

The Latin Beat of 42nd Street

by Mike Freeman

As a resident of this neighborhood for ten years now, I've often make the trek along 10th Avenue between 43rd and 57th Streets, and noticed a number of small Latin record distributors. As a jazz musician and recording artist, I'm familiar with the record industry, and have often wondered when and how these distributors ended up there. Then a few months ago I was surprised to see a big, new, nice-looking place called Manhattan Latin Music Distributors right at the corner of 10th Ave. and 42nd Street in the Manhattan Plaza complex (471 W. 42nd St. to be exact). The owner of this pleasant and lively addition to the block is Mateo San Martin. I found out that he has been a part of the history of Latin music distributors on 10th Avenue from the beginning.

Manhattan Latin Music Distributors sells wholesale to retail record outlets, but part of the store vends retail to the general public as well. San Martin explains that having a distributorship and retail store in one is fairly common, at least in New York City, Miami, and Los Angeles. The retail entrance faces 42nd Street and the wholesale entrance faces 10th Ave. Manhattan Latin Music sells CDs, cassettes, and music videos of both Spanish and American artists. Manhattan Latin Music, like most record stores these days, doesn't sell records; CDs have taken over here, too. The manager of the store, Alberto Uribe, says that "records are pretty much gone at this point." The retail store has everything that is sold wholesale plus some American pop rock music, and some older things, such as Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. The store distributes and sells their own Kubaney label releases as well as Sony, Capitol, BMG, and smaller independent labels.

San Martin is 62-years-old now and began his career in 1949 in Cuba working for RCA records. Seven years later, he started to produce records on his

own record label. Kubaney, featuring Cuban Folklore music. In 1959, San Martin moved to Miami, where his main offices are today. A year later, he opened a Kubaney distributorship at 666 10th Ave. (at 46th Street) in Manhattan. It was one of the first Latin music distributors on 10th Ave. Just as West 46th Street is known as Restaurant Row, 10th Ave. became the place to go if you wanted Latin recordings. His 10th Ave. distributorship, Caribbean Records, distributed for the Musart, Beerless, Discuba, and Kubaney record labels to stores whose business at that time was mainly selling 78s to the Puerto Rican community. "Today it's very diversified you know, it's Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorean, all over."

About eight years ago, San Martin's distributorship moved farther up on 10th Ave. to 48th Street. Then, in need of a bigger place, the distributorship moved to the Manhattan Plaza complex last September. The New York store distributes mainly for the East Coast while the Miami office handles the West Coast, Europe, and Japan. The offices in Miami consist of a 5,000-square-foot building housing the accounting system along with two publishing companies.

The name Kubaney reflects San Martin's roots. It comes from combining Cuba (changing the "C" to a "K") with "ney," from Siboney, which is the name of the first tribe of Indians in Cuba. The



popular sensual dance with stiff legged steps and intricate footwork), which comes from the Dominican Republic, to the outside world. Then, in 1965, war in the Dominican Republic brought a stop to the Merengue recordings he was making. After the war was over, by 1967, San Martin began recording again, and this time the Merengue exploded in popularity. From that time up to today, Kubaney has recorded more than 30 different artists and groups from the Dominican Republic. Over the years Mr. San Martin has recorded a couple of hundred artists and groups, and has released around 500 recordings. The current Kubaney catalog lists about 250 releases. San Martin says that many of the recordings no longer listed in the catalog will be re-released on CD in the future. Presently Kubaney has 15 artists on the label.

The Latin sounds of the Kubaney label have been used extensively in television and film scores. "It started when they used some of our music for *Miami Vice* and from there it just kept going." Other shows and films that have used music from Kubaney include: *Kojak*, *Hunter*, *Prince of Tides*, *Secret of My Success*, *Born on the Fourth of July*. No

first solely instrumental group on the Kubaney label was Violines de Pego, which sold 300,000 copies in Puerto Rico, Mexico, South America, and the U.S. By 1959 San Martin had a catalog of approximately 25 albums. In 1963, his label introduced the Merengue (a

Batteries Included, and *Kindergarten Cop*. Of television and film producers, San Martin says that "it's easy for them to obtain the rights for our music since we own the recordings and the publishing."

About his new store at Manhattan Plaza, he says, "It is unique because people have easy access to everything." Many of the Latin music distributors on 10th Ave. have small spaces with little or no atmosphere. "You have to come to them with a list, then they go into the back and get what you want. Here you can walk around and shop like you were at a supermarket. Everything is classified and easy to find. We have competitive prices and we have specialized products direct from sources, in Europe and elsewhere, that other stores don't have." He goes on to say, "We've tripled our business since we moved from our 10th Ave. location."

San Martin says that, in the U.S., "Sony has 60% of the market and the other 40% is divided among Capitol, BMG, and smaller independent labels." However he says that in his store "one by one Kubaney sales are bigger. For instance, yesterday we sold \$20,000 [worth of product] all together but the strongest seller was one of Kubaney's releases." He says that, overall, 40% of what his store sells is Kubaney with Sony, BMG, Capitol, and the independents splitting the other 60%.

The distributor section of the store takes up the most space and is divided into two main sections, half for cassettes and half for CDs with a smaller video section. I was shown the CD section. It's divided into all the various Latin music styles and sometimes by the country. Categories include: Salsa, Brazilian, Mexican (Mariachi), North Mexican, Tango/Argentine, Merengue/Bachata/Dominican Republic, Flamenco/Spain, Latin Jazz, Puerto Rican, Columbian, new Spanish Romantic (male and female vocals), old Romantic, Tropical, old Cuban, Spanish Pop Rock,

continued on page 11

Latin Beat

continued from page 8

and even Spanish Rap. There is also a small Classic Jazz section imported from Europe.

"The owners and everyone from the building here have been very helpful and very nice," San Martin emphasized. "The situation is very good and workable. The location is really the heart of Manhattan." He adds, "We're trying to build up our neighborhood business. We're trying to meet our neighbors and let them know about us. *We love our neighbors!* We're giving our neighbors 10 percent off."

I suggest that you take him up on his offer or at the very least stop in, listen to the music playing in the store, and look around at the extensive variety. I found it enlightening. If you have questions about the music I'm sure someone there can answer them. I suspect that the sounds of Latin music will soon be emanating from apartments in all corners of the building. It's infectious!