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Photo by Eleonora Alberto



Tito in 2000.

Tito's Note

Photo by Eleonora Alberto



As a musician my work has denied me. I've spent lonesome holidays away from my family and lost many hours of sunshine. But I do not regret it because an artist must do what he feels... it was something I felt I had to do. If my music has brought joy to one person, then I have been successful.

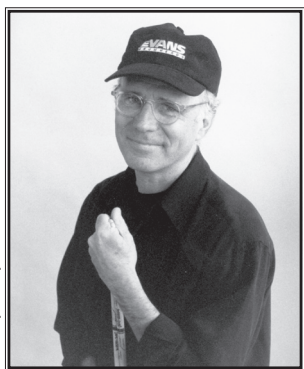
This book and DVD contain a great deal of information about my life, my music and my style of playing, as well as a short history of the music which has been my life's work.

Stay on the clave, and good luck.

Tito Puente

Jim's Note

Photo by Marilynne Herbert



Ever since I heard the bass from the Latin social club coming through the wall of my East Village basement apartment and bought *Puente In Percussion* from the Times Square Record Shop in the 42nd St. subway station, I've been hooked on Latin music.

This project has been very exciting for me. Working with Tito Puente has been a great privilege and I've learned a lot. I'm very thankful to him, especially, and also to Brian Theobald, Ina Dittke, Paul Siegel, Rob Wallis, Joe Conzo, Michael Lydon, José Madera, Louis Bauzó, Ed Uribe and Joanna Fitzpatrick.

Jim Payne

Tito Puente

King of Latin Music

*"There is a rose in Spanish Harlem,
A red rose up in Spanish Harlem..."**

WHEN YOU CUT THROUGH THE ROMANCE AND GET INTO THE STREETS, SPANISH HARLEM, THE LEGENDARY BIRTHPLACE OF AFRO-CUBAN MUSIC IN NORTH AMERICA, IS NOT THAT BIG AND IT'S NOT THAT BEAUTIFUL. A LONG NARROW SLICE OF MANHATTAN, "EL BARRIO" OR THE DISTRICT, AS RESIDENTS CALL IT, LIES SQUEEZED EAST-TO-WEST BETWEEN 3RD AND 5TH AVENUES AND STRETCHES FROM BLACK HARLEM'S FAMOUS 125TH STREET SOUTH TO 96TH STREET, WHERE THE ELEGANT UPPER EAST SIDE BEGINS. A high, blackened stone wall, the track-bed of the Harlem and New Haven Railroad, bisects the neighborhood, and pedestrians have to walk through dank, narrow tunnels to pass from one side to the other. It's a checkerboard neighborhood, blocks of weather-beaten apartment buildings, five- and six-story walkups, interspersed with weedy vacant lots. Steel gates to keep out burglars cover the apartment windows, and every night shopkeepers roll down ribbed metal armor over their storefronts and secure it with heavy-duty padlocks. Trash cans overflow onto the streets and sidewalks.

The "Barrio" of Spanish Harlem vibrates with rich traditions and down-to-earth culture. The smell of fried plantains and rice and beans drifts out into the streets from red- and yellow-fronted bodegas and delicatessens. The sweet-hot sounds of Latin music fill the air from speakers in front of mom-and-pop record stores and from car radios. In the summer, girls chalk hopscotch squares on the sidewalks, and boys play stickball games between parked cars. Housewives lean out of first-floor windows to chat with friends, while old men sit on folding chairs by worn stone stoops and play cards and dominos. The avenues teem with traffic, and the honking horns and the rumble of the subway coming up through the pavement announce that El Barrio is in one of the world's largest cities, New York, with its glittering skyscrapers and rushing crowds, a city where the best and the worst of everything, the haves and have-nots, exist side by side. In El Barrio it's easy to

*Lyrics from "Spanish Harlem," Ben E. King, 1961, writers: Jerry Leiber and Phil Spector.

see what you can get if you're lucky and where you could end up if you're not.

Tito Puente, recognized as the world's greatest timbale player and Latin music's best-loved goodwill ambassador, was born in Spanish Harlem and was educated in its schools and in its streets. Combining the musical heritage he learned there with his own



Tito at age 3.

determination and energy, he became one of the most successful Latin bandleaders of all time. But whether he's playing at Carnegie Hall or a concert to benefit his scholarship fund for young musicians, Tito acknowledges his humble beginnings in El Barrio. If you're from El Barrio, you're proud of it. That's where you grew up and that's where you learned how to survive.



In the early 1920s, a young couple from Puerto Rico, Ernest and Ercilia Puente, boarded a ship in San Juan and spent five days sailing to New York to begin a new life. Though they had heard of opportunities, they knew there would be

obstacles. The language was different and the city was unfamiliar territory. They didn't know what to expect. The first wave of immigrants from the Caribbean islands, Cubans and Puerto Ricans ready and willing to take on the challenge of a new life, had gained a toehold in New York, but they had to fight for every inch of ground.

When the Puentes stepped off the ship they needed a place to live. Ernest also needed a place to work. Determined to make his way in this strange new environment, he finally landed a job in the Gem razor blade factory in Brooklyn. After a short stay in a Brooklyn apartment, they moved to Manhattan's East 110th St., joining other Spanish speakers in the neighborhood that became known as El Barrio. A conscientious worker, Ernest rode the subway to the factory every day and was soon promoted to foreman. At home, too, the young couple's dreams started to take shape. Ercilia gave birth to their first child. Their new son, Ernest Anthony Puente Jr., was born in Harlem Hospital on April 20, 1923. They called him Ernestito, and eventually everyone shortened that to Tito. He was the future King of Latin Music.

Early Years

It didn't take long for young Tito to gravitate toward his life's passion. As a toddler he began to use forks and spoons to bang on the furniture and window sills of their Spanish Harlem apartment. Instead of discouraging what many might consider a questionable pastime in the thin-walled, close quarters of a Barrio apartment building, Ernest and Ercilia encouraged their budding percussionist. Soon, however, the youthful banging coming from the Puente apartment began to disturb the other tenants. "I was a very percussive young man, always playing on things," Tito recalls with a chuckle. "My neighbors complained to my parents, 'Why don't you put that brat to *study* music? He's driving us crazy here!'"

To appease her neighbors Ercilia enrolled her boy in piano lessons at the New York School of Music on 125th and Lenox Ave. Tito's course of study had begun. He was eight years old. The lessons cost 25 cents and in those days a hard-working factory foreman may have considered that an unnecessary luxury. To avoid any possible opposition, Ercilia waited until Ernest Sr. was asleep before tiptoeing into the bedroom to take the money from his pants pockets.

As the dutiful young mother walked her son to the Music School on Lenox Ave., about twenty minutes away, the young boy's eyes and ears were bombarded by the sights and sounds of his buzzing neighborhood. The Park Plaza Ballroom was down the street at 110th and 5th Ave., the Golden Casino across the street on the same corner, and Club Cubanicán close by on the next block. Tito could hear popular Cuban and Puerto Rican songs of the day from open apartment windows and restaurants. Record shops attracted customers by letting music overflow into the street—one record shop on Madison Ave. between 113th and 114th was owned by Victoria Hernández, sister of one of Puerto Rico's most famous composers, guitarists and flute players, Rafael Hernández.

During the 1930s many of the Jewish theaters in Spanish Harlem changed their names and began catering to the neighborhood's growing Latin community. The Photoplay Theater became the San José, the Mount Morris at 116th and 5th became the Campoamor, and musicians began arriving from Cuba and Puerto Rico to play in the pit orchestras. Further west, Tito and his mother

passed the famous Apollo Theater on 125th St., which featured the best black bands of the day—blues, gospel and jazz—as well as vaudeville shows.

In 1928 Ercilia gave birth to a baby girl, Anna, and when Anna was six and Tito eleven, their mother enrolled both children in dance school. Soon they were an amateur dance team. An old photo shows Tito at the age of twelve, standing very straight in black tails and white tie, holding seven-year-old Anna's hand in a formal dance position. "Annie and I studied all forms of ballroom dancing including acrobatic tap," Tito recalls. "We were inspired of course by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. I pride myself on being one of the few band leaders who really knows how to dance."⁽¹⁾ Tito and Anna also joined a children's talent group in Spanish Harlem called the Stars of the Future, sponsored by their local Catholic Church, La Milagrosa. Anna was crowned Queen of the Stars of the Future in 1935, but her feisty young brother was not to be outdone. Tito was crowned King of the Stars of the Future four times. It seems the future King of Latin Music was getting used to that title early in his career.

A Teenager in El Barrio

Living in an ethnically diverse neighborhood can force young boys to grow up quickly, and Tito acquired his street smarts early on. "Around the neighborhood," Tito remembers, "one side we had the Italians, the other side we had the Blacks, and the Puerto Ricans were smack in the middle!" A regular boy, Tito loved to play games with the other kids, especially baseball. But whatever aspirations he may have had in sports and dancing were cut short by a serious bicycle accident which injured one of his ankles. From then on he concentrated on his music. After his early school years at Public School 43, Tito moved on to Cooper and then Galvani Junior High, where he began developing another music-related talent: singing. He joined a vocal quartet and sang songs by the Ink Spots and other popular groups of the day.

Meanwhile, in the larger world, the big bands were taking the country by storm. Swing dance music was on the radio and on the juke-boxes, and big bands played live in the hotels and the theaters of Times Square. Tito soaked it all in. "I would listen to the great dance bands of the day on the radio, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Duke