

# UNITED STATES

## ENDLESS HORIZON FOR LATIN MUSIC

By AGUSTIN GURZA

It was not even 10 years ago, in the fall of 1968, that Jose Garcia conceived a plan to stage a live Latin music show in Los Angeles, a rare event in those days. He was then head of a small Latin record distributor in this area which, as far as he was concerned, could not yet formally be called a market for Latin records. If anything, he remembers, it was a market that "had only begun to awaken."

He felt the live appearance of popular Mexican artists—most of whom had ignored the U.S. on their concert circuits—could help stimulate public interest, not to mention record sales.

So he phoned CBS in Mexico for recommendations. Las Hermanas Huerta would be willing to appear, he was told. As would a young ranchero vocalist named Vicente Fernandez who was beginning to attract attention in Mexico at the time.

Garcia hesitated. Las Hermanas Huerta were well-known, of course. But Fernandez was not, especially in Los Angeles. The idea of using an unestablished act, no matter how promising, ran contrary to Garcia's concept for the show. And it would be risky, even in a developed market.

Garcia was talked into it nevertheless, and Fernandez made his first U.S. appearance Sept. 22, 1968.

"It was almost like a lucky omen," Garcia recalls. "The very next day following the show, Vicente Fernandez' records started to sell in Los Angeles."

Today, Fernandez is one of the major Latin American acts in the world, with his phenomenal record sales in the U.S. contributing significantly to his stature. His last LP, "La Muerte De Un Gallero," was released in the U.S. in May and promises to be among the biggest selling Latin albums in U.S. history. The Caytronics branch office reports its accounts were demanding reorders of the album before initial shipments (made by the thousands, in many cases) were even unpacked.

Today, in short, both Vicente Fernandez and the U.S. market are solid establishments within the world of Latin music. And while both the artist and the market have matured together, the probability is that the U.S. record business will continue to grow and thrive long after Fernandez becomes Latin music history.

Today, Jose Garcia is the president of one of the major business enterprises within the U.S. Latin industry. And as he points out, Latin concerts in Los Angeles today are a common event.

Take the last Easter weekend as an example. While 12,000 fans were enjoying the Camilo Sesto concert at the Sports Arena (the first time that the popular Mexican variety series "Siempre En Domingo" had broadcast from Los Angeles), 8,500 others were watching Los Muecas at the Convention Center and another 4,500 saw a show featuring King Clave, Nelson Ned and Rigo Tovar at the Hollywood Palladium.

And in the year following the April 1976 decision by the Los Angeles Times to cover Latin music on a regular basis in this city, reviews of the following acts appeared in the newspaper:



ing history right along with the Yankee Stadium appearances of the Fania All Stars that attracted 40,000 fans. And like Danny Rivera's recent show at Carnegie Hall and the Grupo Folklorico at Avery Fisher, Latin acts were beginning to be booked in the city's prime venues.

But the growth of the live concert scene is only a reflection of the growth of the U.S. as a record market. A telescopic perspective on that growth during the past 10 years can be obtained by comparing the listings of Latin labels in Billboard's annual Buyer's Guide.

The edition for 1967-68 lists 19 Latin record companies representing some 44 labels, large and small. This does not include major American companies like CBS, RCA and Capitol which were distributing their own Latin music product at that time.

The current edition, by contrast, lists 45 independent companies accounting for 149 different labels.

But the most impressive lesson learned by the Buyer's Guide comparison is that most of the firms that are dominant in today's market were either infants or unknowns only 10 years earlier. And conversely, most of the independent labels listed in the 1967 directory have been reduced to minimal contemporary significance, with a few outstanding exceptions like Falcon, Rangel and, lately, the Grever's A-side Distributors in Texas and Miami and Veleve in Florida.

For example, in 1967 Fania Records was only a couple of years old and co-founders Jerry Masucci and Johnny Pacheco were delivering albums from the trunks of their cars. Caytronics was a new-born that very year. Today, these two firms are undisputedly among the leaders in the U.S. market.

Thus, the Latin market has changed not only in size but in character as well. While the independent firms were growing into substantial enterprises, labels such as Musart and Orfeon were setting up international branches in the country to take personal care of their bulging sales.

And the Latin labels in the U.S. have grown to the extent that not only are they capable of representing, financially and administratively, the best Latin American lines, but they have created productions of their own which with increasing acceptance are being funneled back into Latin America.

**Left side: The Fania All Stars (top), the summit group of salsa superstars, has pioneered the music's contemporary revival, bringing to it international respect and recognition. The group is pictured here during its 1976 tour of Japan. Johnny Pacheco (inset), co-founder of Fania Records, is the All Stars' musical director. No single salsa artist has broken the barrier of ethnic appeal so thoroughly as pianist/bandleader Eddie Palmieri (center below). Known as the "Sun of Latin Music," Palmieri's newly signed contract with Epic Records promises to bring him—and salsa as well—even broader renown among the non-Latin public. A gulf in age, residence and national origin was surmounted when fabled Chicano guitarist Carlos Santana from San Francisco (right) recorded a tune by the Puerto Rican King Of Latin Music, Tito Puente of New York. The tune, titled "Oye Como Va," put the two great Latin populations of the U.S. on common musical ground. The pair is pictured here at a history-making concert at Roseland Dance City, New York City, March 4, 1977.**

**Below: Willie Colon (left), "El Malo" from the Bronx, is considered on his own to be one of the most inventive and adventurous musical minds in salsa. Ruben Blades (below right), a Panamanian lawyer turned poet, for his part burst on the New York scene hailed as salsa's brightest new arrival. But when they teamed earlier this year, the combination proved wonderful and the yield was one of the most provocative salsa efforts of all time.**

**At right: Danny Rivera, Puerto Rico's favorite son and premiere performer, is seeking and getting a wider audience with the aid of his newly adopted label, Coco Records. A sensitive, perceptive and profound talent, Rivera is already among the leading creative figures in the world of Latin music. Los Humildes (below) and Los Tigres Del Norte, two groups hailing from Northern California, have helped make the musical link between the U.S. and Mexico one of mutual creative reciprocity. Their success helped gain Mexico's recognition for Los Angeles' Fama Records as a prime force in "musica regional." Accordion whiz Flaco Jimenez (far right) has brought renewed stature to the often underrated music of his native Texas. Recently "discovered" by rock star Ry Cooder, who called Flaco's music "elegant" and "tasteful," Jimenez went on a tour of Europe and provoked a flood of international interest that nearly drowned his small Texas label.**

"In the span of 20 years or so," says Joe Ramirez, Caytronics West Coast manager who has been in the business since 1955, "there have been considerable inroads into the quasi-monopoly situation that used to exist. Today the giants like CBS, RCA and Capitol cannot afford to be complacent. Because now there is a multi-company environment and everyone has to fight for a hit."

The breakdown of the monopoly situation was a sine qua non for the growth of the industry here. Obviously, with the three majors controlling the market (distributing their own product) and no strong independent firms to speak of, major Latin U.S. lines could find no entry into the market. There was simply no licensing vehicle.

Today, as Ramirez puts it, there is a "constant flow and exchange of product." The point is, finally, that while Caytronics now distributes under license the RCA and CBS material, that fact does not prevent it from also representing Ariola and Hispavox from Spain and Melody from Mexico. Meanwhile, Latin International, a label nurtured by Garcia on the West Coast, picked up the license three years ago for EMI's Latin product as well as two smaller labels, El Virrey and Doremi, from Peru. And all of the Philips and Polydor product from Latin America now is released in the U.S. by Miami Records, a 20-year-old firm based in Florida.

Meanwhile, other domestic firms of medium proportions have been established initially as international branches of foreign labels, and have now undertaken their own domestic productions and spun off their own subsidiary labels. Thus Alhambra, with the parent company in Madrid, not only releases the Spain-produced Iglesias but also new domestic artists like Grupo Alma and the Charansoul Orchestra.

More and more, also, the Latin business here is seeing the healthy growth of independent, medium-sized firms like Coco and TR of New York, Velvet of Miami and Borinquen of Puerto Rico, which manage to capture a sizeable share of the market and create for themselves an image as aggressive, high-quality enterprises.

Each of these firms has established major artists in the U.S.—Eddie Palmieri, two-time Grammy winner, and Yolanda Monge (Coco); Sophy and Wilkins (Velvet); Charanga 76 and Tipica Novel (TR); Ruffy Leavitt and Lissette (Borinquen). And Danny Rivera, an especially important talent, began with Velvet and is now with Coco.

And as an even more striking indication of the market's expansive nature, consider the case of Microfon America, a firm based in remote Argentina. With an international branch opened in Miami barely more than a year ago, the label's artists like Aldo Monges and Carlos Torres Vila have begun appearing on the New York and Miami Latin charts.

There is, moreover, an interlocking relationship between the increased volume of Latin records and the greater sophistication of Latin record distribution in the U.S. An improved distribution system has allowed for greater volume; the greater volume, in turn, demands a more sophisticated system.

There is a general consensus among label executives here that the expansion of U.S. distributors into Latin repertoire was a milestone in the industry's growth. Through the work of J. L. Marsh, Handelman, Western Merchandisers and others, Latin music became available in outlets like Thrifty drug



Puerto Rico's El Gran Combo, Spain's Joan Manuel Serrat and Raphael, New York's Tito Puente, Larry Harlow, Willie Colon and Eddie Palmieri; Mexico's National Festival and Rodeo featuring Antonio Aguilar and Flor Silvestre; and in a single show sponsored by that once tiny record distributor owned by Jose Garcia, Spain's Miguel Gallardo, Mexico's Felipe Arriaga, Argentina's Luciana, Cuba's Olga Guillot, Mexico's Victor Yturbe "Piruli" and Argentina's Leo Dan.

This, however, represents the activity on only one coast. In New York, the concert scene (nurtured to a great extent by the labels Caytronics and Fania) was setting its own records. Sold-out concerts at Madison Square Garden featuring acts like Julio Iglesias and Roberto Carlos were mak-

