

“I don’t care about you/or twenty more just like you.” Like today’s rappers, *soneros*, the singers of the Afro-Hispanic Caribbean tradition, indulged and still indulge in macho bravado. How many times has a salsa aficionado heard those lyrics full of disdain for an adversary! *A mí no me importas tú/ni veinte como tú*. The song is a classic, covered by every band that ever played a Latin dance club. And here it is in the original. Tito Rodríguez, one of the real mambo kings, arguably the greatest, was throwing down the gauntlet.

Although he is not the object of this particular Rodríguez taunt, another Tito, surnamed Puente, was the *sonero*’s rival. Popular Latin dance music could be blood sport – though not literally as in the current gangsta scene. In the era of the two Titos, 1950s New York, fans were as passionate about bands as they were about baseball teams. And there was also something about the prizefighting ring in these bandstand rivalries: let’s see who knocks whom out. Those passionate days are gone, and because Tito Puente outlived his rival for decades, today Tito Rodríguez is not the household name Puente became. Gone days. But what days!

The place was the Palladium Ballroom on West 53rd Street and Broadway. The year was 1950. The beat was the mambo, a hot Cuban rhythm that was already two decades old but did not catch fire until now, in Mexico, New York, and Cuba – and soon, the world. At the Palladium, three mambo bandleaders kings ruled: the Cuban Machito and the Puerto Ricans Tito Puente and Tito Rodríguez. The rivalry of the two Titos became legendary, but it was the music, not the barbs, that drew the dancers – and the Anglo celebrities who would not have understood the loaded lyrics to begin with.

Machito fronted his band and sang. Puente displayed his rapid-fire drumstick skills on the timbales. But the true matinee idol was Rodríguez. He had the looks, and his skills as a sonero can be heard clearly in this 2-disk anthology. These skills translate into being able to lead a very tight band while singing, and in this Tito Rodríguez is perhaps only matched by the Cuban master Beny Moré. And into a capacity for alternating between the more lyrical passages of a tune and the sensual improvisations that weave around a call-and-response chorus, punctuated by scorching solos from the virtuosos in his band.

The quality of the musicians Tito Rodríguez gathered for an *orquesta* – usually a big-band format, Latin ensembles are often called “orchestras” – can be heard in the opening cut of this collection. *Esta es mi orquesta* [This is my orchestra] is not the same grouping that opened at the Palladium in 1950, for this track was laid in 1965, but the quality of musicianship is reflective of Rodríguez’s unfailing nose for talent, from bassist Israel López “Cachao”, who along with his brother Orestes had invented the mambo beat way back, to a young saxophonist, Mario Rivera, who would become a stalwart in the New York Latin jazz revival of the ‘80s. One reason for Rodríguez’s success as a bandleader is that he was a gifted multi-instrumentalist in his own right, besides having one of the most memorable voices in Latin American music.

In the first section of that cut, Cachao’s bass plays a *tumbao*, a vamp that is the basis of an older genre, the rumba, where the beat is kept in place by the big conga drums. And you can hear that *tumbao* again in *Descarga Cachao*, in which Cachao takes advantage of Rodríguez’s team of virtuosos to lead the kind of Latin jam the bassist extraordinaire had invented in Cuba and would form the basis of modern salsa and Latin

jazz. Needless to say, the cut is eminently danceable. As is the rest of this 2-disk set. Latin music mavens Ray Sepúlveda and Ned Sublette are right in saying, in the liner notes for this collection, that Rodríguez's band was considered the most danceable of the three mambo kings – and anyone who has heard the totally danceable Puente or Machito knows just how serious that reputation must have been. And they're right in laying that reputation on the merits of each and every one of Rodríguez's band members. The band that opened the Palladium was awesome as awesome were all of Rodríguez's ensembles, for if his pianist at the ballroom was the great René Hernández, we should note that at a later Palladium gig that was recorded for a live album, the man holding down the fort at the keyboards is none other than Eddie Palmieri. He is here too, in the fiery mambo *Mama Güela*.

And so it went, and so it had always gone. In his teens in the 1930s, Tito Rodríguez was already one of the hardest working musicians in his music-crazed island of Puerto Rico. When he moved to New York, after scoring a hit song back home, he would land a job at the Stork Club – and he would meet the equally young Tito Puente. He would sing with Xavier Cugat, the man who brought Latin dance music to the American masses. And he would be featured in recordings by Chano Pozo, the Cuban percussionist who joined Dizzy Gillespie to create the new sound we now call Latin jazz. He played Miami Beach and he played Grossinger's – helping forge a crossover market for Latin dance music, particularly the mambo. And, of course, he became one of the big three mambo kings at the Palladium during the genre's big decade, the '50s.

He went on. As late as the 1960s, Tito Rodríguez did something that made his label nervous: he recorded an album of the slow torch ballads known as *boleros*. This was a daring move for a mambo bandleader. In retrospect, it seems obvious that Rodríguez, who today is as known for his romantic songs as for his up-tempo hits, would be a major *bolerista*. We can hear him sweep them off their feet with love in the cut *Cuando ya no me quieras*. Few soneros have reached such depths of feeling as Tito Rodríguez in his *boleros*.

In the late '60s, the multi-talented artist produced his own TV show in his native Puerto Rico, bringing on camera not just Latin guest like Xavier Cugat and Eddie Palmieri, but American acts of the level of Tony Bennett, Sarah Vaughn and Sammy Davis, Jr., who would perform backed by Rodríguez's high-octane big band. And when the new decade brought, he had already opened his own record label, TR.

It was in 1973, that the mambo king appeared to open a new phase in his incredible musical career, with a superstar concert at Madison Square Garden that would mark his return to New York, where his huge fame had blossomed two decades earlier. Another mambo king, Machito, led the big band that backed Rodríguez that night. The performance was thrilling; an eight-song set that climaxed with the explosive *Mama Güela* mambo. And even as he delighted his audience once more, Tito Rodríguez, who had been diagnosed with leukemia but kept it from his fans, was dying on stage, never letting the house know this was his last set.

A few weeks later, Tito Rodríguez died. By his side was his wife Tobi Kei, the beautiful Japanese American dancer he had fallen love with in the '40s, when Rodríguez

worked at a New York club called China Doll. The electrifying *sonero*, the flawless bandleader, the greatest mambo king, the unforgettable *bolerista*, all those masters who were Tito Rodríguez were gone. His legacy is here, in these recordings, swinging smooth or taking sound to the limit, but always leading the listener to the dance floor, to shred space with a sizzling mambo or melt in a bolero swoon. What more can one man give?