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# IN MUSIC HANDBOOK

# ANDREW AROS



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# *The Latin Music Handbook*

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**Applause Publications**

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Frances, this one's for you

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# Introduction

This is the first handbook on Latin music specifically written in English. It is intended for use by librarians in both school and public libraries, but can also be of help to individuals who wish to buy records by Latin performers, yet don't know where to begin.

It is not a history of Latin music, and will not make you an expert in this highly complex field. However, it is a springboard and an initial beginning for anyone who wishes to learn more about the music of the Hispanic world.

As such, it treats popular music not as something sacred and furtive, but as an experience that should be shared in by all.

A great deal of this book's success will depend on you, the user. If you find a particular artist or area of Latin music you feel deserves more attention, please let me know. Also, should you have any exciting ideas to publicize your new Latin music record collections, please share those thoughts so that this information can be shared with other readers of this handbook in future editions.

I can be reached via the publisher, or through my mailing address, P. O. Box 4112, Diamond Bar, CA 91765.

Hope to hear from you.



# The World Of Latin Music

The Latin music experience is as varied as can be. It encompasses such diverse elements as folklore, regional dances, national pride, and a tradition dating back to an era during which Spain was the mightiest power on earth.

For far too long, this vital force in music has been ignored. Hardly any books dealing with Latin music exist. Those few titles that are available tend to view it from an historical perspective. With the exception of a few mimeographed sheets available from select colleges and public libraries, there has been no major appraisal of modern Latin music.

Imagine that tomorrow you were asked to organize a Latin music section for your school or public library. To whom would you turn for advice? What would you buy? Once you knew what you wanted, would you even know where to purchase it?

That was precisely the situation I found myself in just a few short years ago when I went to the Rosemead Library as Audio-Visual Librarian. The Rosemead Library is located in one of the bedroom communities east of downtown Los Angeles. A part of the Los Angeles County Public Library system, the Rosemead library is in an area with a heavy concentration of



Spanish surnamed families. While the majority are Chicano, there is also a sizeable Cuban and Latin American population.

As one of the major participants in the first library workshop on Latin music ever held in California, I had a very good idea of what should be bought for my service area. But I wanted to create a workbook that others would be able to use--beyond the borders of Rosemead. Furthermore, I chose to develop a discography that would include Chicano, South American, Spanish, and salsa artists.

While the American musical scene is in a constant state of flux, the Latin market is fairly stable. Only in the last few years with the popularization of salsa, has there been a noticeable change in the buying preferences of the public.

Though most of us are conscious of Latin music, few of us actually realize how much of this music has crossed over and become a part of our own musical heritage. How many Latin songs can you recall? To make it easy, let's use English titles.

Did you remember "Valencia", "In a little Spanish town", "South of the border (Down Mexico way)", "Spanish eyes", "Spanish Harlem", "Granada", "Brazil", "Peanut Vendor", "Mexicali Rose", "Over the waves", etc.

If any of those titles came to mind, they probably did so because they are standards as well as stereotypic. On the other hand, there are many Spanish language titles that are equally familiar for the same reasons. You should be familiar

with "Patricia", "Amor", "Cielito Lindo", "Maria Elena", "La Bamba", "Jarabe Tapatio", "Guadalajara", "Las Cuatro Milpas", "Estudiantina", "Frenesí", "Perfidia", "La Golondrina", and others.

As can be seen, there are countless tunes that readily come to mind. Is there any wonder then, that Latin music has grown in popularity?

Spanish is the primary language for more than three hundred million people around the world. In the United States alone, there are some 20 million Spanish speaking residents. While perhaps not obvious in some areas, there are Spanish speaking citizens in every state of the union.

In the last decade, the ethnic movements in our nation have grown to the point that many of the formerly uninvolved are now avidly seeking their roots. This is especially evident when one witnesses the continual fascination with nostalgia, antiques, and geneology.

The Chicano movement or the rise of Brown power, has been significant, in that it has triggered a sensitivity for the problems of all Hispanics. Trade unions have undertaken minority recruitment programs, and school systems have moved into the area of bilingual education, possibly in an attempt to atone for decades of benign neglect.

Despite the problems of the present, the past remains a vast source of pride for all. United by a common language,

tempered by a colorful and tumultuous history, and still in search of who we were as a key to telling us who we are, music has proven itself to be a universal bond.

The Latin music industry in the United States is a multi million dollar a year business. Possibly because of demographic statistics, this market is centered around three major ethnic groups: the Cubans of Florida, the Puerto Ricans of New York, and the Mexican-American population of the southwestern U.S.

Of course, it is a misconception to believe that these groups reside exclusively in these areas. For just as Chicanos make up a large part of the community in the southwest, there are enclaves of Cubans, Central Americans, and other Latinos within this cultural mix.

Chicago has a substantial Chicano barrio, however, it is basically unproductive musically. Rather, cosmopolitan Los Angeles and the Texas-Mexico border region appear to be the areas of feverish recording activity.

New York, with its large ethnic neighborhoods (mainly Puerto Rican), is the center of the Latin music industry on the East coast. Many of the major bands such as Orchestra Harlow and personalities like Celia Cruz, Joe Bataan, and Johnny Pacheco, use New York as their home base.

Perhaps because the titles of the majority of the songs are in Spanish, as are the lyrics, people feel somewhat alienated where Latin music is concerned. Yet, as was seen earlier,

most Americans know a great deal more about Latin music than they suspect.

Ever since Valentino first dragged some since forgotten starlet across the silver screen in a sensuous tango, the American public has been fascinated by Latin dances. How much less richer would our lives have been had they not been graced by the carioca, mambo, rhumba, pachanga, conga, cha cha cha, merengue, and even the Latin hustle?

In the 40's and even into the 50's, the Cuban born Perez Prado was the undisputed king of the mambo. He took the mambo, with its roots in Mexican music, and turned it into a worldwide rage. Through such hits as "Anna", "Qué Rico Mambo", and "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White", many others were further exposed to the infectious rhythms of this dance.

Cuba was once a fertile breeding ground for great talents. That it produced such famous vocalists as Celia Cruz and the late Beny Moré should come as no surprise. Sadly, with the entrenchment of Castro and the current U.S. policy of non-recognition, little music of value has emerged. Though Cuban exiles residing in Florida have for years monitored broadcasts from their homeland, the emphasis has been on politics, and music has all but disappeared from the airwaves.

Celia Cruz has kept the cumbia alive. Lovingly thought of as the "queen of the cumbia", others refer to her as the

"queen of the guaguanco", an uptempo Cuban rhythm that is at the heart of today's salsa hits.

Salsa is the latest novelty to explode upon the Latin music marketplace. Though many treat salsa as a separate and unique area, it is still a vital part of the industry.

The term "salsa" has been tossed around with such indifference, that many wonder what the word means. Salsa is a sauce, composed of such elements as onions, green chile peppers, and tomatoes. It is often encountered in cooking, or used as a condiment (much like salt, pepper, or catsup) to flavor food. Therefore, an analogy can be drawn showing how salsa can either enhance the musical flavor, or be used for "cooking", a jazz term for intense musical involvement leading to the establishment of a rare rapport between the performer and the audience.

As far as I am concerned, salsa is nothing more than Latin music. Yes, it is the same music that has been heard for more than three decades, with its antecedents in Afro-Cuban rhythms, Cuban street music, and the big band sounds of the thirties and forties. The lyrics express an American consciousness, relating the (sometimes humorous) problems encountered in an urban society. For this reason, the music has not caught on as readily in other areas like South America and Mexico. Yet, within the past year, great inroad have been made by salsa music in areas where it had previously been shunned.

Some of the better known artists involved in salsa include Ruben Blades, Ismael Miranda, Cheo Feliciano, Lalo Rodriguez, Hector LaVoe, Justo Betancourt, and Junior Gonzalez. They are primarily vocalists, but just as vital to their survival are the bands and orchestras with whom they frequently mix.

La Dimension Latina, Guarare, Libre, La Sonora Poncena, Bobby Rodriguez y la Compania, El Gran Combo, and Saoco, are among the top salsa bands. The larger orchestras of Bobby Valentin, Roberto Roena, Eddie Palmieri, Larry Harlow, Willie Colon, Raphy Leavitt y la Selecta, Tommy Olivencia, and Johnny Pacheco, cannot be overlooked, since for many, they are in the vanguard of defining the elusive parameters of what constitutes salsa.

Through the Spanish International Network (SIN), many of these artists receive the necessary exposure via television. American homes now see major Latin musical talent with a frequency once reserved for Dinah Shore, Andy Williams, and Frank Sinatra. The many variety shows such as the popular "Siempre en domingo", which are seen in large urban areas, provide an arena from which these first rate performers can be enjoyed.

Far more different than the convivial boisterousness of salsa, is the romantic and refined style of international vocalists. Relying mainly on ballads and love songs, this group of performers are not unlike Paul Anka, Barry Manilow, or Johnny Mathis. Their primary distinction is that they sing in Spanish--otherwise, there is no significant difference.

Topping these "international" artists, is Julio Iglesias. Iglesias is a former soccer player from Spain. His honey-laced melodies have sold well everywhere. Even in such difficult to crack markets as South America, he has carved a formidable career for himself. Regardless of where he appears, he is able to attract a legion of faithful fans. For more than a year, he has contemplated an English language debut in an effort to appeal to an even wider audience. But so far, no English language release has appeared.

Also from Spain, is Camilo Sesto, a young vocalist who has had a widespread influence. He played the lead role in the Spanish company of "Jesus Christ, Superstar", and has a popularity that approaches that of Julio Iglesias.

Other international vocalists of note include Elio Roca, Ednita Nazario, Manoella Torres, Nelson Ned, Rosita Peru, King Clave, Raphael, Sandro, and Marco Antonio Muñoz.

There has been a noticeable increase in both the number and prestige of international artists. For one thing, on a purely economic basis, it is far more advantageous to appear in other Spanish speaking areas of the world. To limit oneself to appearances within the borders of one's country is not only unwise, but also builds barriers to communication.

Artists such as Ednita Nazario are in such demand, that they often spend much of the year touring a variety of world wide resorts, from the French Riviera, to Spain, South America,

Mexico, and the Carribean. The criticism that these international artists are often bland when stripped of their national identity, is just not valid. For by virtue of their appearances outside their nation, they not only serve as goodwill ambassadors, but enhance the universality of Latin music as a whole.

Mexico, because of its proximity to the U.S., has been one of the major producers of Latin music. In fact, it can be argued that in the southwest, Mexican music is far more popular than our indigenous Chicano groups.

There is a wide variety and range in Mexican music. It includes far more than just mariachi music or even rancheras. Each region boasts its own specialties, and what is popular in one area, is not necessarily in demand elsewhere.

Mariachi music is probably the most familiar. The manner in which the mariachis earned their name is of interest. In the mid-nineteenth century, there were roving groups of musicians who were often called upon to play at various fiestas and on ceremonial occasions. They were very much in demand when it came to playing for weddings, during the French occupation. Since the French word for wedding is "marriage", the form was somehow adapted to signify these musicians, and that's how the term evolved.

While literally thousands of mariachi groups exist today, the leader in the field, is also one of the oldest. The Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, founded around the turn of the century by Gaspar Vargas, has consistently maintained a high standard in



its choice of musicians, that regardless of what recording of theirs one hears, it is bound to be excellent.

Another popular style in Mexican music, is the *cancion ranchera*, which literally translates into ranch song or song of the ranch. It details much about ranch life and romance, set in a world far removed from the artifice of the city. As such, many of these songs chronicle the difficulties between husbands and wives, workers and land barons, and star-crossed lovers. The greatest love is either celebrated or bemoaned for the trouble and sadness it has caused. With such universal themes as these, it is not difficult to grasp the reasons for this genre's extreme popularity.

Of historic significance is the *corrido*, an epic set to music. Throughout much of Mexico's turbulent history, there have been periods when communication between regions was not always possible. This was especially true during the Mexican revolution early in this century.

Those rebels against the immoral dictatorship and authoritarian despots they sought to depose, often had the stories of their exploits set to song. These songs would serve as oral newspapers of the time, since frequently telegraph lines would be downed and the press seized by governmental forces. Through the *corridos*, the deeds and achievements of revolutionary heroes were unfolded in ballad form. Often they were carried