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For the Love of Music

THE POORLY PAID LATIN MUSICIAN

By Frank Figueroa

"No one likes to pay the piper," so the saying goes. Throughout history the same attitude has prevailed towards all artists and especially musicians. Playing a musical instrument is viewed as so much fun that no additional compensation should be expected or given. Musicians require a living wage in order to support themselves and their families just like everyone else.

The Latin American musician in the United States as well as in other countries has never received just compensation. Many of them have lived all their lives in humble circumstances and have died poor and forgotten. Such was the case of Panchito Riset, a Cuban singer who recorded with Conjunto Caney, Cuarteto Flores, and other groups. He also led his own band at the Club Versailles in New York for many years. Panchito died alone, blind, diabetic, and with both legs amputated in "the cuartito" (the little room) that he so touchingly sang about. Cases like these are not uncommon. As you read about life on the other side of the bandstand or behind the tape or disk, you may also reach the conclusion that these men and women played "for the love of music."

One of Riset's first hit recordings in Latin American music was made in 1928 in New York by the Trio Miguel Matamoros. The group's leader, Matamoros, relates that the trio was paid the lowly sum of \$20 per side for that session and for most of the records they made for RCA Victor in New York. One of the songs recorded on that date was *El Son de la Loma*, a hit record when it first appeared and a good seller even today.

In Puerto Rico, orchestras such as that of Rafael Muñoz, the Orquesta Siboney and others paid their musicians as little as \$15 per week. The musical arrangers were paid on the average of \$5 per arrangement and they had to supply their own music paper. One must also consider that the Rafael Muñoz and Siboney orchestras were quite possibly the only two that had steady full-time employment in two of the best hotel ballrooms on the island. The other musicians earned even less, since they just worked one or two nights per week.

In his article about Anselmo Sacasas, Max Salazar tells us about musician exploitation during the 1930s in Cuba. In 1936, Sacasas was the pianist at the Havana Sport Academy and was paid \$3.75 a day and \$6.50 for playing Sunday matinees and nights. When he joined the Hermanos Castro Band he took a pay cut and received \$2 a day. He also had to pay for his uniform. Salazar quotes Sacasas as saying: "My three years with the Casino de la Playa was the most miserable time of my life." He added later, "While other musicians slept, I was writing new arrangements. I was paid \$1 per arrangement and I had to supply the paper which cost me 25¢." Please bear in mind that the Casino de La Playa was a corporation in which all musician-members were to share income. One can just imagine the situation of other

musicians playing in groups with a different structure. Another member of that orchestra, Miguelito Valdés, is quoted by Salazar as saying that Guillermo Portela, the head of the corporation and leader of the band, split thousands of dollars with RCA Victor from the orchestra's record sales. At the same time, band members were receiving pay equivalent to \$10 a week and nothing from the record royalties. Miguelito Valdés' salary problems were to continue as he joined the Xavier Cugat Orchestra in 1940.

The shabby exploitation of musicians by bandleaders reached its highest level with Xavier Cugat. There are literally dozens of stories about his taking advantage of his musicians, not only by paying them as little as possible, but by appropriating their ideas and musical creations. Daniel Santos tells about feeling exhilarated when Cugat, "The Penurious Catalan" offered him \$85 a week for singing at the Waldorf Astoria. Miguelito Valdés also had salary problems with Scrooge Cugat. In the liner notes of the CD *Adios Africa*, Miguelito Valdés is quoted as saying the following: "With Cugat I performed in five shows a day at the Paramount Theater for two weeks, I sang every night at the Waldorf Astoria's Starlight Roof, and I sang on the Camel Cigarette Show's Rhumba Revue." With Cugat, Valdés worked six days a week, filled two and three engagements a day, and recorded every month. All this for \$200 a week. Miguelito Valdés confided in me how Cugat appropriated musical ideas. He said that one day while waiting to go on the Camel Cigarette Radio Show, he (Miguelito) was strumming a guitar and playing the introduction to the song *Perfida*. Upon hearing that introduction, Cugat adapted it for the Camel cigarette commercial that would earn him thousands of dollars in royalties. Some of you may remember C-AM-EL-S.

In the early days, singers were special victims of financial discrimination. The usual practice was to pay the vocalist whatever was left from the band's contracted pay. In New York, most of the time the singer was not a member of the Musicians Union and did not have to be paid the union's minimum wage. Daniel Santos, one of Puerto Rico's most famous singers, tells us about his lifelong battle against low pay. His first professional job was singing two songs several times during the night. Later, he sang Saturday nights at the Borinquen Social Club in New York for the fabulous sum of \$1.50. There were other equally low paying jobs in that city. Santos sang weekends at a cabaret called Los Chilenos for which he was paid \$10.00 a week and all the wine he could drink. At the Cuban Casino he sang, was master of ceremonies, and substituted for any missing waiters all for \$17 a week. One of Daniel Santos' biggest hit recordings was *Despedida* for which author/leader Pedro Flores paid him \$9. Even after becoming a famous recording star, Santos complains about not being paid at all by dishonest promoters. Josean Ramos, in his book *Vengo a Decirle Adiós a Los Muchachos*, quotes Santos as saying: "Call all the Press Associations, United Press, Associated Press and all the others and tell them." He then proceeded to yell out the names of many promoters who owed him thousands of dollars for appearances all over Latin America.

Musicologist Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, writes about the paltry salaries paid to musicians in the 1940s in Cuba. The man who eventually would become the "Mambo King," Dámaso Pérez Prado, was paid


\$1.45 a night for playing at the cabaret Pennsylvania in Havana, Cuba. His lot improved when he joined the Paulina Alvarez Orchestra, where he received \$1.60 a night. Prado wrote musical arrangements for Peer International and was paid \$2.00 for each one. These arrangements were printed as stock arrangements and were sold by the hundreds all over Latin America. I recall purchasing many of them in New York for my band at a cost of \$5.00 each. Some of us also remember Pérez Prado hurrying around New York City in the 1940s trying to raise a few dollars selling his arrangements. I personally ran into him at the Spanish Music Center where he was trying to convince the owner, Gabriel Oller, to advance him some money. However, poetic justice prevailed, and Pérez Prado later earned thousands and thousands of dollars through his mambo recordings for RCA Victor.

Even the renowned Israel López "Cachao" experienced economic exploitation. Luis Tamargo in an article written for Latin Beat tells about Cachao's problems with Panart Records in Cuba. In 1952, Cachao had to obtain a loan for \$200 to finance the recording of one of his famous descargas, most of which have become legendary recordings. To this day, Cachao has not received one cent in royalties.

Another of the Cuban Descargas was also recorded under dishonest conditions by Panart Records. Max Salazar writes in his article on Julio Gutiérrez that appeared in Latin Beat that the record label used Julio Gutiérrez's name to lead a project that eventually was called Cuban Jam Sessions. Panart promoted the event as a party where there would be dancing, drinking, carousing with beautiful señoritas, and playing, just for fun. When the musicians saw the recording equipment they became suspicious. They were told that it was only a matter of preserving the event for posterity. Little did they know that the entire event was being recorded and eventually released. To appease the musicians, each one was given \$20.

In my New York days as a bandleader, I remember that union scale pay was \$20 for four hours and that musicians were paid \$41 for a recording session. Most musicians worked weekends and even the Palladium Ballroom was open only four days a week. Musicians, with few exceptions, lived a rather spartan life in the tenements of El Barrio and the Bronx. It saddens me to see that many of these musicians are still living under such conditions.

But all bandleaders and promoters are not as depicted above. One significant exception is Ruben Blades. In an interview with Rudolph Mangual of Latin Beat, Ruben tells about his earning \$35 a night on weekdays and \$38 on weekends, that is a total of \$73 a week. Since he had experienced such a life, when he became successful, he made sure that his musicians were well paid. The members of the band met and decided how much they would get paid. He refused to take engagements where there was not sufficient money to insure that his band would be well compensated. Blades blames the bandleaders for the current situation in which at times musicians are not paid a living wage. Hooray for Ruben, and while we are at it, let us remind the bandleaders that in addition to monetary consideration, they should recognize their musicians when they record and especially when they play concerts and make other public appearances. I personally attended a concert in Tampa recently where a big-name bandleader did not extend his musicians the courtesy of an introduction to the public. Is Cugat still alive? **TS**



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