

A percussionists' party in honor of 'Patato'

Ed Morales

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The one thing mambo, salsa and Latin jazz fans know is that their music is driven by its rhythmic base, and the percussion section is the heart and soul of every band. But despite the enormous fame of timbales master Tito Puente and the notoriety of conga player Mongo Santamaría, both of whom died in the last few years, percussionists are rarely bandleaders. Often it's only the most diehard fans that give the drummers their due.

Promoter Charles Carlini is doing his part to remedy the situation next Saturday by putting together a Latin Percussion Summit at Satalla (212-576-1155). The show will feature Carlos "Patato" Valdés, now in his 70s, a Cuban who immigrated to New York and played with Puente, among many others; the 80-something Cándido Camero, who's played with everyone from Duke Ellington to Dizzy Gillespie; Ray Barretto, whose 40-plus-year career has equal footing in both jazz and salsa; and Nicky Marrero, best known for his work with the Fania All Stars.

"I just wanted to put these guys together and have a great party in honor of Patato," Carlini said. "But there'll be some surprise guests, and it could go in any direction." Fellow Cuban émigré Camero was the subject of some media attention in the past year because of the release of "Inolvidable" ("Unforgettable") (Chesky Records), a nostalgic collection of songs featuring mambo bandleader Machito's younger sister, Graciela. He is also the subject of a documentary, "Hands of Fire," written and directed by Ivan Acosta, which has been screened around town of late.

"It's important to pay tribute to these guys while they're still around, to recognize what they've done for our culture," said Acosta, promoter of the Latin Jazz USA concert series. "Cándido introduced the three-conga setup to American jazz when he came here in 1946. While Patato played more popular music, the Afro-Cuban rumba, guaguancó, Cándido was a master in the jazz world." In "Hands of Fire," Acosta documents Camero's stints with Billy Taylor, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, as well as his long-time friendship with singer Tony Bennett.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the role of the percussionist in Latin music is that, while the drums are essential to its rhythmic structure, the great innovators have always made their mark in the music's harmony, and even melody. They have remained true to the essence of African music, in which the drum literally sings. "If you want to understand what they call salsa today is all about, you have to analyze and understand what these guys are playing," Acosta said. "This music is not only to make you dance, but also to make you think."

Crucial Sonidos

Sales of Latin music CDs and cassettes rose 16 percent in 2004, according to figures released by Nielsen SoundScan this month. This means that the growth of the Latin music market was 10 times greater than the mainstream, which only showed a 1.6 percent increase...Robi Rosa plays Webster Hall (212-353-1600) Wednesday...A late-night Latin funk series called Héchate, featuring DJ Geo Leche spinning roots and fusion Latin rhythms, kicks off at Joe's Pub (212-539-8778) Thursday...Hip Hop Hoodios will celebrate the release of a new album, "Agua Pa' la Gente," (Jazzheads) next Saturday at Makor (212-601-1000).

E-mail Ed Morales at

sonidoslatinos@nyc.rr.com.

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