

THE QUOTES:

"Salsa is experiencing a new resurgence and leading the charge is the newly formed Spanish Harlem Orchestra winner of the 2003 Billboard Latin Music Awards for new artist. These seasoned sidemen accompanied by four singers are bringing the New York Harlem salsa sound of the 60s and 70s to life for a new generation."

SPY MAGAZINE

"With his new project, The Spanish Harlem Orchestra, Hernandez has finally provided old-school salsa fans with the kind of record they've been demanding for years... an instant classic."

NEWSDAY

"Watching these crack musicians rev up their complex, precision polyrhythms and fire up five-part horn harmonies is as thrilling as riding a horse that suddenly breaks into a gallop. Somebody may have the reins, but the sinewy power is unpredictable. The near-anarchic, party-like climax gave fans a final lesson in classic salsa: Never leave before it's over."

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES



Spanish Harlem Orchestra

Spanish Harlem is the birthplace for Salsa, Latin Soul, Boogaloo and countless other variants within the tropical Latin idiom. From Tito Puente to Marc Anthony, this small enclave has exerted a monumental effect on the sound of American music today. Led by world famous pianist and arranger **Oscar Hernández**, Spanish Harlem Orchestra, has quickly established itself as the curators of this tradition borne of "El Barrio."

In addition to being pianist, arranger and musical director for globally renowned **Rubén Blades**, Oscar Hernández has enjoyed a prolific musical career recording and performing with such world renown artists as Latin music king **Tito Puente**, Queen of Salsa **Celia Cruz**, Latin pop star **Julio Iglesias**, **Juan Luis Guerra**, **Ray Barretto**, **Dave Valentin**, **Johnny Pacheco**, **Ismael Miranda**, **Pete "Conde" Rodríguez**, **Oscar De'leon**, **Luis "Perico" Ortiz**, **Grupo Folkorico Experimental**, **Willie Colón**, **Kirsty MacColl** and **Earl Klugh**, as well as many others. Oscar was also the Musical Director for **Paul Simon's** Broadway show *The Capeman*, working closely with Simon in the studio constructing the musical arc of the controversial show.

From their debut album, *Un Gran Día En El Barrio*, SHO revived the classic 1970 NYC sounds with a new hard hitting point-of-view. Fueled by great singers **Frankie Vasquez**, **Herman Olivera**, **Ray De La Paz** and special guest **Jimmy Sabater**, the songs were hot and included back-in-the-day hits like **Tito Rodriguez's** *Mama Guela*, **Willie Colón's** *La Banda*, and others. It launched the band and garnered them a 2003 Grammy nomination for *Best Salsa Album* and a Latin Billboard Award for *Salsa Album of the Year-Best New Group*.

On their follow-up album, *Across 110th St.*, Spanish Harlem Orchestra was augmented by the roaring trombones of **Jimmy Bosch** and **Dan Reagan**, singers **Marco Bermudez**, **Willie Torres**, **Ray De La Paz** and special guest **Ruben Blades**. It was slamming and garnered the group its first Grammy Award in 2005 for *Best Salsa Album*.

Their most recent release, *United We Swing*, places Spanish Harlem Orchestra among Latin music's greatest bands by paying due to a neighborhood romanticized in **Leonard Bernstein's** *Westside Story* and **Ben E. King's**, *A Rose in Spanish Harlem*.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION



Spanish Harlem Orchestra

United We Swing

Since their arrival in 2000, **Spanish Harlem Orchestra** (SHO) has established itself as a standard bearer of contemporary Latin music. Directed by world-renowned pianist, arranger, and producer **Oscar Hernández**, the thirteen-member all-star ensemble has reintroduced the classic sounds of New York City Salsa to music lovers worldwide. *United We Swing*, SHO's third album, is a stunning follow-up to their 2004 **Grammy award-winning** album *Across 110th St.*, and their 2002 Grammy nominated debut, *Un Gran Día En El Barrio*.

On *United We Swing*, Spanish Harlem Orchestra continues in the same classic-meets-contemporary sound, but with refreshing originality. Nine of the songs are original compositions grounded in the unique identity the band has forged based on the musical legacy of El Barrio, a pulsating Eastside community in NYC located to the south of 125th St that gave rise to Boogaloo, Latin Soul, and Salsa.

"Our music style is the original sound of New York old school "Salsa dura" (heavy salsa) that was played in the early years by our pioneers," says Oscar. "That sound has been lost and we want to keep it alive while educating the new generations (and music lovers in general) on the true musical roots of our culture." Oscar adds, "we've brought back the essence of what makes this music great and are keeping the salsa spirit alive in our recordings and shows."

From the opening horns of "SHO Intro," you know you're in for an aural party. The song is upbeat and features Oscar introducing the members of the band and opening the show. "Llegó La Orquesta" (The Orchestra Has Arrived) was co-written by Oscar and Gil Lopez. It sets up a ballroom scene that will have listeners jumping out from their seats to dance.

"I have a lot of colleagues who helped me on this album and who I feel have their finger on the pulse of what this music should be. The arrangers include **Sonny Bravo, Gil Lopez, Angel Fernandez, Jose Febles** and myself," says Oscar.

SHO pays tribute to the legacy of Manhattans Palladium Ballroom, "the home of the mambo," with "En El Tiempo Del Palladium" (In The Times of The Palladium), that catered to Mambo dancers and featured the bands of the BIG-3: **Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez** and **Machito**. Tipica 73 icon, Sonny Bravo, arranged the Willie Torres tune, "Se Forma La Rumba" (The Rumba Has Begun). Oscar advises "Sácala Bailar" (Take Her Dancing) and leads into the classic 1970s Fania-era hit, "Ahora Sí" (Now's The Time).

The rest of the album will satisfy Salsa lovers with "Que Bonito" (How Lovely) and "Salsa Pa'l Bailador" (Salsa For Dancers). The Joe Cuba cha-cha-cha, "Mujer Divina" (Divine Lady), is done in doo-wop three-part vocal harmony. "Soy Candela" (I Am Fire) keeps the pace burning and segues into a smoking "Plena Con Sabor" (Tasty Plena). "Danzón For My Father" is a piece originally recorded by Dave Valentin that Oscar composed as a tribute to his dad, Emilio Hernández.

Saving a surprise for the finale is always a great way to end a party and Oscar Hernández and SHO certainly do that with special guest **Paul Simon**. "Late In The Evening/Tarde En La Noche" is a reconfiguration of a Simon Top Ten hit from his 1980 *One-Trick Pony* album. Hernández, who collaborated with Simon on his Broadway musical, "Cape Man," arranged the piece with Simon singing the classic refrains.

"I was talking to Paul and asked him if he would want to be a guest on our album. No sooner had the words come out of my mouth and he said, 'I'd love to. What are you thinking about?' I was floored and completely honored. Paul Simon doesn't just record with anybody."

"The first verse that he sings accapella is distinctively different. He told me to leave it like that because he didn't want it to sound like the original. It's more like a dream years later. The combination is really cool. I was going to do it with the original horn lines but in this case I took it to the realm of what we are all about."

From their 2002 debut album, *Un Gran Día En El Barrio*, SHO revived the classic 1970 NYC sounds with a new hard hitting point-of-view. Fueled by great singers **Frankie Vasquez, Herman Olivera, Ray De La Paz** and special guest **Jimmy Sabater**, the songs were hot and included back-in-the-day hits like Tito Rodriguez's "Mama Guela," Willie Colon's "La Banda," and others. It launched the band and garnered them a 2003 Grammy nomination for "Best Salsa Album" and a Latin Billboard Award for Salsa Album of the

Year-Best New Group.

On their 2004 follow-up, ***Across 110th St.***, the Spanish Harlem Orchestra was augmented by the roaring trombones of **Jimmy Bosch** and **Dan Reagan**, singers **Marco Bermudez**, **Willie Torres**, **Ray De La Paz** and special guest **Ruben Blades**, who Hernández worked for in the 1990s as his musical director. It was slamming and garnered the group its first Grammy Award in 2005 for “Best Salsa Album.”

Today, ***United We Swing***, places Spanish Harlem Orchestra among Latin music’s greatest bands by paying due to a neighborhood romanticized in Leonard Bernstein’s “Westside Story” and Ben E. King’s, “A Rose in Spanish Harlem.” El Barrio is a hard urban incubator as described in Piri Thomas’ book, “Down These Mean Streets,” that in the midst of social despair has given the world unique Caribbean musical mixtures.

“I’m from the Bronx,” concludes Oscar, “but if you’re a Latino in NYC you always have a connection to Spanish Harlem. It’s a place where a lot of stuff has happened that for me is kind of a microcosm for Latin New York. As a community it is an important part of the fabric that makes up the city, and we’re compelled to share the power of the music and culture with the world.”

SHO's third great way to meet great band

Pioneer Press

TwinCities.com-Pioneer Press

Article Last Updated: 06/11/2007 12:06:32 PM CDT

Spanish Harlem Orchestra's third album makes a great introduction to the band. That's because "United We Swing" kicks off with a rhythmic "intro" to its stellar 13-member ensemble. These well-deserved nods are followed by nearly 70 minutes of "salsa dura" delights by the mostly Nuyo-Rican group.

SHO has led a nationwide re-emergence of urban-tinged Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican Latin dance music. But to describe it as a throwback - even a great throwback - is an injustice. Even as the group pays homage to the past, it makes an indelible mark of its own with an album of mostly originals that sound like old-school classics.

SHO expertly surrounds the clave - the basic three-two beat that forms the core of Latin salsa dance music - with tight vocal harmonies, sophisticated arrangements and lightning-quick chord and bridge changes. Paul Simon guest-stars on this release, but his presence (like that of legendary singer/actor Ruben Blades on SHO's previous album), is superfluous.

"United We Swing" offers a buffet of Latin music styles ranging from Cuban rumbas and son montunos to Puerto Rican folkloric plenas and waltz-sounding danzons.

This is tight and irresistible dance music, performed at its absolute best. Listen closely to bandleader/pianist Oscar Hernandez's intricate arrangements and Hector "Maximo" Rodriguez's heavy bass sound. But don't blame us if you accidentally wear a hole through the living room floor.

Delicioso.

-RUBÉN ROSARIO ROCK

"The Traveling Wilburys Collection, the Traveling Wilburys, Wilbury/Rhino ****

Rejoice, Traveling Wilburys fans: It's here

After years of bidding warfare on eBay, those searching for the Traveling Wilburys at last have an easier and less costly way of getting the group's long-out-of-print CDs.

It's still tough to fathom how a band that featured George Harrison, Bob Dylan, Roy Orbison, Tom Petty and Jeff Lynne managed to end up with both their CDs unavailable - at least on the mainstream market - especially because the discs had sold millions of copies when first issued. Chalk it up to licensing and complicated contractual issues.

But it's time to rejoice because both 1988's "Traveling Wilburys Volume 1," and 1990's "Traveling Wilburys Volume 3" are now being reissued together in several different formats. There's a standard package and a deluxe edition. The latter includes a 40-page book. Each contains bonus tracks and a bonus DVD. There is also a vinyl edition and a digital edition bundle.

That '88 disc included the wondrous "Handle With Care," originally set as the flip side of a Harrison single from his "Cloud 9" album. But the brass at Warner Bros. rightly found the song to be far too irresistible to relegate to the land of B-sides and persuaded Harrison to get his mates to record a full album together. They did, and songs like "Dirty World," Orbison's spectacular vocal showcase "Not Alone Any More" and Dylan's "Tweeter and the Monkey Man" all helped the album sell more than 5 million copies.

Tragically, Orbison died shortly after the album was issued, but there was one more Traveling Wilburys release, which featured the four surviving members. It was called "Volume 3," even though there never was a "Volume 2." Consider it just one more oddity reflecting the bandmates' offbeat sense of humor.

Spanish Harlem Orchestra rocks Mondavi

By Edward Ortiz
BEE ARTS CRITIC

MUSIC REVIEW

It's a rare thing to bring a Mondavi Center for the Arts audience to a state of near abandon.

But that's exactly what happened Friday evening when the 13-piece Spanish Harlem Orchestra sizzled its way through a two-hour set of salsa music at the concert hall on the UC Davis campus. This deeply likable group of virtuoso musicians, led by Oscar Hernandez, plays "salsa dura," a straightforward brand of dance tunes that took hold of Latin music in New York City circa the 1970s.

But this was no blast-from-the-past concert. Rather, it was a real-time display of how timeless and expressive this music is and how it swings.

That fact was not lost on a nearly sold-out audience well-acquainted with the band's two CDs. The decidedly young audience was more than willing to stand and dance in the seats — a first at the Mondavi.

Some of the evening's best music came from the group's upcoming album "United We Swing." Hernandez's composing style and extraordinary musicianship on piano was showcased in the jazzy Mingus-like chops of the introduction to "Danzon For My Father." The most striking thing about this orchestra is its tight-and-sassy horn section. Trumpeters Pete Nater and John Walsh switched off delicious solos in "Cuando Te Ve," from the Grammy-

winning album "Across 110th Street." This pattern of excellent soloing continued throughout with excellent efforts by Melecio Magdalayo on baritone sax and flute, and the incandescent playing of Luis Quintero on timbales.

The focused coolness of singers Ray De La Paz, Marco Bermudez and Willie Torres was strongest on the three-part harmony of the bolero "Esperame En En Cielo." And they proved they can hold their own on the blistering-hot "Pa Gozar." And by the time the orchestra got to the classic "Arinara," it had turned the staid hall into a perpetual-motion dance machine.

■ ■ ■
The Bee's Edward Ortiz can be reached at (916) 321-1071 or eortiz@sacbee.com

Sacramento Bee, Feb. 12, 2009

SFGate.com**Music Review: Spanish Harlem Orchestra**

By OLIVIA MUNOZ, Associated Press Writer

Monday, May 14, 2007

(05-14) 11:29 PDT , (AP) --

Spanish Harlem Orchestra, "United We Swing" (Six Degrees Records): The lyrics in one of the first songs on the Spanish Harlem Orchestra's new album invites the listener to dance, but the music behind the words double-dare you not to move.

In "United We Swing," the Grammy-winning group brings back "salsa dura" — that exciting fusion of Caribbean rhythms and big-band sound that blared out of Big Apple barrios in the 1970s.

The album is a throwback to that intoxicating time of Willie Colon, Hector Lavoe, Celia Cruz, Ruben Blades and others: blasting brass, outbursts of "wepa!" and, above all, music that moved the audience.

Although the feel is old-school, most of the tracks on the album are, in fact, originals played by veteran musicians who worked with the great salseros of the 70s.

The songs are arranged wonderfully by bandleader and keyboardist Oscar Hernandez. There's also one ("Late In the Evening/Tarde En La Noche") written by Paul Simon, but salsa usually sounds weird in English and that is true here.

The best songs pay tribute to Latin music itself.

"I don't know what it is about the rumba, I don't know what it is about the drum..." goes "Salsa Pa'l Bailador" ("Salsa for the Dancer").

"United We Swing," the third album by the Spanish Harlem Orchestra, is instant joy, a delirious good time.

It doesn't sound new but, man, does it sound good.

CHECK THIS OUT: "En El Tiempo Del Palladium" ("In the Time of the Palladium") is a classy ode to this revered New York club's heyday. It's a must for anyone who saw the likes of Tito Puente there — or wishes they had.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2007/05/14/entertainment/e112914D57.DTL>

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Mon, Sep. 24, 2007

Spanish Harlem Orchestra delivers spirited show

BY JORDAN LEVIN

Whatever Spanish Harlem Orchestra's Saturday night concert at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts lacked in glamour, it more than made up for in energy, high spirits and musical excellence.

A salsa big band with the velvet precision and power of a high-performance sports car, SHO is the kind of dance band they just don't make anymore. At least, not for the clubs where salsa was created.

In the United States, salsa in its original form -- complex, inventive, rocket-powered, as rhythmically tight as it is get-down loose -- is fast becoming like jazz, music you appreciate as art. That means SHO mostly plays the culture circuit, presented by such nonprofits as Miami Dade College at such venues as Gusman, which, though it has fine acoustics, also has a sit-down policy that had ushers squelching people whenever they started doing what comes naturally when you hear terrific salsa.

JOINING THE FUN

It wasn't until the last song, an electric rendition of Chano Pozo's *Ariñañara*, that people were allowed to swirl into the aisles.

SHO isn't that big a big band: two guys each on trumpet and trombone, one on baritone sax and flute, timbales, congas, bongos and stand-up bass. But it sounded like an orchestra. The irrepressible vocalists, veterans Ray de la Paz and Marco Bermúdez, and young gun Willie Tórres, have a now rare combination of exuberant soul and razor-edged rhythmic chops, singing beautiful old-fashioned harmony on the bolero *Espérame En El Cielo*.

"They say salsa is dead -- see any dead bodies around here?" bandleader and pianist Oscar Hernández asked the crowd. No, just wonderful musicians as focused, confident and joyful as they were unassuming -- master craftsmen too good to bother with arrogance.

GENIUS

Hernández' and SHO's genius is in the arrangements, the way the smooth, rich sound of the horns enriches the driving percussion, the way the singers punctuate and lead the song, all of it merging and surging together.

In Hernández's lovely Cuban jazz instrumental *Danzón For My Father*, SHO sounded as beautifully modulated as a fine jazz singer.

Generously, Hernández gave two students from the New World School of the Arts who'd participated in a workshop with SHO Friday a chance to play with them onstage. They did a fine job, faces shining with admiration. More live bodies for salsa.

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Spanish Harlem Orchestra at the Gusman

These guys are gonna make downtown shimmy. *Ayayayayayay!*

By **Robert Hicks**

Published: September 20, 2007



Jerry Lacay

Like Voltron, even greater than the sum of its parts

Details:

Spanish Harlem Orchestra performs Saturday, September 22, at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts, 174 E Flagler St, Miami. The show begins at 8:00 p.m. Tickets cost \$27 to \$52; students and seniors pay \$18, and Miami Dade College and New World School students pay \$5. Call 305-237-3010, or visit www.ticketmaster.com.

Today's Hispanic youth pulsate to the sounds of Dominican merengue and bachata, to the dancehall hybrid reggaeton, to Latin pop and Puerto Rican hip-hop. It's a musical sensibility foreign to Oscar Hernandez, pianist, founder, and musical director of Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

"I think it's good. Every generation has its own music. It's reflective of that. I don't begrudge it. But it's not my style of music. I don't see the long-term credibility of that music.... But I understand how the youth like it," says Hernandez.

The New York-based, 13-member Spanish Harlem Orchestra has helped spearhead a revival of Afro-Cuban and "hard salsa" (*salsa dura*) music worldwide since recording its 2002 Latin Grammy-nominated debut CD, *Un Gran Dia en el Barrio* (Rope-A-Dope Records). The recording also won *Latin Billboard's* Salsa Album of the Year award in 2002. That success bred more laurels when the orchestra's sophomore CD, *Across 110th Street*, won a 2004 Latin Grammy for Best Salsa Album. Now the band is riding a new wave of critical acclaim for its third disc, *United We Swing*, released in May on Six Degrees Records.

In the past, SHO has concentrated on reinterpreting Afro-Cuban and hard salsa standards. As a result, many critics, while lauding the group's musicality, have cited its lack of original compositions. The band has addressed these concerns on *United We Swing*; nine of the 13 tracks are original songs.

"It's important first and foremost to make a really good musical production, one that looks at all the different angles," Hernandez says. "Within Spanish Harlem Orchestra, we have excellent arrangers that have their fingers on the pulse of this music. I include myself, because I arrange almost half of the material, and we have excellent musicians to play those arrangements and songs."

That roster reads like a veritable who's who of Latin music veterans, musicians who have backed up salsa's big names — Tito Puente, Héctor Lavoe, Willie Colón, Ruben Bladés, Celia Cruz, Ray Barretto. The group's three vocalists — Ray de la Paz, Willie Torres, and Marcos Bermudez — sing in close harmony to the rhythms of rumbas, cha-chas, and guaguancós. And SHO's arrangers include Puente's longtime pianist, 78-year-old Gil Lopez, along with Sonny Bravo, Angel Fernandez, and José Febles.

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Paul Simon, too, contributed a composition to *United We Swing*, "Late in the Evening/Tarde en la Noche," on which he also sings.

"It's not about a singer. It's not about one instrumentalist. It's about 13 people who are excellent musicians and, in our case, three vocalists, having the opportunity to create and perform on a high musical level. Those are the elements that we think are important. That's why we've been successful," Hernandez says.

Hispanic baby boomers have long embraced and understood the Afro-Cuban music tradition from the Forties; the great orchestras of Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez in the Fifties; and the Sixties and Seventies salsa of Puente, Celia Cruz, Ray Barretto, Eddie Palmieri, El Gran Combo, La Sonora Ponceña, and others. But today hard salsa gets little airplay over mainstream and Hispanic radio stations in the States. Still, there's been a resurgence — salsa nights are springing up in clubs nationwide, and some young people are learning the dance steps and embracing its driving rhythms, improvisation, and musicality.

Hernandez is excited about re-educating youth about their vibrant Afro-Cuban heritage. The day before Spanish Harlem Orchestra's Miami concert, the group will conduct workshops in hard salsa for local high school and university bands at Miami Dade College.

"We lead by the example of our musicianship and professionalism. Hopefully it captures the right people," Hernandez says. "We want to be accessible to young people, and we do anything we can to educate the youth. It's important that the youth be educated about this music and that they can identify with someone in terms of being a Latino."

Hernandez, age 53, grew up in a large family of Puerto Rican extraction in the South Bronx. At age 11, he joined the community Boys Club, where he took up the trumpet. But he struggled with the brass instrument's technical demands, so a teacher encouraged him to study the piano.

After receiving a piano as a gift at age 14, Hernandez went on to play that instrument in neighborhood bands before turning professional. Working with Ray Barretto for six years and serving as Ruben Bladés's musical director from 1983 to 1996, Hernandez laid the foundation for his leadership of SHO.

Hernandez's resumé also includes stints with Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Ismael Miranda, Oscar D'León, and Johnny Pacheco. Fifteen years ago he produced a salsa record, *Dance City*, for dance instructor and bandleader Eddie Torres. It sold only three copies, according to Hernandez, but the *New York Times* gave it a rave review, which was read by none other than Paul Simon. After listening to the recording, Simon tracked down Hernandez and hired him as musical director for his unsuccessful Broadway show, *Capeman*. Simon's continued admiration of Hernandez and SHO has led to his contributing to *United We Swing*.

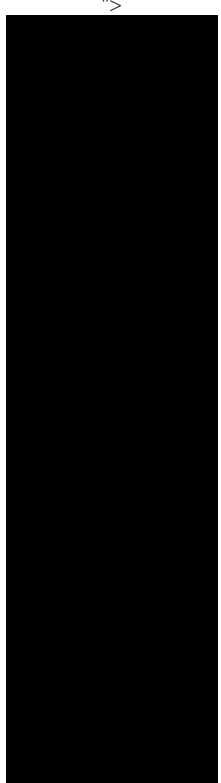
Meanwhile Hernandez hopes his move to Los Angeles will provide more opportunities for SHO. Their only trajectory, as he sees it, is upward.

"We're building in terms of our notoriety, in terms of who we are, in terms of more people recognizing what we're about and the importance of what we're doing," he says. "I do think there is an importance that goes beyond the music itself."



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Spanish Harlem Orchestra
United We Swing

(Six Degrees)
US release date: 15 May 2007
UK release date: 18 June 2007

by Heather Snell

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With the establishment of Spanish Harlem Orchestra in 2000, New York old-school salsa experienced an innovative and exciting revival. Basing their sound on the "salsa dura" or heavy salsa that permeated New York City's Eastside El Barrio community in the 1960s and the 1970s, Oscar Hernández and his 13-member ensemble not only continue a tradition that proved important to the El Barrio community, but they also invest older roots with new meaning by shifting the classical into the contemporary. Their music inaugurates, perhaps, a new golden era in Latin. For as often as Spanish Harlem Orchestra looks back to NYC salsa and the Cuban and Puerto Rican pioneers that made it possible in the first place, the ensemble also looks forward to creating a fresh place for Latin music amid the world's increasingly globalized and, to use Hernández's term, "bastardized" beats". "Our timing was perfect," Hernández asserts in an interview with Rudy Mangual in *Latin Beat Magazine*, "because salsa music had been losing its way in recent years to formulaic bands that sounded the same, saturated with the latest trends that bastardized our rich rhythms".

Although Hernández's comments in this interview and others come dangerously close to affirming an impossible sense of cultural purity, it is undeniably true that Spanish Harlem Orchestra's rhythms are unique. Few Latin bands are as able to convey the same amount of energy as this large NYC ensemble. For all that, Hernández has, since the successful releases of the Grammy-nominated *Un Dia En El Barrio* in 2002 and the Grammy-winning *Across 110th Street* in 2004, moved away from his New York City neighborhood. The release of *United We Swing* marks both the ensemble's creation of original compositions and their signing with the California label Six Degrees.

In contrast to preceding albums, nine of the tracks on the new album were created by the ensemble, a feature that has considerably discouraged Spanish Harlem Orchestra's critics from complaining about the prevalence of covers. What some critics don't realize, however, is that new covers of older songs constitute an important facet of the ensemble's repertoire, which focuses on bringing back to life sounds that risk being forgotten. The modern twists Spanish Harlem Orchestra have introduced to the classics are a necessary first step in their revisionist project. Their collaboration with Six Degrees represents yet another direction for the band, one that has so far been received with enthusiasm internationally.



POPSHOP
AMAZON
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Indeed, Spanish Harlem Orchestra occupies the cutting edge of contemporary Latin, and nowhere is this more evident than on *United We Swing*. Oscar Hernández introduces the members of the ensemble in "SHO Intro" to a sizzling mixture of horns, piano, congas and bongos, a musical phrase that aptly precedes and anticipates the album as a whole. The CD only goes upward from there, with "Llegó La Orquesta"/"The Orchestra Has Arrived" showcasing the pleasing vocals of Ray De La Paz and Marco

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Bermudez and, impossible to ignore, the musical direction and piano work of Hernández himself. This is largely where the group most succeeds, namely: in their seemingly effortless ability to assemble an appealing mix of vocal and instrumental sounds.

Gems include "En El Tiempo Del Palladium"/"In the Times of the Palladium", "Que Bonito"/"How Lovely", "Soy Candela"/"I Am Fire" and Hernández's beautiful "Danzón For My Father"-- a tribute, in fact, to his father Emilio Hernández. Yet even this cursory list does not do justice to the ensemble's at once fun and soothing arrangements, all of which subtly inflect classical Latin with the ensemble's own, more modern, manipulation of the traditional form. Hernández and his collaborators certainly accede to the title of the album: the tracks are remarkably contained in their unification and coherence, to the point where one track almost seamlessly blends into another while shifting gears into a different, and remarkably distinctive, composition.

The only track that seems to barely fit is the last: "Late in the Evening"/"Tarde En La Noche" is a reconfiguration of Paul Simon's original of the same name, from his 1980 album *One Trick Pony*. Despite Simon's laudable effort to attune his vocals to a Latin arrangement, the track proves somewhat anomalous alongside the others. Spanish Harlem Orchestra's vocals, moreover, appear to upstage Simon's. For whatever the reason, "Late in the Evening" seems to fall flat in an album that is otherwise quite expert in its fluid juxtaposition of disparate sounds. For Spanish Harlem Orchestra's part, the ensemble is proud of their collaboration with Simon. In the same interview cited above, Hernández explains: "I was honored that Paul Simon agreed to do the recording because he doesn't just record with anybody. In the end, the song sounds like the band performing, with Paul Simon singing lead, which is awesome." While I don't share Hernández's sentiments about the album's closing track, I must agree with him that notwithstanding Simon's cameo, the group's performance on this latest release is, in a word, awesome. *United We Swing* will appeal mostly to fans of classic and contemporary Latin, but it should also gain some new converts to the genre and remind us all that the traditional still maintains a special place in a world where "bastardization" has become fashionable.

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— 25 September 2007

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The demise of salsa has been greatly exaggerated

BY JORDAN LEVIN

It's been raining on and off all evening, but the 15,000 people in the stands after a Marlins game at Dolphin Stadium, and several hundred more on the field, have stuck it out to hear the music.

By the time El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, the group that has been living up to its name as "The Great Band" of salsa for 45 years, roars on stage, people are dancing, waving Puerto Rican flags, and roaring back as the band sings out "So you like salsa?"

Down in the crowd, 46-year-old Manny Rosales is dancing with 9-month-old grandson Aramis, both their round faces beaming with delight. "Reggaeton is nice," says Rosales. "But salsa is the music of Hispanics."

"It's your roots, it's where you come from," says Aramis' mother, Arlene Lollazao, 26. "Salsa is something in your blood."

Recent conventional wisdom had held that salsa's time had passed, its vitality sapped by commercial formula, its popularity usurped by other Caribbean styles, and, most recently, its street cred and younger audiences stolen by reggaeton.

But the classic Latin dance music is proving surprisingly resilient.

In New York, the genre's birthplace, classic salsa has been making a comeback with increasingly popular salsa nights at several clubs and a cadre of fine musicians sworn to old school musical values, led by the Grammy winning Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

Longtime stars like Gilberto Santa Rosa, who plays the West Miami-Dade club La Covacha tonight, and Victor Manuelle, who sold out Madison Square Garden this winter, tour the world and remain a formidable commercial force. New groups like N'Klabe and NG2 are helping to keep the genre hot for younger audiences.

And Aug. 1 sees the release of the film *El Cantante*, starring Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez, which will bring the story of Hector Lavoe, the voice of classic 1970s New York salsa, to mainstream audiences.

In the more than 30 years since salsa's creation in New York's Spanish Harlem, the music has become a mainstay of Latin culture.

"Tropical music is music for your whole life," says Santa Rosa. "Sometimes it takes a little rest, and I think that's what we've been living through. But there's a new generation of artists who are finding a way to keep this genre going."

Says Ned Sublette, a Latin music historian and musicologist in New York: "We don't have any other music that does what salsa does. It's music for head, heart and hips. We have this idea that dance

music is dumb -- boom, boom, boom. Salsa is anything but that."

A lack of commercial attention from record companies may have been good for salsa, forcing musicians to focus on playing live and on the music, rather than on selling themselves to labels or coming up with songs that fit on radio. Ed Morales, Latin music critic for New York Newsday, knows musicians who work out their songs by dancing to them.

"It's word of mouth and people wanting to do it," he says. "This is one of the few things in the Latin music world where there's an audience being developed from the bottom up."

The cultural bottom is where salsa started in the 1970s, as Latino musicians from poor New York neighborhoods mixed Cuban dance rhythms and big band orchestration with American urban energy and musical styles.

Artists like Willie Colon, Ruben Blades, Hector Lavoe and a host of other musicians on the independent Fania label invented supremely danceable music that spoke to a new American Latino subculture. And since so many of its musicians were New York Puerto Ricans, it also became a much loved style on their home island.

But the 1980s saw the rise of what was dubbed "salsa romantica," where the experimentation, street stories and sharp musicianship of the original innovators gave way to pretty boy frontmen singing formulaic, radio-friendly romantic songs. In the mid- to late 1990s, salsa came back with a new generation of young, powerful singers, notably Marc Anthony and Victor Manuelle, and a vibrant club dance scene. That, too, lost its energy and settled into formula and imitators, making way for the rise of bachata, and, most recently, reggaeton.

So when Spanish Harlem Orchestra, with veteran session musicians playing classic, old school salsa, beat out longtime commercial stars Anthony, Manuelle and Santa Rosa in 2004 to win the Grammy for Best Salsa Album, it stunned the Latin music world. There are raves for their recently released third CD, *United We Swing*, with mostly original songs boasting classic salsa style, ferocious musicianship, sophisticated arrangements and exuberant danceability.

"We came along at the right time," says Omar Hernandez, the group's musical director and founder. "The music had kind of lost its way for the last 15 years. People forgot about the essence of this music.

"It became formulaic, and the industry was driven by the commercial aspect. They wanted everybody to sound the same. That's a shame because our music is a lot more than that -- the development of New York City at the time [salsa was created] was unique, it lent itself to the way the music and culture developed that we took for granted. We realize now it was a special time."

Spanish Harlem Orchestra's recreation of music from that special time is wowing audiences from Prague to Memphis -- it will play Miami's Gusman Center for the Performing Arts Sept. 22. Its audiences are largely either non-Latinos or older Hispanics longing for the salsa of their youth.

Although salsa's longevity has helped make it popular worldwide -- there are major artists from Colombia and Venezuela, salsa dance scenes in Los Angeles, Europe and Asia -- the musical culture of the '70s that gave rise to salsa has changed.

The economics and restrictions of today's commercial music world are unfriendly to a style that requires lots of musicians and thrives on unpredictable, live, dance-driven energy. The very things that

make the genre great also make it difficult for it to reach the mainstream in its most genuine form.

And for music that was radically experimental when it was created, salsa today has become fairly conservative: If it's not structured a certain way, with certain elements, purists don't consider it salsa. While this helps preserve the music's strengths, it also can close it off to innovation.

Jose Conde, a Miami-reared Cuban-American musician who plays a fresh blend of Cuban and other tropical dance genres, says he and other young musicians experimenting with the style are largely shut out of the scene. "I'm not booked in salsa clubs or festivals and I'm shunned by certain salsa DJs in New York," he says. "They're very strict."

And yet he loves and is inspired by the music.

"It's classic, it's wonderful," Conde says. "The songs are great. The characters were alive and vibrant. That's never gonna die."

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