

LENS

A Daughter Documents a Giant of Salsa and Latin Jazz



Ray Santos walking through his neighborhood in the Bronx. 2016. Credit: Rhynna M. Santos

By David Gonzalez

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Listening to Ray Santos recount his career in music is like spinning the dial on a very hip radio. Dizzy Gillespie, Machito, Tito Rodriguez and Tito Puente helped him cut his teeth as a young saxophonist. Later, his reputation as a composer and arranger led him to work with Eddie Palmieri as well as sharing a Grammy win with Linda Ronstadt.

He casually mentions fabled musicians in conversation, not even boasting of his friendships and collaborations with them. This is no surprise to anyone who knows Mr.

Santos, a silver-haired man whose rich voice and courtly manner evoke another era. Many call him Maestro.

Rhynna Santos calls him Papi.

She grew up in his world, standing in the wings as her father played onstage, or even venturing into Celia Cruz's dressing room and watching her prepare for a gig. More recently, as she moved back in with Mr. Santos to work as his manager and caretaker, she has been documenting the life of a man who is a living link to the history of salsa and Latin jazz, musical forms that flourished in the city's cultural hothouse.



Rhynna Santos photographed her father backstage at a lifetime achievement award ceremony. Puerto Rico, 2015. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



Mr. Santos composing a musical piece. 2016. Credit Rhynna M. Santos
Image



Mr. Santos conducting at a rehearsal at the Tapia Theater in San Juan, P.R. 2015. Credit Rhynna M. Santos

“For my father, music is the center of cultural life in New York for Puerto Ricans,” said Ms. Santos, whose exhibit [“Papi, El Maestro”](#) just opened at the Bronx Music Heritage Center. “Yet people don’t know how so many Latin musicians made huge contributions. Latin music desegregated the dance halls in New York City in the 1950s. The music exploded. It’s a disservice to these geniuses, and the music that defined our upbringing.”

Mr. Santos, 89, was born and raised in the heart of East Harlem, the son of a doorman and a doll maker. His musical epiphany came in junior high school, when a friend played a recording by Coleman Hawkins, the tenor sax player whose tone on [“Body and Soul”](#) hooked the young man. He soon persuaded his father to pay \$40 for 20 lessons on a rented sax.

After playing with some “kid bands” in the Bronx — [during an era when the architects of a new sound came of age](#) — he applied to Juilliard, partly on a lark to satisfy his father’s demand that he do something productive after high school. He got in.



Carmen Santos sharing a quiet moment with Ray Santos, her father, in the Bronx. 2018. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



Mr. Santos visiting his parents' graves on Mother's Day in the Bronx. 2018. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



Mr. Santos watching a film at home with his grandchildren, Patryck and Sabina. 2018. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



Mr. Santos listening to his grandson, Colin, practice the violin. 2015. Credit Rhynna M. Santos

It was while he attended Juilliard that he also started performing at bigger, more popular sites, including the Palladium, the Manhattan club that was the pulsing heart of

the mambo craze. Sharing the stage with the Big Three — Tito Puente, Machito and Tito Rodriguez — was like a postgraduate education.

“The great thing was we alternated with Machito, Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez,” he said. “It was very influential. I could hear all their new arrangements every night.”

After graduating from Juilliard in 1952, Mr. Santos went on to play with some of those same trailblazing bands. He toured, moved to Puerto Rico for steady work in the hotels, then returned to New York in 1984, where his “big brother,” the piano virtuoso Charlie Palmieri, helped him land a job at City College, where he taught Latin band for 28 years, as well as continuing — to this day — to do arrangements for others.

Ms. Santos reconnected with her father’s world after returning from a three-year stay in Madrid, where she taught English. Back home in the Bronx, she started helping her father not just with daily tasks and errands, but also by serving as his manager. With her relatively new interest in photography — and spurred by the memory of the vintage photos she had of him as a young man — she set out to document his life on and offstage. Like [Milt Hinton](#), the jazz bassist whose photographs of the scene influenced her, she had an insider’s perch.



A Mambo Kings poster in the home office of Mr. Santos. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



A group of Latin musicians gathered backstage with Mr. Santos before a performance in Manhattan. 2016. Credit Rhynna M. Santos

“I had a certain level of privilege when it came to performers, since I grew up around these famous singers and musicians,” she said. “I can walk into a space and not be star-struck. I definitely respected them. But it is a different situation in that I feel I can really relate and feel comfortable in those spaces. I understand the music better. They are special people.”

And most special is El Maestro, Papi, whose example as a musician and father led her to follow her muse.

“I had the best role model in my dad,” Ms. Santos said. “He showed me you have to follow your passion regardless of financial gains. When I started to find out Dad was famous, I wondered why we weren’t rich, why was I cleaning the house. But he made particular choices to stay true to the music and to us as a family man. At his age, a lot of musicians don’t have successful relationships with their families. My father’s integrity with his music has been long-lasting in my life.”



Mr. Santos reminiscing with his friend Mike Amadeo at the Casa Amadeo music store. Bronx, 2016. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



Mr. Santos visiting Cuba. 2017. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



Carmen Santos fixing her father's tie in preparation for the Puerto Rico Heineken JazzFest. 2016. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



A family celebration of Mr. Santos's 88th birthday. Credit Rhynna M. Santos



Mr. Santos accepting an extended standing ovation after his performance at the Tapia Theater in San Juan. 2015. Credit Rhynna M. Santos

LINK: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/30/lens/a-daughter-documents-a-giant-of-salsa-and-latin-jazz.html>