

# The New York Times

EL ESPACE

## ‘The Public Needed to See This’: Revisiting New York’s Latinx Music History

A new exhibition features more than 25 posters from the New York City night life scene of the ’70s and ’80s.

By **Isabelia Herrera**

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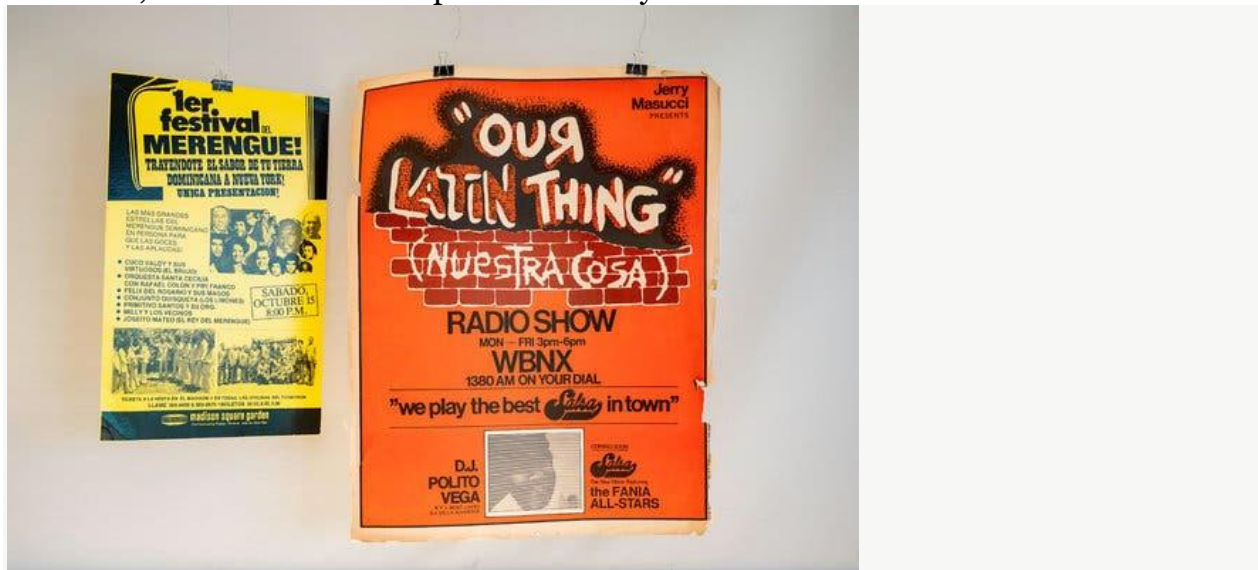


The exhibit “Sabor y Ritmo Antillano: N.Y.C. Latin Music Concert Posters of the 1970s & 1980s” is bringing historic Latin music posters to Harlem’s Rio II gallery. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times; Posters via Henry Herrera Collection

*El Espacio* is a column dedicated to news and culture relevant to Latinx communities. Expect politics, arts, analysis, personal essays and more. ¿Lo mejor? It’ll be in Spanish and English, so you can forward it to your tía, your primo Lalo or anyone else (read: everyone).

As a music writer, I’ve witnessed with exhaustion the revisionist retellings of Latinx music history that have emerged over the years, most recently in headlines announcing a never-before-seen “boom” or “explosion” in Spanish-language music, as if the chart-topping Bad Bunny or J. Balvin hits from recent years were born from the head of Zeus. But those of us who have spent our lives immersed in the world of Latinx music know that despite the Anglo press’s cultural amnesia surrounding Latinx artists, they don’t exist in the shadows; they were and are creating, evolving and recording countless hits for millions of listeners across the world. Latinx music has a rich and propulsive history, and a new, independent exhibition, “Sabor y Ritmo Antillano: N.Y.C. Latin Music Concert Posters of the 1970s & 1980s,” is attempting to unravel a slice of it.

The exhibition, which features more than 25 posters from the holdings of the collector Henry Herrera, was co-curated by two Dominican New Yorkers, Jhensen Ortiz and Wilton Salazar. Ortiz, a librarian who specializes in the preservation of cultural heritage materials, first discovered the posters on eBay.

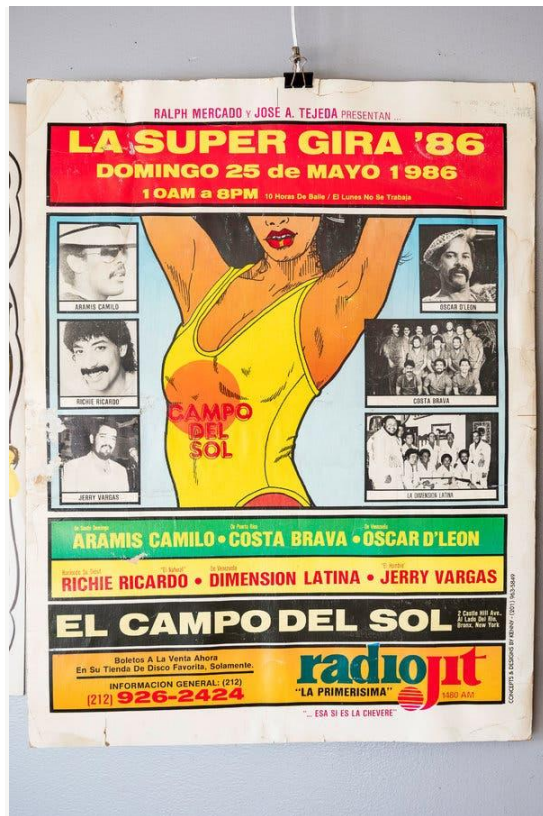


“It wasn’t just record labels,” said Jhensen Ortiz, one of the curators — record shops and radio stations contributed to a community-driven music culture. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times; Posters via Henry Herrera Collection

“I spend the majority of my time looking for memorabilia or ephemera related to Latin music, but particularly Dominicans,” he said. After buying one of the posters for himself, Ortiz realized Herrera had a much larger collection and asked him if he’d be interested in creating an exhibition. “The public needed to see this,” he recalls thinking.

In their curation process, Salazar and Ortiz set out to capture a wealth of genres from Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic — charanga, salsa, merengue — and to foreground the posters’ distinctive typography and illustration styles. (Salazar is a graphic designer, and the two have known each other since they were undergraduates at the City College of New York.)

The resulting exhibition harnesses the energy of 1970s and ’80s New York City night life. The posters advertise large-scale festivals and local events alike, including performances by La Lupe, Wilfrido Vargas, Johnny Ventura, El Gran Combo, Milly Quezada and dozens more, including a concert featuring the bachata artist Eladio Romero Santos in 1979, before the genre’s commercial ascent. The artists would often perform together, so attendees could “get music from all three islands in one night, in a lineup of six, seven bands,” said Ortiz.



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“Sabor y Ritmo Antillano” also uncovers the community-driven music culture embedded in these posters, illuminating a world before corporate event planning and social media marketing. Several posters advertise early morning salsa boat rides, as well as party bus rentals for trips to shows outside of the city, in state parks or towns in New Jersey. Today, that grass-roots spirit and sense of community can feel like a relic of the past, especially as gentrification surges.

“It wasn’t just record labels. It was the record shops where you could go get the tickets, the disc jockeys announcing where you could see them in person and not just listen to them on the radio,” Ortiz said, stressing the importance of calling attention to this “collaborative effort,” which he says is not represented in Latinx music scholarship.

In recent years, [the Museum of the City of New York](#) and [the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab](#) have also hosted exhibitions on the history of New York’s Latinx music scene centered on memorabilia and archival materials. “Sabor y Ritmo Antillano” is unique in its commitment to bringing this history back to the community that birthed it. The pair opted to host the exhibition outside of an academic or museum context, and instead display it at an uptown art gallery. Ortiz wanted to return “control of the narrative” to the public.



A colorful detail from a poster in the collection. Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times; Posters via Henry Herrera Collection

Latinx music history, he said, has typically been shaped and passed down through oral histories, focusing on the most commercially successful artists — “the Johnny Pachecos, the Eddie Palmieris, the Héctor Lavoës, the Willie Colóns, the Ruben Bladeses.”

“But there were many artists who contributed to the scene in the city who are being reflected in these concert posters,” he said. “Unless you’re a record collector and you know about these artists and their recordings, you’re not really going to see them presented anywhere else.”

*The opening reception for “Sabor y Ritmo Antillano: N.Y.C. Latin Music Concert Posters of the 1970s & 1980s” takes place on August 9, at Rio II Gallery on 583 Riverside Drive, 7th Floor, from 6-9 p.m., with a D.J. set from Discolai’s Max “Drlaxcos” Cueto. The exhibition closes at the end of August.*

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Do you have suggestions for El Espace? Let me know: [elespace@nytimes.com](mailto:elespace@nytimes.com)

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/style/new-york-latinx-music-history.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>