

2008 Annual Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert: The Conjunto of René López and Ralph Rinzler

James Early

Ralph Rinzler, founding director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, worked with countless gifted musicians, folklorists, and producers to conduct fieldwork, create publications and recordings, present concerts and public programs, and implement new cultural policies that led to diversity in the Smithsonian's workforce and programming. He was a strategic and outspoken promoter of collaboration with community-based artisans, musicians, academics, and cultural activists with whom he diligently worked to facilitate the Smithsonian's acquisitions and employment of professional staff to represent communities that were, in the polite parlance of the time, "underrepresented" at the Institution. The Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert celebrates Ralph's mind and spirit, his untiring and wide-ranging cultural work, his all-encompassing humanity, his commitment to traditional musicians and artisans, and his never-ending will to increase and diffuse knowledge in support of cultural democracy.

The 2008 concert honors New York City's René López, a grassroots cultural activist, lay scholar, educator, collector, and music producer. René was among Ralph Rinzler's special friends and colleagues in many groundbreaking field research projects and musical endeavors.

René exemplifies the principles of recognition and respect for creative and expressive agency and profound community-based knowledge that Ralph Rinzler fostered in founding the Folklife Festival and in building the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Self-taught through direct observation and lifelong conversations and formal interviews with musicians and through fraternal ties with artists, their families, and their communities, René is deeply loved by local, national, and globally acclaimed musicians. Music writer Alan Lockwood describes René as "one of Latin music's great offstage presences as lay scholar and producer of Rockefeller Foundation and Smithsonian recordings."

As an associate and advisor to Smithsonian Folklife and Folkways projects, René López almost certainly has a longer and broader relationship than anyone at the Smithsonian with Afro-Caribbean traditional music and musicians. His grounding in Latino music and community celebrations,

especially those of New York City, and his exceptional connection to Cuban musicians and ethnomusicologists in Cuba were central to the evolution of Ralph Rinzler's musical taste, Cuban ties, Festival productions, and Folkways recordings.

They met in 1975 when the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at New York's Hunter College invited René to join them in a meeting with Ralph at his Washington, D.C., home to discuss presenting Latino musicians at the Folklife Festival. Although they came from different cultural and class backgrounds, René and Ralph bonded because of their dedication to collaborating with musicians who identified with their communities as much as with their artistry.

Both were keen on research, documentation, and respectful presentation of musicians and their genres and on the importance of disseminating grassroots arts and traditions to diverse audiences across the world.

Their collegiality led to years of Smithsonian performances, archival documentation, recordings, and public programs. In New York City, Ralph made yet unpublished field recordings of Arsenio Rodríguez, whom René called "the founder of modern salsa music and most important spokesperson of the time for the underlying religious and social worldview of Afro-Cuban music." At the 1969 Folklife Festival, Ralph recognized Arsenio as a "folklore treasure, not just a popular musician." René recalls that Ralph was captivated by the harmonica player Francisco Tan of the group *Montañez y Sus Pleneros de la Ciento Diez* (110th Street).

Born in 1939 in the Bronx, New York, René, in the midst of a vibrant musical and dance culture of the 1940s and 1950s, encountered great musicians like Tito Puente, Machito, Marcelino Guerra, and the renowned Cuban band *Sonora Mantancera*—to whom he later introduced Ralph—in well-attended clubs like New York's Palladium, where his Uncle Catalino Rolon booked talent. His socially grounded music taste set him on a lifelong course to friendships with legendary musicians like Arsenio Rodríguez, Alfredo "Chocolate" Armentero, Johnny Pacheco, Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barreto, Manny Orquendo, and Tito Puente. His encyclopedic knowledge of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Caribbean musical traditions in the Caribbean and New York City attracted the interest

of young musicians like the González Brothers (Andy and Jerry), Nelson González, Oscar Hernández, Milton Cardona, and others who would emerge as leaders in various genres of Latino music. Legendary Afro-Caribbean jazz pianist Eddie Palmieri insisted that younger band members “spend time with René López.” Bassist Andy González, considered one of the foremost music authorities, told me that René became a mentor to him, “responsible for my education, sharing everything I needed to hear when I was studying and applying jazz scholarship to learn, because there were no books—only history from René and his collection—when we were up and coming young musicians.”

In 1974, Ralph, his wife Kate, my wife Miriam, Jim Rooney (a specialist on bluegrass music), and I visited René and his family in their Bronx apartment, where the soon-to-become-celebrated Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino was rehearsing their first double-album *Concepts In Unity*, which drew upon traditional Afro-Caribbean styles such as rumba, *son*, bolero, *bomba y plena*, and the poetics of traditional, community-based storytelling and social singing to create a powerfully contemporary music. Their style called attention to New York-based Afro-Caribbean tradition bearers, attracted audiences in Cuba (the musical source and religious inspiration for so many of their broad, distinctive musical talents), and synthesized Afro-Caribbean and “Nuevayorquino” musical traditions.

Grupo Folklórico, comprised of many members with roots in the South Bronx, became legendary for experimental recordings that brought together some of the most gifted, often little-noticed elder composer-musicians (with deep connections to Puerto Rican and other Caribbean and Latin American communities and audiences) with some of the brightest young musicians, who would go on to master traditional musical genres, become major innovators in various Latino and other musical genres, and continue to explicitly identify themselves and their art as grounded in traditional, community-based music and participation.

Among the original Grupo Folklórico guest musicians were the celebrated Julito Collazo (with whom renowned Cuban anthropologist Fernando



René López, Mario Bauza (“the Father of Latin Jazz”), Israel “Cachao” López (one of the creators of the mambo), and Giaovanni Hidalgo (one of Latin music’s greatest percussionists) gather in New York City in 1982. Photo courtesy Harry Sepulveda

Ortiz consulted in his groundbreaking work on Cuban African-descended music and culture) and the recently deceased Patato Valdez, once popularly described as the “world’s greatest conga player.” These musicians joined other tradition bearers—such as Los Pleneros de la 21; Israel “Cachao” López, the “inventor of mambo”; Jesús “Chucho” Valdés, the extraordinary Afro-Cuban jazz pianist—and a younger generation of Latino musicians, including Andy and Jerry González, Papo Vásquez, and Manny Orquendo, all of whom, through direct connections to René López, performed at the Smithsonian and enriched its archival and recording collections.

The historical friendship and collaboration between Ralph Rinzler and René López continue to bear fruit, most recently in the 2007 Smithsonian Folkways recording *Tío Tom* produced by René.

James Counts Early is the director of Cultural Heritage Policy at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. He served as deputy assistant secretary when Ralph Rinzler was assistant secretary for Public Service at the Smithsonian, and he is a close friend and longtime colleague of René López. He works on the development of cultural heritage policy and is an activist for cultural diversity and equity issues in national and international institutions.