The Mamboniks by Lex Gillespie (review)

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In the 1950s, the mambo was all the rage in New York City. The Afro-Cuban music form and dance practice attracted participants from across cultural and class strata. Star musicians such as Tito Puente and Celia Cruz performed with big bands in dancehalls, including New York’s Palladium Ballroom on 53rd and Broadway. These musicians played to eager, full crowds of people mixing swing dance’s virtuosic tricks with polyrhythmic hip swivels while their feet tapped out patterns driven by clave sticks. Mambo drew an intercultural crowd of practitioners, especially American Jews. These “mamboniks” (emphasis on the first syllable), self-described mambo lovers, are the focus of Lex Gillespie’s feature-length documentary The Mamboniks. The film traces a handful of these dancers’ histories practicing mambo from their time as young people to their current experiences as retirees. By shuttling back and forth between New York, Miami, and Havana, and between the 1950s and the present day, the film gives a sense of the transnational circulation of mambo (and mamboniks) as well as its intersecting diasporic contexts between the Jewish, African American, Italian, and Latinx communities in the United States.

Meeting the cast of characters gives a lived sense for the 1950s mambo scene. Spinning between Greenwich Village stoops, Jewish delis, hair salons, Miami/South Beach, Coconut Creek’s Gold Coast Ballroom, and Havana’s Tropicana nightclub, practitioners recount their 1950s world of mambo by visiting and narrating old haunts. The film gives a sense of mambo’s longevity through these mamboniks’ embodied histories. The mamboniks’ experiences dancing and playing music, then at the Palladium Ballroom and now at the Gold Coast Ballroom, fosters their memories of their own lived histories by using their bodily practices to connect to their past.

Gillespie situates the mambo craze within the historical context of the United States’ relationship with Cuba in the 1950s. Cuba was a popular postwar Caribbean destination for American tourists before
Fidel Castro’s rise to power in 1959. The US embargo on Cuba following the 1962 Bay of Pigs invasion confrontation between the US and Soviet Union severed ties between the United States and Cuba. Cutting this contact stemmed the flow of Cuban material culture into the US. Mamboniks remember the difficulty trying to hear Cuban short-wave radio stations in New York to which they previously tuned. After the embargo, according to dancer and musician Joe Marchese, “The Cuban music just stopped coming here.” He recalls driving down to Key West, Florida, tape recorder in hand, to record Cuban radio from there. The combination of the Cuban embargo, the rise of rock and roll, and the 1966 closing of the Palladium Ballroom, the mamboniks explain, greatly decreased the practice of American mambo. Yet, Gillespie also highlights how the intercultural mixing of the Jewish, Italian, Puerto Rican, and African American communities in the Palladium offered a respite from antisemitism and racism outside its walls, alongside the nascent American Civil Rights Movement. This is an important area of inquiry that is ripe for further investigation.

The Mamboniks shows how the mambo, in turn, became a deeply embedded postwar Jewish cultural practice in New York. Many of the mamboniks anecdotally draw connections between the rhythms of klezmer and mambo as a way to explain Jewish practitioners’ attraction to mambo rhythms in music and dance, but the connection seems broader than that since klezmer and mambo are otherwise musically distinct. The mambo became ubiquitous in New York-based Jewish culture in the 1950s. Mambo bands played weddings and bar mitzvahs, and swing dance nights at the 92nd Street Young Men’s/Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YM/YWHA) on the Upper East Side turned into mambo nights when Tito Puente entered the scene. Mambo also traveled through Jewish channels between Cuba, Florida, and New York. Jewish families vacationing in Miami Beach luxuriated in Cuban music and dance by way of hotels featuring mambo lessons and dance nights; these vacationers brought their interests back to New York. Significantly, Jewish social life in the Catskills mountains network of summer resorts was based in the mambo. Mambo dance lessons, music performances, Latin nights, and social events generated the underlying rhythm of the Borscht Belt. Gillespie underscores this history with archival footage of dancer Max “Burnsie” Burns teaching lines of Catskills vacationers fitting their feet into boxy mambo patterns and dipping their hips back and forth to keep up with the rhythm. “Mambo Judie” Friend, one of the film’s highlighted dancers, credits a teenage summer in the Catskills for her birth as a mambonik. In fact, Gillespie highlights, screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein’s adolescent summers in the Catskills at the Grossinger’s
resort, where she took mambo lessons while her parents played golf, inspired her to write the iconic film *Dirty Dancing* (1987). Mambo is the underlying rhythm and central tension of *Dirty Dancing*, which is set in 1963. The film follows the summer exploits of a shy teenager (Jennifer Gray) staying with her parents in the Catskills as she secretly pursues a love affair with one of the resort’s main dance teachers (Patrick Swayze). Bergstein employs the mambo as a metaphor for socioeconomic class and also as an embodied narrative vehicle for this coming-of-age story.

As the mambo buttressed 1950s Jewish life in New York, Gillespie shows, Jewish leaders had a hand in establishing mambo institutions. Most prominently, the owner of the Palladium Ballroom was Maxwell Hyman, a garment district businessman who was a furrier by trade and a Holocaust survivor. He used the Palladium as a showcase venue for mambo bands and dancers, where the dance form flourished under his direction. Sidney Siegel, founder of the music label Seeco Records, was the first to sign Celia Cruz from Cuba in the US. Many American mambo band leaders, like Marvin “Rey Mambo” Baumel, Art “Pancho” Raymond, and the Irving Fields Trio highlighted in the film, were also Jewish, joining the ranks of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and African American bands specializing in Latin music.

Gillespie uses lively interviews and archival clips to explore this important yet brief intercultural dance phenomenon that had a lasting impact on the broader American culture. A trove of archival materials supports the film’s narrative. It intercuts contemporary footage interviewing dancers including Rhea Anides, Ida Carlini, “Mambo Judie” Friend, Marvin “Marvano” Jaye, Vincent “Vicente” Livelli, Allan “Lusty” Lustgarten, Joe Marchese, “Mambo Bob” Roberts, Augie and Margo Rodriguez, “La China” Villamil, and Marilyn “Buttons” Winters with the historical evidence. This material includes archival film footage, photographs, publicity fliers, ticket stubs, and other ephemera from a range of repositories, such as the American Jewish Historical Society, Library of Congress, the 92nd Street Y, the Smithsonian, and mamboniks’ personal collections. The archival footage gives a lived sense for the 1950s environment in New York City, the Catskills, Florida, and Cuba in which the mambo thrived. Ticket stubs and event programs twirl as cutouts across the screen, and digital highlighting of people in photographs helps them pop out against the otherwise-flat black-and-white historical images with a three-dimensional liveliness.

*The Mamboniks* shows the centrality of mambo to New York Jewish culture in the 1950s. In doing so, the film answers a question I never thought to ask: Why was *Dirty Dancing* set in the Catskills? The answer is less about the location than it is about the dancing—and both parts
of the answer relate to Jewish cultural practices in the American North-
east. Gillespie shows how practicing mambo was as defining a cultural
touchstone for the middle-class postwar Jewish community in New York
as was summering in the Catskills. *The Mamboniks* tells a transnational
story as well: Gillespie shows how American mambo is as much about
changing relations between the United States and Cuba as it is a story
of Jewish practitioners of mambo. This film is an effective complement
for courses in American Jewish culture and public programming in
Jewish community settings and film festivals. For audiences interested
in the intersections of dance, music, and the American Jewish experi-
ence, Gillespie’s history of Jews and mambo illuminates their symbiotic
relationship for a short, exhilarating decade.