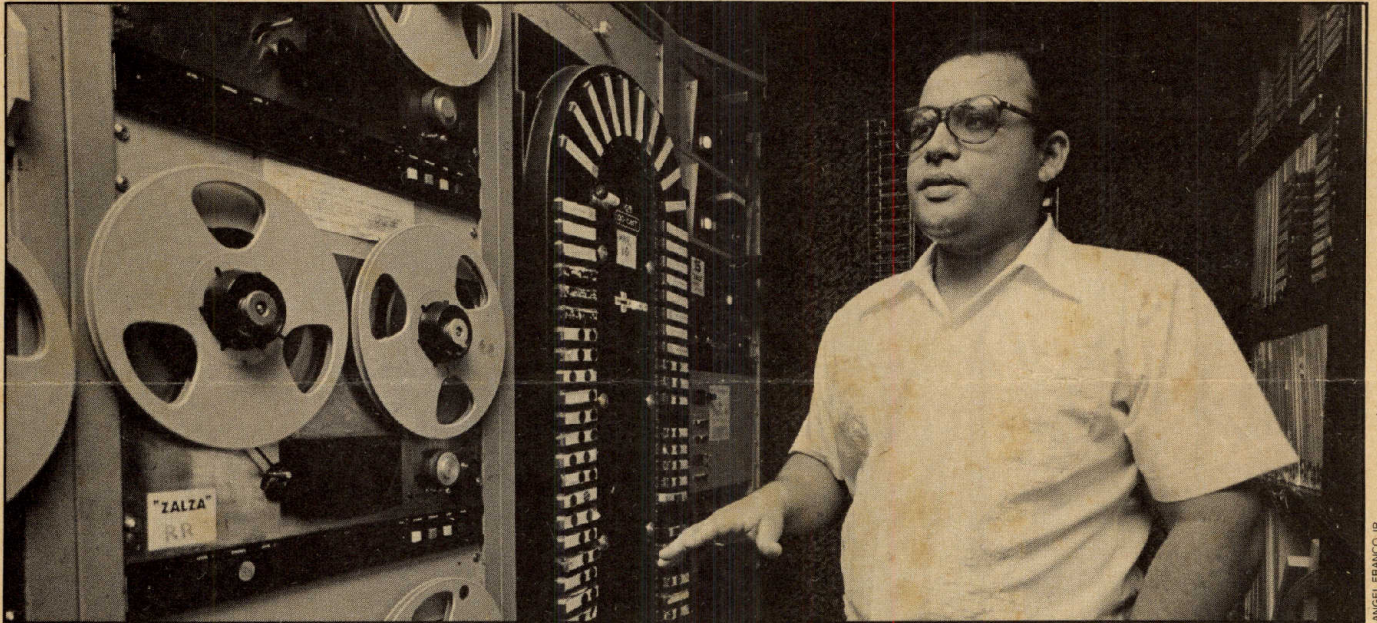


# MUSIC

## Forget Disco, In Puerto Rico They Want Salsa



Ricardo Santiago: salsa by computer • El animador radial más popular de Puerto Rico combina lo nuevo y lo viejo en su programa musical.

By Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán

Recently, this very New York Puerto Rican-Cuban went "home" to Puerto Rico. One of the purposes of the trip was to examine the state of radio on the Island. And I made an interesting discovery: Salsa is back on top in Puerto Rico!

What a difference a year makes. . . . In the summer of 1978, disco—primarily the machine-made "Eurodisco" school—was all the rage in Puerto Rico. Saturday night Travolta fever, you know. In the summer of '79, though, island Puerto Ricans seem to have begun abandoning the greasy kid stuff in favor of homegrown.

"What's really amazing is that we're experiencing the revival of a music that's never been away, a native art form that has never been number one till now," says Ricardo Santiago, the new crown prince of San Juan radio. Santiago is the program director as well as DJ on San Juan's hugely successful Z-93, the first FM station to score with an all-salsa format. He came to Puerto Rico eight years ago after a childhood in New York. He is a graduate of Music & Art High

School and an ex-bassist with Ricardo Marrero's group. And he has clearly been around music long enough to have perspective.

"Before 1976, Island radio was dominated by North American pop or Spanish middle-of-the-road—you know, *baladas*, Sandro, Lissette, that stuff. And a slice of rock. Salsa was considered to be a 'vulgar' music, music of the barrios. Then in 1976," Santiago continues, "Radio Salsoul came on the air with a mix of disco and salsa. Broadcasting from Caguas, it swamped the competition. Several stations started copying the Salsoul format, and gained success as well.

"What we did here at *Zeta-Noventaytrés* was to analyze that Salsoul's success came primarily from the salsa and not the disco. I don't think 'the masses' were clamoring for disco. That was a superimposition of radio programmers, promoters, managers, disco club operators and record execs; it came from the top down—not from the bottom up. *Pero* salsa! I mean, at the height of what was being billed as 'the disco craze,' the Fania All-Stars had to turn thousands away at Coliseo Roberto Clemente. So did the Puerto Rico All-Stars, the Sonera Mayor tribute to Ismael Rivera and the Tito Puente *Homenaje a Beny Moré* concerts. No, the *salseros*

were the audience." Santiago clearly likes the story. "So, on December 29, we went all-salsa," he says, his eyes aglow. "And by the time the next rating came out four months later, we were Number One with a 33% share."

Now there are several stations jumping on the all-salsa bandwagon, FM and AM. As a DJ (on New York's WBLS), my only complaint when I checked out Z-93's facilities was that it is an automated station. The DJs don't spin the records directly; everything is pre-recorded on cartridges similar to 8-tracks, then handled by computer. Ricardo Santiago and I went back and forth on this one for a while. "Come on, bro'," he finally admonished, "when you heard it, could you tell this was an automated station?" I had to admit I could not; it is a slick sound.

A little too slick for my taste. I could not call myself a DJ if I did not have the freedom to spin, to mix two records on two different turntables and create a new third sound, to segue from the end of one record into the start of another. But I cannot fault Ricardo's taste: he seems to be San Juan's top programmer. All his stuff swings, and he includes the best of "yesterday's music"—which I dig.

But the big news is that salsa has once again hit the top in Puerto Rico. □

Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán, for several months NUESTRO's New York regional editor, is a DJ at WBLS Radio.