ALEGRE RECORDS
BY JIM MOTAVALLI

Before he was 21, Spanish Harlem-born Al Santiago already had a long history in Latin music. Santiago was, in fact, born into it. His father was a multi-instrumentalist in Latin dance bands and his uncle led the Bartolo Alvarez Big Band. Santiago studied piano, then saxophone and took over his uncle’s band when he was 18—renaming them the Chack-a-Su-Su Boys. A 14-year-old Eddie Palmieri sometimes was on piano and Buck Clayton played trumpet one memorable evening.

Santiago borrowed $1,800 from his family in 1951 and started the Casa Latina del Bronx record store, later enlarging it in a new location in 1955 as Casalegre. That too was in the family, as his uncle had quit the band to start another record store, Casa Latina, in Spanish Harlem. The next logical step for Santiago the musical entrepreneur was founding Alegre Records, known as “the Blue Note of Latin music” in 1956. Alegre was groundbreaking both in the music it recorded and the way it was packaged, though the business was somewhat haphazard. The label’s first album was Johnny Pacheco y Su Charanga Volume One in 1960 and it quickly became the biggest-selling Latin album to date. Soon after, Santiago signed Charlie Palmieri and Sabú Martínez for Jazz Espagnole (which barely sold at first but is now regarded as a classic).

Santiago produced 49 albums in the period between 1960-66, including six or seven from the ‘jam band’ Alegre All-Stars, led by Charlie Palmieri and featuring the trombonist Barry Rogers (as well as Johnny Pacheco originally). Santiago was sold to Branston Music (owners of Tico and Roulette) in 1966 and then to Fania in 1975. Pacheco was also a founder of Fania, so the legacy is clear. And the Bronx is antioxidative.

This month, the Bronx Music Heritage Center (cultural arm of WHEDco, the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation) will hold a combined discussion and concert, featuring Oreste “Kidd Ore” Abrantes y Su Orquesta playing the music of the Alegre All-Stars. The talk will include South Bronx-born Bobby Sanabria, the Grammy-nominated Latin drummer and educator; Orlando Marín, who was timbalero in the Alegre All-Stars; Mike Amadeo, who worked for Casalegre and now runs Latin shop Casa Amadeo—the oldest record store in New York; producer Bobby Marin; and musician Chris Rogers (son of Barry).

According to Elena Martínez, Co-Artistic Director of the Bronx Music Heritage Center, “We aim to present in our space the musical and cultural legacy of the Bronx, which is the birthplace of salsa and the birthplace of hip-hop. The history is another thematic layer. People don’t realize that Al Santiago started both the Casalegre record store and the Alegre label.” The center features a 1,700-square-foot gallery/performance space, which hosts art exhibits and concerts that Martínez said, “have another layer to them.”

Sanabria, who co-directs the Bronx Music Heritage Center with Martínez, told TNYCJR that Alegre (both the record store and label) “basically brought together some of the best Latin musicians in New York City under one roof to showcase their talents. Al Santiago—who was one of the funniest people I ever met, he’d have you in stitches in five minutes—was inspired by the Cuban descarga jam-session records he heard. Those records were very popular at the time. So Al figured, why not do the same thing here in New York City? Our musicians are just as good, if not better.”

So the Alegre All-Stars were born and the albums became very popular. “Al would sign the leaders to the label and then they would select the sidemen,” Sanabria said. “He had musicians like Charlie Palmieri and Barry Rogers, who was a force of nature. The records were both popular and critically successful—all they became collectors’ items.”

And they looked different. Izzy Sanabria (no relation to Bobby) was a cartoonist whose fanciful and funny black-and-white covers drew from such sources as the “Spy vs. Spy” strip in Mad Magazine. Some covers featured caricatures, others full-blown comic stories. “Instead of sexualized poses, there was high art,” Sanabria said.

The records weren’t always promoted to the level their artists demanded and Sanabria said that dissatisfaction is in part what led Johnny Pacheco and former New York City cop Jerry Masucci (who fell in love with the music while working as a lawyer in Cuba) to found Fania in 1964. But that’s another story and not quite so Bronx-centric.


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