Tito Puente is one of Latin music’s most enduring figureheads. The native New Yorker was born in 1921 and lived in Spanish Harlem with his Puerto Rican family. At a young age, he was recruited to be a percussionist in bandleader Machito’s popular Afro-Cuban Orchestra. He studied music at the esteemed Juilliard School in New York City. Upon graduating, “El Rey de los Timbales,” or “The King of the Timbales,” as he was known, formed his own band and began playing regularly at his hometown venue, the Palladium Ballroom. Puente released over 50 albums throughout his career, rendering him one of the most prolific recording artists in his field.

My parents came from Puerto Rico. Most of the Puerto Ricans who came at that time, during the 1920s, lived in Brooklyn. (It took them five days to get here on the boat.) But eventually, my parents moved to New York City, to Manhattan, El Barrio. That was the neighborhood. Most of the Puerto Rican people lived there.

I gained my experience there, because musicians have to gain their experience playing out in the street. It’s very important. You can study in a university, or a conservatory of music, or a music school to learn how to read music and all that. But then, for you to pay your dues, to really get out there and learn, you have to go to jam sessions.

And I grew up with that type of training. That was very important, to be exposed to that kind of music, Jazz or Latin, right in the neighborhood. That’s what helped me a lot for my future.

-Excerpted from an interview conducted by Jim Payne for “King of Latin Music,” 1999