

ALEGRE RECORDS

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

Before he was 21, Spanish Harlem-born Al Santiago already had a long history in Latin music. Santiago was, in fact, born into it. His father was a multi-instrumentalist in Latin dance bands and his uncle led the Bartolo Alvarez Big Band. Santiago studied piano, then saxophone and took over his uncle's band when he was 18—renaming them the Chack-a-Ñu-Ñu Boys. A 14-year-old Eddie Palmieri sometimes was on piano and Buck Clayton played trumpet one memorable evening.

Santiago borrowed \$1,800 from his family in 1951 and started the Casa Latina del Bronx record store, later enlarging it in a new location in 1955 as Casalegre. That too was in the family, as his uncle had quit the band to start another record store, Casa Latina, in Spanish Harlem. The next logical step for Santiago the musical entrepreneur was founding Alegre Records, known as “the Blue Note of Latin music” in 1956.

Alegre was groundbreaking both in the music it recorded and the way it was packaged, though the business was somewhat haphazard. The label's first album was *Johnny Pacheco y su Charanga Volume One* in 1960 and it quickly became the biggest-selling Latin album to date. Soon after, Santiago signed Charlie Palmieri and Sabú Martínez for *Jazz Espagnole* (which barely sold at first but is now regarded as a classic).

Alegre produced 49 albums in the period between 1960-66, including six or seven from the ‘jam band’

Santiago formed, the Alegre All-Stars, led by Charlie Palmieri and featuring the trombonist Barry Rogers (as well as Johnny Pacheco originally).

Santiago stayed active in music, but Alegre was sold to Branston Music (owners of Tico and Roulette) in 1966 and then to Fania in 1975. Pacheco was also a founder of Fania, so the legacy is clear. And the Bronx is appreciative.

This month, the Bronx Music Heritage Center (cultural arm of WHEDco, the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation) will hold a combined discussion and concert, featuring Oreste “Kidd Ore” Abrantes y Su Orquesta playing the music of the Alegre All-Stars. The talk will include South Bronx-born Bobby Sanabria, the Grammy-nominated Latin drummer and educator; Orlando Marin, who was timbalero in the Alegre All-Stars; Mike Amadeo, who worked for Casalegre and now runs Latin shop Casa Amadeo—the oldest record store in New York; producer Bobby Marin; and musician Chris Rogers (son of Barry).

According to Elena Martínez, Co-Artistic Director of the Bronx Music Heritage Center, “We aim to present in our space the musical and cultural legacy of the Bronx, which is the borough of salsa and the birthplace of hip-hop. The history is another thematic layer. People don't realize that Al Santiago started both the Casalegre record store and the Alegre label.” The center features a 1,700-square-foot gallery/performance space, which hosts art exhibits and concerts that Martínez said, “have another layer to them.”

Sanabria, who co-directs the Bronx Music Heritage Center with Martínez, told *TNYCJR* that Alegre (both

the record store and label) “basically brought together some of the best Latin musicians in New York City under one roof to showcase their talents. Al Santiago—who was one of the funniest people I ever met, he'd have you in stitches in five minutes—was inspired by the Cuban descarga jam-session records he heard. Those records were very popular at the time. So Al figured, why not do the same thing here in New York City? Our musicians are just as good, if not better.”

So the Alegre All-Stars were born and the albums became very popular. “Al would sign the leaders to the label and then they would select the sidemen,” Sanabria said. “He had musicians like Charlie Palmieri and Barry Rogers, who was a force of nature. The records were both popular and critically successful—they became collectors' items.”

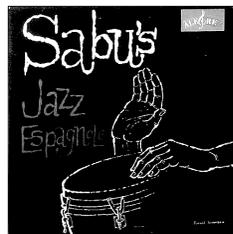
And they looked different. Izzy Sanabria (no relation to Bobby) was a cartoonist whose fanciful and funny black-and-white covers drew from such sources as the “Spy vs. Spy” strip in *Mad Magazine*. Some covers featured caricatures, others full-blown comic stories. “Instead of sexualized poses, there was high art,” Sanabria said.

The records weren't always promoted to the level their artistry demanded and Sanabria said that dissatisfaction is in part what led Johnny Pacheco and former New York City cop Jerry Masucci (who fell in love with the music while working as a lawyer in Cuba) to found Fania in 1964. But that's another story and not quite so Bronx-centric.

“Bronx Rising! – The Hidden Legacy of Alegre Records” with Oreste “Kidd Ore” Abrantes y Su Orquesta is at Bronx Music Heritage Center Aug. 17th. See Calendar



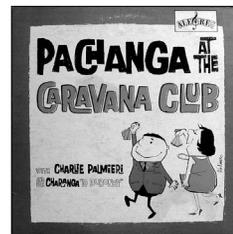
Eponymous
Pacheco Y Su Charanga



Sabu's Jazz Espagnole
Sabu Martínez



Eponymous
Kako Y Su Combo



Pachanga At The Caravana Club
Charlie Palmieri



Las Charangas
Pacheco/Palmieri/Fajardo

VOXNEWS

OUT-OF-TOWNERS

BY SUZANNE LORGE

Los Angeles singer **Gretje Angell's** debut *...in any key* (Grevlinto) comes as a surprise and a delight. A surprise because by her own admission she's turned to jazz somewhat belatedly in her performing life and a delight because this debut is that good. Raised on her father's jazz records, alongside his kit (her late father was Akron, Ohio drummer Tommy Voorhees), Angell studied classical voice and has performed roles with the Los Angeles Metropolitan Opera. What she borrows from her classical training is a granular vocal precision not all jazz singers can master; she tackles each phrase with poise and dexterity, without sacrificing the creamy timbre of the voice. What positions her solidly in the jazz idiom is her highly developed ability to improvise. That she can step into jazz as a fully formed scat singer is remarkable. The nine standards feature guitar-based arrangements; Angell uses strings and trumpet on one tune—the ballad “Deep in a Dream”—but for the most part the settings for her vocals are spare and complementary. Angell excels at Latin feels, as in the engaging “Berimbau”, in spot-on Portuguese, and brisk “One Note Samba”. Which isn't to suggest any shortcomings elsewhere—she turns out smooth,

percussive scat lines on an uptempo “Them There Eyes” and swings with ease on “Do Nothing ‘Til You Hear from Me”. In truth, Angell's out-of-the-gate effort is a rare first album. It's just right.

Vocalist **Sara Gazarek**, another L.A. talent, has similar strengths as Angell—gorgeous tone, expert soloing chops, careful ear for flattering arrangements. Her career has progressed differently, though: She received laudatory national attention as a vocal jazz student at University of Southern California in the early aughts and her first album, *Yours* (Native Language), in 2005, was a breakout success. This month Gazarek will release her sixth album, *Thirsty Ghost* (s/r); she describes it as “the first record that has ever truly felt like my voice, my sound and my heart.” A strong admission. She explains that after suffering some extreme personal losses she could no longer sing the light-hearted melodies for which she was known. Thus there's heartbreak in her renderings “I Get Along Without You Very Well” and “Lonely Hours”; determination in confrontational “Jolene”; and vulnerability in the gripping Björk song “Cocoon”. Gazarek celebrates the album at Jazz Standard (Aug. 10th).

Hollywood denizen **Seth MacFarlane**, creator of the animated sitcom *Family Guy*, is all about crooning romance when it comes to his vocal recordings—the anti-thesis of his TV fare. On *Once In A While* (Verve) he runs through a baker's dozen of standards like “I Remember You” and “What'll I Do?”, his deep

baritone enveloped in luxuriant string arrangements by conductor Andrew Cottee. The album touches on MacFarlane's own feelings of love and loss and, as with Gazarek and *Thirsty Ghost*, MacFarlane cannot hide his sentiment on *Once In A While*. As he admits in the liner notes, “It's all in there, folks.”

Singer **Peter Eldridge** and pianist Kenny Werner both used to teach at NYC institutions of higher learning, Manhattan School of Music and New York University, respectively. Now colleagues at Berklee College of Music in Boston, the two have paired up for *Somewhere* (Rosebud Music), a fully orchestrated album of standards and standard-sounding originals. Like the two preceding releases, this album explores aching emotions; on this one Werner's at times buoyant interjections and the soothing comfort of the strings act as palliatives. Even hearts can heal.

Other travelers: **Dee Dee Bridgewater** visits New York to play Birdland (Aug. 6th-10th) and SummerStage's Charlie Parker Jazz Festival (CPJF) at Marcus Garvey Park (Aug. 24th). **Brianna Thomas**, Peoria native who now lives in New York, has August gigs that overlap with Bridgewater's; she'll sing at Grant's Tomb as part of Jazzmobile Summerfest (Aug. 7th) and then at CPJF (Aug. 23rd). New Orleans-based singer/drummer **Jamison Ross**, jazz vocalists' favorite non-jazz vocalist, plays Jazz Standard (Aug. 8th-9th); and Aussie-bred bassist/singer **Nicki Parrott** unveils her new Arbors album *New York to Paris* at Birdland Theater (Aug. 8th-10th). ❖