Eddie Palmieri makes it a point these days to remind us that La Perfecta II is not meant to be a “revival band.” Rather than “reviving,” he thinks of this present-day remake of his groundbreaking band from the early 1960s, Conjunto La Perfecta, as “revisiting” an earlier concept and context. Instead of just a rerun of an older phenomenon, “revisiting” is a more creative, with-the-times way of re-creating, of reenvisioning musical breakthroughs and discoveries of an earlier era still very much alive in the minds and hearts of many listeners and dancers today. In a way, it’s post-salsa revisiting pre-salsa and perhaps arriving at the core of this thing called “salsa” in the process. The irony is that, whatever its intent, the recordings and concerts of La Perfecta II, which remain remarkably faithful to the original sound, have been generating something of a revival of salsa in its irresistible infancy, ever since Eddie birthed the new group some forty years later.

Even more recently, there is another important and related salsa revival/revisitation afoot. The current return of Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino is likewise not intended as a mere throwback to the heyday of its predecessor in the mid-1970s, even though most of the original musicians are still in place and though their repertoire mainly consists of the original tunes from their two collectible LPs, Concepts in Unity (1975) and Lo Dice Todo (1976). But in their historic concerts in Berlin in September 2007 and at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in June 2008, the new, regrouped Grupo is moving their bold musical concept in directions unexplored and in accord with cultural and musical developments of the intervening years. Though the dialectic of “folk-
lore” and “experimentation,” tradition and innovation, remains the guiding premise, what constitutes both “folklore” and “experiment” has of course changed with the times and with a changed Nueva York.

In both cases, revisiting Conjunto La Perfecta and the original Grupo Folklorico amounts to an exercise in musical and cultural memory. La Perfecta II seeks to transport us back to the early 1960s in Latin music, when a new generation of young, second-generation New York Puerto Ricans began to come out with their own style, building on, but distinct from, the prevalent sound of the previous, mambo era of the 1940s and 1950s. They revered the giants of that formative period—Machito, Tito Rodriguez, and the first New York–born mambo king, Tito Puente—but they had to strike out in new directions of their own making. The Cuban pachanga was the first new rhythm that the young Turks picked up on, and Charlie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, Johnny Pacheco, and other upcoming bandleaders and instrumentalists took up this Nueva York–inflected variant of the traditional Cuban charanga sound, with its characteristic small-band format featuring flute and violin. Eddie famously carried the innovation even further by—following the lead of legendary plenero Mon Rivera—highlighting a frontline of trombones. This was what his brother Charlie jokingly called “trombanga,” and with a slew of unmistakable recordings featuring the symbiotic collaboration of Eddie and trombonist Barry Rogers, Conjunto La Perfecta contributed more than any other group to creating a new sound of the times. Here was the initiation of the musical revolution that nearly a decade later, around 1970, came to be called “salsa.”

The reunion of Grupo harkens back to a different time in the salsa story, toward the waning, rather than the dawning, of that musical heyday. By 1974, when Andy and Jerry Gonzalez formed the Conjunto Anabacoa (the first name of Grupo), and 1975, when the original ensemble recorded Concepts in Unity, New York Latin music going by the name of “salsa” had already reached the peak of its commercial popularity under the aegis of Fania Records, the label that made salsa into a known quantity. Indeed, salsa itself was by then a “label,” as it were, in the existing market of musical commodities. Less clearly perhaps, “salsa” was also an identifiable stylistic option among the expanding repertoire of a budding “world music.” What had begun a decade or so earlier as the voice and feel of a generation and a community, as exemplified by Conjunto La Perfecta, was by the mid-1970s already degenerating into a formulaic commodity field characterized by a predictable and overproduced sound.

The Fania All-Stars and the label’s packaged stable of in-house musicians came to stand for that standardization in the eyes and ears of many of the most
creative musicians of the time, including some who had recorded with Fania. They felt that the making and marketing of “salsa” involved a betrayal of treasured musical roots and, at the same time, a blunting of any experimental and creative edge to their expressive struggle. Andy González explained, “Fania used the Motown formula of recording music, which was to use the same group of musicians, the same rhythm sections for almost every recording. The same arrangers, the same producers, and the same-sounding kind of product.”¹ In *The Book of Salsa*, Venezuela historian César Miguel Rondón speaks of the Fania-produced salsa of this period as “supermarket music” and describes the label’s 1974 crossover album *Latin, Soul, Rock* as a “new musical trend” introduced by the company “to represent the convergence of styles that dominated the pop music market at the time.” “The new product, ‘Latin Music,’” he says, “was a sort of rock with congas.”²

Grupo Folklórico was the epitome of this sentiment and an epicenter of resistance to the hegemony of the industry in the doings of musical practice and creativity.³ Drawing together a dream team of practitioners from a range of Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican genres, arguably the best at their respective instruments, the formation of Grupo was obviously not at odds with the “all-star” idea, which was widespread on the scene in those years and typified by Fania and also the Alegre All-Stars, the Tico All-Stars, and such stellar groupings for many other labels. What was different about Grupo and what set it in polar contrast with the Fania enterprise and the salsa-as-Fania narrative were its musical concept, practice, and product. Here was salsa that was at the same time anti-salsa, New York Latin music designed to run directly counter to “salsa” as invented, tailored, and packaged by the market, most visibly represented by Fania. Grupo’s guiding aesthetic of folkloric tradition and contemporary experimentation rooted in a specific social place—Nueva York—aimed to offer a clear, attractive, and real alternative to the deracinated, decontextualized, and creatively stifling results of the commercializing process.

Grupo’s two LPs, which have enjoyed an avid international following of salsa connoisseurs for over three decades, exhibit that aesthetic in action and the wide range of styles and instrumental resources that intermingle and are brought into dynamic unison in their unique repertoire. To start with the personnel and instruments, the original group’s forte and binding element was of course the rhythm section, anchored in Manny Oquendo’s solid timbales, Andy González’s versatile bass, Oscar Hernández’s percussive piano, and an array of seasoned drummers including Milton Cardona, Frankie Rodríguez, and Gene Golden on *batás* and Jerry González on *tumbadora* and *quinto*. Other instru-
mental mainstays included the masters Chocolate Armenteros on trumpet, Nelson González on tres, Jose Rodrigues and Reinaldo Jorge on trombone, and flutist and tenor saxophonist Gonzalo Fernández. The main vocalists were the seasoned Cuban Virgilio Martí; Willie García, already a veteran Cuban salsa singer at the age of thirty-six; and street musician par excellence Genaro “Henny” Alvarez, a Puerto Rican drummer, composer, and singer. This core of accomplished and highly regarded exponents of Cuban and Afro-Caribbean music, plus an assortment of special guest appearances and cameos by the likes of master *bata* drummer and singer Julio Collazo, violinist Alfredo de la Fé, legendary vocalist and composer Marcelino Guerra, and Carlos “Caito” Díaz, who had been a vocalist with La Sonora Matancera since its founding in 1924, assured a seemingly boundless resource of musical possibilities and experiments in multiple musical languages. Though they were all stars or were to become stars in subsequent years, the idea was not so much a lineup of celebrities as a collective of players in synch, held together by their love for the music, respect for each other, and connection to community and by the guiding premise as conceived primarily by the González brothers (Andy and Jerry) and Manny Oquendo and by the steady-handed and expert sensibility of producer/mastermind René López. López, a New York Puerto Rican born and raised in the Bronx, is a ubiquitous presence in the story of New York Latin music since the 1960s and an undisputed guru of Afro-Cuban music this side of Havana. Along with coproducer Andy Kaufmann, it is he who is mainly responsible for renaming the group “Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino,” boldly articulating its central concept, and for reuniting and recasting the group thirty years after its short-lived apogee in the mid-1970s.

As for the music itself, the taproot and trunk of the stylistic tree is of course Afro-Cuban music in its wealth of variants, especially the *rumba guaguancó–son montuno* continuum. But the albums contain many other genres, most of them brought into lively interaction with that basic stylistic modality: *guaracha*, *bolero*, *charanga*, Puerto Rican bomba and *plena*, Brazilian samba and bossa nova, calypso, Mozambique, and of course various *jazz* idioms are all present in this constantly shifting and surprising pastiche. There is not a piece in either of the collections that is not in the tradition of one or the other “folkloric” form, yet there is also none in which this primary style is left intact, as it were, and not interrupted and mixed with other stylistic languages.

The first selection on *Concepts in Unity*, for example, “Cuba Linda,” probably the best-known and most beloved song in their repertoire, is a nostalgic hymn to the lost homeland, a beautiful, alluring *guaguancó* sung incomparably
by Virgilio Martí. Though recognized as a guaguancó, the piano, tres, flute, and timbal parts tend to veer off from that genre's usual instrumentation, and Chocolate’s ever-present trumpet gives it a flavor of classical son in the manner of the septetos of the 1920s and 1930s; indeed, the lyrics even include some familiar lines from Ignacio Piñeiro, the leader of Septeto Nacional and generally considered the father of the traditional recorded son. In that vein, the following track on the album, “Choco’s Guajira,” is an unmistakable example of the son guajira, featuring the lush trumpet of Chocolate in his inimitable style, but here again other stylistic qualities also come through. A signature piece, “Anabacca,” for which the group is perhaps best known and which even mentions “el Conjunto Anabacca,” is a powerful guaguancó recorded by Arsenio Rodríguez, which includes an extended piano solo that shows strong jazz influences. Two songs from Puerto Rican folklore, “Adelaida” and “Luz Delia,” leave no doubt that they are a plena and a mazurka, respectively; but in the Grupo context, their traditional features are constantly interrupted and toyed with in multiple ways, be it the unexpected trombone and cowbell in “Adelaida” or the complex string and hand drum parts in the mazurka. The same kind of deliberate and creative interference is evident in the two religious invocations to the orishas, “Canto Asoyin” and “Canto Ebioso,” both executed with appropriate reverence to the original musical forms, but both complicated by fascinating interventions, most notably Andy González’s bass part in “Canto Ebioso.”

The most characteristically “Grupo-style” numbers on both albums are the street rumbas (rumbas callejeras), generally composed and/or sung by Henny Alvarez, a veteran of the rumba scene in Central Park and composer of several of Grupo’s songs (along with, interestingly, the lyrics for Larry Harlow’s salsa opera, Hommy). On Concepts in Unity, those tunes are “Carmen la Ronca” and “A Papá y a Mamá.” The most prominent among these tunes on Lo Dice Todo is the leadoff piece, “Cinco en Uno Callejero,” called such because of the interplay of five different rhythms centering on Puerto Rican bomba. “Corta el Bonche,” “La Mama,” “Aguémimo,” and “Iya Modupué” all share that quality of a very freewheeling and open-ended “experimentation” with the rumba guaguancó and guaracha.

The unquestioned mastery of the traditional forms that is demonstrated by the musicians allows them to move in and out of any given folkloric expressive field and bring to bear an assortment of other idioms in fully complementary ways. The social implication is that the densely multicultural demography and soundscape of the home location, Nueva York, make for the ready presence of all of these rhythms in their daily lives, and it is precisely the mixing and weav-
ing that typify the musical locale in which they all find themselves. Though their music is fundamentally Cuban in its national origin, all but a few members of Grupo are New York–born Puerto Ricans, whose diasporic urban lives allow them familiarity with and command of a huge range of styles and rhythms. Great Cuban masters like Chocolate, Julito Collazo, and Virgilio Martí do help ground the performances in lifelong Afro-Cuban musical experience, but none of them would question the chops of any of the other players—like Nelson González on tres, Frankie Rodríguez, or a whole rhythm section on their respective instruments, as idiosyncratically Cuban as those instruments may be.

The key term for this kind of music making is descarga, the jam session. It is informal, improvisational, and fun, as a matter of principle. Originally, descargas often happened in after-hours clubs and private parties, or in a non-performative mode, and without any scored arrangements whatsoever or even much by way of a preconceived plan. There is such confidence and respect among the musicians that structures and sequences take shape during the course of the presentation, and interactions, though challenging and emulative, are free of the interpersonal jealousies and competitiveness that so often poison collective endeavors. Of course, the idea of the Fania All-Stars was also based on the descarga format and on sharing the stage among peers, most obvious in the typical alternation of solo stretches that much Latin music shares with and perhaps borrowed from jazz performance practice. The tracks on the Fania All-Star recordings are also long, many ranging close to ten minutes in duration, as are those of Grupo, so that in neither case was there much regard for the usual limit on the length of singles recordings.

The difference, in my view, has to do with the relatively greater tightness of the weave among the instrumental parts and with a sense of structural coherence that emerges from the Grupo numbers despite all their informality and extemporaneity. The relative openness of the form and seeming randomness of the delivery in a piece like, for instance, “Iya Modupé,” the closing number on Concepts of Unity and, to my taste, their crowning achievement among all the many gems, does not preclude the distinct and pleasing feel of a coherent sequence of mood and pacing. The development is evident in the vocal line of that song, which moves from a self-assurance in the early parts, to an unsettling effect toward the middle section due to the periodic intervention of restless trombone and bass parts, and then to a forceful resolution or restoration of confidence at the end with the lengthy flute solo, the interaction of coro and trombone, and then Chocolate’s lyrical trumpet taking it out for the final
minute. This, for me, exemplifies descarga at the pinnacle of its potential—improvisational yet deliberate, open but structured, experimental and folkloric.

Rather than necessarily the same songs or even the same musicians, it is this realization of the descarga principle or technique that René López and the group seek to “revisit” in their new incarnation in our times. It is not quite clear why the members of Grupo decided to go their separate ways in 1977; the band was in fact gaining increasing acclaim, and their records were still selling well amid many invitations to perform. But in the intervening years, all have gone on to successful careers in many bands, some of them under their own leadership; those who were not already luminaries have become so—that is, those who did not pass away (as did some core members like Virgilio Martí, Jose Rodríguez, Frankie Rodríguez, Gonzalo Fernández, and Henny Alvarez) or cease to be active in music (as did Willie García).

The most widely acknowledged sequel to and outgrowth of the Grupo of the 1970s was no doubt Conjunto Libre, mainly because of the central formative role, once again, of the González brothers, Manny Oquendo, Oscar Hernández, and Nelson González. Renamed Libre and then Manny Oquendo’s Libre (because of the anchoring role of the seasoned and tireless timbalero), the band added Barry Rogers to join Jose Rodríguez on trombone for the first time since their collaborations in Conjunto La Perfecta. Relative newcomers (at the time) who were added were soon-to-be-master Nuyoricans Papo Vázquez on trombone and David Valentín on flute. Libre continued the energetic initiative of Grupo in resisting the commercialization of salsa, but by comparison, they incorporated less of the “folkloric” and more of the “experimental” (including more Latin jazz) into their sound, which was more in line with recognizable salsa at its best. Though lacking the name value and market backing of the Ray Barretto, Willie Colón, or Eddie Palmieri recordings, Libre has its place of honor in the annals of salsa. Along with the Latin jazz breakthroughs of the Fort Apache Band under the primary tutelage of Jerry González, the role of these post- and anti-Fania projects in the history of New York’s Latin music has been consistently bold and pioneering, contributing to a strong counternarrative of that history.

Now, a full generation after the heyday of salsa, Grupo is back. The taste for old-school salsa from the 1970s, before it was eclipsed by merengue and hiphop and salsa romántica, is still very much alive and has been amplified by a huge and growing international audience of listeners and dancers. For many, what passes for modern-day salsa lacks both the folklore and the experimentation of the good old stuff, and for a surprising number, that has meant not so much
Fania but Grupo. The musicians and René López could not help but get wind of that continued and growing interest, and the idea for a reunion of Grupo took hold. López’s project called for a new CD recording, to be promoted and accompanied by a documentary video about the group, including profiles of some of its individual members. As mentioned, all but a few of the original performers are still playing actively, and all responded enthusiastically when first approached about the idea. The only question was, what would be the right occasion and venue for the reunion?

Chance has it that in those very days during 2006, the House of World Cultures (Haus der Kulturen der Welt) in Berlin, Germany, was planning a major showcase of New York City cultures for the fall of the following year. When told of the plans to reunite Grupo, they made a well-advised beeline for René López, and plans were set with no further ado: Grupo would do a single live concert in the halls of the Haus der Kulturen in September 2007, all for video and audio recording. López figured this would be an excellent trial run, to then be followed by other cameo concerts, one at the Smithsonian’s Folklife Festival, the other in the “at-home” setting of Hostos Community College in the South Bronx, in July and November 2008, respectively. (It is the third of these reunion appearances, the one at Hostos, which is being earmarked for a possible live CD recording.) Meanwhile, a film crew has been shooting and interviewing at all rehearsals and appearances, as well as at a formal conversation with René López about the concept and history of Grupo.

The concert in Berlin came after two rehearsals in New York and one on location. The core standbys—Andy and Gerry, Manny, Nelson, Oscar, Gene Golden—were joined by new members, some of them of huge musical presence: Oscar “Puntilla” Ríos who replaces Julito Collazo on the santería end of the repertoire and Virgilio Martí at the deeply traditional percussion and vocal parts; Jorge Maldonado, longtime singer for La Sonora Matancera and now lead vocalist in place of Henny Alvarez; Abraham Rodríguez, the versatile young Bronx Puerto Rican percussionist and backup vocalist strongly schooled by Puntilla, in place of Willie García; Eddie Zervigón, musical director and flutist from Orquesta Broadway; Guido González filling in for Chocolate, who was not available for the trip; and Eddie Venegas, a very young, classically trained Venezuelan multi-instrumentalist who held up well on both violin and trombone. Under the musical direction of Andy González, the group started off a bit falteringingly but soon started clicking. They reached impressive intensity toward the end, on “Anabacoa” and “Se Me Olvidó que Te Olvidé,” when the international crowd delighted in recognizing and even dancing to the beloved
and unique Grupo sound once again and in live performance. For the most part, the group stayed with the original songs from the records, which they used as a gauge and standard. At this point, they were at what we might call the “re-vival” stage of the renewal, the main goal being to do justice to the songs as they sound on the recordings.

The concert on the mall in DC, in the huge tent facing the Smithsonian castle, was an even more energetic occasion than that at the congenial Haus der Kulturen and had an even more synergetic audience; it also carried more personal resonance for the original members of the group, for it was in that same context and venue, the Smithsonian’s annual Folklife Festival on the mall, that they had played in 1975. Again the rehearsals were a bit edgy, and the opening numbers were sometimes shaky. But once they got into a groove, there was the old irresistible and inimitable Grupo doing their thing, with some interesting and inevitable variations reflecting the renovated personnel and their diverse strengths. Though they again stayed for the most part with the known repertoire, there was more daring in veering off from the original versions as recorded. Some of the intensity of the moment was that of the new Grupo, with presences like those of Puntilla and Eddie Zervigón having their indelible mark and with newcomers like Venegas and Abie Rodriguez bringing new accents and angles to the familiar songs.

On this occasion, though, they decided to add one new entry to the repertoire, a Grupo version of Arsenio Rodriguez’s canonical *son montuno* “La Gente del Bronx,” with its resounding chorus “el elemento del Bronx!” The idea, of course, was not only to pay further tribute to Arsenio, the single most important overall influence on Grupo and its members, the towering figure who showed that “modernizing” the *son* meant not a separation from but a deepening of the musical tie to African and *guaguancó* roots. The newly minted selection was also meant to reemphasize the group’s Nueva York location and even to specify the centrality of that borough of the city where most of the musicians live and grew up and where Arsenio spent some of the most productive years of his momentous career. Here was the occasion for Grupo to celebrate the master once again and to execute in the spirit of Arsenio, if not à la lettre. Beyond the varied adjustments and reworking of the song as they knew it from the Arsenio recordings, they decided to make one change in the lyrics, so as to bring the original up to date and in line with the times: when the *coro* in Arsenio’s tune sings “igual bailan mambo que el danzón,” the singers in the new group replace the *danzón* reference with the dance sound of young people in the Bronx today: “igual bailan mambo que reggaetón.” It is in that irreverent, experimen-
tal spirit in their relation to the folkloric giant Arsenio Rodríguez that the new incarnation of Grupo Folklórico is revisiting itself—and asks to be revisited—as a cultural phenomenon.

We are writing in July 2008, and preparations are by now underway for the concert on November 1 at Hostos Community College. It promises to continue the revisiting process and to take the re-creation of Grupo to an even higher level. First off, they will be rejoined by Jerry González, who could not take part in the DC event. There are also plans for cameo appearances by important complementary musicians. Here, Grupo will be playing on their home turf—in the Bronx, Nueva York, of their folklore and their experimentation—so the interaction and energy should be even more symbiotic than in the earlier reunion concerts. What exactly to expect is hard to tell, of course, what with the very special assortment of musicians, all involved in wide-ranging projects of their own and sure to bring some of that to the session.

But the one planned feature of the program that holds my deepest interest and curiosity is the inclusion of Eddie Palmieri making an appearance on piano to play his signature hit of all time, a Grupo version of “Muñeca.” What will the masters of Grupo do with this contagious song from the La Perfecta album Lo Que Traigo Es Sabroso from 1964. How will they and Eddie “revisit” that cherished number that all of them have played many times, which, perhaps more than any other song, can be identified with salsa as a musical modality even though it was written and popular years before the music was called by that name.

Here, with the anticipated Grupo/Eddie version of “Muñeca,” musical memory comes full circle, since most of the original core members of Grupo Folklórico—the Gonzalez brothers, Nelson, Manny, Oscar Hernández, Jose Rodrígues—either cut their teeth playing with Eddie or are a result of the revolution he wreaked on New York Latin music in the early 1960s. René López even refers to the original Grupo as an “Eddie Palmieri Alumni Band.” By way of explanation, López states that the whole Grupo concept and experience grew out of the musical era ushered in by Palmieri’s “trombanga,” including the dialectic of folklore and experimentation that was their hallmark.

Revisiting La Perfecta and revisiting Grupo Folklórico are thus part of the same process, which is in a larger sense about revisiting salsa. These two efforts are about re-creating, respectively, the seeds and the harvest of salsa, thus critically flanking its boom period from both historical directions. Call it “revisiting” or even “revival,” both reunions are about activating musical memory. They are about continuing the unending struggle to uphold and to experiment with
folklore—that is, with deeply rooted Afro-Caribbean expressive traditions—and to ground creative experimentation in the fertile soil of that folklore.

**POSTSCRIPT**

Grupo did it again: they blew people away. The long-awaited November 1, 2008, concert at Hostos Community College left the packed auditorium enthralled and demanding more. From all appearances, the crowd was indeed comprised of the salsa sophisticates one would expect at a Grupo reunion concert over thirty years later: mainly New York Puerto Ricans and African Americans who had lived and loved Grupo since way back when, in the salsa seventies, and were in the know about the special, inimitable quality that Grupo stood for in the Latin music firmament of those years and ever since. Call them “Grupo maniacs,” but they hung on every note, recognized the tunes from the first chord, and, while fully present before the newly constituted group, found themselves collectively wafted back to an earlier period in their sonic lives. This must be what Eddie Palmieri had in mind when he was talking about “revisiting” a great and indelible cultural moment.

Eddie himself had other obligations that night and was unable to take part. So though still on the agenda, the new, Grupo version of “Muñeca” will have to await future opportunities. There were other unexpected changes of plan as well, the most notable of them occasioned by the passing away of the great Orlando “Puntilla” Ríos in August. The loss was profound, throughout the Afro-Latino musical and spiritual community and of course for Grupo, where his role and sheer presence in its new incarnation have been central. But in the Hostos concert, held in Puntilla’s memory, Grupo demonstrated the wisdom of their guiding concept of improvisation: in facing this and other challenges, they were able to replace the irreplaceable by once again adapting their format and building on new strengths. The young Afro-Cuban drummer, singer, and dancer Pedrito Martínez joined the group in Puntilla’s unexpected absence and surpassed the hopes of all but those who already knew of his inspirational talent in all three capacities. His strong presence throughout the concert was no doubt one of the highlights of the evening.

Another surprise was the participation of the veteran Puerto Rican vocalist Israel Berríos, who was a vocalist in Arsenio’s band in New York during the 1950s and 1960s and musical director of the New York–based son group Son de la Loma in subsequent years. He captivated the audience with his renditions of a bolero and a danza and of course served as lead voice in “La Gente del Bronx,”...
which brought the proud hometown crowd to its feet. In recognition of the largely Nuyorican audience, the group decided to bring back the plena from its first album, “Adelaida,” with its irresistible and hilarious chorus “Si me pego en el pool (yo me caso contigo)” (If I hit the lottery (I’ll marry you)). Originally performed by the early New York plena group Victor Montañez y Sus Pleneros de la 110, the lead was assumed in this 2008 rendition by the young Nuyorican drummer and singer Alex Lasalle, and his vibrant energy and powerful voice electrified the hall.

As Grupo Folklórico II moves forward and aspires to a longer life span than the first time around, the principle of descarga continues to guide the project in all its aspects. Even the shifting personnel and repertoire go to illustrate the group’s inherent ability to be flexible, its commitment to improvisation. What amazes and delights even the musicians themselves is performing these complex and demanding musical compositions without arrangements and without even a set plan for any given execution. With Grupo, unlike in the other bands they lead or play with, it is arrange as you go, within each tune and in the lineup of songs and even musicians on any given occasion. Confident musicianship is of course a prerequisite to such flexibility and open-endedness and to such a free hand with the musical traditions. But as Jerry González and his startling jazz-guaguancó rendition of two Pedro Flores standards, “Obsesión” and “Perdón,” demonstrated perhaps more powerfully than anything else on that already historic November 1 evening in the South Bronx, Grupo is, by its very nature and in its founding concept, about resisting and refusing formula and standardization. It is steeped in traditions, from bolero to rumba guaguancó, but those traditions might be interwoven among themselves and laced through, in this case, with Gerry’s signature Miles Davis–sounding muted horn. Grupo is faithfully folkloric and boldly experimental Nueva York style.

In our times, perhaps even more than the mid-1970s, when Fania Records was taking salsa in a strongly commercial, formulaic direction, there is a need for that alternative idea of what “salsa” is about and to restore it to its improvisational intentions, to that delicate balance between tradition and innovation that Grupo stands for by definition. La Perfecta showed the way and opened the door to this new stylistic practice back in the 1960s, at the threshold of salsa history, and the “Eddie Palmieri Alumni Band,” Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino, upheld and continued that alternative musical concept and practice as salsa’s heyday was beginning to wane. Today, La Perfecta II and Grupo II, as revisited by their original proponents, are once again holding the line against the rampant standardization and dilution of that rich musical
legacy. Salsa memory is about tapping history and reinstating descarga to the center of Afro-Latino musical expression.

Notes

The authors would like to thank Kwami Coleman for his contribution to this essay.

2. Rondón, Book of Salsa, 96.
3. René López discussed the relation of the founding of Grupo to this resistance to Fania in his June 28, 2008, interview on the Washington DC radio show Latin Flavor. In personal conversation in September 2008, Nelson González told me that Grupo was sometimes referred to as “el cuco de la Fania,” the haunting spirit, as it were, of the powerful record label.
4. I differ here with the interpretation offered by Rondón, who claims that “the salsa boom had indirectly affected the group, poisoning its folk music and its experimentation” (Book of Salsa, 248).
5. López, interview.
6. The phrase “me pego en el pool” refers to the betting pool in bolita, based on the horse races. This line was unfortunately improperly translated in the English version of Rondón’s Book of Salsa (on p. 242, it reads, “if I win at pool”).

Bibliography