



SPANISH HARLEM ORCHESTRA

Biography

Since its original conception by producer Aaron Levinson in 2000, **Spanish Harlem Orchestra**(SHO) has established itself as a standard bearer of contemporary Latin music. Directed by world-renowned pianist, arranger, and producer **Oscar Hernández**, the thirteen-member all-star ensemble has reintroduced the classic sounds of New York City Salsa to music lovers worldwide. *Viva la Tradición*, SHO's fourth album, is a stunning follow-up to their 2007 Grammy nominated *United We Swing*, 2004 Grammy award-winning album *Across 110th St.*, and their 2002 debut, *Un Gran Día En El Barrio*.

The 12-track collection marks the orchestra's debut album for Concord Picante. *Viva la Tradición* takes up where its three predecessors left off – stirring the pot of mid-20th century influences and keeping the salsa simmering for current and future generations.

Now in its tenth year, the Spanish Harlem Orchestra is one of the most formidable and authentic Latin jazz combos of today. Yet for all of its appeal with contemporary audiences, the group's success is actually rooted in the past. A lively and energetic affair, *Viva la Tradición* draws on inspiration from the music's history and enduring traditions. The collection is comprised largely of original compositions and arrangements of classic salsa tunes by bandleader/founder **Oscar Hernandez** as well as enlisting the support of veteran composer and arranger **Gil Lopez** on three of Lopez's compositions ("Son De Corazon," "Nuestra Cancion," and "Regala De Dios).

Viva la Tradición opens with the exciting "La Salsa Dura," a song bursting with punching horn lines and spirited vocals composed by Cuban salsa composer and bandleader **Manuel Simonet** that "really captures what we're about," says Hernandez. Amid the series of salsa tracks, one of Gil Lopez's compositions, "Nuestra Cancion," acts as an unlikely

addition to the high-powered energy of the set. The collective included this ballad as a point to their listeners, in order to communicate, “you need to listen to this, because this how it was done back in those days. It was just beautiful music.”

The orchestra finishes with two songs: Hernandez’s “Rumba Urbana,” a percussive and complex tune that shimmers with tight trumpet lines and syncopated rhythms around improvised solos, and “El Negro Tiene Tumbao,” a tune that draws on the bold and artistic delivery by featured guest vocalist **Isaac Delgado**.

From their 2002 debut album, *Un Gran Día En El Barrio*, SHO revived the classic 1970 NYC sounds with a new hard hitting point-of-view. Fueled by great singers **Frankie Vasquez, Herman Olivera, Ray De La Paz** and special guest **Jimmy Sabater**, the songs were hot and included back-in-the-day hits like Tito Rodriguez’s “Mama Guela,” Willie Colon’s “La Banda,” and others. It launched the band and garnered them a 2003 Grammy nomination for “Best Salsa Album” and a Latin Billboard Award for Salsa Album of the Year-Best New Group.

On their 2004 follow-up, *Across 110th St.*, the Spanish Harlem Orchestra was augmented by the roaring trombones of **Jimmy Bosch** and **Dan Reagan**, singers **Marco Bermudez, Willie Torres, Ray De La Paz** and special guest **Ruben Blades**, who Hernández worked for in the 1990s as his musical director. It was slamming and garnered the group its first Grammy Award in 2005 for “Best Salsa Album.”

United We Swing, placed Spanish Harlem Orchestra among Latin music’s greatest bands by paying due to a neighborhood romanticized in **Leonard Bernstein’s** “Westside Story” and **Ben E. King’s**, “A Rose in Spanish Harlem.” El Barrio is a hard urban incubator as described in Piri Thomas’ book, “Down These Mean Streets,” that in the midst of social despair has given the world unique Caribbean musical mixtures.

“I’m from the Bronx,” concludes Oscar, “but if you’re a Latino in NYC you always have a connection to Spanish Harlem. It’s a place where a lot of stuff has happened that for me is kind of a microcosm for Latin New York. As a community it is an important part of the fabric that makes up the city, and we’re compelled to share the power of the music and culture with the world.” *United We Swing* received a Grammy nomination for Best Tropical Album in 2008.

Front to back, *Viva la Tradición* is very much a nod to the countless artists – well known and obscure – who helped usher salsa music into the cultural mainstream several decades ago. “Preserving that legacy and introducing it to new audiences in a new century,” says Hernandez, “is more important than being the musical flavor of the month.”