



Other genres rely on tradition and relevancy within a social and cultural context to maintain a growing and consistent fan base. A prime example of such a genre is Latin Music, more specifically Salsa music. Salsa is driven by the support of not only its' enthusiasts but by a fundamental tie to the music that is rooted within culture and community. As second, third and even fourth generation Latinos become more inclined toward American music forms (Dance, Pop, Hip-Hop), traditional forms like Salsa are increasingly left behind.

Producer, Composer and Pianist, Miguel Bonilla wants to change that. He believes that over the last few decades, Salsa music's inability to evolve in both form and marketability is the reason that the genre has seen a dip in popularity amongst the youth.

"Both the music and the music industry has evolved in every aspect. We, as Latin and Tropical musicians and music lovers, need to keep up with the times." declared Bonilla

With years of experience in the field, Bonilla's objective is to use his knowledge of Latin music and combine it with new age technology and marketing like electric instruments and social networking.

Bonilla's perspective on Salsa music is well rounded. After coming to the United States from his homeland of Colombia in the mid 1980's, he became infatuated with the hard-hitting intoxicating rhythms of the Fania All Stars. He studied the music created by Latin music legends like Hector Lavoe, Johnny Pacheco and Charlie Palmieri. Soon after he became fixated on the piano's part in the musical arrangements.

"I fell in love with the music and the way the piano was played in a Salsa band, I really wanted to get into that." remembered Bonilla.

He received lessons from Gilberto Colon Jr., the former piano player for Hector Lavoe, among others. In less than a year, with no other formal training on the Piano, he acquired enough skill to land a job as the pianist in the Tito Nieves Orchestra. After a few years with Nieves, Bonilla enjoyed success playing for many of Salsa music's stars at the time like Victor Manuelle and Ray Sepulveda. However it was his stint with Marc Anthony's orchestra that gave him the gravitas to become the band leader for La India and begin his foray into arranging and eventually producing.

"I wanted to push further. I realized that I liked playing but I wanted to be the guy that said how things were going to be done".

Bonilla's next big break would come from meeting Grammy-winning Latin Music producer Sergio George. George was the mastermind behind nearly every Salsa hit from the late 1980's to the mid 1990's and decided to take Bonilla under his wing. After collaborating on several arrangements, George gave Bonilla the chance to produce his own tracks including George Lamont's hit in 2000 "Ya lo se que tu te vas".



With a few hits under his belt, Bonilla decided that it was time to work independently. He worked with artists including Huey Dunbar (formerly of DLG) and became the musical director for Don Omar's band.

His latest project, "The Sound of New York", is a collective of artists featuring George Lamond, Papito, Sostre and Zeitlin Perez. Bonilla envisions a form of Salsa that would capture the attention of the younger generation while remaining authentically urban and representative of New York City.

"Once Reggaeton came out everyone started to go to Puerto Rico and forgot about New York. I wanted to bring the New York sound back into the picture" said Bonilla.

"I started putting things together, writing and composing my own songs trying to develop my own sound--something totally different."

What remains to be seen, is what exactly is the "New York sound" of Salsa in 2011. Popular Salsa artists like Gilberto Santa Rosa and Victor Manuelle have followed the same formulas that made them stars in the 1990's. Even Salsa's top-dog, the multi-talented International mega star,

Marc Anthony, has not diverged far from his original formula when it comes to his tropical, Latin releases.

“I am not knocking anyone--artists like Victor Manuelle and Gilberto Santa Rosa are doing their thing. But I think we can take tropical Latin music and catch up with the technology and catch up with the sound.”

Bonilla’s eclectic approach goes against the grain and therefore must win over Salsa fans.

“I am fusing everything...all the technology that is available and used in American Dance music and hip hop. We even use auto-tune!”

The idea is a gamble but Bonilla is hoping that the younger generation will connect with the changes.



“The kids are not into it [current salsa sound] because we are not giving them what they want. And what they want is a fresh sound. They think--‘yea, I like Salsa, I am a Latino--but instead of a live bass, can you give me an electric bass. Instead of horns and you put a synthesizer in it?”

The level of success (both crossover and otherwise) seen by a star like Marc Anthony is the exception to the rule. Many Salsa artists either fade into obscurity or fail to break in all together. Bonilla is determined to counter that harsh reality by utilizing modern concepts like social networking and viral videos to increase the marketability and popularity of his artists.

“The way we market the music now is different. We are using the internet---we are virally everywhere!”

The response has been encouraging and the ensemble is scheduled to perform at the legendary New York City nightclub the “Copacabana” in mid-October.

“It is not the usual Salsa track or tropical track--its just a fusion of all kinds of things and we are getting very good feedback from all over the world. I know we can bring Latin music back on top.”

It seems that nearly every 20 years, Latin music, specifically the sub-genre of Salsa, seems to go through an evolution in sound. There was the Mambo craze of the 50's, the Fania daze of the 70's and the romance-laden 90's. And so it seems the timing is spot on--all that remains to be seen is what the technology age has to offer Salsa music in the 2010's.

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