' obsession with Cuba gave rise to salsa

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A photo from the exhibit, Rhythm & Power: Salsa, in New York.
Jose "Yogui" Rosario and Pablo E. Yglesias

The Cheetah Club on Broadway and 53rd Street was the "granddaddy of the big commercial disco," wrote cultural historian Steven Watson in his 2003 book, "Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties." Warhol and crew roller-skated on the Cheetah's enormous dance floor; the 1960s musical "Hair" debuted there before scandalizing Broadway.

And on Aug. 26, 1971, it became, according to legend, the "birthplace of salsa."

That’s when a group of local musicians from the young label Fania Records introduced their hot, homegrown brew of Latin dance music to the world, launching a sensation.

“It was a Thursday night, so we thought nobody was going to come see us,” Larry Harlow, a pianist for the headlining Fania All-Stars, told The Post. “But there were these lines that were five blocks long. It was a real happening.”

Some more traditional musicians have grumbled that salsa was just a clever name for good, old-fashioned Cuban son music, a 19th century folk tradition that mixed Spanish melodies with African clave rhythm. But New York City was the birthplace of salsa the phenomenon, heralded by musicians such as Harlow, keyboardist Eddie Palmieri and Cuban singer Celia Cruz.

Andrew Kist

“Rhythm & Power: Salsa in New York,” a new exhibit opening Wednesday at the Museum of the City of New York, traces how the Big Apple would give rise to this kinetic, poly-rhythmic fusion characterized by politically charged lyrics and brawny instrumentals.

“It’s aggressive and street, nasty, funky,” drummer Bobby Sanabria said. “Salsa is Cuban music played with a New YorkPuerto Rican freakin’ attitude.”

Latin American music began dominating New York clubs as early as the 1910s. The Big Apple was experiencing an influx of Central American and Caribbean immigrants, especially Puerto Ricans, who were granted US citizenship in 1917. When the coffee industry collapsed at home in the 1930s, they

flocked to Spanish Harlem and the South Bronx, where they found a vibrant community bursting with Latin record stores, dance halls and tons of performance opportunities.

“There was live music everywhere [in the South Bronx],” said Sanabria, adding that little had changed by the 1960s, when he was growing up. “It was the sound of drums resonating through the cavern of the projects. You couldn’t escape.”

It helped that New Yorkers were obsessed with all things Cuban.

“There was the rumba craze in the 1930s and then you had all of these [Cuban dance] crazes,” said trombonist and “Sounding Salsa” author Chris Washburne. “The mambo craze, the cha-cha.”

These new immigrants quickly adopted the raucous, up-tempo Cuban styles being played in ritzy clubs such as the Copacabana and the Palladium Ballroom, where celebs like Marlon Brando and Frank Sinatra would go listen to timbale prodigy Tito Puente, Afro-Cuban bandleader Machito and Puerto Rican singer Tito Rodríguez.

“Though it closed in the 1960s, the Palladium was really the club that set things in motion [for salsa],” said Washburne. “That’s where the mixing of jazz and different types of Latin music starts to occur.”

Timbales and cowbell, mid 1990s from the Rhythm & Power: Salsa exhibit in New York. Museum of the City of New York

Machito combined his Afro-Cuban rhythm section with American big-band arrangements and jazz improvisation. Harlow, a classically trained pianist from Brooklyn, added elements of bebop to his Cuban-inspired compositions, throwing in trombones for a deep, roaring sound. The jazz-influenced keyboard player Eddie Palmieri hired a trombonist named Barry Rogers, who incorporated blues licks on his solos with the band.

“The music kept evolving,” said Derrick Washington, curator of the “Rhythm & Power” museum exhibit. “They added more horns, trombones. And the content changed more. You were seeing the women’s movement, the Black Power movement and the [Puerto Rican nationalist] Young Lords group.”

Songs began to tackle discrimination, oppression, poverty and heritage — lyrics that the fun-loving Cuban tunes tended to avoid. The trombonist Willie Colon even recorded an album of Puerto Rican Christmas folk songs as a statement of cultural pride.

“Everything was changing: Woodstock, Vietnam, civil rights,” said Harlow. “The cha-cha-cha? That was your mother’s music. We were really writing songs about what was going on.”

The Cuban embargo, in 1960, helped create an opening for this new kind of hybrid Latin music, since Americans were no longer so keen on consuming music from a communist enemy. Reflecting salsa’s multi-ethnic roots, one of its major proponents, oddly enough, was an Italian-American lawyer and former cop from Brooklyn.

Jerry Masucci, a lawyer and an ex-cop, didn’t play an instrument, but one of his divorce clients was the Dominican bandleader, arranger and flutist Johnny Pacheco, and the two would frequently obsess over Cuban son music.

In 1964, each chipped in $2,500 to start Fania Records, which would herald a new Latin-music identity, one that was quintessentially New York. Over time, they started referring to this type of music as salsa, a term long used by Cuban musicians, such as in the 1930s hit “Échale salsita” (“put a little sauce on it”) by the band Cuarteto Machin, to mean the flavor, heat or spice needed to liven up a milquetoast composition.

Courtesy of Fania Records / fania.com

The ethnomusicologist Jose Obando has identified 95 different folkloric traditions in salsa, spanning all over the world. But what distinguishes New York salsa, or “salsa dura,” is the trombones.

“If you listen to Cuban music up until the ’60s, you get trumpet solos all over the place, but no trombones,” said Sanabria. “You start adding trombone and then all of a sudden you have this big, fat, meaty sound. It took a while to evolve, but it became a signature sound for New York City.”

Masucci had a flair for promotion and spectacle, and he arranged a supergroup of the best Latin bandleaders and singers, the Fania All-Stars. An under-the-radar 1968 debut at the jazzy Red Garter club on West 10th Street, featuring Pacheco, Puente, Palmieri and others, served as a warm-up for their star-making Cheetah Club gig. Yet Masucci had greater ambitions.

In 1973, the Fania owner became obsessed with the idea of mounting a concert at Yankee Stadium to prove that an all-Latin show could draw enormous crowds in an American city. The stadium was planning to undergo a renovation and was loathe to turn over

the ball field to Fania during the regular season. But Masucci persisted, and, on August 24, 44,000 screaming fans piled into Yankee Stadium to see the Fania All-Stars perform.

“It was the largest gathering of Puerto Ricans,” said Latin deejay Ray Collazo, who took the bus from Philly to New York to catch the show. “The music was so hot. At one point people started passing around the biggest Puerto Rican flag. It was an emotional moment.”

During a vigorous conga duel between “Nuyorican” drummers Mongo Santamaria and Ray Barretto about midway through the All-Stars’ set, the audience could no longer stay put. The attendees suddenly rushed the stage, trampling the field. A woman jumped on Harlow’s piano, which reportedly had fireworks stashed inside to set off later. Ecstatic fans began grabbing instruments. The musicians locked themselves in a room backstage to hide.

When the Yankees came back from playing in Milwaukee, they were worried they would have to find a new home for the rest of the season, due to the damaged turf. Masucci was slapped with a $60,000 fine. But it was worth it: It made Fania legendary.

“It was like the Beatles at Shea Stadium,” said Sanabria, who was a teen when the concert happened. “It was a cataclysmic event.”

By the late 1970s, salsa had become the voice not just of New Yorkers, but of Latinos all over the globe. The All-Stars, thanks to a documentary concert film called “Our Latin Thing,” released after the Cheetah Club performance, suddenly were in demand, performing throughout Latin America, Europe and Africa. They were even invited to play at the “Rumble in the Jungle” fight between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali in Zaire, Africa.

“We didn’t get paid, but we got to see Muhammad Ali fight and got three days room and board, so we didn’t complain,” said Harlow.

Fania may have disintegrated in the 1980s, but salsa has continued to flourish in Colombia, Spain, France and Japan. It also continues to creep back into popular music, with young artists like Marc Antony and La India creating a more romantic pop version in the 1990s and artists such as Beyoncé and Jurassic 5 using salsa samples in their songs.

And though it is now played all over the world, salsa’s unique blending of cultures and adaptability remains authentically New York.

“It only could have happened here,” said Elena Martinez, a folklorist and co-artistic director of the Bronx Music Heritage Center, who heads a salsa tour of the South Bronx. “Sure, there’s other cities where there are diverse neighborhoods, but New York is just ripe for that kind of fusion [that would create salsa].”