

NEW YORK PRESS

BEHIND THE SCENES

A leader in the Latin Music industry talks about his projects and ambitions

By Sushil Cheema

A song on the radio caught music-lover Edilberto “Eddie” Rodriguez’s attention one day in 1969 as he stood in line to see the Marine Corps dentist. “You know what song that was?” he asked one Friday night in March. “Fill Me Up Buttercup.” A look of aversion crossed his face. “I never liked that stuff, but it was like, ‘Oh, wow! Music!’ I didn’t realize how much I missed music. In the Marine Corps there was no music, no nothing!” he exclaimed, his eyes growing wide with disbelief at the memory.

Rodriguez has not allowed the rhythms and beats he loves so much become such a rare luxury in his life again. “It comes out of his pores,” his wife Brenda Rodriguez said of her husband’s passion for the art.

Today, Rodriguez is president of Latin Works Music Corporation, a company he established in 1999 to promote artists, organize concerts and produce music. His resume includes work with artists like Tito Puente, Celia Cruz and Eddie Palmieri. On Friday, he moved into a new Park Avenue office from which he will run Latin Urban Music Professionals, a subsection of Latin Works Music that will center on ad sales and consultant work with Latin media outlets like Editorial Televisa and Univision Radio.

In March, Rodriguez stood out from the crowd on the sidewalk outside Mom’s Bakery on the Bronx’s Grand Concourse. He was at home, however, comfortably chatting in Spanish with locals, ending one conversation gracefully in order to move on to the next—this one in English. Taking a table at the back of the narrow bakery, Rodriguez sipped coffee from a paper cup and began to talk about the one person no one ever asks this self-proclaimed, “behind-the-scenes guy” about—himself.

Such reserve is rare to see in a man who has become a driving force in a tough industry. But much of Rodriguez’s relationship with music is not typical, including how he originally became interested in Latin sounds.

“Latin music to me was my parent’s music,” Rodriguez, who was born in Puerto Rico but grew up in the Bronx, said. “It wasn’t my music. It wasn’t for my generation.” Instead, he preferred artists like Smokey Robinson, the Jackson Five, the Supremes, the Temptations or “anything black,” he said, adding, “not the Latin thing.”

But when his family moved briefly to California in the mid-1960s and he began to play the trumpet in his junior high school band, his bandmates introduced Rodriguez to the sounds of jazz artists like Stan Getz and Herbie Mann. He began listening to a variety of sounds, and, eventually, he found Latin music. “It looked like I got more to my Puerto Rican roots through the music,” he said of jazz.

A move back to New York coincided with the rise of bugaloo music that combined black and Puerto Rican rhythms with jazz. “I was crazy about that music because they were singing it in English with a Latin beat,” Rodriguez said, his eyes wide with excitement. “I really started to get into Latin music.” After the Marine Corps, he fell in love with music promotion.

While president of the Veteran’s Association at Bronx Community College in 1975, Rodriguez organized a Veteran’s benefit and was charged with contacting and booking the chosen bands, Tipica 73 and Machito, popular Latin groups at the time. To do so, he enlisted the help of Ralph Mercado, a top figure in the industry who became a mentor to Rodriguez and who remains a close friend today. At the time, Mercado taught Rodriguez a valuable lesson about the business—money is the key.

“I look back on it now, and it’s funny,” Rodriguez said of his first encounter with Mercado, referring to how he had not realized how much the two bands would cost for a single evening (the total came to \$1,100). Though the concert was not very successful, Rodriguez gained experience.

Later seeing a bass player get electrocuted through his amplifier one night at a club was “a wake-up call” about the complexities of the business, he said. Before that night, he had never thought about issues like insurance and security. The musician recovered, but Rodriguez remembers that night as being one of the worst experiences of his life.

Working with Tito Puente, however, is one of his best memories. In 2000, Puente’s manager passed away, and when Rodriguez called Puente to express his condolences, the artist mentioned that he was in need of a replacement. “‘Eddie, are you available?’” Rodriguez recalled him asking on the phone. “I thought, ‘Those are big shoes to fill!’ but I said, ‘When do you want me to start?’” Sadly, Puente died only four months after Rodriguez began working for him. “That was incredible,” Rodriguez said of that time. “That was a life’s dream.”

In his new office, he exudes excitement about his coming projects and plans for the future. He said he wants to look at Hispanic media events and create ones that target the Hispanic community. Specifically, he wants “to bring a moment of ‘Let’s forget about our troubles and be entertained’” to audiences. He is currently promoting a reggaeton event called Block Party Concert 2006 that will take place at Madison Square Garden in September and will include popular artists like Calle Trece, Rakim y Ken Y, Voltio, and Tito el Bambino. “I’m on a mission to achieve the American dream. I want to do great

events, not good events, but great events that make people say 'Wow!' when they leave."