Clarion Review

Biography

Tito Puente
Josephine Powell
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Four Stars (out of Five)

> *The music arrived with images and therein laid its appeal…it was polished and primitive; it was lush and sensuous and eminently danceable.*

Here was an iconic bandleader and renowned percussionist like no other. who alternately thrived and endured through a sixty-year career in Latin music. Josie Powell traces the evolution of Afro-Cuban Puerto Rican and jazz forms from their generally recognized origins through the end of the twentieth century focusing on Puente's interactions with professional allies and constant rivals. Depression-era Spanish Harlem was an impoverished place of packed tenements and partial assimilation but giants like Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman weren't far away. Live radio spilled from open doorways transmitted from the *Cotton Club* the *Savoy* the *Palladium*. Young Tito's mother de-emphasized school but salted back quarters to fund music lessons.

Readers eager for tell-all revelation and dirty laundry will learn only that this man was impatient with amateurism and “was not known to turn down an alcoholic beverage.” The biographer’s thirty-five year association with her subject was ever evolving from fan to hired dancer to concert promoter to friend with only an oblique hint of anything which isn’t the public’s business. Powell steps around her own spotlight for the most part only showcasing trips to Castro’s Cuba and her involvement with the making of movies: *The Mambo Kings Salsa* and *Havana*. She documents musical events as an aficionado of the Latin genres almost religiously avoiding disclosure of Puente’s family life. Those not yet born during the Big Band decades or Mambo mania can imagine the atmosphere from descriptive passages of Manhattan ballrooms Havana dance halls LA nightclubs. The appeal of highly rhythmic melodies to the masses as Latin forms spread across America and around the globe isn’t surprising at all.

The tone is quasi-academic and facts are fully cited drawing on over eighty interviews and a raft of other published accounts. A considerable quantity of Spanish phrases are a natural part of the narrative—most are interpreted for the non-fluent but a minority rely on context for full understanding. Distinctions between Mambo Salsa Cha-Cha and so on could have been more definitive. The role of Santería in Puente’s well-being and its centrality to his later-career sound is a real gem of information.

As the picture of a musician roughs in the projected image of a clownish entertainer looks like a cover. A serious competitor at heart Puente worried that fickle audiences would shift to the next style too quickly; another performer was always threatening to pull ahead. He couldn’t always be considerate and jovial. *When the Drums Are Dreaming* presents both cultural history and an insider’s view of one individual’s ceaseless effort. This book isn’t just for dedicated fans.