

# LATIN MUSIC at the Bowl, 1943-1967

By Josh Kun

The Hollywood Bowl Museum presents a new exhibit this summer: *Música y Sabor*, featuring 90 years of Latino performers at the Bowl. In this article, Professor Josh Kun concentrates on 1943-1967, an exciting period of growth in Latin music here in Southern California.

— Carol Merrill-Mirsky, Curator

On a brisk October night in 1943, at the bottom of the sloping hills of Bolton Canyon, Xavier Cugat and His Orchestra pulled off a Hollywood Bowl first: they sent elegantly arranged *mambos* and *rumbas* up into a star-filled Los Angeles sky.

In the more than two decades since the Los Angeles Philharmonic debuted there in 1922, the Hollywood Bowl had seen everything from symphonies and Easter services to gospel choirs and big band swing, but it hadn't seen anything like "Perfidia," "I'm A Bombshell from the Bronx," or any of the other Latin-tinged hits that Cugat and his guest that night – Mexican-American singer and screen siren Lina Romay – were famous for. But there they were, both appearing courtesy of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, the studio that featured them that year in *Stage Door Canteen*, and the timing was perfect. Cugat – born in Spain, raised in Havana, and made famous in New York – had already gone from being a society fixture at Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria to becoming Hollywood's favorite chihuahua-cradling musical Latino, the perennially tuxedoed poster boy of the Latin craze who already had even the most buttoned-up of Anglophiles rushing off to sign up for mambo classes.

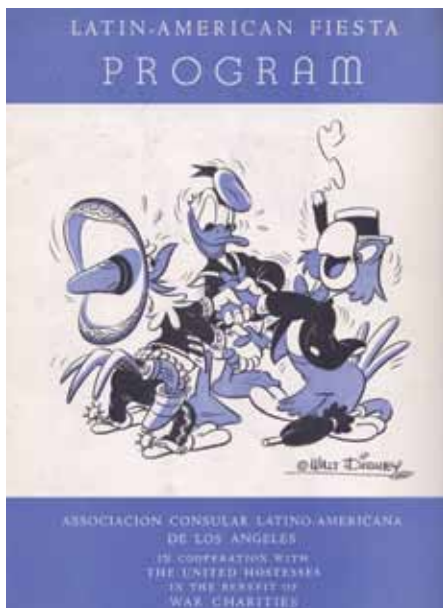
The Bowl dubbed the historic night *Latin American Fiesta*, and

while Cugat was the evening's ideal featured star, he was far from alone. Conceived in the Good Neighbor Policy wake of Walt Disney's three-month goodwill trip to South America, *Latin American Fiesta* was political diplomacy re-imagined as a pan-American musical buffet. Besides Cugat and Romay, it included Colombian singer and rising MGM star Carlos



Ramírez, Mexican singer Carmen Molina, Cuban bandleader and former Cugat guitarist Desi Arnaz, and the Boys Band of Los Angeles County Sheriff Eugene Biscailuz (a descendent of Spanish settlers in California). There was a parade of 21 Miss Americas from across the Americas, complete with their respective national tunes and dances, and even cameos from Donald Duck and his Brazilian parrot pal Joe Carioca, both stars of 1942's *Saludos Amigos*, the first of Disney's South of the Border features. The night's program framed the concert as a tribute to "American Democracy" and as proof that Los Angeles was itself a good Latin American neighbor – a city that, as the chair of the Venezuelan consulate wrote in the program above a drawing of Uncle Sam dancing with a Latin American señorita, "has repeatedly given proof of its sympathetic understanding and appreciation of the Latin-American peoples and its ability to interpret our psychology."

*Latin American Fiesta* wasn't just a victory for consulates and politicians; it was a victory for Bowl audiences who had rarely been exposed to Latin American popular music. Though the Bowl was created in the midst of the Progressive movement as part of a belief in the power of public concerts to promote social consciousness, morality, and virtue, those values rarely extended to the music and culture of the thousands of Latinos who called Los Angeles home in the 1920s and '30s. After 1920, the Mexican population of Los Angeles was on the rise like never before (the *Los Angeles Times* even toyed with printing a Spanish-language edition of the paper), and Spanish-language arts had been thriving in the city since 1910, from Spanish-language theaters to an ever-growing local Mexican music scene anchored by acts like Las Hermanas Padilla and Los Madrugadores. Yet as historian Kenneth H. Marcus noted in *Musical Metropolis*, his 2004 study of early Los Angeles music culture, "the progressive spirit that drove many of the Bowl's founders rarely allowed the participation of Latinos." There were notable exceptions, of course: Mexican folk songs were included in a



## MUSEUM *continued*

1924 “Spanish Program,” a Latin American ballet troupe appeared in 1926, and Mexican classical composer Carlos Chávez made his first of many Bowl appearances as early as 1937. “The fact that the residents of this State are the immediate neighbors of Mexico, and understand the country,” the program for Chávez’ debut insisted, “goes to assure Chávez of establishing for himself a permanent place in the hearts of his audience tonight.” It was only after *Latin American Fiesta* six years later that the popular music of both Latin America and U.S. Latinos would start to establish its own permanent place on the Bowl stage.

In 1945, the Bowl launched *Pan-American Night*, a high-meets-low, Hollywood-goes-folkloric mash up that fed directly off the rising popularity of “Latin” themes in U.S. pop culture and was split between classical pieces led by Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau, a grab bag of folk songs from across the Americas, and a finale featuring Corinna Mura singing the music of leading Mexican pop songwriter María Grever. Mura was no stranger to L.A. audiences. She had already sung at the bar of Rick’s Cafe in Casablanca and was about to appear on screen in both *The Gay Señorita* (Columbia’s “Hippy, Heppy Latin Love Show” set in Mexican California) and on Broadway in *Mexican Hayride* (Cole Porter’s musical comedy about a female Mexican bullfighter). Grever was also a friend of the mid-century U.S. pop songbook, perhaps best known for “Cuando Vuelva a Tu Lado” becoming “What a Difference a Day Makes” and “Te Quiero Dijiste” ending up as an Esther Williams hit, “Magic Is the Moonlight.”

By 1959, the Bowl began to look beyond Hollywood musicals as its source for all things Latin pop and started to dig deeper into Latin American popular music traditions with a concert that paired the

Heights-born pop singer Andy Russell (who sang both “Frenesi” and “In My Wax Museum”), pioneering Tijuana rock band The Moonlights, Mexican ranchera star Lucha Villa, and beloved Cuban singer Miguelito Valdez.

Its sequel a year later continued to splice genre and culture by featuring Mariachi Los Camperos doing “Spanish Flea” (a Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass tune that was already a fixture on *The Dating Game*), plumed Brazilian strummers Los Indios Tabajáras playing both Chopin and Tommy Dorsey, and the octave-hopping Incan princess Yma Sumac doing the “Magic Flute Mambo.”

Perhaps most importantly, though, 1967’s *Bowl Goes Latin!* also featured East L.A.’s own Chicano rock pioneers Thee Midneters,

performing what the Bowl program described only as “Songs of Love, Rhythm, and Psychedelia.” Their set undoubtedly included their fuzzed-out cruising stomper, “Whittier Boulevard,” an anthem for a Mexican-American musical world that had for too long been kept at the Bowl’s margins. Cugat may have led the Bowl on a Latin American



Music Center Archives/Otto Rothschild Collection

Lucho Gatica (right) with Nat King Cole receiving the JCI Inter-American Goodwill Award at the Hollywood Bowl, 1959.

acclaimed Chilean crooner Lucho Gatica with Mexican ranchera diva Lola Beltrán. The night’s hosts included Mexican actor Ricardo Montalban and Nat King Cole, who just a year earlier had released *Cole Español*, his now iconic tribute to the music of Latin America.

But it was in the 1960s, with two installments of the *Bowl Goes Latin!* concert, that the Bowl lived up to its boast that “The Bowl goes Latin all the way.” The 1966 concert made plenty of solid, if predictable, choices – Cuban bandleader René Touzet, Mexican mariachi legend Nati Cano, the return of Xavier Cugat – but also mixed the bill up by adding the Boyle



expedition in 1943, but it was in 1967, right on the brink of the Chicano civil rights movement, that the Bowl decided it was time to listen even closer to home. It was time to point its ears east of Bolton Canyon to the Latin America that, from the very start, had always been making music within the heart of Los Angeles.

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