

# “Celia & Johnny”--Celia Cruz and Johnny Pacheco (1974)

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Essay by Frances R. Aparicio (guest post)\*



*Celia Cruz*



*“Celia & Johnny”*



*Johnny Pacheco*

Born in the Dominican Republic, Johnny Pacheco is a well-known percussionist and flutist in the New York Latin music scene. In addition to playing music, he has played a major role in musical productions as partner to Jerry Massuci, the manager of Fania, the recording company that marketed Salsa music in New York, nationwide, and internationally. Pacheco began his musical career drumming with the Xavier Cugat Orchestra, and since his early days as a percussionist, he had learned much about style and rhythm. According to Juan Moreno Velázquez, Pacheco’s unique sound--known as the “Pacheco Groove”--turned him into a favorite, particularly among New York dancers and lovers of Afro-Caribbean music.

As a producer and music executive, Johnny Pacheco had a talent for matching singers with songs and orchestras. As recording director of “Celia y Johnny,” he facilitated Celia’s stardom and eventual global fame as a Salsa singer and as an embodiment of this musical style. Celia had been singing with Tito Puente and other Latino orchestras in New York since her exile from Cuba in 1961. Pacheco invited her to record with him in order to allow her the opportunity to sing more freely and to truly project her unique voice. He felt that Celia’s vocal potential had not, as yet, truly reached its highest peak. Given the arrangements, rhythms, and repertoires in the album that were familiar to Celia, she truly capitalized on this recording as an album that marked her true entry into legend as a Salsa singer.

“Celia y Johnny” is also foundational in understanding the diverse styles within Salsa music. The album is “a true classic” and it marks what would be called “the Golden Age of Salsa.” As César Miguel Rondón writes, the album marks the emergence of the “Matancera” style in Salsa recordings, a style that reproduces the traditional sounds and instrumentations of Cuban musical forms such as the guaracha and the rumba, the ones that Celia Cruz had herself interpreted since her early musical performances in Havana with the Sonora Matancera, a group named for its origins in the Cuban city of Matanzas. Rondón explains that it is not a coincidence, then, that the orchestra of Johnny Pacheco is very similar to the Sonora Matancera sound. This style, which Rondón calls the “matancerización” of Salsa, stands in opposition to the earlier, more “avant-

garde” style that emerged in the streets of New York and that was embodied by the second-generation young, mostly Puerto Rican musicians from the Bronx, such as Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe. These two styles embody the internal heterogeneity of Salsa music proper in New York. Whereas the local Puerto Rican musicians from the barrio were performing experimental sounds, rhythms, and song lyrics that contested dominant, mainstream styles of Latin music and that articulated their experiences as racial minorities in the marginal spaces of New York’s barrios, Celia Cruz contributed Cuban traditional sonic textures to a Salsa world that would embrace both. The decades-long debates about whether Salsa music was Cuban or Puerto Rican or pan-Caribbean would dominate discussions about this pan-latino, urban music. Celia Cruz, along with Tito Puente, insisted that Salsa music was Cuban music. “Celia y Johnny” helps us to understand these opinions, for Celia in particular embodied, performed, and sang the Cuban strands of Salsa music exclusively.

Produced by Jerry Masucci, with Johnny Pacheco as lead singer and in percussion, guiro and flute, Papo Lucca at the piano, and Justo Betancourt as a voice in the chorus, Celia Cruz majestically interpreted canonical favorite hits, such as “Quimbará,” “Vieja luna,” and “Toro Mata.” “Quimbará” would become her signature hit. With its strong African performative elements, such as the accent on the last syllable of the title word, the song privileges the Cuban rumba and the guaguancó rhythm on stage. As Celia rapidly signifies and plays with the shifting syllables of “Quimbará,” and enacts repetition as a major rhetorical style of African origins, she exhorts the audience to join in this exhilarating rhythm that propels the listeners to dance. The song reaffirms the visual style of the cover. Celia and Johnny sit together facing the camera, with Celia wearing a traditional African robe and with oversized long earrings that frame her black Afro, a signature hairstyle of the 1970s.

Both Johnny and Celia performed “Quimbará” multiple times after the recording, with Celia singing that “la rumba me está llamando” [“the rumba is calling me”] and already inserting into her vibrant performances her trademark shout, “Azúcar!” As César Miguel Rondón has written, “This song is still unbeatable. Celia’s intelligence and sabor in playing with the montuno, as well as the extraordinary arrangement, made this one of the most anthologized cuts of salsa music. The lyrics, drawing on the old tradition of celebrating music itself by giving it primary emphasis and by rooting it in everyday life, represented a microcosm of everything that had happened in the Caribbean rumba.”

The inclusion of “Toro Mata,” composed by Carlos Soto de la Colina, from Peru, anticipates the truly hemispheric and pan-latin American origins of Celia’s long standing musical repertoire. While Celia’s most important hits originated in Afro-Cuban musical traditions, she also embraced Latin American folklore and classics from all over the continent. “Toro Mata” is but an early example of this vast repertoire.

After more than 70 recordings, numerous awards and recognitions, and thousands of performances all over the world, Celia Cruz passed away from brain cancer on July 16, 2003. It is fitting to notice that Johnny Pacheco accompanied Celia Cruz on the stage until the end. In the Telemundo-sponsored posthumous homage to Celia Cruz broadcast in 2003, entitled “Azúcar: Homenaje a Celia Cruz,” Pacheco played the flute in, among others, the on-air interpretation of “Guantanamera.” It was, indeed “...at Pacheco’s side that Celia changed the course of her

musical future” and it was at his side that she concluded her musical career. It is meaningful that this homage to Celia closed with “Quimbará” sung by the numerous singers and interpreters who participated in the two hour show. The inaugural role of “Celia y Johnny” in launching her into fame as a Salsera is reaffirmed by the inclusion of “Quimbará” as the closing song during the televised homage.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.