

Tito Rodriguez

El Inolvidable

by **Ned Sublette** and **Harry Sepúlveda**

With its home base at New York City's Palladium Ballroom, the mambo era was the pinnacle of Latin music in the United States. No account of those Palladium nights fails to mention the three stellar dance bands known as the Big Three: Machito and His Afro-Cubans, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez.

Of the Big Three, singer, bandleader, and multi-instrumentalist Tito Rodríguez is the least known today, perhaps because he left the scene long before the others. But not only was Rodríguez's band generally considered the most danceable of the three, it was, player for player—with musicians like bassist Israel "Cachao" Lopez and pianist René Hernández—probably the greatest collection of Latin musicians ever assembled in one regularly working dance orchestra. And Rodríguez was a pioneer in breaking out from the New York City scene to become an international superstar. This compilation will allow you to hear Tito Rodríguez at the height of his popularity.

Pablo "Tito" Rodríguez Lozada was born January 4, 1923, in the Barrio Obrero section of Santurce, Puerto Rico, one of ten children of Puerto Rican architect José Rodríguez and his Cuban wife, Severina Lozada.

Rodríguez began singing professionally as a young teenager with a group of master musicians in the band *Industrias Nativas*, which was directed by "El Maestro Ladí" (Ladislao Martínez) and included the legendary *jíbaro* guitarist-composer Felipe "Don Felo" Rosario Goyco, with Rafael Castro singing harmony. He then joined a second group almost by accident, as he recalled it in a radio conversation with fellow bandleader Willie Rosario more than thirty years later. Rodríguez was present at a rehearsal of Manuel Jiménez's *Cuarteto los Ruiseñores Criollos* (the Creole Nightingales) when an argument over the lyrics broke out between trumpeter Plácido Acevedo and Félix "Corozo" Rodríguez, the group's singer. Corozo stomped out, leaving the band in the lurch with a 9:00 PM radio gig that night. Sans Corozo, the group spent the rest of the day rehearsing their repertoire with Tito, who subsequently joined the group, which later changed its name to *Cuarteto Mayarí*. Still only in his teens, Rodríguez was simultaneously a member of two of the busiest groups in Puerto Rico.

In 1939, riding the success of *Industrias Nativas'* hit, "Amor Perdido," Tito moved to New York City, where his older brother Johnny Rodríguez had one of the most popular trios in the city. Johnny was able to get Tito work in an orchestra he led at the Stork

Club, playing Sunday matinee shows. It was here that he was first introduced to another talented teenager, just three months younger and soon to become his professional rival: Tito Puente.

Johnny continued to connect his brother with the New York Latin music circle. Tito began singing at the Huracán, at Fifty-third and Broadway, with Cuarteto Caney, led by Cuban *tresero* Fernando Storch and one of the most popular groups playing Cuban *son* in New York City from the mid-'30s on. Tito then sang with a succession of top orchestras, recording with Enric Madriguera in 1941 and with Xavier Cugat, as well as with Cuarteto Marcano in 1942. He then joined the orchestra of heavyweight Puerto Rican pianist Noro Morales, recording with him in 1944. After being drafted into the U.S. Army for a year, Tito briefly returned to Morales. He then joined the newly formed orchestra of Cuban bandleader José Curbelo, in which he once again crossed paths with Tito Puente.

On November 29, 1946, at the age of twenty-three, Tito Rodríguez recorded “El Rey del Mambo” with Curbelo, making history as the first New York record to use the word “mambo.” Around this time, Curbelo worked regularly at a cabaret club called the China Doll (the former La Conga). Though musicians were prohibited from mingling with the dancers, Rodríguez fell in love with and began dating the Japanese American Tobi Kei, whom he later married. Furious, Curbelo fired him in 1947, but Tito remained married to Kei the rest of his life.

On February 7, 1947, Rodríguez appeared as a vocalist on the landmark New York recordings of Chano Pozo and Arsenio Rodríguez with members of the Machito orchestra for the Coda label, owned by Gabriel Oller and run out of his store, the Spanish Music Center. Later that year, Tito started his own group, Los Diablos del Mambo, with whom he recorded eight numbers for Oller—four of them arranged by Tito Puente. When Rodríguez signed with George Goldner’s new Tico label, Oller insisted on retaining the rights to the group’s name, which then changed to Los Lobos del Mambo before becoming simply known by the bandleader’s name.

At first, the new group worked at Grossinger’s in the Catskills. As Rodríguez moved along the circuit, the group ranged from five to nine players, depending on the financial possibilities. While playing with a five-piece at the Delano in Miami Beach, he met Maxwell Hyman, a Latin music aficionado who was about to buy the Alma Dance Studio, at Fifty-third and Broadway in midtown Manhattan, and convert it into the Palladium Ballroom. The Palladium became world famous as the epicenter of the mambo explosion—and that was the beginning of the legend of Tito Rodríguez. While an integrated dancing public competed to show off the best moves, Machito and His

Afro-Cubans, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez competed to outshine each other.

In 1953, Rodríguez moved over to RCA Victor, which also recorded Tito Puente. Both artists went back and forth between RCA and Tico, the only two labels interested in Latin music at the time. In 1960, Rodríguez, not wanting to take a backseat to Puente or any other Latin artist, signed with United Artists Records, a well-financed two-year-old label associated with the movie studio of the same name, on the condition that they not sign any other Latin artists without his approval. His first album for UA, *Tito Rodríguez Live at the Palladium*, with veteran Julio Andino on bass and the young Eddie Palmieri on piano, was a huge success, leading off with “Mama Güela,” which closes disc two of this compilation. José Curbelo was a booking agent by then, and his Alpha Artists handled Rodríguez’s engagements. But in 1961, Rodríguez became incensed when he found himself on the West Coast second-billed to Puente, as both were Latin superstars by this point. Defiant, Rodríguez left Alpha and never performed next to Puente again.

Rodríguez released at least two albums a year during his time under contract to United Artists. Wanting to enlarge his circuit by trying a different approach, Rodríguez came into some conflict with the label in 1963 when he told them he wanted to record *boleros* (ballads). Although UA thought it risky for a successful dance-band singer to make a romantic album, Tito prevailed, working closely with arranger Leroy Holmes on *From Tito Rodríguez with Love*. Tito understood how marketing worked, and he knew what the audience wanted: boleros cut across all the borders of the Hispanic world. That album, his all-time bestseller, made him an internationally known artist. The first cut, the Latin standard “Cuando Ya No Me Quieras,” is included on this compilation.

In 1964, after four years with UA, he moved over to Musicor—a label founded in 1960 that had come under the control of former UA man Art Talmadge—where once again he would be the only Latin artist. On his first album for Musicor, 1964’s *Carnival of the Americas*, he recorded a challenge song widely assumed to target Tito Puente: “Avísale a Mi Contrario Que Aquí Estoy Yo”—“warn my enemy that I’m here.” “Un Cigarrillo, la Lluvia, y Tú,” from the same album, features an outstanding arrangement by trumpeter Harold Wegbreit with tense, muted-horn harmonies against the simple, solid slow-dance *tumbao*, and a perfectly calibrated interpretation of a bittersweet lyric. With Rodríguez’s typical restraint and understatement, it could serve as a master class on how to sing with a band, as well as how to wrap a band around a singer.

When UA demanded one more album to fill out the contract he had walked out on, Tito revisited old *conjunto* (small-band) charts and did a pair of *descargas* (jams) to fill

the album out. To freshen up the charts, he brought in René Hernández, who with Julio Cueva in Cuba had been one of the first and finest mambo arrangers, and who in New York had arranged Machito's biggest hits. Intended as a throwaway, *Tito Tito Tito* turned out to be a down-home dancer's classic and one of Tito Rodríguez's biggest albums, due in part to the hit "La Toalla." The no-chart-necessary "Descarga Cachao" is the greatest filler cut imaginable—a rerecording of a classic number by the band's bassist, Israel "Cachao" López, the most influential Cuban bassist of all time, whose original recording of the tune from *Cuban Jam Sessions in Miniature* on the Cuban independent label PanArt had popularized the concept of Cuban-jazz jam sessions.

Meanwhile, Musicor's lack of promotion didn't help further Tito Rodríguez's success. He recorded for them until 1968, though his last big-band album for them was in 1965. For *Tito No. 1*, he recorded an unusual number that opens disc one of this compilation. "Esta Es Mi Orquesta" features Tito's spoken introductions for each member of the orchestra. Timbalero Miguel Collazo, conguero Marcelino Valdés, and bongosero John "Dandy" Rodríguez add their licks, one by one, while pianist René Hernández holds down Cachao's insistent *guaguancó* (traditional Cuban rumba). The horn section includes trumpeters Víctor Paz, David González, Tony Cofresí, and Emilio Reales. Rounding out the reeds are altoist Bobby Porcelli, tenor player and arranger Ray Santos, and, on baritone sax, Mario Rivera. But when *Tito No. 1* came out, the cut was not included, and it collected dust until producer Al Santiago specifically created an album around it, 1968's *Esta Es Mi Orquesta*. Santiago filled out the rest of the album with unfinished material, which infuriated Rodríguez, who called him up and confronted him about it.

By the time the track came out, the magnificent band it proudly presented had been defunct for three years. The band was too expensive to maintain, so Rodríguez dissolved it and moved back to Puerto Rico in 1966. There he appeared as a soloist at hotels and lounges, while continuing to maintain a presence in New York, traveling back and forth frequently. Re-signing with UA in 1968, he became a TV producer, creating his own show, *El Show de Tito Rodríguez*, for Puerto Rico's WRIK-TV, one of two television stations owned by United Artists. Though it only lasted one season, his guests included not only Xavier Cugat, Eddie Palmieri, and Orlando Cepeda, but also singers Tony Bennett, Sarah Vaughan, Sammy Davis Jr., and Shirley Bassey, backed by a super-tight big band with five saxes, four trumpets, three trombones, and the occasional bikini-clad female extra.. Soon after, in 1971, he moved to Florida and began a strong comeback on his own label, TR.

On February 2, 1973, at Madison Square Garden, Tito Rodríguez topped a multi-artist concert bill produced by rock promoter Richard Nader, with the bands contracted by Latin-music impresario Ralph Mercado. Only the second major Latin concert at that facility, it was heavily promoted as the return of Tito Rodríguez to New York, backed by none other than Machito's orchestra. However, no one knew it would be Tito's last show, except maybe Tito himself. He had been diagnosed with leukemia, though he was adamant about keeping his illness a secret from his fans. As the headliner, he was the last to go on. While waiting in the dressing room, he began to feel dizzy and asked Machito's singer Graciela for a glass of water. But he never let on that he was hemorrhaging.

After El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico finished their set, the announcer called out Tito's name—the moment the crowd had been waiting for. Graciela walked with Tito from the dressing room to the stage, where he received a rapturous reception. The dying fifty-year-old man sang a full set of eight numbers, closing with his signature, “Mama Güela”—originally titled “Mambo Mona” in honor of George Goldner's Puerto Rican wife, Ramona. Maxwell Hyman used to beg him not to play the song at the Palladium, because from the moment the dancers would hear the brass intro, they would stampede the dance floor, causing it to shake and threatening to crack open the ceiling of the downstairs bar.

On that cold New York City night in 1973, Tito Rodríguez finished his set while bleeding internally. No one in the audience even knew anything was wrong. The consummate professional, Tito Rodríguez would have rather died onstage than not go on at all. Tito sang his final notes as beautifully as ever, and was then rushed to the hospital, where he died a few weeks later on February 28, his wife by his side.

Tito Rodríguez's 1960s discography includes over four hundred tunes, with a consistently high standard of composition, arrangement, and performance. This compilation focuses on his '60s sides for United Artists and Musicor, showcasing his versatility as a *bolerista*, *sonero*, *rumbero*, *mamblero*, and big-band singer. There wasn't a bad number on any one of the sixteen different albums these cuts originally appeared on.

This compilation is for new generations to enjoy and learn from, but it's hopefully just the beginning of a deeper appreciation for the music of Tito Rodríguez.

Ned Sublette is the author of *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*.

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