

THE DAY THE CLAVE STOPPED...Text By: Aurora Flores

"New York's Latin Music programming shrinks as population grows"

That two-bar, five-note heartbeat that's the metronomic lifeblood of much Latin music has hit hard times in the city that fostered its growth. While mambos and cha-chas have sashayed through Broadway since jazzman **Symphony Sid Torin** was radio "Rey" in the '50s and '60s, today's public and community radio stations, once pioneers in Latin music programming, are stagnating. They've abandoned their mission to give voice to the voiceless.

Take the case of Pacifica station WBAI. Through the '60s and '70s, its strength in advocacy for change, social reform, and avant-garde artistic expression was unequalled. Today, its mission, like its community muscle, has slackened. WBAI has long aired a handful of programs for Latinos, but even after 30 years, the levels have grown little to reflect the rapidly increasing percentage of Latinos in the metropolitan area, many of them now celebrating Puerto Rican Heritage Month through November. Out of 168 hours per week, only 17 are Latino-directed. Met with demands for increased radio play from Latinos, WBAI instead has created an environment of hostile competition between in-house producer **Ibrahim Gonzalez's** "Radio Libre!" and former producers **Nando Alvericci** and **Mickey Melendez** of "Con Sabor Latino", two salsa shows staggered over 26 weeks on alternating Sundays. At the end of this trial period, in mid January the station will decide its "winner" based on a loose set of seemingly arbitrary criteria. Yet when the station curried support from Latinos during its internal coup starting in December 2000, it was surprised and reluctant to hear complaints that its programming did not reflect the city's Latino reality. Democracy Wow!

Across the Hudson, WBGO spins jazz 24-7, and celebrated its 25th anniversary this year by canceling the metropolitan area's only Latin jazz show, "The Latin Jazz Cruise" hosted by **Awilda Rivera**, who also fronts "Evening Jazz" Monday through Friday.



SYMPHONY SID/Photo By: Izzy Sanabria/www.salsamagazine.com

When asked about the move, general manager **Cyphus Bowles** blamed the show's host, citing her decision to work five instead of six days a week. With an air of corporate haughtiness, Bowles argued that there were few complaints from the listening audience, only from musicians- "and artists always complain," he emphasized. He added, though, that even the musicians were ultimately happy with the station's decision to play one song per hour from a pre-approved list of 25 Latin jazz artists, rather than "ghettoize" them onto one show.

"The reason given to us for the show's cancellation was a lack of fundraising," underscored **Bob Sancho**, a Latin music producer and board member on several arts organizations. "But airing The Latin Jazz Cruise on a Saturday night, when most Latinos go out, with no promotion or outreach, was programmed for failure". Sancho outlined a strategy for helping the station raise money, rationalizing that a specialty show like the Latin Jazz Cruise is critical for showcasing new talent while educating the public through comprehensive interviews and analysis of trends. But when told that ground rules placed a gag on asking for the show's reinstatement,

Sancho rescinded his nomination to the station's board of directors, feeling unable to represent Latinos if WBGO wasn't willing to discuss the cancellation. Further, support letters for the program were submitted by congresspeople Jose Serrano and Nydia Velazquez.

After Bowles's bald-faced assertion that musicians were satisfied, he quickly reported that The Latin Jazz Cruise was slated for return in December but wouldn't specify a date, citing the "revision" of the decades-old program's format. He dodged WBGO's responsibility as the only station to play Latin jazz, calling commercial Spanish-language stations not representing their own heritage "criminal". but just as jazz is an important part of American music, Latin jazz, born in New York City the '20s with the advent of Agosto Cohen's big band, is also an American genre, albeit an afterthought in the jazz world.

"The lack of radio programming for Latinos is a national trend", points out Alfredo Cruz, a 30-year-veteran of public radio and currently a professor of jazz in California. "although public and alternative radio stations have a handful of hosts airing outstanding interviews and specials on the music, the administration has become a cheap imitator of corporate reality, skewing statistics that do not reflect or conform to Latinos. If you look at NPR, Latino USA is its only nationally syndicated program tackling the myriad of issues we face daily as a community in half an hour. Radio administrators have lost the connection to the soul-which is what this music is."

- Text authorized by: Aurora Flores / www.zondelbarrio.com
- originally published by www.villagevoice.com
- Photo of Symphony Sid By: Izzy Sanabria/www.salsamagazine.com
- Recopila: klave latina team

