

... results, industry watchers strong demand for Apple's president
IN '70s, BIG MONEY SET THE TONE OF THIS SPICY LAT

Once-hot biz of salsa sound is a cold note

By **AURORA FLORES**

They lived and died out together in New York — the exciting Latin musicians who made the "salsa" sound world famous, and the Brooklyn-born lawyer who promoted the rhythm, profited from it and then left it behind.

Today, Jerry Masucci, 52, is in Argentina making a movie. The salsa beat is in eclipse. And one of Masucci's former recording artists has legal action pending against him from their glory days together in the '70s (RECORDS)

The rise and fall of Masucci's once-famous recording label, **Fania**, is a uniquely New York saga — the tale of a street-smart New York businessman who hooked up with a group of talented Hispanic musicians to pump up a form of Latin music into an international phenomenon.

Until salsa music's popularity grew faint in the early '80s, Masucci recorded such superstars as Tito Puente, Celia Cruz and Ruben Blades. Through the company he had named for a woman on one of the label's first recordings, he had as many as 45 artists working for him.

Twelve years ago, Fania Records accounted for more than 80% of all salsa record sales in the United States. Today, the sales figure is so obscure, not even Masucci himself could say how many records the company, now known as Musica Latina International, sells. In happier times, Fania grossed around \$5 million a year, according to Masucci.

In the '70s, Fania had a recording studio on Broadway, a pressing plant in Puerto Rico, and

See **SALSA** Page 6



JERRY MASUCCI, whose Fania Records 12 years ago accounted for more than 80% of all salsa record sales in U.S.

PHOTO/FRANCISCO LOPEZ

Salsa sound now rings flat sales in city of origin

FROM PAGE ONE

a Seventh Ave. headquarters with a staff of 50. From there, deals were made to distribute throughout the U.S., Latin America, the Caribbean and Spain.

Moreover, the company sponsored shows on seven radio stations nationally and owned another in Puerto Rico. By that time, Masucci had made two movies on the Latin music scene, "Nuestra Cosa — Our Latin Thing" and "Salsa."

Fania All-Stars — the label's best-selling bandleaders and solo artists — sold out stadiums all over the world, including Africa and Japan. Interests in magazines and nightclubs, along with production and distribution deals with Columbia and Atlantic Records, made Fania the biggest salsa label in the 60-year history of Latin music in New York.

Quite an achievement

Masucci had created an all-embracing Latin music machine. It was an impressive feat for a former high-school dropout who didn't know a mambo from a cha-cha.

After receiving his equivalency diploma in the Navy, Masucci — the son of an auto mechanic and a seamstress — became a cop and then a business student in Mexico City. It was there he rekindled the interest in Latin music he first acquired while stationed in Cuba.

Back in New York, he entered New York Law School, passed the bar exam and went from a low-paid law clerk to a full partner at a firm called Pariser & Masucci. He then joined Johnny Pacheco, a Latin music artist who was a client, to form Fania Records in 1963.

With an initial \$5,000 investment, the two made their own deliveries to the record shops and began cranking out hits.

End of things

But in 1980, paradise crumbled. What went wrong?

The end of Masucci's stranglehold on Latin music began in the late 1970s, Masucci re-

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Jerry Masucci

called in a phone interview from his home in Buenos Aires, where he spends half his time when not involved in his real estate and music business in New York.

It was in the late 1970s, when Masucci was looking to break into the film industry. He released a major movie bomb about a young boxer, "The Last Fight," starring Ruben Blades and lost, according to Masucci, \$500,000 on the deal. Its title became a harbinger of things to come.

At about the same time, artists started rumbling among themselves about royalties and low pay. And the distribution deals with Columbia and Atlantic Records didn't catapult the All-Stars into the American market as had been expected.

Despite these circumstances, however, Latin music nightclubs featured bands seven nights a week. The clubs brimmed with patrons.

Until, that is, Ruben Blades, who also was a lawyer, came along in 1973.

The popular singer and songwriter says that at first he, too, trusted Masucci and was charmed by his engaging manner. But he says he quickly realized royalties were not forthcoming. Artists, Blades reports, felt intimidated and had a code of silence when it came to discussing contracts and wages with each other.

By 1976 Blades had found a sympathetic ear in Willie Colon and formed an alliance with the young trombonist and bandleader. Blades also hired entertainment lawyer David Lubell and through his efforts, the two men say, began to receive royalty payments — albeit a bit late and incomplete.

Masucci countered by saying, "I don't pay attention to what people like Ruben Blades have to say." Howev-



BETTER DAYS: During salsa music's heyday, Willie Colon (left, above) and Ruben Blades made popular and profitable music together; Jerry Masucci (below) and Cuban singer La Lupe (reportedly now residing with daughter in homeless shelter) at contract signing in 1975.



Madison Square Garden was host to sold-out salsa concerts several times a year. And a Latin music category was added to the Grammys awards.

But after much pressing, Masucci insists the main reason behind his disenchantment with the industry was the ingratitude of the artists. "After 15 years," he says, "I was tired of the same old thing."

"The ones who didn't sell were jealous of the superstars, and the superstars all wanted to be Julio Iglesias," he recalls in his pronounced Brooklyn accent.

"They were all starving before I came into this business, but nobody was happy afterwards, either."

Despite his complaints, those familiar with Fania say the artists were unsophisticated about business and legal matters — no match for Masucci, who was a lawyer.

er, he noted that his company was the first ever to pay royalties in the Latin music field.

Industry sources speculate that when Blades tried to form a union in 1979, Masucci decided he'd had enough. Masucci, however, says he didn't even know that Blades was trying to form a union. "The musicians were already part of the local union here," Masucci said with a laugh. "Besides, it didn't matter 'cause they never paid their dues, anyway."

Sold his company

The next year, Masucci sold Fania for \$1 million to a group of Argentinian businessmen who controlled a company called Val Syn.

Nonetheless, Masucci remains affiliated with the label. "I'm a consultant with the company on all aspects of its business," he says.

And he is not without al-

lies. In a recent interview, prominent composer Tite Curet Alonso said that he was, always happy with his eight-year contract with Fania. "What's wrong with many of the artists is that they agree to something and then complain if they feel the other person is getting the better end of the deal," he said.

Meanwhile, the company continues to record a handful of its former stars, such as Celia Cruz and Ray Barretto, out of Beethoven Studios on W. 31st St. in Manhattan.

Masucci added that he expects to pursue his own film production projects (he produced the soundtrack to the movie "Something Wild," starring Melanie Griffin) and to release a few salsa recordings in the Argentinian market.

Salsa music, on the other hand, has been trying to recover from its fall from favor. Its sounds can be heard on

the disco circuit, while a few clubs book young Dominican salsa groups, the newest tenants of the music sweatshops who are singing and dancing to wages even lower than those prevailing during the Fania dynasty.

There are no longer any local magazines or upscale clubs that embrace the Afro-Cuban rhythms of salsa's roots, and even the Spanish-language radio stations have all but abandoned the sound in New York.

The beat goes on

Throughout the rest of the country — in California and Miami, for instance — many FM stations still spin the spicy salsa sounds.

It is only in New York, once considered the mecca of Latin music, that a void exists. The Spanish language radio stations claim that with the influx of new immigrants from throughout Central and Latin America, the musical tastes have changed.

But when the salsa beat was robust and on the rise, almost everyone would agree that it was Jerry Masucci who was the colorful driving force behind the movement.

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