

THE LAST MAMBO

past • present • future
of salsa in the bay area

a documentary by Rita Hargrave



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Running time: 55:10 minutes,
in English

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LOGLINE

San Francisco Bay Area salsa and Latin jazz performers and audiences struggle to maintain culture, creativity and community in the face of powerful socioeconomic and demographic changes. This fascinating history of the Bay Area Latin music scene explores the post WWII growth of California's multi-ethnic music community, the 1950's Mambo craze, the 70's heyday of Salsa and subsequent expansions of the art form. In today's fast-changing environment, despite decreasing audiences and venues, Bay Area performers are transforming the future of the Afro-Latin music and dance through education and outreach.



SYNOPSIS

The Last Mambo explores the past, present and future of the San Francisco Bay Area's Salsa and Latin jazz community. The film reveals how for decades socio-economic and political marginalization have threatened the growth and survival of the Latin music and dance community. Since the 1930's African American and Latino musicians have struggled under the weight of segregation to reach out to multi-ethnic audiences. In the 1940's local bands and visiting headliners like Tito Puente courted largely minority audiences at venues like Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland and Jimbo's Bop City, a fixture in the largely African American Fillmore district of San Francisco. When Mambo swept the nation in the 1950's the music expanded to more high profile venues and reached more ethnically diverse audiences through the pioneering artistry of Cal Tjader and newly arrived Afro-Cuban percussionists Mongo Santamaria, Armando Perazzo and Francisco Aguabella.

These musicians launched a tradition of cultural cross-pollination and social engagement among Latino and Non-Latino musicians. For the next 50 years, scores of dedicated Bay Area musicians and dancers have produced electrifying live performances and Grammy-winning recordings. They have also nurtured generations of Afro-Cuban music lovers of every age and ethnicity. The art form continues to inspire education, cultural preservation and community building. Since 2000, however, the Bay Area Latin music community has been battling new forms of adversity. The region's booming tech sector, sky-rocketing real estate prices and shrinking audiences have forced scores of Latin music venues to shut their doors. Yet undaunted, the energetic musicians, dancers and radio hosts of today strive to meet the challenge by transforming the future of Salsa and Latin Jazz through education and outreach at music schools, community centers and radio stations. *The Last Mambo* celebrates their passion and dedication to perform, educate and inspire the next generation of musicians, dancers and participants.



CHAPTER I — OUR ROOTS

Chapter 1 explores the variety of AfroLatino rhythms, sounds and movement styles that make up the Bay Area Latin music community.

Though rooted in Afro-Latin music and social traditions, the San Francisco Bay Area salsa and Latin jazz community has been forged by performers and participants from diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds. Since the Bay Area has not had large Cuban or Puerto community, the music took a different path than it did in New York. As Wayne Wallace, trombonist, teacher and band leader notes,

“I think of everything we do here as being so hybrid. We don’t have on set Puerto Rican community, one Dominican community, one Cuban community... That’s why...the possibility of doing so many different things and styles happen coming out of this area. Because no one has to stay in one camp.”

From Cal Tjader’s Modern Mambo Quintet in the 1950’s to today’s bands Louie Romero’s Mazacote or John Santo’s Machete Ensemble excel at their innovative use of traditional forms and instruments. The Bay Area’s culturally inclusive sensibility has provided fertile environment for AfroLatin folkloric styles and less well known Cuban musical ensembles like charangas to flourish. Few communities in the country can boast such long legacy of supporting Charanga bands like Orquesta la Moderna Tradicion, which is dedicated to the 19th century Cuban-style danzón, an elegant but less well known sound featuring flutes and violins interweaving with the traditional the brass and percussion and rhythm sections.

San Francisco Bay Area salsa dancers also draw inspiration from other movement styles into salsa including hustle, Lindy Hop, tango, Hip Hop and Afro-Cuban folkloric dances.



CHAPTER II — HOMEFRONT

Chapter II highlights how after WWII the growth of California's Latino community inspired Merced Gallegos to launch the Bay Area Latin music scene at Oakland's Sweets Ballroom. His Sunday afternoon dance parties known as tardeadas both brought together a culturally diverse community and introduced the Bay Area to top notch Afro-Caribbean entertainers from the U.S. and Latin America.



CHAPTER III — MAMBO SESSIONS

Mambo Sessions profiles how the 1950's national fascination with Mambo inspired West Coast music pioneers Cal Tjader and Carlos Federico (Panamanian born) to give birth to fearless blends of Afro-Cuban percussion and jazz styling. Tjader's Modern Mambo Quintet and Federico and his Panamanians created cutting edge sounds that brought together people of all ethnicities and nurtured a communal experience and atmosphere of social connectedness that flowed between musicians and their audiences.



CHAPTER IV — CESAR RULES

Cesar Rules profiles the era of 1960-1980's when Cesar's Latin Palace was the mecca for Bay Area Latin bands. This San Francisco nitespot opened its doors to internationally known icons such as Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barreto, Tito Puente and Celia Cruz. This period also marked the emergence of Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco and La Peña in Oakland, vibrant community centers which provided workshops, classes and performance spaces. Teacher/performers like Carlos Federico and John Santos provided their audiences with lectures about the social and historical background of Afro-Caribbean music and expanded their understanding and appreciation of the art form.



CHAPTER V — SALSA EXPLOSION

Salsa Explosion profiles the 1980's-2000 period and focuses on how the hard driving dance grooves of bands lead by veterans like Benny Velarde and Pete Escovedo, the influx of Cuban musicians and dancers helped expand the salsa community. Bay Area salsa clubs, ballrooms and dance studios became vibrant sources of popular dances styles (mambo, salsa, rueda) but also folkloric Afro-Cuban music styles.



CHAPTER VI — MILLENNIUM SALSA

Millennium Salsa profiles community from 2000 forward and highlights how even though the nightclub Salsa scene waxes and wanes pivotal people keep pumping life into the scene. This segment illuminates how music education and outreach are key to building community and insuring the future of the art from.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Latin music and dance ignited my life in 1995 and since then I have spent thousands of rapturous hours dancing, teaching and writing about salsa and absorbing Latin jazz. “The Last Mambo” was inspired by my first trip to Havana, a city overflowing with conservatories, theaters and museums devoted to the rich music and dance heritage of the Cuban people. My conversation with Olav Alen Rodriguez, a renowned Cuban ethnomusicologist, convinced me that the Bay Area Latin music community had its own diverse, ever evolving story that needed to be told.

What is unique about our story? Wayne Wallace, composer, trombonist and musical director of “The Last Mambo said it best: “Everything we do here artistically is a hybrid. There is no one Cuban community, Dominican community or Puerto Rican community. We have the possibility for creating fresh new music here because nobody has to stay in any one camp.”

While making this film, I discovered that for over 60 years Bay artists who hail from across the country and all over the world have freely cross-pollinated, collaborated and created our unique brand Afro-Latino music. I was blown away by the interviews and published material for the film that showed how the Latin music scene was also a magnet for racial integration and social empowerments.

But the closure of Jelly’s, one of my favorite salsa hangouts, in 2005, drove home the fragile and transient nature this art form. The demise of Jelly’s was a harbinger of the dismantlement of an artistic community, bulldozed by soaring real estate prices, sprawling gentrification and the changing social demographics of the current tech boom. “The Last Mambo” celebrates the community’s struggle to survive by promoting education and outreach to music and dance lovers of all ages, social classes and ethnicities.

“The Last Mambo” is about hope, solidarity and resilience in the face of inescapable social change. I want more people to appreciate and applaud the talent we have here, find out more about the pillars of the Latin music and dance community, and support live music. I would love for people in other cities (e.g. Seattle, Portland, Chicago, D.C) to explore and document their own salsa and Latin jazz communities’ past, present and future. All along this film making journey I have been thrilled by the encouragement and support from friends and family for this project.

“The Last Mambo” is a hopeful documentary that showcases Salsa and Latin Jazz in the Bay Area as a potent social force that brings together our diverse community of performers and participants, embodies cultural preservation and promotes artistic expression and education.

Love the dance, live the music.

Rita Hargrave

THE MUSIC

Released in 2019, *The Last Mambo* documents the diverse cultural landscape, social history and future of the San Francisco Bay Area salsa and Latin jazz community. The two volume double CD collections, “Salsa De La Bahia Vol I and Vol II”, are the musical companion to *The Last Mambo* and showcases many hidden gems heard only on local radio programs and in nightclubs. These pieces are sterling reflections of the state-of-the-art salsa music that artists in the Bay Area have created. “Rita and I chose the songs with the idea of this CD being a dance record that showed the musical diversity of what the Bay Area scene has to offer,” comments Wayne Wallace, composer, musician and music director for the film.

There is no better person for the task of producing the soundtrack for *The Last Mambo* than Wayne Wallace. From playing to the pen, Dr. Wayne, a title bequeathed to him by the great Pete Escovedo, is a student of Cuban music with impressive salsa and Latin jazz credentials. He has excelled as musical director of the Pete Escovedo Orchestra, John Santos & The Machete Ensemble, and Conjunto Cespedes as well as in sideman gigs with luminaries like Tito Puente and Manny Oquendo & Libre. The musical spectrum of “Salsa De La Bahia Vol I and II” shows the kaleidoscope of Afro-Latin musical colors seen and heard around the Bay Area. Complimenting this rich collection are four original pieces performed at an all-star recording session in 2012. “Everyone understood that this was an opportunity to make a collective musical and artistic statement about the music we have played for years,” explains Wayne. “We spoke of the lineage of Cal Tjader, Carlos Federico and the many musicians who helped create this music.” *Salsa De La Bahia* truly honors those who have dedicated their careers to playing and advancing salsa and its Afro-Caribbean roots as well as the people that surround the scene to dance, listen and cheer their hometown heroes. It pays due to a scene now recognized internationally for the caliber of its musicians and dancers but that is still largely ignored for its artistic merit by the mainstream media.





PLAYERS

MUSICIANS

Cesar Ascarrunz
David Belove
Anthony Blea
John Calloway
Edgardo Cambon
Bobi Cespedes
Jesus Diaz
Pete Escovedo
Roger Glenn
Rebeca Mauleon
Kat Parra
Louie Romero
John Santos
Benny Velarde
Orestes Vilató
Wayne Wallace

DANCERS

Selma Abinader
Jose Barroso
Lester Washington
Herman Bossett
Ceci Chevere

RADIO HOSTS

Chuy Varela
Chata Gutierrez
Jose Ruiz
Luis Medina
Emiliano Ecchevaria

EDUCATORS

John Calloway Ph.D.
Francesca Rivera Ph.D.
Sylvia Ramirez

FEATURED BANDS

Anthony Blea Y Su Charanga
Avance
Bay Area Timba All-Stars
Edgardo Cambon and Candela
John Santos Latin Jazz Quintet
John Santos & The Machete Ensemble
La Orquesta Moderna Tradicion
Latin Jazz Youth Ensemble
Machito and his Afro Cubans
Pacific Mambo Orchestra
Pete Escovedo Latin Jazz Orchestra
Rebeca Mauleon and AfroKuban
Ruben Hurtado Ensemble
Wayne Wallace Latin Jazz Quintet

THE MAKERS



RITA HARGRAVE – DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/WRITER/VIDEOGRAPHER

Rita is a dancer, dance teacher, dance historian and geriatric psychiatrist. She is the founder of www.salsaroots.com, a San Francisco Bay Area based website devoted to the Afro-Cuban, Afro-Puerto Rican and African American roots of salsa dancing. Rita co-produced with Wayne Wallace, founder of Patois Records, of the CD sets *Salsa De La Bahia Volume I* and *Volume II*. This is her first feature film.



REGINALD D. BROWN – CO-DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/WRITER/ VIDEOGRAPHER

Reginald D. Brown is a freelance writer/producer/director and a member of the Directors Guild of America, Inc and Writers Guild of America, west. His extensive career in film and television production includes documentaries such as *Witness to a Dream* and *Profile in Courage*, *Linda L. Smith*, both of which chronicle the rise of two African American educators and their academic learning centers for underserved minorities. His PBS documentary *I Remember Beale Street* explored the downward spiral of what had once been a historic Memphis neighborhood and legendary birthplace of the “Blues.” He is an instructor in television, video and digital media at University of California, Los Angeles.



MANUEL TSINGARIS – EDITOR

Manuel has been an editor for over twenty years consistently bringing an intuitive sense of story telling and a deft aesthetic style to films that are placed in his hands. A believer in the writer’s adage, “you get to the head through the heart”, to Manuel, the story is paramount. This was recognized in 2014 after editing the feature documentary *Alive Inside* when it was honored with the Audience Award for Best Documentary at Sundance. Other recent works include, *The Latino Americans*, a 6-hour PBS mini-series retelling US history through a Latin lens which won a Peabody Award, and the award winning documentary, *Purgatorio*, a poetic fable exploring the beauty and brutality of the US/Mexico Border. Most recently, *Dogtown Redemption*, a film about the homeless recycling community in West Oakland, was featured nationwide on PBS/Independent Lens.



PAUL KEALOHA BLAKE – VIDEOGRAPHER/EDITOR

Paul is a Hawaiian storyteller, independent producer and co-founder of East Bay Media Center, a 501(c)3 Non-profit Corporation established in Berkeley, California in 1980. Under Paul’s direction East Bay Media Center provides technical and educational media resources to East Bay communities. In 1991, Paul with co-founder Mel Valpour launched the Berkeley Video and Film Festival. Paul is a tireless educator and media advocate for community involvement, especially for marginalized youth and minorities. He has an extensive history in the production and promotion of documentary films.

THE MAKERS



WAYNE WALLACE – MUSICAL DIRECTOR/TROMBONIST/COMPOSER/ARRANGER/EDUCATOR

Six-time Grammy nominee Wayne Wallace is one of the most respected exponents of African American-Latin music in the world today. He is known for the use of traditional forms and styles in combination with contemporary music, and has earned recognition with his recent placement in the Downbeat Critics Polls under the trombone and producer categories. Mr. Wallace is an accomplished arranger, educator, and composer of music for film and television. He has also received grants from the Creative Work Fund, the National Endowments for the Arts the Lila Wallace Foundation and the San Francisco Arts Commission. Mr. Wallace has performed, recorded and studied with acknowledged masters of the Afro-Latin and jazz idioms such as Aretha Franklin, Bobby Hutcherson, Earth Wind and Fire,

Pete Escovedo, Santana, Julian Priester, Conjunto Libre, Whitney Houston, Tito Puente, Steve Turre, John Lee Hooker, Con-funk-shun, Francisco Aguabella, Manny Oquendo and Libre, Max Roach, the Count Basie Orchestra and Orestes Vilató. He is a professor of practice in jazz at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.



JESSE "CHUY" VARELA – SPECIAL CONSULTANT

Chuy is the music director at KCSM FM 91, the Bay Area's jazz station, and has written for the SF Chronicle, Latin Beat, Jazz Times and numerous other publications. His 30+ year career in radio includes broadcast and administrative assignments at KPFA 94.1 FM in Berkeley, KJAZ Radio in Alameda, Pacifica Radio and National Public Radio. He has served as a consultant for the Smithsonian Institution, the Oakland Museum and the SF Mexican Museum. In 2006, Varela was awarded a Bob Geddins Lifetime Achievement Award by the West Coast Blues Hall of Fame in Oakland, and a Salsa Ambassador Award from the West Coast Salsa Congress in Los Angeles. Chuy has produced several CDs including "To A Mambo King - The Carlos Federico Memorial Album (JCV), "Pachuco Boogie"

(Arhoolie) and "Ay Califas! Raza rocks the 70s & 80s" (Rhino). He has written numerous liner notes and translations for record companies like Verve, Concord, Nonesuch and Six Degrees. He has lectured on Latin Jazz at Stanford University, UC Berkeley, UC Riverside, UC Santa Cruz, San Jose State and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Chuy has been hosted "Latin Jazz" a 4 hour Sunday afternoon radio program on KCSM since the mid-1980's.

ADDITIONAL CREDITS

ADDITIONAL EDITORS

Carl Pfirman
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CAMERA/AUDIO

Paul Kealoha Blake
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Carlos Betancourt
Snitow and Kaufman Productions
Ian Leyda

ANIMATION

David Murray

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