Some may not be aware that the “Boogie Down Bronx” goes by another moniker. The Bronx is also known as El Condado de la Salsa, and as of 2011 The Bronx Tourism Council instituted Bronx Salsa Fest, a month-long festival of the music, the legends, the dance. When you talk to old school salsa aficionados, they will fondly talk about Fania, a record label that made Afro-Cuban-based dance music a worldwide phenomenon. This was embodied at the August 24th, 1973 Fania All-Stars concert at Yankee Stadium which featured some of the top Salsa performers.

Fania was the brain child of former New York City police officer and divorce lawyer from Brooklyn, Jerry Masucci and his partner, Dominican bandleader and flautist, Johnny Pacheco who grew up in the Mott Haven district of The Bronx. Formed in 1964 the music that the Fania label produced was considered revolutionary. In its formative years they were producing music with Afro-Cuban rhythms played by Latinos in New York City, the majority of which were Nuyoricans (New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent). The term “salsa” had been bandied about before and used in songs since Septeto Nacional recorded “Echale Salsita” in Cuba in the 1930s. However, the word gained currency after the U.S. embargo against Cuba when Masucci and Pacheco adopted it to describe the music their label produced. Fania literally spread “salsa” by releasing the movies, Our Latin Thing (1972) and Salsa (1975), both directed by Leon Gast.

In bringing “salsa” to the community, the label was up against young Latinos in New York City who had come of age in the 1960s and weren’t into the big band mambo sounds of their parents, however, they were inspired by the R&B and rock and roll of AM radio and the British invasion. So in the late ’60s the young Latino community began listening (and creating) Latin bugalú which was a fusion of African-American R&B and Afro-Cuban music, particularly cha cha chá and son montuno. This music had none of the sophistication of the Afro-Cuban jazz and mambo performed by the Three Mambo Kings—Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez— and it was sung in English. By 1968, with industry insiders and established bandleaders of the old guard refusing to accept it, bugalú began to fade and the sounds of Fania enervated the young Latino community. The Afro-Cuban rhythms remained in the forefront, but the musical arrangements leaned toward either the old guard Cuban conjunto sound or the more updated New York City power trombone style with trumpets. The music, once again sung in Spanish, reconnected many to their culture. Musical icons, that are still revered today
recorded and performed for Fania: Ray Barretto, Cheo Feliciano, Hector Lavoe, Willie Colón, Larry Harlow, Roberto Roena, Rubén Blades, Celia Cruz, La Sonora Ponceña, Pete “El Conde” Rodríguez, Adalberto Santiago, Ismael Miranda, Yomo Toro, and Barry Rogers to name just a few. Musicians from The Bronx played a significant role in Fania and were members of the Fania All-Stars (the label’s super group). Johnny Pacheco, Pete “El Conde,” Willie Colón, Eddie Montalvo, Nicky Marrero, and Ray Barretto grew up in The Bronx. Yomo Toro and Hector Lavoe migrated from Puerto Rico. La Lupe was from Cuba. But they all settled here. Performers who graced the stage with the Fania All-Stars such as Mongo Santamaria also made The Bronx their home at one point in their lives.

The Bronx’s soundscape has new Latino music sounds including the Dominican bachata, but salsa still remains a part of the borough’s legacy and identity.

Elena Martinez is a folklorist with City Lore and the Co-Artistic Director of the Bronx Music Heritage Center. She is the Co-Producer of the award-winning documentary, From Mambo to Hip Hop: A South Bronx Tale.
AUGUST 17

BRONX RISING!: THE HIDDEN LEGACY OF ALEGRE RECORDS
7:00 pm | $5—$7
Before there was Fania Records, there was Alegre Records and the Casalegre Record store in The Bronx. This program will feature a discussion by some of the musicians who were part of the Alegre story as they recount its legacy including Orlando Marín, timbalero and bandleader, Mike Amadeo, proprietor of the longest continually-run Latin music store in NYC, Bobby Marín, producer who used to work at Casalegre and Chris Rogers, jazz musician and son of Alegre All-Star, Barry Rogers. It will be moderated by Bobby Sanabria and followed by a musical performance in tribute to the Alegre All-Stars by Oreste “Kidd Ore” Abrantes y Su Orquesta.

Bronx Music Heritage Center, 1303 Louis Nine Blvd

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