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Music: Enter Salsa: Some Like It Hot

A drum choir of congas, bongos and timbales sets up a spiky beat punctuated by rattling maracas and a shower of cowbells. A pair of trumpets blasts off in the brass brigade. At the center of the excitement a small, bearded figure huddles over the piano, sweat pouring off his face. Eddie Palmieri attacks the keyboard with fingers, forearms and chin before a sellout crowd at Manhattan's Avery Fisher Hall.

The name of the sound is salsa, as in salsa picante—Spanish for hot sauce. As anyone who can tell tamales from timbales knows, salsa is guaranteed to open up nerve endings. From Boston to Miami, young Hispanics are picking up the beat. In recent years Latin music programs have been smash hits at New York's Madison Square Garden and Yankee Stadium. There is an embryonic curiosity about salsa on the pop scene too, among fans who are no longer charmed by recycled golden oldies—Bobby Vinton's Beer Barrel Polka, for example—or who prefer music that is spicy rather than electronically spacy. In March, salsa playing appeared on Don Kirschner's TV rock show. New York's progressive music radio stations WQIV-FM and WNEW-FM have started programming the salsa sound.

"I don't think there is any way to stop salsa," says Palmieri. "The day is coming when rock bands will find themselves playing opposite a Latin orchestra." Although it has been developing for 30 years, salsa is a new musical adventure for most Latinos as well as for Americans. Its roots extend back to Cuban dance music of previous decades like the rumba. After 1961, when the U.S. suspended relations with Cuba, emigrant Latin musicians and mainland-born Puerto Ricans gradually fused their own style with elements of American rock, soul and especially jazz. The result was salsa's singing dances. They are a combination of pungent vocal melodies challenged by complex instrumental counterrhythms.

Salsa retains the two traditional types of Cuban ensembles: the conjunto, a descendant of street-festival bands, and the charanga, a miniature symphony orchestra with the bright lilt of flutes and strings.

Wooden Spoons. Salsa is urban music, born on hot summer nights on city rooftops and streets where kids make music drumming on mailboxes and the sides of cars, or hitting an empty beer can with a wooden spoon. The glue that holds it all together is clave, a continuous 3/2 beat tapped out on a pair of hollow

sticks. Musicians sprinkle percussive accents around the clave and layer complicated rhythms on top of it: bands like to get six or eight going simultaneously. But it is the continuous clave beat that starts feet moving, hands clapping, and prevents aural chaos.

Salsa has grown with little help from the music industry. Spanish radio and television stations tend to be conservative, preferring to feature traditional Mexican and South American musicians. Four years ago, Latin-rock Guitarist Carlos Santana introduced salsa to the national youth market with his hit single of Tito Puente's *Oye Como Va*. In an attempt to win a bigger audience, some of the new generation of salsa musicians urge a more commercial sound ("going *Americano*"), Trombonist Willie Colon, 25, frequently deviates from traditional Cuban rhythms. Others, like Conga Drummer Ray Barretto, remain purist ("tipico"). Barretto, 39, experiments harmonically in his jazz-inflected scores but retains the Cuban beat. Seguida, a new Latin-rock group, compromises by combining Latin rhythms with English lyrics.

Last year Latin music outstripped jazz in record sales; yet at the music industry's annual Grammy awards it was ignored. "Salsa sells \$50 million worth of records a year and there is no category for it," complains Orchestra Leader Larry Harlow, who is currently trying to remedy the situation. Izzy Sanabria, publisher of Latin NY magazine, is not waiting. He has organized a Latin Recognition ceremony to be held at Manhattan's Beacon Theater next week. "This is music's hip new sound," says Sanabria. "It is vibrant and intense, and nobody has yet needed to put an amplifier on a conga."

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