

RALPH MERCADO

Ralph Mercado has been hailed as one of the most important figures who gave rise to Latin music worldwide. During his 50 year career he promoted and produced events, managed and booked legendary artists, established a major independent record company, two publishing companies, a video and film production company and a catalog of award-winning international hits that have transformed the Latin music industry.

Born in 1941 in Brooklyn, NY, Mercado started organizing parties and dances as president of a neighborhood social club while just a teenager in the mid-1960s. He produced "waistline parties" where gentlemen had to pay the entrance fee of a penny-per-inch of their date's waistline. Eventually Mercado's parties graduated from the basement on the Pacific Street block where he lived to his own venue above a car wash nearby known as the "3 & 1 Club". There he began booking local Latin bands such as Eddie Palmieri and Richie Ray & Bobby Cruz among others. Mercado also began his first management, booking and promotions company called "Showstoppers". He promoted R&B acts including James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight & The Pips, the Stylistics, the Chi-Lites and others ... starting a *Salsa-meets-Soul* music trend ... aka SalSoul.

As Mercado ventured into other boroughs, Manhattan became a key location for his growth. He promoted dances at the Cheetah Nightclub and presented Latin jazz at the Red Garter, Village Gate and other downtown venues and helped to expand the reach of the *Fania All Stars* through various shows including the famed Yankee Stadium concert. His partnership with Jack Hooke, the late Tito Puente's longtime manager and confidante, created the "Salsa Meets Jazz" series at the Village Gate and the "Latin Jazz Jam" as part of the annual JVC Jazz Festival held at Carnegie Hall.

An astute judge of talent, Mercado opened Ralph Mercado Management (aka RMM) in 1972, signing Ray Barretto and Eddie Palmieri as the first two artists to his company. He went on to manage numerous notable names in the industry, including it's two biggest stars, Tito Puente and Celia Cruz. As promotions grew in the mid-1980s the wildly popular "*Latin Tinge*" nights at the famous New York hotspot *Palladium* were bringing close to 3000 *salseros* to dance every Thursday night for several years.

Mercado would go on to expand his reach even further through establishing RMM Records & Video, RMM Flimworks, and music publishing arms Caribbean Waves & Crossing Borders Music. With over 140 artists signed to RMM Records, the label sold millions in recordings a year. He produced the internationally recognized and acclaimed documentary "*Yo Soy Del Son A La Salsa*". His publishing companies provided music for major feature films, television and soap operas.

Always an innovator, with more than 30 satellite offices globally, Mercado pioneered the presentation of Salsa music in Africa, South America, Europe, Asia, Israel and the world over.

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He was one of the firsts to bring Latin music concerts to prestigious venues such as Radio City Music Hall with Julio Iglesias; Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall; the Beacon Theatre; and the iconic Madison Square Garden.

He created the *New York Salsa Festival*, one of the longest standing annual events running for more than 35 years. In 1976, Mayor Abraham Beame presented Mercado with a proclamation establishing the annual September concerts as "Official New York Salsa Day". Mercado events attracted corporate partners such as Coca Cola, Proctor & Gamble, Phillip Morris, McDonalds and others.

Ralph Mercado was honored with a Billboard Magazine's Lifetime Achievement award in 1999. He was one of a select few executives to have ever received this award.

Ralph Mercado's organizational and management skills did much to shape the growth of Latin music. His efforts refined the concepts of promotion, performance and touring that would become the industry standard. With a passion for discovering and developing talent, he mentored and shaped the careers of young superstars like Marc Anthony & La India. He enhanced the careers of Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, Oscar D'Leon, Eddie Palmieri, while simultaneously launching the solo careers of Tito Nieves, Tony Vega, Jose Alberto "El Canario" and many others. With a keen understanding of the Latin music market, Mercado maintained a dense network of relationships with radio people, press outlets, music distributors and retailers, and many stakeholders and influencers within and beyond the Latin music infrastructure. His entrepreneurial spirit continues to serve as inspiration for many today's promoters.

Mercado ventured into owning various nightclubs and restaurants. His eateries included the American themed steakhouse *Alma Grill* located Midtown Manhattan, the upscale Mexican restaurant *Zona Rosa* located just south of Carnegie Hall, and the Nuevo Latino restaurant and lounge *Babalu* in Hell's Kitchen. He also owned *Club Broadway*, later named as the swanky NYC club *Latin Quarter* on the Upper West Side, which would later be relocated to the East Side and called *LQNY*. And, across the country, along with superstars Jennifer Lopez and Jimmy Smits, he had a stake in LA's *Conga Lounge*.

Above all, Mercado's success stemmed from his passion for the music and the drive for global reach. *"In the very beginning,"* said Mercado, *"I started RMM (Ralph Mercado Management) and the other companies because I loved the music. I still do."* Mercado first fell in love with the rhythms while at the Palladium nightclub when he was only 16, watching the big bands of Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodriguez. *"Right then I knew I would be involved with this wonderful music one way or another."* He confessed slyly, *"And thank God I was never a musician. I would probably have been terrible and would have starved to death. I used to dance a little but nothing to write home about. My forte is as a promoter."* He proudly stated, *"I've always been a promoter."*

Notwithstanding, this promoter of humble Brooklyn, New York origins and Puerto Rican/Dominican descent, rose to the top of the music industry through sheer hard work, dedication and belief in the rhythm of his Latin heritage.