THE BROOKLYN INK

INTO HIS NINTH DECADE, RIVERA ENJOYS A JAZZ RENAISSANCE

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Ray Rivera, jazz guitarist, singer and songwriter, strolled to the mike at the Brooklyn Marine Island Salt Marsh Nature Center on a hot night this June. The pine box of a park ranger station, occupancy 50, was standing room only.

Rivera looked sharp in a brown, plaid suit. He had no set list. He sized up the audience and dove right in. The first chord reverberated through his Herb Ellis model hollow-body Epiphone guitar.

"I've got a crush on you," he sang, enunciating the lyrics of the Gershwin standard. "I-I-I've gotta crush on you-u-u," he elaborated, his silvery voice spreading.

Through the sticky marsh air, heads grooved to Rivera's tunes. This concert was his fourth at the Salt Marsh Nature Center since 2010. This series is just the latest evidence that, in its modest and respectable way, Rivera's career continues into its seventh decade.

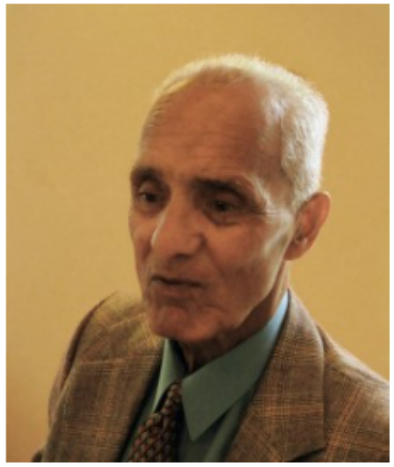
"Ray's guitar playing is pretty basic," said bassist Dave Moore, 80, who closely collaborated with Rivera in a guitar-bass duo for 10 years. "The chords are always right. But his singing is really fabulous, in that he doesn't embellish too much, but he has phrasing that is just phenomenal."

Leading jazz critics and historians are more temperate in their judgment. To *National Public Radio* producer Howard Mandel, Rivera's crowd-pleasing style of commercial jazz is "workman-like." Dan Morgenstern, director of Rutgers University's Institute of Jazz Studies, said Rivera stood out more as a composer-singer than instrumentalist.

Indeed, one of Rivera's biggest songwriting hits, *You've Been Talkin' Bout Me Baby*, was recorded in 1965 by the Ramsey Lewis Trio for their Grammy Award-winning album *The In Crowd*. The album peaked at number two on the *Billboard 500*. Another Rivera hit, *Cuchi Frito Man*, was featured on Latin-jazz icon Cal Tjader's 1965 album *Soul Burst*.

Rivera recorded more than a dozen albums in his career. Their success was niche, even by jazz standards. Rivera's most critically acclaimed album, the 1980 release *Let Me Hear Some Jazz* on Insight Records, was nominated for a Grammy Award. Rivera's best-selling album, 1971's *The Now Sound of the Ray Rivera Orchestra* on MGM, showcased performances by well-known friends like Brazilian guitarist Eumir Deodato and Latin conga player Pucho.

"They sound friendly and easy-going, direct, companionable," said Mandel as he listened to Rivera's work. "But 'important?' I'm afraid no one has invested in his career enough to raise it to the level of recognition to which the term 'important' could be applied." Rivera never tracked on the *Billboard* charts, never ranked on the yearly *Down Beat* magazine poll for standout jazz artists.



Rivera pauses to chat before a set. (Photo: Robert Fieseler/The Brooklyn Ink)

Yet, Rivera has attracted a cult following among musicians and listeners. Presently, a YouTube clip (http://bit.ly/nhppXr) of Rivera in a guest performance with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis at the House of Tribes Community Theatre on January 7, 2007 has over 17,000 hits. An independent label, Meltdown Records, will soon release a backlog of recordings entitled *Rare Masters of Ray Rivera*. Rivera's out-of-print 45-inch records sell on eBay for hundreds of dollars. Taken together, these elements affirm that Rivera, at age 81, is experiencing a late career renaissance.

Many who know Rivera's music also know his life story. In 2008, he self-published a biography called *Ray's Tune: Music Is My Thing*. Walking through the "Wall of Fame" hallway in his two-bedroom, South Brooklyn apartment, Rivera points to photos of himself with Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington and Francis Ford Coppola. Smiling beside each celebrity appears to solidify his status as a star beneath the radar—always on the cusp of making it.

Rivera performs with an ease that betrays none of his upbringing: four years in a foster home, five years at an orphanage, six years in an abusive household with his mother's boyfriend. "I cast that anger down early on in life," said Rivera.

At age 14, Rivera said, he was kicked out of his mother's apartment on 103rd Street in Harlem. He caught pneumonia and almost died at Montefiore Hospital. Alone in the hospital room, Rivera began to hear music around him. "Like floating on a cloud," he recalled. "Beyond belief, music I'd never heard. And, as I grew up, I said, 'I wish I could write music like that.'"

Weeks later, Rivera began writing poetry for the first time. "I could write these poems," he said. "I had a knack for writing lyrics, writing songs. It was just like a natural thing." Rivera was 15 when left the hospital. Two years later, he'd become a rising star in the New York jazz scene.

Through the late '40s, Rivera bounced around as a lead vocalist. When Rivera met clarinetist Frank Gator, Gator was enticed by Rivera's potential. He slapped an upright bass in Rivera's hands. Rivera went for it. "I was playing by ear, 'cause I had good ears," said Rivera. "I could listen between the notes."

Throughout the '50s, Rivera's voice won the admiration of jazz greats. Singers Bobby Darin and Billie Holiday came to see Rivera perform at Midtown restaurant Matty's Town Crest. Rivera recorded with jazz heavyweights Hank Jones and Toots Thielemans. He sang alongside bop vocalist Babs Gonzales, who exclaimed of Rivera's showmanship, "Damn, Ray, you're trying to make all the money."

By the late 1950s, Rivera seemed poised for a breakout. Fresh off a 13-week stint on the *WPIX—Channel 11* television show *The Spotlight of Values*, Rivera recorded with MGM and Decca Records. Performing demos at the Brill Building, a 49th Street hub for the music business, he'd earned his way into the American Society of Composers, Artists & Publishers (ASCAP).

Then, the power center of music shifted. Folk and rock 'n' roll achieved market dominance. Major labels like A&M Records (founded in 1962) and Capital Records (ushering in Beatlemania) lured musicians west to Los Angeles. Rivera made the choice to stay in New York City. "I probably could have made it big there," Rivera insists now, "but I didn't sign with anybody cause they were out there robbing people."

In an atmosphere where many artists signed unfavorable contracts or went unpaid for recordings, Rivera's kneejerk suspicion of managers and major labels kept from him pursuing opportunities. "I'd hear this guy or that guy weren't paying the artists," remembered Rivera. "So, I said, 'Why should I record?' I said that a lot." Rivera walked away from projects with Cadillac Records and Charlie Parker Records.

Rivera tells a story, with bassist Nick Ara in background. (Photo: Robert Fieseler/The Brooklyn Ink)

Most of Rivera's early recordings, such as the single *Ho-Dee-Ing-Dong* on Decca Records, never developed into future partnerships. Musical relationships would dissolve after one release, usually over terms of pay. "You had your music out there, and you never got paid," said Rivera. "I'd say something. Next thing you know, they dropped the whole thing." Rivera's assertiveness wasn't always welcome, and he was not a big enough star to impose it.

In 1963, Rivera switched instruments. He walked into the studio of guitarist Kenny Burrell to demonstrate a song, and the only instrument around was Burrell's own guitar. Rivera inspired Burrell with his style of play: no single notes, all chords. Burrell sent Rivera to guitar teacher Allen Hanlon, who told Rivera, "I'm gonna bring out what you have."

By the mid '60s, Rivera's songwriting career surpassed his performing career. Writing for jazz, Latin, salsa, country, blues and rock, he became one of the early cross-genre composers. "He was writing for everyone," said vinyl collector and seller Robert Watlington, 63. "That's unheard of. Because you generally build up your little dynasty in your own little ghetto." Composer Claus Ogerman, who recorded with singer Frank Sinatra, began collaborating with Rivera.

Yet, though he received ample work, Rivera collected few royalties. According to Rivera, his biggest selling song, *You've Been Talkin' Bout Me Baby*, earned him next to nothing. "Someone was interviewing Ramsey Lewis," said Rivera. "And he said, 'That album sold over a million copies.' And I said to myself, 'I didn't get paid for a million copies.'"

In 1981, Rivera formally acquired the rights to his songs. He inked a distribution deal with CBS Music Publishing that year and received a $7,500 advance. Through that deal, he continues to earn royalties on his catalog.

On December 1, 2011, Meltdown Records plans to release the career retrospective *Rare Masters of Ray Rivera* for download on Amazon.com. *Rare Masters* represents a masterwork of 15 out-of-print or previously unreleased albums. "It's gonna be a surprise for people," said Rick Russo, 53, owner of Meltdown Records, "to realize that this incredibly melodic material all comes from one mind."

Rivera will play his fifth concert at the Salt Marsh Nature Center (http://bit.ly/nLXTSO) on August 20 at 7 p.m. Additionally, he'll play two sessions at Adobe Blues (http://bit.ly/mORseR), a Staten Island restaurant, on August 27 at 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. Both concerts are free of charge.

Way back at Montefiore Hospital, Rivera heard a proverb that stuck with him. He recites it from memory at many performances: "No star is lost we once have seen. We may have been what we might have been." He interprets it to mean, "If you believe in something, go for it."