

The Palladium Ballroom 53rd and Broadway



Tito Rodriguez at the Palladium

Location Description:

In the 1940s and 50s, the rhythmic pulse of Latin music and dances like the Samba, the Mambo, and the Cha Cha, were all widely popular on the radio and in dancehalls across the U.S. New York City's Palladium Ballroom, at 53rd Street and Broadway, seemed to be the epicenter of Latin music and dance at that time. Audiences came to hear bands, but they also came to watch some of the most talented dancers in the city -- many of whom were Jewish, Black, Italian, as well as Latino -- show off on the dance floor. For amateurs who wanted to learn the choreography to Latin dances, the Palladium hired instructors to give lessons. Whereas the late 1940s and 50s was still largely defined as an era of segregation, the multi-ethnic crowds at the Palladium exemplified the capacity for music and dance break down social barriers.

In Their Own Words:

"No one who went to the Palladium could think about anything but dancing. People moved their bodies in incredible ways to the rhythm of the mambo--the most beautiful dance I had ever seen."

-Marlon Brando, Oscar-winning actor

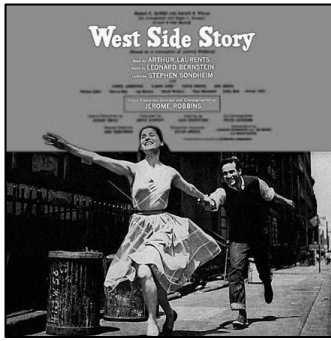


Audiovisual Resource:



The Mambo, an elaboration on a traditional Cuban dance, was one of the most popular dance crazes during the 1950s and was often featured in concerts by bandleaders such as Machito, Tito Rodriguez and Tito Puente. Watch a [live 1955 performance by Tito Rodriguez](#) in New York City, with accompanying Mambo dancers. Imagine you are in the audience that night and take notes as you watch the performance. What are your reactions to the music, the dancing, and the energy of the dancehall?

The Winter Garden Theatre 1634 Broadway

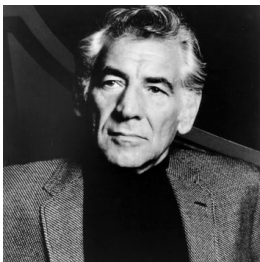


Location Description:

West Side Story opened on Broadway in 1957. Its story centers on two rival teenage gangs -- the all-white Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks -- facing off on the streets of New York City. At the center of the narrative are two teenagers in love, an Italian-American boy named Tony and a Puerto Rican girl name Maria. The songs and orchestration were heavily influenced by Latin music that could be heard in Latino communities throughout New York City during the 1950s. The play became one of the most beloved pieces of American musical theater, winning three Tony Awards for the Broadway production and ten Academy Awards for the 1961 film adaptation.

Leonard Bernstein, the composer of the musical, was not Latino, but rather the son of working class Ukrainian Jewish parents. Below, he describes his musical inspiration for the production.

In Their Own Words:



"My imagination caught fire as the Latin-American rhythms began to pulse in my mind." One day, the composer took a wrong turn and ended up near 125th Street in Spanish Harlem. *"All around me Puerto Rican kids were playing, with those typical New York City shouts and the New York raucousness. Suddenly I had the inspiration for the rhumba scene."*

-Source: "Always Magic In The Air" by Ken Emerson

Audiovisual Resource:



Watch the [trailer](#) for the 1961 film adaptation of *West Side Story*. Envision yourself attending a production of *West Side Story* on Broadway and take notes as you watch. In your opinion, how does the music compliment the story line? What might your reaction be as an audience member living in New York City at that time?

The Brill Building 1619 Broadway



Location Description:

The legendary Brill Building at 1619 Broadway, along with its sister offices at 1650 Broadway, were two of the primary locations for the music publishing industry in New York City. During the 1950s and 60s, gifted songwriters and tunesmiths including Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller, Burt Bacharach, Carole King, and many more would compose some of the most celebrated Rock and Roll, Pop, and R&B songs in American history. Among them, were Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, who together wrote more than 500 songs between 1958 and 1965. They worked very closely with the R&B group the Drifters, for whom they penned many Latin-inspired chart-topping songs.

In Their Own Words:



Mort Shuman described himself as “*a mambo*nik” who “*wrote rock ‘n’ roll but lived, ate, drank and breathed Latino.*” He was a frequent concertgoer at the Palladium Ballroom, four blocks north of the Brill Building, where he would listen to orchestras led by Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez.

Doc Pomus was also a devotee of Latin music. He had grown up a block away from a Puerto Rican community in Brooklyn. Pomus used to sit outside on summer nights and listen to the music emanating from his neighborhood. According to Shuman, sometimes when they wrote together they would try to evoke “*the whole ambiance of Spanish songs.*” -Source: “Always Magic In The Air” by Ken Emerson

Pictured: Mort Shuman (left) and Doc Pomus (right)

Audiovisual Resource:



Analyze [back-to-back audio recordings](#) to explore the Latin influence on American pop songs. First, listen to Machito and His Orchestra perform “El Jamaquino,” making note of the rhythm and feel of the composition. The audio sample will follow with “This Magic Moment” written by Pomus and Shuman and performed by the Drifters. How do these two songs compare in terms of their use of Latin American rhythms and percussion? How are they different?