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Can Salsa Escape The Cultural Ghetto?

By ROBERT PALMER

Latin music, a popular hybrid rooted in Cuba which has become the basis of a thriving music industry in New York, touches the mainstream of American pop periodically. Xavier Cugat with his rumbas, Dizzy Gillespie with his Afro-Cuban jazz, and Carlos Santana with his Latin rock have all captivated substantial non-Latin audiences, but these have been isolated phenomena. The movers and shapers of Latin music, and the performers whose names are familiar in every Latin household, have rarely tasted the advantages which come with major record label affiliations, airplay on pop and progressive radio, and exposure in other media. Contemporary Latin music, which is often called salsa, is one of the last truly underground popular musics in North America, but lately several of salsa's superstars have begun reaching out toward a broader pop audience.

The time seems ripe for salsa to "cross over," in the parlance of the record business, to shed its more parochial associations and begin to corner a share of the non-Latin market. Disco music has made Latin percussion in-

struments and Latin dance rhythms an integral part of much contemporary pop. Reggae, the popular music of Jamaica, has won over a relatively substantial share of the American rock audience, and although its rhythms are different from salsa's, they can be traced directly to the same African sources. The Salsoul Orchestra has combined muted salsa rhythms with sleek soul arrangements and come up with several hit records.

A year ago, salsa seemed to be about to become the new rage. "Latin New York," a magazine which publishes informative articles in English on the broad spectrum of Latin music, proclaimed the arrival of "Puerto Rican Chic," and the All-Stars of the principal Latin record company, Fania, sold out Madison Square Garden. But crossing over has not been as easy as some Latinophiles thought it might be. There is the language barrier; even though some salsa is primarily instrumental, even a few lines sung in Spanish are liable to frustrate pop music fans who like to identify with song lyrics. And there is a business barrier. Fania and the other Latin labels are known by record wholesalers and retailers as specialists in an ethnic market. Any attempts they might make to expand their distribution into cities and towns

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without significant Latin populations are sure to be met by the indifference of businessmen who know nothing about Latin music and would just as soon keep it confined in its cultural ghetto.

With this latter problem in mind, several of the more ambitious Latin groups and artists have signed distribution agreements with major labels, but the results have not always been salutary. When the Fania All Stars began recording for Columbia, they turned most of the musical direction over to Gene Page, a pop arranger best known for his work with Barry White. Their first Columbia album, "Delicate and Jumpy," had its moments, but for the most part it was a Gene Page disco album with a top-notch Latin rhythm section and rock guitar solos by guest artist Steve Winwood.

More recently, Ray Barretto signed a contract with the Atlantic label. This association looked more promising, because Mr. Barretto has had extensive experience as a percussionist on disco, rock and jazz recordings, and Atlantic has always been an industry leader in the selling of black music to a white audience. Mr. Barretto is an intense, gripping performer, and for his first Atlantic album, "Tomorrow," he recorded his new Concert Orchestra live at the Beacon Theater.

"Tomorrow" leans more heavily on brass and reed arrangements which are in a jazz idiom than it does on the choral call-and-response and hypnotic percussion jams which are central to more traditional salsa. But the music is heated and occasionally exhilarating, and its elements have been well

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blended. There is enough Latin for the Latin fans, enough jazz for jazz aficionados, and enough momentum and drive for the most energetic dancers. One might quibble about the bass-heavy recording sound, and certainly a studio album which gives more solo space to the band's fine lead guitarist, Barry Finnerty, should prove more commercial than this set, which is dominated by brass and Spanish-language vocals. But "Tomorrow" is a first step in an exciting new direction which could yield the first significant salsa crossover hit.

Even more exciting is "Lo Dice Todo," the second album by the Grupo Folklorico y Experimental Nuevayorquino. As its name implies, Grupo Folklorico is expanding salsa's horizons in two directions, exploring the music's folk roots in African chant, Puerto Rican country dances, and the trumpet-and-percussion sound of the pre-revolutionary Cuban conjuntos on the one hand, experimenting with new instrumental combinations and cultural hybridizations on the other. Neither the folklore nor the experimentation is forced because the group includes older musicians, who formed their styles playing at hill country dances or in Havana bistros, and young avant-gardists who have acquired their

knowledge of African and Latin roots by traveling and studying.

It is difficult to imagine a similar generational mixture working well in pop music or jazz, but the Grupo Folklorico brings it off with aplomb. In a sense, it is a floating pool of musical specialists, who combine in an appropriate configuration for the performance of each composition. This approach lends great variety to "Lo Dice Todo," and the fact that most of the tracks on the album feature virtuoso instrumental performances makes it even more appealing.

There is a gentle, unhurried rural mood to much of the Grupo Folklorico's music. On "Se Me Olvido," a kind of country rhumba, violin, accordion and percussion instruments interact in a free-flowing counterpoint. Two of the group's most remarkable soloists, the Cuban trumpeter Alfredo Armenteros and Nelson Gonzalez, a virtuoso of the Puerto Rican tres guitar, execute driving but lyrical improvisations on "Trompeta N Curero," a traditional guaguanaco. The Grupo Folklorico's more experimental side is represented by "Corta El Bonche," a visionary mixture of salsa percussion, a bracing flute and violin arrangement by Bobby Paunetto, and jazzy solos from flute and timbales.

"Lo Dice Todo" does not cover the broad range explored by the group's extraordinary first album, "Concepts

in Unity," but it is more succinct and on the whole more appealing. Salsoul, Grupo Folklorico's record label, has not yet been able to help the group dent the pop market, but of all the new approaches to salsa, this one could be the key to pop acceptance, or at least to the sort of substantial cult audience now enjoyed by Jamaican reggae. The music's lyricism, the fine picking on the guitar-like tres, the varied instrumental combinations and rhythmic approaches, and the group's ability to generate heat without becoming overly brassy or repetitive should be enough to make most fans of progressive rock forget all about the language barrier.

The first really important Latin crossover artist or group will have to attract a wider audience with positive qualities like these while retaining enough roots to please the audience which has supported salsa all along. Losing Latin listeners while failing to gain a pop following would constitute an artistic and cultural debacle. Grupo Folklorico, which is true to its Latin roots in all their tangled multiplicity, knows this, and so does Ray Barretto, who dedicated his album "Tomorrow" to his musicians, friends, and business associates and "to la gente, the people who came out and kept us alive while they waited for the rest of the world to catch up!" ■

DELICATE AND JUMPY, the Fania All Stars; Columbia PC 34283. TOMORROW/BARRETTO LIVE; Atlantic SD 2-509. LO DICE TODO, Grupo Folklorico y Experimental Nuevayorquino; Salsoul SAL-4110. CONCEPTS IN UNITY, Grupo Folklorico y Experimental Nuevayorquino; Salsoul SAL 2-400.