

# SIEMBRA

## WILLIE COLÓN & RUBÉN BLADES

*Siembra* is one of those landmark albums that marks a before and after in a musical genre. Thirty years after its release, the seven songs on the second album by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades remain a reference point for salsa and a creative high-water mark for all Afro-Caribbean music.

Yet, unlike other influential albums that set trends or spawn imitators, *Siembra* ranks in a class of its own. Even though it was the best selling salsa album of its era, other musicians knew it would be futile to copy it. For in many ways, *Siembra* was a magical work, the product of a unique time and place that even its own creators never attempted to duplicate, though they would go on to make two more albums together.

To understand *Siembra's* startling impact, consider what was happening in Latin music in the fall of 1978. The salsa boom of the early 70s, an authentic cultural phenomenon, was fading, along with the decade that had seen it rise from the streets of San Juan and Spanish Harlem. By 1978, music that had once sounded so fresh started to sound formulaic and artists who had once found inspiration in the *barrio* had started calculating how to reach wider audiences by crossing over to a

non-Latino market. Not surprisingly, fans abandoned salsa in droves and flocked to the pop music craze of the day, disco music.

Suddenly, *Siembra* arrives and hits a note heard round the world. There had been nothing like it in salsa before and there's been nothing quite like it since.

The album opens with a few bars of clichéd disco music, suggesting perhaps that Blades and Colón had fallen for the fad. But the music abruptly snaps into a salsa rhythm with an insistent, irresistible *clave*, the heartbeat of Afro-Cuban music. The shift from frivolous fad to hardcore salsa is so powerful that it makes musical mockery of those lightweight disco bars.

Thus, a note of satire was struck before a single word was sung.

Blades then launches into the biting verses of "Plástico," an indictment of materialism and social pretense that marks the opening salvo in a record that would succeed by going against trends and traditions. Instead of crossing over to English-speaking audiences, *Siembra* built musical bridges to the rest of Latin America. Instead of sticking to standard dance rhythms, it experimented with new

percussion patterns and defied the rules of *clave*. Instead of offering tunes tailored for dancers, it offered songs made for listeners, with complex lyrics and provocative messages.

"It wasn't a predictable album," says Colón. "You started listening and it would just kind of blow your mind because we broke a lot of rules."

Like a lot of great art, though, *Siembra* didn't just appear in a vacuum. The elements that made it great were already percolating in the salsa scene. It wasn't the first album to contain narrative songs based on *barrio* life. It wasn't the first to suggest messages of racial equality and assert Latino pride. It wasn't even the first concept album in salsa.

But those elements all came together in a way that made *Siembra* special. And that was no fluke. Its creators, in their separate ways, had set out to make their mark.

Says Blades, the songwriter: "At the risk of sounding immodest, I believed it would be like no other salsa album ever made because of the lyrics and the urban themes. I wanted to prove that audiences were more intelligent than they were being credited for and that salsa could be of interest even for non-dancing, non-*barrio* people all over Latin America. I believed then and now that music is not intended solely for entertainment and escapism; it can be used as means to confront issues of social and political importance and to document our struggles, our failures and our triumphs as a society."

Says Colón, the producer: "I wanted to put out the best record anybody ever made. I wanted you to picture the band in your mind when you heard the record, to close your eyes and actually feel where the instruments are, like sonar almost."

Playing the original vinyl album today on a modern, audiophile turntable tells you how well he

succeeded. Achieving technical quality that holds up after three decades took ample rehearsal before even getting to the studio, and ample freedom once there.

"There was nobody looking over our shoulders and screaming about using too much studio time," says Colón. "We were able to get really meticulous about the recording and just relax and fool around without saying, 'Oh, no, how are we going to pay for the next ten hours?' There was no time pressure, which is a real luxury."

The only constraint was in the grooves of the vinyl, which could hold only so much music, unlike higher capacity CDs which had not yet been invented. The album's biggest hit, "Pedro Navaja," was also its longest at 7:21, one of only three songs on Side A. That length was anathema to commercial radio, and even Colón worried it was too long.

Yet, when stations tried cutting it, fans called in to complain. They wanted to hear the whole story, which Colón calls a "phono-novela" - about the two-bit street thug who accosts a prostitute and gets his comeuppance. The song became a phenomenon in its own right spinning off theater productions, a movie, a sequel and even a proposed television show.

The song was loosely based on "Mack the Knife," and like that tune it escalated in tone and pace as the story progressed. The song's taut and gripping arrangement, by Luis "Perico" Ortiz, gave Blades the first sense that something special was in the works; he calls it "dark and nasty, like a shark going at you sideways." Colón knew that Ortiz, more than other arrangers, listened closely to lyrics and tailored his charts to the text. For "Pedro Navaja," he opens with a single conga behind Blades' vocal, a perfect start for a complex story.

"He didn't overwrite," says Colón of Perico's

work, "but that was smart of him because he had such a long ways to run that if you start over-writing in the beginning, it's just going to be a mess. His arrangement was dynamic. It just kept building and building, and by the time it did get to the chorus, it was just smokin'."

Choosing the right arrangers was another secret to *Siembra*'s success. For the rousing close of the album, Colón recruited Argentine arranger Carlos Franzetti who infused the title track with strings and high drama, which Blades rightly calls "majestic." Colón says "it sounded almost like a battle cry," with the chorus shouting the two-syllable word that means "to sow" in Spanish.

Blades uses the imperative - "Siem-bra-a-a-a." - commanding listeners to sow if they hope to reap a better life for themselves and their children. In his songs, or improvisations, he alludes back to that disco introduction with a reference to actor John Travolta, star of the film "Saturday Night Fever" which ignited the mass disco craze: *Olvida la Travoltada y enfrenta la realidad / De la cara a tu tierra y así el cambio llegará.*

The themes in *Siembra* hit a chord across the continent because Blades had an instinctive sense for the values and ideals of Latin American culture. The chorus of "Pedro Navaja," for example, evoked a popular belief in the unexpected twists of fate ("La Vida Te Da Sorpresas.") "Plástico" hit the nerve that divides social classes. "Buscando Guayaba," another big hit, touches on the need to be resourceful when Blades improvises a scatting solo because, as he announces on the record, "the guitarist didn't show up" for the recording. And in the mystical "Maria Lionza," he invokes a Venezuelan cult

goddess to show how the poor pray for miracles everywhere in the same way, no matter what shape their saints take in the syncretic fusion of Spanish, African and Indian religions.

Add to all this the elements of ethnic pride, Latino empowerment and Pan American unity and you have a mighty powerful cultural mix that allowed Siembra to cross all class, racial and geographic borders. Those themes naturally arose from the collection of songs Blades had written for the session. In the studio, the themes were strengthened, as when the duo decided to add a rousing roll-call of Latin nations at the end of "Plástico."

Some excellent songs didn't make the cut. The politically charged "Tiburón" and the satirical love story "Ligia Elena" were left for their next album, *Canciones del Solar de Los Aburridos*. One can quibble with the choices, given they kept "Dime," a ditty that now seems dispensable.

But Blades says he wouldn't change a thing. ("What ever for?") And Colón only wishes he had included one of his own songs, not so much for artistic reasons as for royalties, since the album sold so well.

As to why *Siembra* has had such long-lasting and far-reaching impact, the two artists offer succinct responses.

Says Colón: "It wasn't just an album but a social movement."

Adds Blades: "It was honest. It was smart. It was powerful music."

Liner notes written by **AGUSTIN GURZA**

## Fania Records, Inc.



PRINTED IN U.S.A.