



## SPANISH HARLEM ORCHESTRA CAPTURES THE LATIN JAZZ LEGACY OF PASSION AND BEAUTY

Now in its tenth year, the Grammy-winning Spanish Harlem Orchestra is one of the most formidable and authentic Latin jazz combos of the present day. Yet for all of its appeal and success with contemporary audiences, SHO's success is actually rooted in the past. The 13-piece collective owes its front-line status to an unwavering respect for the music's rich history and a tenacious adherence to the music's enduring traditions.

Spanish Harlem Orchestra celebrates that musical and cultural legacy with *Viva La Tradición*, their new album set for release on Concord Picante on September 28, 2010. A mix of fiery salsa and a few moments of melodic balladry, the album's 12 tracks harken back to a time of Latin big band recordings populated by seasoned musicians who assembled in the same room at the same time, brought their best to the table and generated a spontaneous, natural energy all their own.

"I've played and recorded with a lot of great artists from different eras," says pianist, bandleader, producer and SHO founder Oscar Hernandez, who began his career as an arranger and musical director in the 1970s for artists like Tito Puente, Ray Barretto, Celia Cruz and many others. "And Spanish Harlem Orchestra, since its earliest days ten years ago, has accompanied many great artists as well. So the title of the album is a statement about a group of musicians who understand first-hand the tradition of this music and all the great artists who were responsible for the tradition."

Indeed, Hernandez is all about tradition. Although born into a large Puerto Rican family living in the Bronx, it was the nearby Spanish Harlem neighborhood that shaped his cultural musical sensibilities. The soundtrack to this bustling enclave in the '60s was a mix of Latin jazz and American pop radio emanating from any given window on any given day.

Hernandez started playing the trumpet at age 12, then switched to piano shortly after. By the time he finished his teen years, he was making a living as a professional musician and gigging with some of the most talented Latin jazz artists of the '70s. He spent much of the '80s producing, arranging and playing piano for Panamanian vocalist Rubén Blades while simultaneously leading his own band, Seis del Solar.

After two decades of session work, composing, arranging and producing, Hernandez was approached by producer Aaron Luis Levinson in 2000 about the idea of assembling and recording a Latin jazz orchestra. The result was *Un Gran Día en el Barrio*, the 2002 debut recording from Spanish Harlem Orchestra that scored a Grammy nomination for Best Salsa Album and a Latin Billboard Award for Salsa Album of the Year. The Grammy win came with the followup album, *Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street* (a reference to Harlem's southern boundary), released in 2004. *United We Swing* followed in 2007.

*Viva la Tradición*, the orchestra's fourth effort, takes up where its three predecessors leave off – stirring the pot of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century influences and keeping the salsa simmering for current and future generations.

The album opens with the lively “La Salsa Dura,” a lighthearted and energetic song originally penned by Cuban salsa composer and bandleader Manuel Simonet that “really captures what we’re about,” says Hernandez.

Elsewhere, Hernandez enlists the aid of veteran arranger Gil Lopez on three of Lopez’s own songs: “Son De Corazon,” “Nuestra Cancion” and “Regalo De Dios.” The 80-year-old Lopez, who was writing and arranging before many members of Spanish Harlem Orchestra’s lineup were even born, has lost none of his original edge. “I get the biggest kick out of being able to tap into a musical brain that’s still so vital,” says Hernandez.

He admits that Lopez’s “Nuestra Cancion,” a ballad amid a series of spirited salsa tracks, is an unlikely addition to the sequence, but it’s there for good reason. “A ballad like this is not really what we’re known for, but I put it on here to make a point,” he explains. “It’s our way of saying, ‘You need to listen to this, because this is how it was done back in those days. It was just beautiful music.’”

The orchestra rides hard into the home stretch with the percussive and syncopated instrumental, “Rumba Urbana,” – a piece written and arranged by Hernandez, with plenty of intriguing dynamics throughout its six and a half minutes – followed by the rollicking closer, “El Negro Tiene Tumbao,” a tune that derives much of its bravado from the expressive delivery by guest vocalist Isaac Delgado.

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.

“When people tell me we should do it this way or that way in order to make it more commercially successful, I just don’t think that way,” he says. “I don’t function on that level. That’s not to say I don’t want to be commercially successful. Of course that’s very important, but it’s not the primary driving force behind what we do. These musicians are all people who care very much about what we’re doing as a group.”

What’s more, they understand what it means to play under the banner of Spanish Harlem Orchestra. “Spanish Harlem is kind of a microcosm of Latinos in New York,” says Hernandez. “It’s an important place culturally for our people and our music. Just like Harlem was extremely important culturally for African Americans, so was Spanish Harlem for Latinos. We’re not a bunch of flyweights who took the name as some kind of ethnic gimmick. We’re the real deal, and we earned the right to take that name.”

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