



How I Love the Classics...

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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José Madera has a tough job. He's the *timbalero* and calls the shots for the [Mambo Legends Orchestra](#). It's hard enough keeping track of four trumpets, four trombones, four saxophones, keyboard, bass, conga, bongo, and three singers. The band's other director is saxophonist Mitch Frohman. The added weight comes from the fact that the orchestra was formerly led by Tito Puente, the legendary *timbalero* and vibraphonist. José is a master percussionist, but those are commodious shoes for anyone to fill.



I recently saw Mambo Legends at Arlington, Virginia's Artisphere, an ideal venue for this rousing dance music. It was a spiritual experience. I was transfixed by the precision, power and swing of the band as it zipped through Tito's classics. For those readers who love Salsa and are used to smaller *conjuntos*, I highly recommend that you prioritize Mambo Legends at least once--there is nothing like a classic big band sound. It's one thing to hear a trombone solo; quite another to witness Louie Kahn, Sam Burtis, and Reynaldo Jorge execute a tri-party *mano-a-mano*—truly mesmerizing in the spirit of Generoso Jiménez. Musicians like Francisco Torres, Conrad Herwig, Steve Turre, and Jimmy Bosch are, for sure, at the top of their game, but gifted and legendary is a status that requires more time and, within this context, allegiance to the classics and the genre's instrumental structure and swing.

It's funny how the classic, the legendary, eventually comes full circle. I consider myself truly blessed to witness this phenomenon in my lifetime. When I entered law school in the early 1970s, the big band Mambo sound was giving way to the music of smaller Salsa configurations, with the exception of, say, the Fania All Stars, assembled for special occasions and recordings. Many of the All Stars headed their own active, smaller ensembles. Interestingly, it was during this time that Mambo and Salsa were themselves being challenged by emerging hybrid genres and artists who offered something different, fresher to younger crowds no longer drawn to fading venues like New York's Palladium Ballroom. I would offer up the example of Latin Soul and its best-known proponent, [Joe Bataan](#). Latin Soul is a New York street-inspired concoction of Salsa, Soul, Bugalú, Doo Wop and Disco. It took an Afro-Filipino from East Harlem, like Joe, to give it life and rally young audiences, even those like me who listened from the opposite side of the country. I invite you to journey back with us when we bring Joe Bataan to Washington on October 19th at 6:30 pm for a free concert and conversation at the National Museum of Natural History's Baird Auditorium.

Blessedly, it appears that Latin Soul, like its Mambo predecessor, is making a comeback. To readers, I commend "The Classic Edition" of WPFW's *Latin Flavor* music stream, heard every Sunday from 6-8 p.m. EST—by Washington-area listeners at 89.3 FM, or on-line at www.wpfw.org. Under the steady hand and seasoned ear of Jim Byers, listeners are transported back to the present to fully engage with this music. If there is a more gifted or knowledgeable radio program host, I have yet to listen to him/her.

While watching the Mambo Legends Orchestra, my eyes would occasionally drift to the dance floor. I smiled as enthralled dancers, older and young, demonstrated that they were totally hip to what was happening on stage. One of the enduring beauties of classic music well played is the degree to which it connects across generations. May it continue to be so for those who follow.