

Rhumba Please

By Robert M. Merchant

Although the Fox Trot was the dominant popular dance in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, it certainly was not the only popular dance. Of course, the Tango enjoyed a great vogue in the 20s, mainly popularized by Hollywood and Rudolph Valentino. Then, too, there were those crazy dance steps—like the “Black Bottom,” “Charleston,” and “Prep Step” (Remember that one?...no, I didn't make it up)—that came along and enjoyed a brief but frantic popularity. But what the tango may have been to the Jazz Age, the Rhumba would be to the sleek and modern 1930s...a new, exotic, and fascinating rhythm that would be exploited beautifully by Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood and most of all, the smart night clubs of New York.



Although there had been recordings of Cuban rhythms before 1930, for a very limited taste, the actual unveiling, so to speak, for America started in the spring of 1930 when Don Azpiazu and His Orchestra appeared at the Palace Theatre in New York playing several authentic Cuban rhumbas with authentic Cuban instruments (maraccas, conga drums, bongos, claves, etc.).

The highlight of their performance was a nifty little tune called “El Manisero.” We know it as “The Peanut Vendor.” This proved a most popular ditty to say the least and it would eventually snowball into a huge success for not only Don Azpiazu but the Cuban/Rhumba craze to come.

With a declining market for phonograph records during the Depression years, Victor had the good sense to not give up but to meet the worsening economic times with prolific recordings of almost every sort of music. Happily, on May 13, 1930, Azpiazu's band was recorded doing the Peanut Vendor. Then again on the 15th of May—

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two more Rhumba/Rhumba Fox Trots—again on the 28th of May with two more Cuban numbers and on thru 1931 with more sessions to fill up Victor's catalog.

It wasn't long before other Rhumba bands started appearing on Victor as well as its competitors like Columbia, Brunswick, and Decca, not to mention the host of "Dime Store" labels meant to sell at the local 5 & 10.

Sadly, or maybe not, most of these were studio groups of musicians who had never seen Havana or even a palm tree but to my mind they seem to really "put it over." And that was not limited to the United States. Even London's famed and prestigious Ambrose was busy having his band turn out a Rhumba every month or so for English Decca.

Cuban music became so popular that many of the major hotels in New York during the 30s had not only a big named dance band like Emil Coleman or Jolly Coburn but an alternating Rhumba band as well. Even at the Rainbow Room high above Radio City, Ray Noble's smart Anglo-American dance orchestra alternated with Panchito & His Rhumba Band.

As the 1930s came to a close, the Rhumba remained very popular. There was something new from our South American friends on the horizon, however. In the 1940s, the Conga came into its own and in the 50s, the Bossa-Nova came bopping up from Brazil. No comment...American music of a sort that holds no interest for this writer.

I would leave you with a discography of records that are excellent examples of Rhumba music, such as "Rhumba Please" and "Sorry, Wrong Rhumba," but now that we are so very far away in time from the 1930s, I'm afraid your chances of turning up used 78s at the Salvation Army or "Ye Olde Junk Shoppe" are very slight indeed.

A happy and very convenient way to get your hips a movin' are these CD's on the Harlequin label: *Cubans in Europe 1929-34*, *Cuban Big Bands 1940-42*, and most importantly, *Don Azpiazu*, which has all of his 1930-31 Victor recordings and much more.