

“Dance Mania”--Tito Puente (1958)

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Essay by Jim Payne (guest post)*



*Tito Puente
1923-2000*

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Tito Puente brought me into his garage last year. We were working together on a book/CD, “Tito Puente’s Drumming With The Mambo King,” and later we were going to a video shoot for the same project. We needed to load up his timbales because he was going straight to a gig afterward.

The garage was filled with instrument cases: fifteen to twenty sets of timbales, neatly stacked in their cases against the wall; trap drums; vibes, which he affectionately called his “venetian blinds”; marimbas; and piles of plaques, awards, keys to various cities, pictures of Tito with different Presidents, gold records, Grammys, rolled up posters of concerts and performances--in short, a lifetime's worth of musical memories.

The first thing that struck me was the old drumset gathering dust in a corner. “I played the drumset first,” said Tito, “then I went over to the timbales.” Tito studied drumset with a man he remembered only as Mr. Williams, who knew nothing about Latin music. But Tito went to him to learn how to read and play shows. Tito’s idol was Gene Krupa, and at an early age he won \$10 playing Krupa’s “Sing, Sing, Sing” solo note-for-note in a music contest. During his early days he soaked up the big band music of Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Chick Webb.

In addition, he was soaking up the Latin music of his Afro-Cuban heritage--the music of Machito, Noro Morales, and Arsenio Rodriguez. Tito eventually melded these two musics together, adding big band instrumentation and jazz harmonies to Afro-Cuban rhythms. He considers this one of his most important musical contributions.

Tito also studied the piano. He began the piano at age eight with Victoria Hernandez, and then studied with Luis Verona, pianist with Machito's Afro-Cuban Orchestra. When Tito was twelve, he formed a dance team with his sister, Anna. They modeled themselves after Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, but percussion became Tito's first love.

Tito studied hard. By age fifteen some were calling him El Nino Prodigy--The Child Prodigy. He started playing drumset with Federico Pagani's Happy Boys and learned about the authentic Cuban feel from the Happy Boys' timbalero, Cuban-born Josè Montesino. Having learned the rudiments from Mr. Williams, Tito was able to apply them to the timbales as well.

Soon, Tito added timbales to his drum setup. Eventually, the timbales became his main instrument. He brought them out front and played them standing up (now the accepted way of playing) so he could give cues more easily. Eventually he became the most famous and influential timbalero in the world--El Rey de Timbal.

Tito was like an excited kid in a toy shop as he showed me the twenty sets of timbales in the garage--timbales painted in psychedelic colors, timbales painted in solid colors, timbales painted in day-glow colors, his six gold timbales, his timbalitos, his thunder drums, and the timbales that were originally painted with naked women. "They had to be painted over," he chuckled. "After all, I'm supposed to be a role model for a lot of people. You can't have that stuff on there."

At sixteen, Tito dropped out of school and went on the road. At nineteen, he got the gig with the Machito Orchestra, the premier Latin band of the time. At twenty, he was drafted into the Navy. During the down time at sea in the South Pacific he played alto sax in the ship's band. He had studied alto with Joe Allard in New York. He learned arranging from a friendly pilot on the ship. Eventually he became the ship's bandleader.

Shortly after Puente returned from the war he got a chance to put his own band together for Sunday afternoon gigs at a new place called the Palladium. The Palladium became the hugely popular "Home of the Mambo," and Tito and his band were off and running.

Tito was a showman, as evidenced by the wild paint jobs on his many sets of timbales, his sequin jackets, his grimaces and tongue-biting during solos, and his over-the-head stick moves. He believed a big part of his job was to entertain people and make them dance, but he was also a very serious musician.

After a while we went into the house. Stacks of arrangements and yellow music-score paper surrounded the piano in his workroom.

As we looked over some of the exercises for the book, Tito tapped out the rhythms on the table top to make sure they were correct. "Clave--very important, those two little sticks," said Tito. "I

always write the clave on the bottom of the score just in case the phone rings or something. That way, when I come back I know exactly where I am in relation to the clave.”

He didn't like the term “reverse clave,” which is used when the clave changes from 3:2 to 2:3 or vice versa. “What do you mean, ‘reverse’? You're going backwards or something? No, no that's not it,” he insisted. “The clave doesn't change; the feeling changes. The clave stays the same, but if a section starts in the middle of the clave you feel it differently.”

So we used the term “change of clave feeling.” He was very particular. He had no time for inferior musicianship, and if he found a mistake in the manuscript or the musical exercises, he let me know it in no uncertain terms.

I'm sure he was just as particular about how all the arrangements stacked in the corner were played by his musicians. Tito ran a tight ship, but he always expressed a deep love for the musicians in his band--“the boys,” as he called them. Trumpeter Jimmy Frisaura was with him for forty years. When Puente's long-time bassist, Bobby Rodriguez, started to lose his eyesight, Tito bought an oversize Xerox machine so he could enlarge the parts.

Some of Tito's most compelling music had no horns, no piano, no score, and no arrangements at all. In 1955, a skeptical record-company owner, George Goldner, allowed Puente to go into the studio after midnight (to save on studio costs) and record some music for drums only. Tito assembled percussionists Mongo Santamaria, Carlos “Patato” Valdes, Willie Bobo, and himself, along with bassist Bobby Rodriguez. As Mongo passed around a bottle of Havana rum, they talked over various breaks and ensemble figures. The resulting album, “Puente In Percussion,” is a percussionist's dream, as relentlessly energetic as the red jackhammer on the cover. “I had my chops built up at the time,” said Tito, modestly. It became one of the most famous percussion records of all time.

And the recordings continued. Tito has an amazing 118 albums to his credit--the most of any artist to date! Probably the most popular was the 1958 “Dance Mania.” Two years ago, “The New York Times” listed it among “Top 25 most significant albums of the 20th century.” Tito knew how to make people dance; after all, he had been a dancer himself. “Puente listens to the big band as a rhythm player, and he interprets the band as a drum,” says conguero/trumpeter Jerry Gonzales.

When the Palladium closed and the Mambo era was over, Tito's reputation was so firmly established that he kept working through the various dance crazes such as the boogaloo and the pachanga. He glided through rock 'n' roll and ignored disco.

When the Salsa era dawned, Tito rode the wave once more along with all the newer stars (many of whom had played in his band)--Eddie Palmieri, Larry Harlow, Ray Barretto and Johnny Pacheco, to name a few. In 1971, a guitarist named Santana recorded a song called “Oye Como Va,” which Tito had composed and recorded 1956. Tito smiled when he talked of the royalty checks in six figures that started appearing in his mailbox.

In 1980, Puente signed with Concord Records and turned his talents to recording adventurous Latin-jazz albums such as “El Rey,” featuring songs by John Coltrane, among others.

It was time to go. Tito's wife, Margie, picked out his shirt and jacket and packed them in a hanging bag while we loaded the equipment into the trunk. Tito, at 76, carried his own timbales as I carried the stands. We headed to his restaurant, aptly named Tito Puente's, on City Island in the Bronx. Tito drove.

The restaurant is virtually a Tito Puente theme park. His pictures are on the walls and laminated into the tables. Conga drums serve as bar stools. Tito even appears on the menu in a chef's hat.

Of course, he created a serious commotion when he arrived. The place was crowded and everyone wanted to shake the hand of the little man with the big smile and the gleaming mane of white hair. Tito stopped at tables, talked to the patrons, and signed autographs. The maitre d' showed him to his favorite table and asked if he was going to have his usual filet of sole and red wine. “Yes, thank you, how did you know?”

When lunch was over, Tito got down to business and the video cameras rolled. He stood in front of the famous mural with the greats of Latin music, identifying each person and adding a few kind words--Cachao, Miguelito Valdes, Mongo, Charlie Palmieri, Count Basie, Xavier Cugat, Desi Arnaz, Duke Ellington. Tito never failed to give credit to those who helped popularize “our Latin music.” When the shoot ended, Tito was proud of the efficiency of his performance. “They call me ‘one-take Tito,’” he laughed.

A group of school children was having a special cultural field day at the restaurant and were eating lunch on the enclosed porch. Tito went out to greet them, acknowledged the teacher and thanked her for her work with the kids. (Tito had his own scholarship fund to help aspiring Latin musicians.) The children were thrilled and asked for autographs. Tito took it all in stride and showed genuine affection for all.

The first half of the day was over. Tito smiled, said goodbye, and went off with his “band boy” Ralph Barbarosa (who's been with him for thirty-two years) to rehearse and play a concert that night in Carnegie Hall. I wish I could have tagged along for that.

Tito died on June 1, 2000. A few months later, he was recognized at the first Latin Grammy Awards, winning for Best Traditional Tropical Performance for “Mambo Birdland.” Tito was the greatest--a real old-school gentleman and the most down-to-earth superstar I've ever met. He taught me a lot about drumming and even more about how to live life. We all miss him.

Jim Payne is a member of the online faculty at Berklee College of Music where he teaches R&B/Funk drumming to students from the US and all over the world. He has a long career as a drummer, educator, producer, and collaborator with the best musicians in jazz and funk. His private online School of Funk at www.funkydrummer.com expands his teaching format with all local and international students.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.