

Tito Puente, the soul of Latin music, dead at 77

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Tito Puente, best known for popularizing Latin dance music and jazz in the United States for the past half-century, passed away on May 30 in New York City. He was 77 years old and died following heart surgery to correct a faulty valve.

He was born Ernest Anthony Puente, Jr. on April 20, 1923 in New York City to parents who had just migrated from Puerto Rico. “Tito” as he became known, was a pioneer of Latin jazz and an icon of Latin dance music worldwide. This year, as part of its Bicentennial celebration, the Library of Congress honored him as a “Living Legend.” He recently won his fifth Grammy award following the release of *Mambo Birdland*.

News of Puente’s death shocked and saddened many among his fans and in the music industry as a whole. World-famous musicians along with many workers, young and old, lined the streets of New York for seven hours on Saturday June 3 to pay their last respects. His native island, Puerto Rico declared three days of official mourning.

This Latin and jazz musician who tirelessly performed for many decades is deserving of such a reaction. Many wonderful tributes have appeared in major newspapers and magazines throughout the country pointing out the musical achievements made in the course of his career. He was one of the last of the big band leaders in American music and, like Duke Ellington and Count Basie, kept his group performing for close to 50 years out of love and dedication to the musical art form.

Tito recorded over 120 albums in a wide variety of styles. Known as El Rey del Mambo—The King of Mambo—Puente’s theatrical wit, along with a perpetual grin, continued from his days at the Palladium dance hall in New York during the 1950s and 1960s, to the

end of his life. This reviewer had the opportunity to dance along with thousands of others at the Los Angeles Hollywood Bowl where he regularly performed, just last summer. It appeared at the time that Tito’s enormous energy was timeless and would keep going forever.

Tito Puente came of age as a musician during the time of the big bands—Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Glen Miller and Jimmy Dorsey—when jazz and swing were gaining ever-increasing popularity among the American public. His neighborhood, commonly known as Spanish Harlem, was influenced by this music, while also retaining the island culture.

He expressed a love for music and dance at the age of 7. His mother then scrapped together the money for piano lessons after neighbors complained about the constant banging on pots, pans and window frames. Best known throughout his career for playing the timbales, he also mastered the piano, vibraharp, xylophone, saxophone and guitar.

Tito’s big break in music came during the period leading up to and following World War II. After the main drummer from Machito’s famous big band was drafted into the military, he was recruited to play drums and performed excellently.

After serving in the Navy during the war, Tito studied music at the Julliard School of Music in New York under the GI Bill. He worked briefly with other bands and then started the Tito Puente Orchestra, which packed in audiences every weekend at the main dance hall known as the Palladium. At that time, Mambo was the most popular dance among black, white and Latino workers.

Tito is best known for bringing the timbales to the front of the bandstand and playing them standing up. This created conditions for liberating the rhythm

section and also allowed Puente to demonstrate his fancy footwork.

Tito's earliest recordings are full of optimism and life. His best dance and Latin jazz compositions are from the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Material composed in later years tends to suffer from an attempt to fuse many musical influences in an effort to accommodate changing tastes among the youth. This began to change in the 1980s when Tito worked closely with a number of well-known jazz musicians and arranged some wonderful tunes.

Tito made a major effort to keep Afro-Cuban music alive following the US embargo against Cuba in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban revolution. Best known among the Cuban singers is Celia Cruz, who became the Queen of Mambo and would regularly perform with Puente's orchestra.

In summing up the sentiments of many of his fans, the remarks of Robert Farris Thompson, a professor at Yale University, are perhaps the most poignant. "He gave us all a life.... And by us I mean not only Puerto Ricans, but mainland blacks, huge numbers of Italians and Jews. We all loved him."

Music that is truly beautiful does have universal appeal, and the renewed interest in Latin dance music and jazz and blues among a younger generation today is indeed a positive one. We have Tito Puente to thank for keeping these rhythms alive for the past 50 years.

While there are over a 100 recordings, among my favorite are:

Cuban Carnival—Recorded in 1955 and 1956
Dance Mania, Vol 1 and 2—Recorded in 1958
Mambo Birdland—1999



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