

New York Latin Stories: Bobby Marin

By Judy Cantor-Navas

“I was born on 107th Street in West Harlem - I grew up during that whole gang war era,” says Bobby Marin, remembering an album called *Saboreando-Pot Full of Soul*, featuring musicians he put together expressly for the recording. He dubbed the band 107th Street Stick Ball Team after the neighborhood kids who he would hang out on his street with in his youth.

“I sang in a group called the Del Chords on my block. We sang at the Apollo theater on amateur night a couple times.

We would be rehearsing, usually in hallways in the building to get the echo effect. Then the people would be saying ‘shut up!’ They’d throw us out, so we’d come outside, and our friends would be jamming, banging on cars and trash cans, and a couple of them had congas, so we started to ask them to back us up. We sang the songs and they played Latin behind us. This was all before boogaloo, but it’s what boogaloo became.

So years later, I decided to do the 107th Street Stickball Team, using the Latin Chords, which was my later vocal group, and combine it with Orlando Marin and a few of the other guys that played on the streets. Being on MGM records, it kind of got lost; it never got promoted. But there was some good material there.”

Marin, who is now 82 years old, operates out of his house in Florida, where he is busy running his indie label, and often on the phone. On a recent afternoon he was waiting for a call from Latin soul king Joe Bataan, a pal from the old days in the sixties. He colorfully describes those times as prolific and competitive ones for recording, when, despite an interest from labels in what was happening in El Barrio, they often didn’t know what to do with the music. Some great albums suffered from a lack of a marketing plan, and were only appreciated in later years when collectors or DJs rediscovered them.

That was the extraordinary case with “(I’ll Be a) Happy Man,” a song that Bobby Marin wrote for a group called the Latin Blues Band. The track was sampled on Christina Aguilera’s song “Ain’t No Other Man,” a 2006 radio and MTV that won Aguilera a Grammy Award. Marin was not credited on the pop star’s song.

“(I’ll be a)Happy Man” originally appeared on the album *Take a Trip Pussycat*, by The Latin Blues Band, which was another group put together by Marin. He remembers the recording of the album, which was released with a bizarre suggestively sado-masochistic cover:

“The guy that produced it was a famous rock and roll producer, Marty Craft. He formed a company with Stan Lewis, from Speed Records. They signed Louie Ramirez, who I worked with intensely in the 70s and 60s, and myself to produce and bring in some talent. So in 1966 we brought The Latin Blues band in there.”

The Latin Blues Band later became Los Astronautas, also known in English as The Moon People. “(I’ll Be a) Happy Man” was recorded again as “Happy Soul” and then again, as the instrumental “Hippy Skippy Moon Strut.” As the decades went on, the single became a collector’s item, and was at some point discovered by Aguilera’s producer.

“In 2009 Christina Aguilera happened to listen to it and liked the music in the background, so they sampled it. They sampled the background music and she put her voice on it.”

At that time, Marin was working as a consultant for Fania records in Miami, the archetypal label whose catalogue was reborn in the 1990s.

“The only way I found out was that I was working for Fania. One day they asked me, ‘Are you familiar with this song?’ They played just the music part, and I started singing the lyrics. The CEO at Fania at the time said, ‘But how do you know the lyrics?’

And I said, ‘Yeah, I know them. Because I wrote it.’

And you know I’m a kidder, and at first they didn’t believe me...”

Then they helped Marin sue.

“Through so many trials, we won every one of them. I was awarded 25% of the song’s publishing, and it was a big, big seller, so it wound up being very nice for the royalties.”

The money allowed him to start his label, Mambo Music. The label’s offerings of current albums and vintage recordings include unreleased gems like bootlegs from performances by Machito and Tito Puente.

“They are classics,” says Marin, who has released the recordings as the start of a series of “The Early Years” albums. They go back to the Fifties. They were recorded on a cassette at the Palladium Ballroom. You can hear [MC] Symphony Sid chatting with Tito Puente, Machito chatting with Miguelito Valdes; the disc jockey. I kept the interesting parts in there, but I didn’t want to intrude too much on the music; the music somehow was recorded so well with a cassette player that I took advantage of it.

An upcoming release is also by Tito Puente, this one a jazz album produced by Marin’s older brother, producer Richard Marin, at whose side Bobby started his own career.

“It’s a beautiful album, a soft album, with vibes and saxophone. Bossa nova mostly, and jazz, done very, very well. I think it was going to be for RCA. They didn’t release it. My brother had the tapes, and I decided I’ll put it out. it’s wonderful music.”

IN THE HEART OF SPANISH HARLEM

Marin recalls that in 1966, when he was 24 years old, he went into the studio to assist his brother with the recording of *The Heart of Spanish Harlem/En el Corazón de Spanish Harlem*, with a band led by Louie Ramirez.

“That album that’s what really got me interested in producing.

I became friendly with Louie Ramirez, and we went out to form a writing team,” Marin explains. “We wrote, arranged and produced so many boogaloo songs, everyone was asking us for tunes. When I was in the air force, I was writing songs for rock bands. When I came back, I still had the material, so we converted them into boogaloo songs.”

“Lucy in Spanish Harlem” opens the album.

“That’s a novelty song. We used the singers from Joe Cuba, and I sang a lead on that song because the other people were committed to other songs. They said, ‘You wrote the song you’re going to have to sing it.’ I said ‘What? I don’t sing.’ and they said, ‘Well, do what you can.’

My brother is on the album cover. The kid in the photo is brother’s son, right now he’s retired. That’s how long ago that was. Richard is standing next to the guy from [record store] Casa Latina. He paid to be on the cover, so my brother got him on the cover in front of his shop,

It's a phenomenal album, but it was Mercury records, and they didn't have a Latin division, so they never promoted it or did any marketing for it. My brother retained the rights to the recording and it just sat around for years, but little by little I've been putting out singles from the album.

The cover photo of another album cover from that era, *El Party con La Crema* was taken at a party at Marin's house.

"I'm dancing with my ex-wife towards the back. I had long hair. You can see my, ex-wife, with bare shoulders.

There were so many good songs that came out of that album that were being played around at different venues, but one of them in particular was the first song, "El Party."

The whole thing of the album is about a party. So if you listen to the album, it starts out with the doorbell ringing, and someone says 'hey Bobby.' And in the mix are like cocktail sounds, it sounds like there's a whole party going on. From start to finish.

The idea of that was at the time I was producing for UA Latino, and the Joe Cuba band had broken up. They had a sextet and they were always big when it came to selling records. So I said, hey, I'm going to put a sextet together and see if we can fill that void. So we put the sextet together and it was all star, top notch players. In fact I think that they even called them the Latin Allstars."

He points out another dancer on the album's cover:

"There's the founder of Alegre Records, Al Santiago. He's in the front with his daughter. Al was my mentor, I just followed him around when I was first learning the trade.

I worked for a small record label that had a record shop on Prospect Avenue in the Bronx called Mary Lou's. And Al had a very popular record store a few blocks from there, Casa Alegre. That's where everybody went to get their new releases. And I went in there selling him records and we got friendly, and he asked me to join his company.

There are so many stories that come up because of my association with Al."

Here's a good one: "Al Santiago was recording two new albums, but he ran out money and the studios was going to destroy the albums if he didn't come up

with the \$2100 that he owed. So I talked to Al, and he said, ‘if you can come up with the money, I’ll sell you the two albums .’

One of the albums was by Joe Bataan, *Gypsy Woman*.
And the other one was the first Willie Colon album, *El Malo*.

And I talked to Willie. He was like 18 years old at the time.
I took my brother Richard to see them perform and he saw the reaction of the crowd.

He said, ‘Well, Bobby – I’ll go to Decca records and I’ll ask them if they’d be interested.’

Decca records and other major labels shied away from musicians who were not in the union. So we devised a plan where Decca would pay for their union membership in lieu of a recording fee. So I was with my brother in the studio that we got for Joe Bataan to record *Gypsy Woman*.

And I remember it was a blizzard out there and he was late. Finally, I got a phone call from Joe. He says, ‘I don’t know how to tell you this Bobby, but I just signed with another company.’ I said, ‘what?!’

He says, ‘Well, [Johnny] Pacheco and his lawyer and Symphony Sid have this new company. I think they call it Fania.’

I said, ‘Fania? What’s that, a disease?’

I said, ‘Are your sure you want to do this?’ He said, ‘I already signed.’

And I said, ‘Well, at least I’ll have the Willie Colon album. And that’s when he said, ‘Hold on a second.’ And Willie gets on the phone says ‘I don’t know how to tell you this, but...’

Al Santiago sold Alegre to Morris Levy the gangster who owned Roulette records. And Al had me show up with him to the meeting. So I know everything that went down. That was in the 70s I suppose. And finally Morris sold everything to Fania, and that’s how Fania would up with all of this great music. But Fania was also the antithesis of what I was trying to do. They controlled the radio stations so well that I couldn’t get my music played.

Al was a good man.”

Marin has as many stories as he has records. And that's a lot. Here are a few more:

Love Burst

Bobby Marin & The Latin Chords

"Al Santiago went on to run the Latin department for Musicor Records. They had Tito Rodriguez, and one or two other Latin artists, but they also had The Platters and Gene Pitney, and a pretty decent record label, they were ok. They didn't give him a very big budget to release music, so they told him, 'why don't you use our music tracks recordings that we have and then you find someone to put the voices on it?'"

So Al liked our group, and we decided to do an album with The Latin Chords. We had tracks from The Platters, from other groups. So that was like thrown together, but it's a cult favorite. People are playing like 500-600 dollars for the album now."

La Peluca

Oro records

"That was Louie Colon, who I signed up to United Artists. We did about three albums. "La Peluca" was one of the favorite songs. It's a song about a guy who's bald, and the leader of the band, Louie Colon, was bald, completely bald. We used to make fun of him about his bald head, so we got someone to write a song about it. Louie Ramirez was the arranger."

From the Street

Latin Uniques

"That was one of the artists that we brought to Speed Records. It was a part of the whole boogaloo craze.

They needed a singer. We were walking down by Broadway and the cast from one of the Broadway plays was outside taking a break. And I was walking down the sidewalk with somebody, and they said hello to a guy named Tony Middleton. He was part of the Broadway play. And we asked him, 'Hey, do you want to make a recording?' And when he finished the play he came to the studio and recorded a couple of songs."

OCHO

Ocho

"That's one that I'm really proud of. When I was at United Artists, we were looking to sign up interesting groups. So art director Chico Alvarez, who is

leading his own band now, suggested that I listen to Ocho because they were from New Jersey where he was from. They came in to audition and I fell in love with them. It was an all African-American group, and they played the best Latin music you want to here.

Mostly it's like Latin jazz but uptempo, so I loved it. But I said, 'We need singers, so I brought in Manny Roman to sing the lead for them, and I brought in Jimmy Sabater, Willie Torres, Ismael Quintana, big names to sing *coro*. And I wrote material for them and Chico Mendoza, the leader of the band, he wrote the charts. People loved this album; it has great material. Old Cuban songs that were redone. "Ay que frio" was one of the songs that we did. It's an old Tito Rodriguez song. We wound up doing like four or five albums with Ocho. A very special group."