ECHOES OF AN ERA: "SIEMBRA"

José Mangual Jr. reflects on a classic recording (New York City, Sept. 11, 2008)

Photo of José Mangual Jr. by Martin Cohen

By Chico Alvarez Peraza

In last month's Latin Beat issue, I wrote about an unforgettable event which took place thirty years ago at Roseland Dance City. It happened on May 26th of 1978, when New Yorkers of every national origin witnessed a star-studded tribute to the great Cuban vocalist Miguelito Valdés. I also stated that unbeknownst to many of us who attended the event, it sublimely signaled the end of an era. In retrospect, the year 1978 also ushered in a new epoch, albeit one that remained, nevertheless, rooted in the past. Traditional Cuban forms (such as guaracha, mambo, guajira and son montuno) were by no means doomed to extinction, nor was the traditional Puerto Rican jíbaro music, nor the Dominican perico ripia'o, for that matter. Instead, they would undergo a transformation, one that was already taking place since the beginning of the decade. Amidst the noisy streets and the skyscrapers was a developing cultural and socio-political amalgam that would ultimately serve as a conduit to the "outside world," that is to say, that it would link Spanish-speaking New York to the rest of the Spanish-speaking world.

At first, it was contained within the Spanish speaking neighborhoods as a sort of regional "melting pot" ("transculturation" was how Fernando Ortiz referred to it). Then, during the fifties, it began to take form and expand outward, coming to fruition at approximately the same time as the cultural and economic isolation of its primary musical source, Cuba. All of this resulted in a rather strange musical metamorphosis (as opposed to a more radical and sudden revolution of ideas). After years of experimentation and attempted "crossovers," the musical stage was set for a most ambitious project that would be released in 1978 by the Fania record label, simply titled *Siembra*. Although the groundwork had been previously laid out by those pioneers and innovators who had been crossing cultural lines since the forties, three people figure prominently here, that is to say, during this "modern" period in time: Producer and musician Willie Colón; composer and vocalist Rubén Blades; and of course, the moneyman, Jerry Masucci. The release of *Siembra* created an environment of awareness that departed from the "old school" of thought,

which was designed to party hardy and not question anything. This status quo would remain in place as long as we could all afford to go out and have a good time on the weekend. It was an extension of an evolutionary process that had begun immediately following World War II, when the inner city and its surrounding boroughs burst forth with a new generation of hyphenated Americans. It was at this time that the transcultural process actually began to bear fruit, in such a way that forty years after Vicentico Valdés and Tito Puente enraptured and swayed our parents to the sounds of mambo and chachachá, we—the baby boomers—had our own generation of "Latin stars," and they spoke to us. Soon, the severed cultural ties to the "old country" would undergo both a restoration and a renovation.

Siembra also created a wide margin of profit for a music that had been largely marginalized during the previous decades. Cristóbal Díaz Ayala informs us in his book "Música cubana: del areyto al rap cubano," that this type of commercial cross-cultural phenomenon had already been happening during the previous two centuries, that it was merely an ongoing historic process. Still, the changes that took place in NYC during this particular decade were slated to be radical, and they came quite suddenly. I managed to catch up with one of the musicians who provided the rhythmic foundation for *Siembra*: the percussionist José Mangual, Jr, whom I have known since that time. We forged a friendship back when he was working on his tribute to the legendary Chano Pozo, as one of the first musicians whom I recall to be putting out his own product in those years. We decided to meet in his apartment in Harlem, where he agreed to shed some light on the making of that recording, as well as to provide his opinion about the reasons for *Siembra's* huge success.

Chico Alvarez Peraza: Joe, your credits as sideman have appeared on hundreds of albums.
José Mangual JR.: Thank God for that! (Laughter).

CAP: I know that you come from a musical background, as your father was the great José Mangual Sr., who was an active member for many years, of Machito's orchestra. We also remember fondly his subsequent work with Herbie Mann's group; and eventually he would go on to record as a soloist for the LP Ventures label. I don't think I'd be off base if I said he was probably your main inspiration, growing up in such a musical atmosphere.
JMJ: Yes. Of course he was; and not only was I inspired by my father, but I was also blessed to have grown up with all those great musicians whom he played with—Vicentico Valdés, Tito Puente, René Hernández, Chombo Silva, Mario Bauzá and Bobby Rodríguez, all those greats that passed through Macho's band. I remember vividly the phone ringing all the time, with calls from all of them. We lived at 107 Madison Avenue, not too far from where we are right now. Actually, my dad never left this area, he was a lifelong resident of "El Barrio" (Spanish Harlem). He was a master percussionist, and he also played the tres and the acoustic bass.

CAP: You seemed to have mastered more than one instrument on your own, although your main axe is the bongó, of course. You are what we would call an "all-around" percussionist, especially in terms of Afro-Cuban rhythms, either secular or religious. Do you also play batá drums?
JMJ: Yes...well, that's where it all started for me, with the bongó I mean. I especially like the batá drum, and I have even recorded it on a couple of albums, but I don't consider myself a batalero (batéa player) per sé, not like a Gene Golden or a Julito Collazo. Those are real masters. My father was not a batalero either, nor was he a santero (santería practitioner). My mother was involved with the religion to an extent, and later on, when I met Milton Cardona, I really got into it. He is also an excellent batá player. I belong to the first generation of Manguals to be initiated in the Yoruba religion. That association helped me when I began to play with Willie Colón's band, because there we began to experiment with those rhythms, while staying within the framework of popular dance music. Julito Collazo was a pioneer in that fusion here in NYC, and back when Julito was playing trap drums with Tito Puente, I missed out on a great education. I remember that every Sunday, or at least twice a month, we (Willie's band) would gig at the Club Caborrojeño, opposite Tito, and Julito was always asking me to come to his house so that he could teach me some batá drumming. But I never took him up on it, and it's something that I have always regreted. Eventually, I learned enough from Milton to incorporate some "toques" (batá patterns) into the popular mainstream, so it worked out well when we (Milton and I) were with Willie.

CAP: A number of years after you joined that aggregation, those very same Afro-Cuban liturgical ingredients became lost within that mainstream, washed out to the point where they were no longer deemed necessary.
JMJ: Yes, but it's coming back, because I've been hearing a lot of it recently.

CAP: Tell us about those first encounters with Willie Colón's band, and how you viewed what was happening at the time. I'm talking trends here.
JMJ: Before I played with Willie, I played with pianist Monguito Santamaría, who was heavily into the fusion of black (Afro-American) and Latin music, not heavy into the jazz vein like his father was, but in more of an R&B style. That was the thing in those days, that and the mambo. The Palladium-style mambo also had a big influence on me.

My brother and I used to practice to all the Tito Puente albums, especially the ones that featured Mongo (Santamaría) and Willie Bobo on them, as well as the *Dancemania* album, when Ray Barretto replaced Mongo. That's when he (Mongo) and Willie joined Cal Tjader. That was our school.

CAP: Now, that was a great team. Wasn't it?
JMJ: Oh, yeah, and that was what we used to call "true" Latin jazz: North American jazz players playing with Latin percussionists. A perfect blending of both worlds, like Mongo's band back when Julito played timbal. Both Willie and Julito were great on the drums too, they could play straight-ahead jazz like any jazz drummer out there. These were the guys who set the standards. And they all played bongó, too, which was my instrument. I learned so much from them, and I applied that knowledge while I was with Willie Colón.

CAP: Latin jazz was a world unto itself, one that actually preceded the "salsa explosion." There were also some other modalities that we can safely place somewhere between these two styles, like the pachanga and the boogaloo, both of whom were short-lived dance forms that functioned as a sort of bridge between the old jazz-tinged mambo era and the hard salsa that evolved from it. And yet, there was an obvious difference between the latter and the former, mainly in the sense that it was a smaller sound. The big bands suddenly began to disappear, and the smaller conjunto-style format began to replace them. Enter the trombone-fronted orchestras of Eddie Palmieri and Mon Rivera, with their light but aggressive sound. Many younger musicians in their formative years, such as Willie Colón, took up that sound. Now, you and I were both there at the start of that new sound, and frankly, it seems that there is a big gap between Tito Puente's Dancemania and Willie Colón/Rubén Blades' *Siembra*. Could you tell me how you personally viewed this evolution, from its embryonic stage and the advent of the trombone bands right on up to that landmark recording of *Siembra*?
JMJ: Well, Willie and the band had made quite a few albums before that, and even with Rubén Blades, we had made two albums, so the change was already audible and the style had by this time taken root among the youth, as early as 1970. We already had that sound, with the trombones.

CAP: Yes, but Eddie Palmieri had previously worked with that instrumentation, and yet, he didn't particularly have that same "sound". So what identified or separated the Willie Colón trombone sound from Palmieri's La Perfecta and from Mon Rivera? What was the ingredient that set you guys apart, rather than make your band just another copy of La Perfecta? This is something that is very rarely talked about or written, something that is not being documented properly. It seems like everyone who comments on this topic is simply repeating the same old saying that this whole "salsa" thing was born out of nowhere in 1975, that it was the sole creation of Willie Colón or the Fania All Stars.
JMJ: Well, no, I don't think that it came out of nowhere, it had gradually evolved from all those sounds which we were hearing in our youth, from Arsenio to *Dancemania* right into the pachanga and then on to the boogaloo, until it finally hit a certain level of intensity and energy that was not felt before. After the pachanga craze, we did begin to see the rise of folks like Ricardo Ray, Ray Barretto, Joe Cuba, and others who were still deeply rooted in the old Cuban sound, but who were also experi-

Photo of José Mangual Jr. by Martin Cohen

menting with new hybrids and sounds. Barretto and Harlow are two excellent examples of the balance between the old school and the new wave. I guess the Palmieri influence on us was an extension of his musical experience with Tito Rodríguez. The arrangements were "out of sight," for a small group like that. We really dug that stuff.

CAP: Can you pinpoint a specific time period when these changes were beginning to take hold (during the three-year period between 1968 and 1970), when the word "salsa" had not yet been exploited commercially?

JMJ: Well, with Colón's *El Malo* and *Guisando* albums, we introduced a certain type of arrangement, most of which was a spinoff of La Perfecta's moñas, but which had a much faster tempo. *Jazzy* was one of those charts that made the older bandleaders take notice. We may not have been quite polished yet, but we were onto something that was a little different. Automatically (and immediately following the release of *Cosa Nuestra*) we had begun to clearly define what our "sound" was about. And by then, everybody was copying us. I recall once when we played opposite Tito Puente and he introduced us as "the boys." Six months later, we were selling more records than he was. It took us all by surprise, but once we had it, we ran with the ball all the way to the touchdown. And that's when everybody started calling the music "salsa."

CAP: What about the Afro-American experience and its influence on young Latin musicians? This was mostly during the boogaloo and Latin soul period, when it was quite prominent, but which suddenly disappeared at the end of the sixties. Was it because black musicians were then beginning to be drawn toward their own music, meaning jazz and R&B? I mean, was that ever a factor involved in your "sound"?

JMJ: Well, we certainly had many black musicians within our ranks during that era, including Mark Diamond, Dwight Brewster, Pucho Brown, Al McKibbon, Lonnie Hewitt and Rodgers Grant, among others, and then we didn't see any new ones until the advent of Ocho, plus there was Artie Webb when he was working with Barretto. We did see a rise in Anglo and Jewish musicians, but I don't think that their culture influenced us much, except in terms of rock-oriented music, you know, of the crossover type. I know that it was the total opposite during the big band era, when both U.S. white and black musicians were more visible within "Latin" circles. If anything, they conformed to our music and didn't attempt to inject any of their own nuances into it. U.S. white musicians were pretty much learning the rudiments, while U.S. black musicians were more seasoned at playing in what can be called a "Latin vein," and yes, they did influence us in the beginning, because of all the jazz that was present in our music.

CAP: And it also worked in reverse, with tunes like Héctor Rivera's *At the Party,* which featured North American black singers, and became quite popular back then. We're talking about "crossing over" as it is known in the business.

JMJ: Yes, but there was also the fact that the Spanish-language radio stations did not want to play that type of "crossover," for whatever reasons, and their policies toward anything that was "black" or sung in English was instrumental in eliminating both boogaloo and Latin soul from the airwaves. Only Dick Sugar, Symphony Sid and later Joe Gaines were playing any black-influenced music.

CAP: So then, you're saying that someone like Joe Bataan could not get his records played on mainstream Spanish-language radio, simply because he was singing in English?

JMJ: That, and the Afro-Latin jazz influence that permeated. These station managers were purists, so we came back and gave them a "pure" music, but one that had that same type of soulfulness. This is a little known fact, and it sort of pushed us younger musicians into getting down with a more "typical" or "rural" sound, but one that still had an "urban" edge to it. Willie's band then began to record Cuban guajiras that had less of a blues feel, like for example, Palmieri's *Café* or Johnny Colón's *Boogaloo Blues*. And with Héctor Lavoe on vocals, we just couldn't go wrong, because he was essentially a jíbaro. Later on, that taboo was lifted, and we began to see guys like Bobby Rodríguez (leader of La Compañía) with hits such as *Sunday Kind of Love* and *A Latin from Manhattan*. They brought that style into another level, but even with their

success, it was still limited to night time radio shows.

CAP: Joe, let's fastforward to the early seventies. What changed the attitude of those radio stations which had practically banned that music in favor of more traditional forms three or four years earlier?

JMJ: Well, for one thing, Fania bought some airtime, and spread around a lot of money to ensure that their product would be heard.

CAP: Zooming in on that ten-year period between 1970 and 1980, when Fania was at its zenith, and when the best Cuban dance material was coming out of NYC, I'd like to cite the first two Celia and Johnny collaborations, the two initial albums by Pete "El Conde," the *La Ley* album by the Lebrón Brothers, *Infinito* by Willie Rosario, *Para Mi Gente* by Chivirico Dávila, the *Típica 73* debut album, Ismael Miranda's debut album as a soloist, *Lo Sabemos* and *Pa' Bravo Yo* by Justo Betancourt, all of which had what I like to call "the three main ingredients in a recipe for success." First is the musicality of these productions. Were they musical? Yes! Invariably, they blended melody, harmony and rhythm, all basic to good Cuban dance music. And they all featured excellent arrangements, with just the right amount of embellishment, but not complicated. Second is the lyrical content, which sometimes can actually hinder the production. Thirdly is the interpreter, or the main artist, which in most cases is a vocalist. When these three things come together they will constitute either a good commercial product or a failed one. A fourth component is the message that these lyrics convey to the listener. Definitely, there are differences of opinion regarding the importance of this last one, but nevertheless, it factors in on the ultimate success of any recording. To me, this is where *Siembra* departs from the norm. Do you agree with me on that, Joe?

JMJ: Oh yes! Most of the music that you mentioned, with some exceptions, are lyrically still party albums. *Vamo' a echar un pie..., La rumba me llama..., Vacila como yo*, etc. They were still conveying that time tested message which we had all been hearing since the days of the Palladium, when records were being produced strictly for dancers. And that old street "guapería" is in there too, as well as nostalgic images of nature's rural beauty, even some patriotic themes, but nothing that addressed the socio-political situation of Latinos in North America and elsewhere.

CAP: Enter Rubén Blades, who was not alone by the way in terms of redefining the importance of socially meaningful lyrics. There were composers in Cuba who were also doing this type of protest song, like Pablo Milanés who was actually sponsored by the government; and in Puerto Rico, you had Curet Alonso, whose many themes dealt with slavery, racial equality and particularly the black Caribbean experience. The old guajiro and jibaro themes were still there, but the music was much more aggressive and reflected these social themes as well. Many of the old familiar party themes are found in Wilie Colón's music as well. Even in *Siembra*.

JMJ: True, but I think *Siembra* took it to another level, and to give credit where it is due, it was Rubén who spearheaded that movement. But it didn't last very long either, and by that time he was ready to take the next step in his career, which was acting and eventually becoming involved in politics. Rubén had no competing contemporaries here in New York in that arena. In terms of composing songs of social awareness, there was no one here that was really ready to take the baton from him. In reality, he didn't need to record anymore. He had used popular Latin music to further his political aspirations and to convey his social message to a broader constituency. And then, the radio stations, they did not want to play any more music that had socio-political messages. It was a no-win situation, and yet here we are, 30 years later and *Siembra* remains an everlasting document from that era.

CAP: Funny what music can do. And funny how quickly things can change.

JMJ: You got that right, bro, and because we were so used to hearing all that party music, we didn't even notice what Rubén Blades was trying to do or what was happening to the art of making music. Even worse, we didn't foresee the changes that were coming, so that after the euphoria of *Siembra* wore off, we got stuck with "salsa romántica."

Later, when we all started to record mostly bland music, we were suddenly told that we couldn't "repiquetear" (riff) or put certain "toques" (hits or beats) into our playing, that we had to keep it mellow and not get crazy with the rhythm. "Keep it simple," they said to us. So we did, because we still needed to make a living.

CAP: In retrospect, it is easy to see and hear what great beauty abounded in not only that album but in all the music created during that period. Those were some rich harmonies and some beautiful melodies, with hip charts that made sense to the dancer, and lyrics that spoke to the new generation and to its needs. There were wonderful singers who could interpret twelve different tunes in twelve different ways, and not sound like a carbon copy of each song.

JMJ: Chico, *Siembra* had all that and more, and this is not to put down any of the other singers from that period, but because Rubén was also the principal writer, he knew exactly how he wanted that song to be interpreted. Some of the albums you mentioned lacked the interpretation as it was meant to be, as the composer had imagined it in his or her mind. On *Siembra*, Rubén comes off as more than just a band vocalist, he comes off as an actor, and mind you, we still did not know that he was on his way to being one, but we did know that he had an actor's way with those lyrics, like no one else had. I mean, just think about *Plastica* for a moment, who would have thought about writing a song like that? It spoke specifically about a young lady, but it could easily have been written for a male, because it made you think about the phoniness of some people, and how they tend to make themselves up into what they are not, how pretentious they can be, and how this is not a trait worthy of us as a people. I was too young to understand that message, but now I see it for what it was, a wake-up call. There is a message of awareness in those lyrics that was probably lost to many people at the time, but if it reached just a few, then it was worth putting on vinyl.

CAP: When you went into the studio with Willie and Rubén, did you think you were going to do just another salsa recording, or did you think you were about to create a new type of "concept" album?

JMJ: Well, we had done two albums before that which included one or two songs with social messages, but *Siembra* went beyond all that and surprised the hell out of all of us, including Jerry Massucci, who practically gave Willie carte blanche in terms of what he could do in the studio. The sky was the limit, and that was probably why it did so well. There were no restrictions put on any of us. It did so well that soon we were touring extensively throughout Latin America, and the people in those countries didn't even want to dance to our music, they preferred to just sit there and enjoy our performance and sing along to the lyrics. This is what Rubén was striving for all along, for people to listen with their minds, and not just with their feet.

CAP: How much of *Siembra* was Rubén and how much of it was Willie?

JMJ: This is where we get to the nitty and the gritty of it, so that even now, when we are celebrating that music after 30 years, we can get to the truth of it all. *Siembra* was right on target, and Willie wasn't afraid, he was the producer, and as such he believed in it, and to his credit, those messages still hold true today. Musically, it is a time piece, and that aspect of it belongs to us, the musicians, and to the arrangers of course. It is music that we can be proud to let our children and their children listen to. Yeah, there was some minor arguing in the studio, but they eventually all came together to create a masterpiece. Willie knew exactly who to pick, as in the case of the arrangers. Luis Ortiz, Louie Cruz, Carlos Franzetti (and Willie, of course) all came through with flying colors. Each arranger came in and directed the band on their particular chart, and the results were just mind blowing. Each song was produced with the overall concept of the album in mind. Willie never envisioned a single hit, but an album of hits.

CAP: And yet, the big hit was *Pedro Navaja*, which has since become a standard, despite the fact that no one has ever attempted to cover it. This is, I think, a testament to its endurance.

JMJ: Sure. Because Willie, as a Latino and as a producer (and mindful of Rubén's intentions) never lost sight of the fact that the music on *Siembra*

should remain danceable. Even so, the people who were buying this record were not strictly dancers confined to the ghetto; they were coming out of universities and they were thinkers, ambitious young people who heard the message and made a decision to do something positive with their lives and not go the way of the Pedro Navaja stereotypical character (here, José sings *"la vida te da sorpresas, sorpresas te da la vida"*). This was a new audience for what was essentially dance music, and these new listeners were also singing along to *Siembra...*, which means that they were basically sowing their intellectual seeds, in order to make it in the world. All of these messages are inspirational in one way or another. Positive messages, that make you want to pull yourself up.

CAP: So then it was "Operation Bootstrap," set to the rhythms of urban New York City life. And indeed, it seemed to have functioned as such, for a while at least. But after the eighties had passed and all the touring had come to a halt, what happened then?

JMJ: We then came to a period when the economy was not what it was during the "salsa boom," and Massucci and his colleagues began to taper down on their elaborate productions, cutting back on costs and tightening their belts (as well as causing us to tighten our own belts). The great volume of work that we once saw was no longer available. Add to that the emergence of digital technology, which was supposed to have made it easier to produce records, but which in fact was harmful to the working musician. All these things contributed to the decline in the production of that music which reflected our fast-paced way of life in the seventies. Subsequently, the dance clubs began to either close or taper down on the amount of live entertainment (bands) that they hired.

CAP: I remember almost immediately feeling the loss of the key ingredients mentioned earlier—musicality, strong interpretation (singing) and lyrical content, and promotion. A company that did not promote its product just didn't sell records. Suddenly, it seemed that the labels wanted the artists to take on that task, or at least guarantee that we could sell records (except for the majors, whom only promoted their top artists). In the days of Fania, even an artist who was not a "star" could get over and make a decent living playing music, as long as he/she released a record.

JMJ: The record labels took the spark out of the music when they restricted what we could do in the studio. It was that simple. Either we did it their way or we had to record ourselves, and that was always a risk, because now we no longer had the Fania machine behind us, to make sure that our music would be aired. We lost the energy that characterized our music, our "salsa." It was impossible to make an album like *Siembra* in the nineties, unless you were a millionaire and most of us were not. Why, not even Rubén could have made another *Siembra*, even if he was considered financially endowed.

CAP: What was the single most important thing that remains in your consciousness about that recording?

JMJ: The thing that most impressed me about this recording was the beauty of the arrangements, and the musicianship of the sidemen. They were so professional. Since I was a percussionist who was already toying with the idea of becoming a singer, I was deeply impressed by the singing and the lyrics, even though I did not hear them at the time of the recording. It all comes down to what you said, those three key ingredients, they were there, plus there was the magic of the moment, an energy that was electrifying, even spiritual. Afterwards, when we went back in to do the background vocals (coros), that's when I listened for the first time and realized the importance of the songs, and how they could ultimately change the direction of the music. You see, I grew up listening to party songs, where the main topic was "getting down" and having a good ol' time, and now I was hearing lyrics that blew me away. It deeply influenced the type of songs that I would later choose for my own recordings as a singer.

CAP: I guess what we are are both acknowledging here Joe, is the emergence of the classic story-telling form which flourished in the nineteenth century, and which was ultimately taken to the dance floor in our own time. Rubén also wrote *Juan Pachanga*, which has its parallels in a classic North American country-western ballad, and which he sang to the urban beat of "la calle" (the street). I could always tell that Rubén read a lot of novels and watched a lot of North American movies, as it was reflected in his tunes. This was the story of a loser, much like *Pedro Navaja*, only with a soul, and with feelings, like *El Cantante*, and they were both written in the same story-telling style that Motown had so often employed. Like Fania, Motown also released material which was danceable, but which at the same time questioned the status quo, as was the case in Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*. And by the way, Gaye's album also had socially relevant themes, and in fact was more of a protest album than even *Siembra*. It was also very successful commercially, and it too led to a musical movement, but even that trend was to be stifled later by mainstream radio, in order to accommodate the more easygoing and trivial sounds of disco music. You see Joe, the story of *Siembra* has its parallels in the Afro-American experience too.

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JMJ: It's all in the interpretation, Chico. These guys all had soul, and it came through in their recordings. The messages were there, but without their interpretation of those messages the albums might have never become hits. After *Siembra*, we went into *Maestra Vida*, which is one helluva recording in its own right, an extensive musical journey that takes the music into a whole new realm. That was probably the last production of its kind, as shortly afterwards, the market began to change, until eventually the bottom fell out. That trend is gone and Rubén was the last one to bring it out there; he put his stamp on it. As far as the writing and the interpretation goes, there hasn't been anything comparable since, at least not in that particular style. Others may have written social story lines into their songs, but Rubén got to the people who had the money. He reached them on an intellectual level, and to me that was what made him and that album great.

CAP: How can we get back to this? It's hard to tell a twenty-year old today to go and listen to *Maestra Vida* or *Siembra*, because today's youngsters have been indoctrinated into something much different; they are bombarded by a pop culture that doesn't teach them to think or question anything. Today's youth is grounded to a style that has little musicality, lyrical meaning or masterful interpretation.

JMJ: Most of our U.S. Latin youth today is not bilingual like we were, and some of them don't even speak Spanish, but if they do and you can get them to listen to *Siembra*, they will ultimately thank you for it. It will enlighten them politically and make them aware of the richness of our Caribbean culture. Each song has a positive message, and if thirty years ago it made so many of us stop and think, then it could do the same again in 2008. I think that they should at least give it a listen. ■

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JMJ: We then came to a period when the economy was not what it was during the "salsa boom," and Massucci and his colleagues began to taper down on their elaborate productions, cutting back on costs and tightening their belts (as well as causing us to tighten our own belts). The great volume of work that we once saw was no longer available. Add to that the emergence of digital technology, which was supposed to have made it easier to produce records, but which in fact was harmful to the working musician. All these things contributed to the decline in the production of that music which reflected our fast-paced way of life in the seventies. Subsequently, the dance clubs began to either close or taper down on the amount of live entertainment (bands) that they hired.

CAP: I remember almost immediately feeling the loss of the key ingredients mentioned earlier—musicality, strong interpretation (singing) and lyrical content, and promotion. A company that did not promote its product just didn't sell records. Suddenly, it seemed that the labels wanted the artists to take on that task, or at least guarantee that we could sell records (except for the majors, whom only promoted their top artists). In the days of Fania, even an artist who was not a "star" could get over and make a decent living playing music, as long as he/she released a record.

JMJ: The record labels took the spark out of the music when they restricted what we could do in the studio. It was that simple. Either we did it their way or we had to record ourselves, and that was always a risk, because now we no longer had the Fania machine behind us, to make sure that our music would be aired. We lost the energy that characterized our music, our "salsa." It was impossible to make an album like *Siembra* in the nineties, unless you were a millionaire and most of us were not. Why, not even Rubén could have made another *Siembra*, even if he was considered financially endowed.

CAP: What was the single most important thing that remains in your consciousness about that recording?

JMJ: The thing that most impressed me about this recording was the beauty of the arrangements, and the musicianship of the sidemen. They were so professional. Since I was a percussionist who was already toying with the idea of becoming a singer, I was deeply impressed by the singing and the lyrics, even though I did not hear them at the time of the recording. It all comes down to what you said, those three key ingredients, they were there, plus there was the magic of the moment, an energy that was electrifying, even spiritual. Afterwards, when we went back in to do the background vocals (coros), that's when I listened for the first time and realized the importance of the songs, and how they could ultimately change the direction of the music. You see, I grew up listening to party songs, where the main topic was "getting down" and having a good ol' time, and now I was hearing lyrics that blew me away. It deeply influenced the type of songs that I would later choose for my own recordings as a singer.

CAP: I guess what we are are both acknowledging here Joe, is the emergence of the classic story-telling form which flourished in the nineteenth century, and which was ultimately taken to the dance floor in our own time. Rubén also wrote *Juan Pachanga*, which has its parallels in a classic North American country-western ballad, and which he sang to the urban beat of "la calle" (the street). I could always tell that Rubén read a lot of novels and watched a lot of North American movies, as it was reflected in his tunes. This was the story of a loser, much like *Pedro Navaja*, only with a soul, and with feelings, like *El Cantante*, and they were both written in the same story-telling style that Motown had so often employed. Like Fania, Motown also released material which was danceable, but which at the same time questioned the status quo, as was the case in Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*. And by the way, Gaye's album also had socially relevant themes, and in fact was more of a protest album than even *Siembra*. It was also very successful commercially, and it too led to a musical movement, but even that trend was to be stifled later by mainstream radio, in order to accommodate the more easygoing and trivial sounds of disco music. You see Joe, the story of *Siembra* has its parallels in the Afro-American experience too.

> *"The people who were buying* Siembra *were not strictly dancers confined to the ghetto; they were coming out of universities and they were thinkers, ambitious young people who heard the message and made a decision to do something positive with their lives and not go the way of the Pedro Navaja stereotypical character."*

JMJ: It's all in the interpretation, Chico. These guys all had soul, and it came through in their recordings. The messages were there, but without their interpretation of those messages the albums might have never become hits. After *Siembra*, we went into *Maestra Vida*, which is one helluva recording in its own right, an extensive musical journey that takes the music into a whole new realm. That was probably the last production of its kind, as shortly afterwards, the market began to change, until eventually the bottom fell out. That trend is gone and Rubén was the last one to bring it out there; he put his stamp on it. As far as the writing and the interpretation goes, there hasn't been anything comparable since, at least not in that particular style. Others may have written social story lines into their songs, but Rubén got to the people who had the money. He reached them on an intellectual level, and to me that was what made him and that album great.

CAP: How can we get back to this? It's hard to tell a twenty-year old today to go and listen to *Maestra Vida* or *Siembra*, because today's youngsters have been indoctrinated into something much different; they are bombarded by a pop culture that doesn't teach them to think or question anything. Today's youth is grounded to a style that has little musicality, lyrical meaning or masterful interpretation.

JMJ: Most of our U.S. Latin youth today is not bilingual like we were, and some of them don't even speak Spanish, but if they do and you can get them to listen to *Siembra*, they will ultimately thank you for it. It will enlighten them politically and make them aware of the richness of our Caribbean culture. Each song has a positive message, and if thirty years ago it made so many of us stop and think, then it could do the same again in 2008. I think that they should at least give it a listen. ■