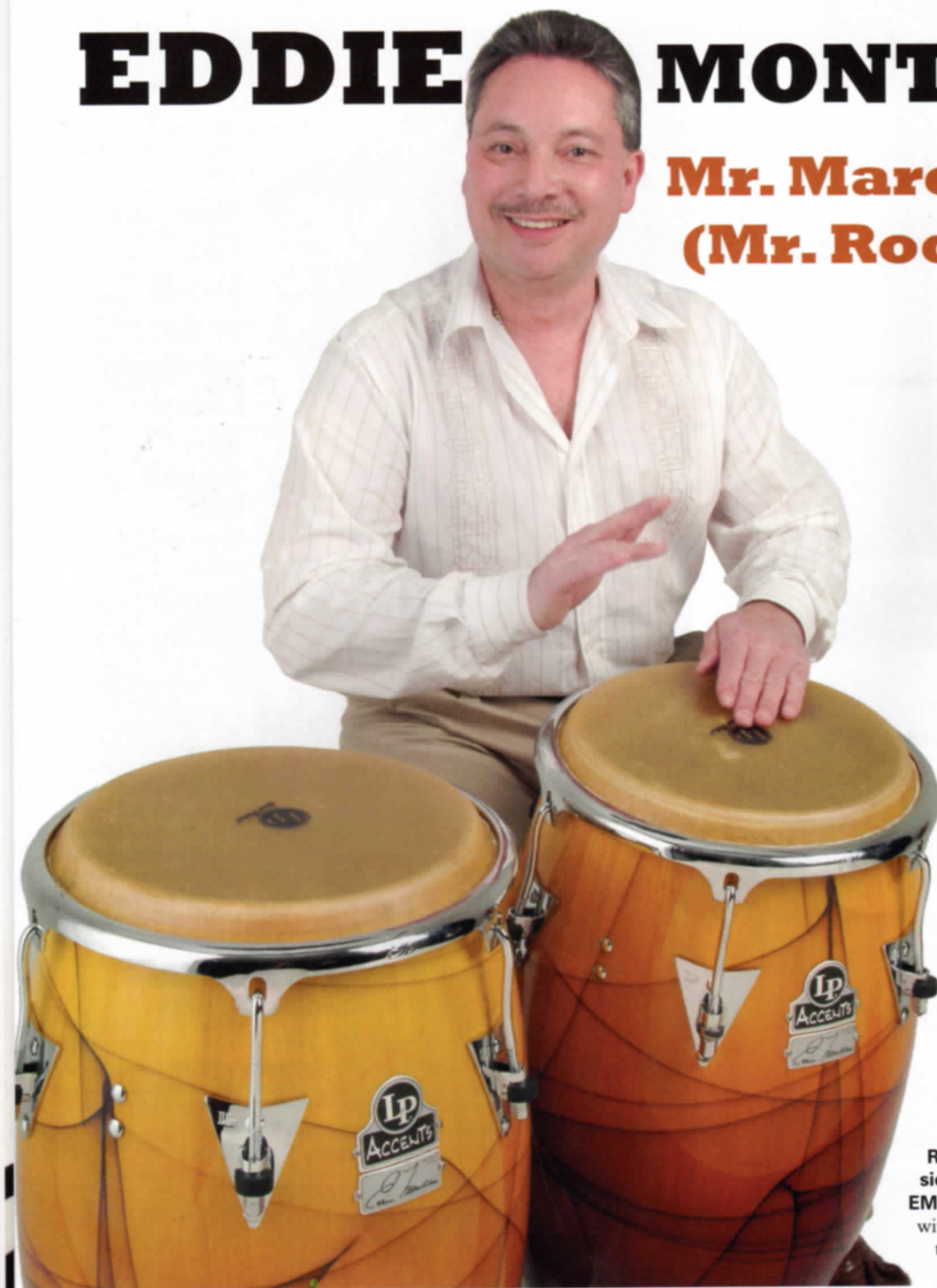


EDDIE MONTALVO

**Mr. Marcha
(Mr. Rock-Steady)**



Everything that came in to the store that was tropical, Cuban, Puerto Rican or just plain Latino, I would buy. At that time, the LP records at Casa Alegre were sold at \$1 to \$3 each. The store had listening booths in which you could listen to the albums. If you liked it you would consider buying it, and if you did not like it, well you just put it back on the racks. My problem was that I would always find something that I liked, and ended up buying it. But this is how I was able to listen to a whole lot of Latin music from an early age, and develop my love and passion for this music.

RM: When did you start paying Latin percussion instruments?

EM: By the age of six, I was already messing around with the bongó, but it wasn't until around age ten that I really started getting the hang of it. I taught myself how to play by listening to many of the master percussionists. At that time, no

one was really teaching or wanted to teach the right way to play Latin percussion. In our school's music class, we were instructed how to play string, brass and woodwind instruments, but Latin percussion was still an ignored part of the urban world. The people that did play Latin music around town kept it to themselves, like if it was a big secret or something, and only for a few select individuals. Personally, I think that many of them were just insecure and worried about losing their gigs to other, better players. And that's basically the way it was during the early 1970s. In my teens, I joined the school band and got to play the conga drums a bit, but the instrument was just being introduced into the school music system and was still very new.

During high school is when I initially started playing with small local bands. I remember that one of the first bands that I joined was that of pianist Gilberto Colón, today better known as "El Pulpo." My first professional gig was with Joey Pastrana's band in the early 1970s. Then I went on to play with Tony Pabón & La Protesta, followed by a short stint

By Rudy Mangual Photo ©Latin Percussion

Occupying the conga drum seat on the historical Willie Colón and Rubén Blades seminal recording Siembra was a young Nuyorican by the name of Eddie Montalvo. Along with bongosero José Mangual Jr. and timbalero Jimmy Delgado, he provided the percussive soundtrack of this legendary recording, which currently is celebrating its 30th anniversary. The following is an interview with Eddie Montalvo, conducted from his home in New York City...

Rudy Mangual: Take our readers back to the very beginning.

Eddie Montalvo: OK, Rudy. I was born and raised in the Bronx, New York City, to Puerto Rican parents, in a home where Latin music and Puerto Rican culture was always present. At the young age of 10, I would visit Casa Alegre (Al Santiago's record shop), located on Westchester Avenue in the Bronx, almost weekly, to hang out and buy records.

with Ernie Acevedo & La Conspiración. My first recording was with a band called La Conquistadora de Martín Galagarza, around 1972. And those were my early beginnings in the New York City salsa scene. Then one day, while playing with Tony Pabón, timbalero Orestes Vilató came up to me and said, "Listen kid, give me your telephone number." I was a skinny young kid and he really surprised me. Vilató, who was a member of Típica '73, was leaving the band to form what was to be known as Los Kimbos. Soon thereafter, he called and offered me the conga player position in his band, which also featured singer Adalberto Santiago. After Los Kimbos, I played with Johnny Pacheco, who was backing many of the upcoming Fania Records artists.

Around 1977, José Mangual Jr. approached me and told me that Héctor Lavoe wanted me to join his band. But the word around town was that to play in Héctor's band you also had to do *coro* (sing chorus). So I told Mangual, "You are crazy, I can't sing chorus." And he responded: "Do not worry, we will train you." We argued back and forth for a while, until I finally agreed to go to a rehearsal. The following Monday I did the rehearsal and Héctor informed me I had the job. Wow, I was really nervous during that rehearsal, but thank God everything worked out fine, even singing chorus!

I continued working with Pacheco as well as with Héctor and joined the ranks of the Fania All Stars. In 1978, I was asked to record in Willie Colón and Rubén Blades' album *Siembra*, which became the most successful salsa album of the times, as well as an important salsa recording for several other reasons. After *Siembra*, I also recorded on the Willie Colón album *Solo*, which featured the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, making it another groundbreaking recording from the salsa movement. And since then, thank God, I have been able to continue working with just about everyone in this business at the studios, on tours and on the road, as well as in the New York City *cuchifrito* (salsa scene) circuit. I have recorded over 200 albums as a sideman and was also able to do an album as a bandleader.

RM: Getting back to the album *Siembra*, how was that experience?

EM: I had been working with Willie Colón's band for a couple of months, on and off, but in reality, Milton Cardona was the band's conguero. Again, it was José Mangual Jr. who one day, after a gig, told me that we were going into the studio to record the *Siembra* album. Until that day, I thought that Cardona was going to do the recording, but Colón gave me the job and I'm very grateful that he did. *Siembra* will always be a very special recording to me and personally one of the best salsa recordings of all times, not because of me, but thanks to the talents of Rubén Blades and Willie Colón. The rhythm section was also BAD! (LAUGHTER) Let's just say that life after *Siembra* was somewhat easier, even though many people don't know that I had a daily job with the New York City Electric Company (7 am to 5 pm) since 1973 and throughout most of my musical career. I just recently retired from my daytime job.

RM: Do you remember what type of conga drums you used in the recording?

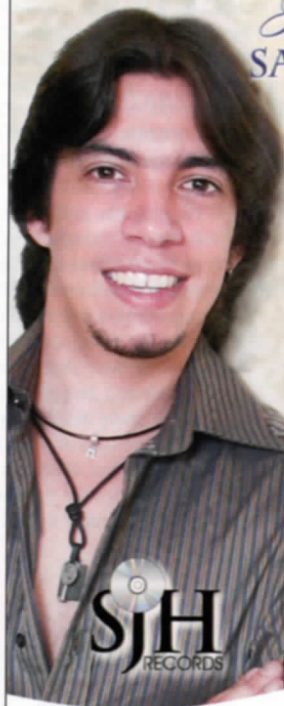
EM: I do. They were LP Classics. I have been endorsing Latin Percussion products since 1976.

RM: Your rock-steady conga playing style has earned you the nickname "Mr. Marcha." What do you attribute this to?

EM: I have always been much disciplined about my playing by practicing daily and that's what makes my *marcha* strong and steady. When I play the conga drums, I play for the dancers, not for me. Many of the younger conga players in the scene these days are very fast and flashy but their *marcha*, their grooves are very weak. You can say that I'm from the Willie Rosario School of playing salsa music. It's all about grooving and *afincando* (locking in with the groove) all the way, about making music for the dancers. ■

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