DESIGNATION REPORT

Bronx Opera House

Landmarks Preservation Commission

Designation Report
Bronx Opera House
June 13, 2023

Designation List 533
LP-2667

DESIGNATION REPORT

Bronx Opera House

LOCATION

Borough of Bronx
436-442 East 149th Street

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

Designed by George Keister and developed by George M. Cohan, this Italian Renaissance Revival-style theater and commercial building featured Broadway acts in its early "Subway Circuit" years before hosting a succession of clubs that were central to the Bronx's innovative and influential Latin Music scene in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Bronx Opera House, 1914
Architectural and Building, "The Bronx Opera House, New York", Vol.46, No.4, April 1914, 152

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Bronx Opera House

436-442 East 149th Street, Bronx

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Built: 1912-13
Architect: George Keister

Landmark Site: Borough of Bronx, Tax Map Block 2293, Lot 46 in part, consisting of the footprint of the historic building at 436-442 East 149th Street, as illustrated in the attached map.
Building Identification Number (BIN): 2097024

Calendared: February 14, 2023
Public Hearing: May 2, 2023

On May 2, 2023, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Bronx Opera House as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.3). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Three people testified in support of the proposed designation, including representatives of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Historic Districts Council, and a representative of both the Mott Haven Historic Districts Association and Bronx Borough Landmarks Preservation Community. No one spoke in opposition. The Commission also received nine letters in support of designation, including from the representative of East Bronx History Forum. No letters were received in opposition.

Summary

Bronx Opera House

Located on East 149th Street in the South Bronx, the Bronx Opera House recalls the rich history of its neighborhood as a center of Latin music and dance between the 1940s and 1970s. It was built as a theater and restaurant between 1912 and 1913 by the Bronx 149th Street Realty Company, led by George M. Cohan, and was designed by architect George Keister. The building served as an entertainment center for more than six decades, featuring Broadway acts in its early "Subway Circuit" years and serving as a major center for the Bronx's growing, innovative, and influential Latin music scene in the 1960s and 70s.

George Keister's architectural practice was active from the 1880s through the 1930s. He designed buildings throughout Manhattan and the Bronx, including the individually designated Belasco's Stuyvesant Theater (1906-1907) and Hurtig & Seamon's (Apollo) Theater (1913-1914). Constructed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style, the Bronx Opera House features a symmetrical palazzo-type tripartite façade with large first-story openings framed by rusticated limestone pillars, richly detailed tympana containing cartouches reading "C & H" (likely for developers Cohan and Harris), spandrels and friezes ornamented with garlands, cartouches, and festoons, and a modillioned cornice crowned by a classical parapet.

George M. Cohan (1878-1942), the Bronx Opera House's developer, is considered by many to be the first superstar of American show business. He worked as an actor, composer, playwright, producer, dancer, songwriter, and theater-owner, and wrote popular songs such as "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "Give My Regards to Broadway," which endure as widely known classics. Cohan opened several theaters in the first and second decades of the 20th century, including the Bronx Opera House, as part of the "Subway Circuit," which played past Broadway productions and tested potential future ones in neighborhood venues outside Manhattan's Theater District. Many famous names passed through the theater in its early days, including John, Lionel, and Ethel Barrymore, Julian Eltinge, and Cohan himself.

After World War II, thousands of Puerto Ricans came to New York City. Many settled in the South Bronx, which eventually grew into a thriving Puerto Rican community.[1] As that happened, the Bronx's Latin music scene flourished, and at the end of the 1950s, the Bronx Opera House became home to a series of nightclubs including the Club Caravana, the Bronx Casino, and El Cerromar featuring performances by major stars such as Tito Rodriguez, Charlie Palmieri and Johnny Pacheco. Charlie Palmieri and his brother Eddie Palmieri, both widely popular musicians in the Latin music scene, recorded an album in the building, *Pachanga at Club Caravana* in 1961. The *New York Times* acknowledged the club as being "pivotal to the emergence of the Pachanga dance craze." For several decades the Bronx Opera continued to serve the growing Latino/a community of the South Bronx with dances and concerts, and was an important place of social gathering and expression of Latin culture.

The extant historic portion of the building facing 149th Street includes the building's primary facade and historically contained the theater's main entrance and entry lobby, a restaurant, offices and, during the building's period as a significant Latin music and dance venue, several Latin music clubs. This portion of the building was converted into the Opera House Hotel in 2012-2013 by the property

owner, a sensitive adaptive reuse that preserved the historic facade and the building's prominence within the Hub, and honored its history. The rear portion of the theater containing the original auditorium has been demolished and replaced by a new building, which is not included in this designation.

Today, the Bronx Opera House still stands as a testament to its storied past. Its intact and elaborate façade reflects the building's historic use as a theater and as a music and dance venue that was central to Latin music and culture. The building remains an important part of the community, serving as a reminder of the rich history and cultural heritage of the Bronx and its central place in Latin music history.

Building Description

Bronx Opera House

Description

The Bronx Opera House is a four-story commercial and theater building designed by George Keister and located on 149th Street between Bergen and Brook Avenues in the commercial section of the Bronx's Melrose neighborhood, known as the Hub. The extant historic portion of the building facing 149th Street includes the building's primary facade, the western portion of which contained the theater's marquee and main entrance.

Designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style, its primary façade on 149th Street has a tripartite configuration with seven bays, divided into a one-story base, a two-story middle section topped by a denticulated cornice, and a one-story attic crowned by a modillioned cornice and classical parapet. The façade is primarily clad in buff-colored brick, and the upper-story ornament is primarily terra cotta. The end bays project from the façade above the ground story.

The single-story base of the façade is divided into bays by rusticated limestone pillars and topped by a modillioned cornice with cartouches in its frieze. The rings for the historic marquee that hung over the theater entrance in the westernmost bay remain on the two westernmost cartouche ornaments. There are metal spandrels featuring festoons and cartouches in between the second and third story windows.

The second and third stories make up the middle section of the façade, topped with a denticulated cornice. In this section, the outermost bays have paired windows divided by brick pillars, whereas the inner five bays are divided by fluted terra cotta pillars. The third-story windows are topped with terra-cotta tympana with garland and medallion motifs in the five middle bays and cartouches in the outer bays. The cartouches on the middle bays feature an interlaced C & H, probably referring to developers Cohan & Harris. In between the second- and third-story windows are patinated metal, likely copper or bronze spandrels featuring festoons and cartouches.

The one-story attic is topped by an elaborate cornice with dentils, egg-and-dart molding, foliated modillions, and crowning cartouches and anthemia. All seven bays have paired windows, with brick pillars with terra cotta bases at the five central bays. The building features four flagpoles on the rooftop.

Alterations[2]

Alterations are primarily limited to the replacement of windows and ground floor doors and storefront infill, and removal of top floor balustrades. At the time of the building's opening, the three westernmost ground-story bays appear to have been associated with the theater entrance with an awning extending across all three; this awning was replaced by a marquee by the late 1930s that was removed by the late 1980s. The upper stories originally had additional signage, including a two-story projecting vertical blade sign, which was removed by the late 1930s. The original restaurant entrance within the easternmost ground-story bay contained what appear to have been multi-pane wood-and-glass doors below a three- or four-pane wood-and-glass transom. The easternmost ground-story bay was originally crowned by an awning similar in design to the original theater awning but was removed before 1979, and a modern awning was installed in that location with the conversion of the building to the Opera House Hotel in 2013. The plaque beside the entrance door of the hotel highlights the rich history

of the building.

All of the historic upper-story windows have been replaced. The original windows appear to have been six-pane casements with two-pane transoms at the second story, eight pane casements at the third stories, and four-over-four double-hung windows at the fourth story. It appears that all historic windows except for the four at the westernmost inner bays have been replaced after 1979. A stone or terra-cotta balustrade that extended across the base of the fourth story was removed prior to the early 1940s. On the rooftop are four flagpoles, which appear to replace flagpoles that were original features of the building but were subsequently removed.

Early History of Melrose and the Hub[3]

The area now called the Bronx was occupied by the Reckgawawanc tribe prior to and during the early years of European settlement.[4] The earliest European settlement in the Bronx was established along the Harlem River, in what is now Mott Haven, in 1639. In 1874 the towns of Melrose, Morrisania, West Farms and Kingsbridge west of the Bronx River, and in 1895 the towns of Pelham and Eastchester, the village of Wakefield, and the town of Westchester east of the Bronx River, were annexed to the City of New York from Westchester County.[5] In 1898, all of these annexed areas became the Borough of the Bronx. Soon after annexation, local residents, property owners, business owners, and booster groups like the North Side Association began agitating for improved infrastructure, including better transportation connections with Manhattan.[6]

Beginning in the 1890s the Bronx became the refuge of thousands of first- and second-generation immigrants seeking to escape the crowded tenements of East Harlem and the Lower East Side. Between 1880 and 1930 it was one of the fastest growing urban areas in the country, with its population reaching well over a million by 1930.[7] Improvements in transportation throughout the 19th century made the Bronx more accessible to Manhattan and contributed to its growth. As early as 1841, the New York & Harlem Railroad began regular commuter service between the Bronx and Manhattan. The New York & Harlem Railroad, following the Bronx River valley, was opened to White Plains by 1844 with stations in Morrisania, West Farms (Fordham), and Williamsbridge. In 1886, the Suburban Rapid Transit Company extended Manhattan's Third Avenue Elevated over the Harlem River, and by 1902, it would reach Fordham Road and Bronx Park. In 1904 the first IRT subway along Westchester Avenue and Southern Boulevard was opened, connecting the southern Bronx with Manhattan's west side and augmenting the Third Avenue El in providing cheap, frequent rapid transit service between the two boroughs.

With the opening of these mass transit routes, urbanization began to transform the Mott Haven, Melrose, and Morrisania neighborhoods. Residential housing and small frame structures gave way to New Law tenements and large business buildings.[8] Encouraged by this growth, grocery stores, restaurants, vegetable and fruit markets, tailors, and hardware stores were also established. By the turn of the century, the commercial and social heart of Melrose—with numerous theaters, shops, and banks—was centered around the intersection of East 149th Street, Melrose, Willis and Third Avenues, known as the Hub.[9]

Located at the former intersection of the Third Avenue El and IRT Subway, the Hub is the oldest major shopping district in the Bronx; for much of the 20th century, it was the "great business center of the north borough" with department stores, boutiques, movie palaces and vaudeville theaters that drew residents from all over the borough. As early as the 1910s, theater buildings began appearing around the Hub, which became known as the "42nd Street and Broadway" of the Bronx.[10]

Architect George Keister

The architect of the Bronx Opera House, George Keister, was born in 1859 in Belleview, Iowa.[11] He received his architectural degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology after

attending Cornell College in Iowa, and subsequently worked for the Boston architectural firms of Ware & Van Brunt and George F. Meacham. He came to New York City in 1885, formed a brief partnership with Frank E. Wallis in 1887-88, and was associated with Russell Sturgis until 1890 when he started his own practice.[12] Keister served as secretary of the Architectural League in the 1890s[13] and wrote an article titled "Fads in Architecture" for the *Architectural Record* in 1891.[14] He died in New York in 1945. Throughout his career, Keister proved to be a versatile, resourceful architect, expert in adapting the popular styles of the time to a wide array of building types.

Keister's earliest-known commissions in New York included tenement buildings designed between 1885 and 1890 in the Greenwich Village, Greenwich Village Extension II, and South Village Historic Districts. In 1891, he designed the exceptional row of ten Queen Anne-style rowhouses known as the "Bertine Block" that form the core of the historic district of the same name in the Bronx. He was also the architect of the neo-Georgian style McAlpin House (1902-03), a designated New York City Landmark that is now part of the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum. Other well-preserved Keister-designed apartment buildings and row houses survive within the Upper West Side/Central Park West, West 71st Street, and Riverside-West End Historic Districts, and in the West End Collegiate Historic District Extension, while Queens' Douglaston Historic District contains one of his rare freestanding houses.

Religious buildings designed by Keister include the Sunday School (1890) of St. Mary's Protestant Episcopal Church on West 126th Street, a designated New York City Landmark; and the Romanesque Revival-style First Baptist Church (1891-94), located in the Riverside-West End Historic District Extension I. Keister's portfolio also includes a variety of commercial buildings, such as the Hotel Gerard (1893, a designated New York City Landmark), as well as the Renaissance Revival-style Von Hoffman Hotel (1893, within the Madison Square North Historic District) and many other loft, warehouse, office and store buildings in Sullivan-Thompson, NoHo, Ladies' Mile, and Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic Districts.

At the turn of the 20th century, Keister's practice specialized in the design of theater buildings. Notable examples include the Belasco Theater (1906), at 111-121 West 44th Street; and the Apollo Theater (1913-14) at 253 West 125th Street, both of which are designated New York City individual landmarks. Keister also designed George M. Cohan's Theatre at Broadway and West 43rd Street, built in 1911, a year before construction began on the Bronx Opera House. Like many of Keister's other theaters it was later demolished;[15] the Bronx Opera House is one of Keister's few theaters that survives today.[16]

Developer George M. Cohan[17]

The developer of the Bronx Opera House was George M. Cohan, the legendary actor, songwriter, dancer, playwright, lyricist, and producer who played an instrumental role in American theater history and was known in the early 20th century as "the man who owns Broadway."

Cohan was born in Rhode Island in 1878 to Irish American parents, Jerry Cohan and Helen "Nellie" Cohan, who were both vaudevillians. At age nine, George Cohan and his sister Josie began to tour the country with the act "Four Cohans", formed by their parents.[18]

While Jerry and Nellie Cohan considered themselves as "road" actors, George wanted to succeed in New York, the heart of American theater. Following George's lead, the Four Cohans started performing in New York City theaters, and George

made his Broadway debut in 1893 in *The Lively Bootblack*. Cohan became the manager of the Four Cohans, performing, booking, composing songs, and writing sketches for them and for other vaudeville shows, as the Four Cohans became the highest-paid touring act in vaudeville. During the 1890s, Cohan's career as a composer also took off with songs such as "Why did Nellie Leave Home" and "Hot Tamale Alley," featured in May Irwin's famous vaudeville show.

At the beginning of the 1900s, George Cohan moved to New York as a vaudeville veteran to devote himself fully to the Broadway musical comedy stage. In 1901 and 1903, he wrote two musicals, *The Governor's Son* and *Running for Office* based on his vaudeville sketches. His main success on Broadway came after he met his long-time partner, Sam Harris. In the first two decades of the century, Cohan and Harris became one of the most successful production teams in the country. Together, they produced over 40 musicals, which played in Broadway theaters as well as on the road, and also established Cohan's reputation as a composer of popular songs.[19]

The first of their many productions was *Little Johnny Jones* in 1904, which starred Cohan himself. Three songs became hits from this play; "Goodbye Flo," "Give My Regards to Broadway," and "The Yankee Doodle Boy," which included the famous patriotic lyrics: "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy, a Yankee Doodle do or die; a real live nephew of my Uncle Sam, born on the Fourth of July." With this play, Cohan became an established figure on Broadway. In 1917, Cohan composed "Over There," inspired by America's entry to World War I, which has become one of America's most enduring patriotic songs.

Cohan and Harris also acquired several Broadway theaters, as well as the Grand Opera House in Chicago, and developed new theater buildings, including the Bronx Opera House.[20] With these playhouses, Cohan and Harris created their own circuit, where their productions were shown in turns.[21]

In 1920, the production firm of Cohan and Harris broke up and Cohan continued his career as a solo producer. In the 1930s, he acted in the Hollywood film *The Phantom President* and produced and appeared in many Broadway shows, including *Ah Wilderness* and *I'd be Right*. His final play was *The Return of the Vagabond* in 1940. In 1942, his career was dramatized in a movie called *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, in which he was played by James Cagney in an Academy award-winning performance. Cohan died in 1942.

Throughout his life, Cohan wrote over 40 plays, collaborated in the writing of 40 others, and contributed to the production of about 150 musicals. He also composed over 500 songs, some of which are remembered as among the greatest of their time. In 1959, a bronze statue of Cohan, created by sculptor Georg John Lober and architect Otto Langman, was erected in Times Square, bearing the lyrics of his famous ode to New York theater, "Give My Regards to Broadway."[22]

The Subway Circuit

Located in the Hub and easily reachable from Times Square by subway, The Bronx Opera House was a theater in the "Subway Circuit," which brought "direct from Broadway" productions to local residents who could not afford to see them on Broadway.[23]

"Subway Circuit" referred to theaters or "neighborhood houses" outside of the Broadway theater district between the1920s and early 1950s.[24] During these years, Broadway shows played for a season and closed during the summer, when they were sent on "road tours" outside New York City or "circuit tours" to neighborhoods outside the Theater

District, including to the outer boroughs. Potential future Broadway shows were also tested on the Subway Circuit prior to debuting on the Great White Way. Playing the theaters on the Subway Circuit was convenient for actors, as commuting between them and the theatrical environment and clubs on Broadway only took about 30 minutes.[25]

Shows playing on the Subway Circuit were regularly advertised in newspapers during the 1910s and 1920s. As the *New York Times* recalled in 1972, "Bronx theatergoers in those days did not need Broadway; they had the Bronx Opera House, a part of the 'subway circuit,' which presented shows a week or so after Broadway closings."[26] Shows at the Bronx Opera House, including *A Successful Calamity* with William Gilette, *Saturday's Children* with Ruth Gordon, and *Springtime in Mayo* with Fiske O'Hara, were advertised regularly in the *New York Times*' "Subway Circuit" section between 1917 and 1928, when the theater was one of nine making up the circuit.[27]

The Construction and Design of the Bronx Opera House

The Bronx Opera House was developed by George M. Cohan and the Bronx 149th Street Realty Company, which was owned by Cohan and Harris. Construction of the theater, located on the former site of a commercial stable, took place from 1912-1913 under contract with Cramp & Company.[28] Like many other theater buildings of the era designed by Keister, the Bronx Opera House consisted of two buildings: a rear building containing the theater itself and a front building housing the theater lobby and commercial spaces.[29]

The auditorium in the rear building, since demolished, was designed to seat 2,500 people, and was leased to Cohan & Harris for its first 21 years. The theater's primary public face fronting on 149th Street was originally leased to a restauranteur for its first 21 years,[30] and contained a kitchen, storerooms, and boiler room in the basement, a restaurant and a café on the first floor, a banquet hall on the second and third floors, and lodging rooms and offices on the fourth floor.[31] A 1916 plan labeled the second floor as a private club dance hall seating more than 290 people.[32] This portion of the building would later house a succession of significant Latin music clubs starting in the early 1960s, and remains today.

As many of his other buildings, George Keister designed the Bronx Opera House in Italian Renaissance Revival style, which was a popular style for civic and commercial buildings including the theaters in the New York City between 1890s and 1930 and was preferred by George Keister in many of his theater designs. Being typical to the style, the main facade of the front building features palazzo-type horizontal massing and symmetry. Characteristic of the style, the tripartite composition of the façade is articulated by a denticulated cornice above the ground story base, a second cornice topping the mid-section and a third cornice crowning the building. The large openings on the façade are flanked by rusticated limestone pillars at the ground story, fluted terra-cotta pillars at the mid-section and brick pillars at the attic as well as the projecting end bays. The façade also incorporates distinctive architectural elements of the style including richly detailed terra cotta tympana containing cartouches reading "C & H" (likely for developers Cohan and Harris), spandrels and friezes ornamented with cartouches, garlands, and festoons and as well as a modillioned cornice crowned by a classical parapet. This elaborately ornamented facade served as the public face of the building, with the theater's marquee and main entrance, since removed, at its western end.

The Early Years of the Bronx Opera House

The Bronx Opera House opened to the public in

1913 with Eugene Walter's play *Fine Feathers,* featuring Max Figman and Lolita Roberson.[33] Under the management of Cohan, Harris, and A. H. Wood, the venue presented vaudevilles, dramas, and musical comedies. During its early years, the Bronx Opera House became known for its shows with original Broadway casts, offered at affordable "Subway Circuit" prices.

Among the shows presented in the Bronx Opera House featuring well-known performers of the era were *Broadway Jones*, a comedy written, produced, directed by, and starring George M. Cohan; *Justice*, with John Barrymore; *Cousin Lucy*, starring the legendary female impersonator Julian Eltinge; *Laughing Lady* with Ethel Barrymore; *Bunny in Funny Land* featuring John Bunny; and *Peter Ibbetson*, starring John and Lionel Barrymore.[34] In addition to its Broadway shows, the theater also regularly featured Sunday afternoon vaudevilles and motion pictures.[35]

In 1920, Cohan and Harris ended their partnership, but it appears that they continued to hold interests in the building until 1929 when the Cosmopolitan Opera Association took over the lease.[36] Until the mid-1930s, the house continued to present comedies, operas, and vaudeville and stage shows, including performances by Harry Houdini, "the greatest magician of the age."[37]

From the mid-1930s until the 1980s, the Bronx Opera House intermittently operated as a movie house. The building was advertised in newspapers under different names, such as "Bronx Theater," "Bronx Movie House," "Teatro Bronx," and "Teatro Hispano" between the 1940s and 1970s.[38]

While the auditorium in the back building drew large audiences, first for live shows, and later for movies, the front building served as a gathering place for the community. From 1941 to 1954, the Friendship Club hosted numerous events, likely in its banquet hall.[39] The Friendship Club was described by its organizer Lester Lockwood as a "small town social, devoted to old time dancing for middle aged and older folks."[40] Their ads were promoted with the tagline "Folks over 28 only, no jitterbugs."[41] The building was subsequently occupied by the Tara Ballroom, an Irish dance hall, in the mid-1950s, just as the neighborhood's Irish American community was declining in size and the South Bronx's importance as a Latin music center was taking off.[42]

Latin Music in New York[43]

New York's Latin music scene grew out of the arrival of thousands of people from Cuba and Puerto Rico in the city in the late 1910s and 1920s. These newcomers mostly settled in Brooklyn waterfront neighborhoods and in a section of East Harlem that soon became known as *El Barrio* ("the neighborhood"). Granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, Puerto Ricans could travel freely between their home island and the mainland and live in either one; facing economic hardship at home, many were drawn to New York, where they found work in the city's many factories, in the needle trades, as domestics, or in restaurants and hotels. As citizens of an independent country, Cubans did not share Puerto Ricans' legal status here. Despite this, many Afro-Cuban musicians started moving to the U.S. to escape discrimination by white Cubans and American owners of Cuban hotels and resorts who would only employ whites or light-skinned Cubans of mixed race. Cuban musicians who earned their living accompanying silent movies also started leaving the island with the advent of talking pictures in the late 1920s.

Latin music soon thrived in *El Barrio*, the city's leading Hispanic commercial and entertainment center, following the arrival from Puerto Rico of Victoria Hernández and her brother Rafael in 1919. A legendary composer—his

"*Lamento Borincano*," composed in East Harlem, is considered Puerto Rico's "unofficial national anthem"—Rafael was said to be "the first Latino to sound a Latin musical note in New York."[44] Pioneering businesswoman Victoria opened the city's first Puerto Rican-owned music store in *El Barrio* in 1927. It catalyzed the local music scene, serving not only as a purveyor of records, piano rolls, and musical instruments but as a central meeting place for Latin musicians and the bandleaders and record-company executives looking to hire them. In the back of the store she gave music lessons to local children, including a young Tito Puente.

Historian Max Salazar has described Latin music during these years as "indispensable … for Puerto Ricans and Cubans determined to live in an alien environment."[45] At the same time, it was gaining mainstream appeal with the 1931 release of the hit record "The Peanut Vendor" by Don Apiazu and His Havana Casino Orchestra and the popular M-G-M film *The Cuban Love Song*. Dedicated Latin music venues opened in East Harlem in the 1930s, and the genre hit new heights following the founding of Machito's influential New York-based band The Afro-Cubans in 1940. Despite the contributions of Puerto Rican and other Latino musicians to Machito's and others' bands, Cuban musical styles such as *son*, rumba, conga, mambo, and cha-cha would dominate Latin music into the 1950s due to Cuba's economic power and prominence in the Caribbean and its music's "exotic appeal to white audiences," many of whom had visited the island's famous resorts or at least dreamed of doing so.[46] Nevertheless, a cross-pollination was already taking place, with the popular Cuban singer Miguelito Valdes regularly performing Puerto Rican songs, and Machito's music incorporating African American-rooted swing music and jazz. The merging of musical elements from across Latin American cultures with African American and other homegrown influences was fundamental to creating the distinctive, innovative Latin music that would emerge from New York to be embraced around the world in the postwar era. This integration of diverse musical influences was perhaps only possible in a city as open, dense, and diverse as New York. It was facilitated by the close proximity of the city's Hispanic and African American communities in Harlem and the Bronx, as well as Machito's 1940 marriage to *Puertorriqueña* Hilda Torres, which eased tensions and encouraged intermarriage between the city's Cuban and Puerto Rican communities, contributing to the development of a pan-Latin sensibility that would be crucial to the creation and marketing of salsa music decades later.

During the 1940s, Latin music fully broke through to non-Hispanic audiences following a dispute between American radio networks and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) which licensed much of the music they played. Starved of their usual supply of songs, radio stations increasingly played rumbas, congas, and Latin ballads outside of ASCAP's control, bringing the music to new audiences. The opening of the Palladium Ballroom just north of Times Square in 1948 provided the first major venue dedicated to Latin music outside of the city's Spanish-speaking communities; hosting major performers such as Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez, this "home of the mambo" was credited with launching a nationwide craze in the 1950s that saw mainstream singers like Rosemary Clooney and Perry Como recording mambos as the genre became a fixture of wedding and bar mitzvah celebrations and Catskills resort entertainment.

The South Bronx as a Latin Music "Crucible"[47]

Between the 1940s and the 1970s, the section of the South Bronx stretching from Mott Haven northward

to Melrose, Longwood, and Hunts Point was one of the country's leading Latin music centers. Historians Roberta L. Singer and Elena Martinez call the South Bronx "one of the great crucibles for the development of a New York Latin music sound," playing a crucial role in the creation and marketing of salsa, which has spread across the globe since emerging as a distinct musical genre in New York City in the 1960s and '70s.[48] The Bronx Opera House is among the few major surviving sites recalling this historically and culturally significant era in the city's history.

Latin music's expansion beyond *El Barrio* after World War II coincided with the South Bronx's growth into the city's largest Puerto Rican community, fueled by the displacement of thousands of East Harlem residents by urban renewal projects and a massive migration wave in search of better economic opportunities, facilitated by the advent of air travel and the city's ample supply of working-class jobs from the island that would increase New York's Puerto Rican population to more than 800,000 by 1970.[49] For Puerto Ricans, as for the Jewish, Italian, Irish, and other immigrants who had preceded them in the neighborhood, the South Bronx "represented upward mobility," featuring modern, affordable apartments and lively commercial districts; its excellent public transit made it convenient to *El Barrio* and to employment opportunities throughout the city. The South Bronx □was also teeming with old theaters and music and dance venues ready to be repurposed for new audiences as their old patrons departed for the suburbs. These sites would be crucial contributors to "the physical infrastructure … of an economically sound, socially lively, culturally rich community."[50]

Latin music was being performed in the South Bronx by the 1920s, when a handful of local clubs and restaurants catered to its nascent Cuban and Puerto Rican communities. After selling her East Harlem store in 1939 and briefly moving to Mexico, Victoria Hernández returned to New York and opened a new store, *Casa Hernández,* in the South Bronx's Longwood neighborhood in 1941. Other music stores opened nearby, including Casalegre, owned by Al Santiago, the co-founder of Alegre Records. Considered "the Blue Note of Latin music," Alegre was crucial in popularizing two styles that flourished in New York in the 1960s: *pachanga*—mixing Cuban *son montuno* with Dominican *merengue*—and boogaloo (*bugalú*)—combining Cuban influences with African American rhythm-and-blues—drawing a new, younger audience to Latin music.[51] Both Charlie Palmieri's *Pachanga at the Caravana Club, which recorded live in the Bronx Opera House* (1961) and Pete Rodriguez' infectious boogaloo record *I Like It Like That* (1967) were Alegre releases. Santiago also formed the band the Alegre All-Stars, whose jazzy, jam-based *descarga* performances laid the groundwork for the Fania All-Stars, the legendary salsa band assembled in 1968 by former Alegre artist Johnny Pacheco and his partner Al Masucci, co-founders of the pioneering salsa label Fania Records.

By the 1960s, countless South Bronx gathering places had been reclaimed as Latin music and dance venues. These included large, elaborate ballrooms and theaters like the Hunts Point Palace—nicknamed "the Palladium of the Bronx"—as well as old vaudeville and movie houses, school auditoriums, community and social centers, and various other spaces converted to after-hours joints. Spanish-language movie theaters presented live music between films, within variety shows, and in their amateur nights. Latin music pervaded this most densely musical area of what would come to be known as "the salsa borough," home to hundreds of singers, instrumentalists, and bandleaders including "mambo kings" Tito Puente, Machito, and Tito Rodríguez. Musicians "rehearsed and jammed in

informal places such as apartments and courtyards, on rooftops, parks, and street corners"; as *conguero* Lefty Maldonado recalled decades later, "in the South Bronx … you could walk every block and hear this *tun-tun-tun-tun* from the roof, everyplace. And it was beautiful."[52]

All of these spaces operated within a rich, complex cultural ecosystem that nurtured a remarkable number of local children into legendary Latin musicians. Many of them hung out, starting in the late 1940s, at a neighborhood soda fountain (nicknamed the "Mambo Candy Store" for its jukebox) run by the father of future Latin music stars Charlie and Eddie Palmieri. Bandleader, *timbalero*, and South Bronx native Orlando Marín, who was playing major neighborhood venues alongside Eddie Palmieri and Tito Puente by the early 1960s, recalled growing up within a few blocks of the Palmieri brothers and other future music legends such as Joe Quijano, pianist Joe Loco, bongo virtuoso Manny Oquendo, longtime Fania All-Star Ray Barretto, and Johnny Pacheco, among others. "It was like a phenomenon, you couldn't plan a thing like this. It was like the cream of the crop from the future," Marín said in 2000.[53] Singer and Martinez describe the local Latin music scene between the 1940s and 1970s as "an explosion of musical activity and creativity … a locus for performers to adopt, adapt, and reinterpret primarily Afro-Cuban music forms and styles to express their urban South Bronx reality."[54]

By the late 1960s, this creative energy had exploded into salsa music, which was primarily popularized by Johnny Pacheco's handpicked band the Fania All-Stars. Merging largely Afro-Cuban influences with jazz, rock, funk, and soul, salsa appealed to a younger audience with a strong sense of Latino pride. Fania's marketing of this music as salsa, according to Pacheco—himself a Dominican immigrant—recognized that Fania's musicians included "Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Anglos, Italians, and Jews, that is, a diverse group of condiments that would make good sauce," which contributed to its appeal across ethnic and racial boundaries.[55] Though now a worldwide phenomenon, salsa music is largely rooted in the South Bronx and the musicians who grew up there and blossomed in its Latin music scene between the 1940s and 1970s. The Bronx Opera House became a major center of the Latin music and dance culture that emerged during this significant era.

Bronx Opera House in the Mid-20th Century: La Caravana, Bronx Casino, El Cerromar

By the 1950s, according to music historian Max Salazar, the South Bronx was "the entertainment capital" of Latino New York.[56] Over the next two decades, three of the area's most prominent Latin music venues would be located within the banquet hall of the former Bronx Opera House: *La Caravana*, the Bronx Casino, and *El Cerromar*.[57]

La Caravana, also known as the "Club Caravana" was the first of these three clubs. It opened in April 1959 as a "spacious and beautiful ballroom-cabaret" founded by brothers Gil and Sonny Merced, and Federico Pagani.[58] Known as "*El Gran Federico*" and the "Father of Latin Dance Promotion," Pagani was instrumental in promoting Latin dance and organizing sold-out events at Latin music and dance venues throughout New York.[59]

After its opening, La Caravana immediately became one of the most important event spaces for Latin music in New York.[60] Not only did it provide a venue for numerous Latin orchestras and performers, but it also played a significant role in the development of *Pachanga* music in the city. Originated in Cuba in the 1950s, Pachanga is a festive and lively music, that combines Cuban *son montu*no and Dominican *merengue* and *boogaloo* with African American rhythm-and-blues and bears

similarity to the Colombian *merecumbe* and has a signature dance with various styles within the framework of Cha Cha.[61] During the early 1960s, as the popularity of the "new" dance craze Pachanga was on the rise, the management of La Caravana capitalized on the trend.[62] Just one year after opening, in 1960, the club began showcasing many bands and dancers performing Pachanga including Manolin Morel Campos, Joe Quijano, Johnny Pacheco, and Charlie Palmieri.[63] Pachanga was the main rhythms played in the club, while the same performers would switch to other Latin music beats in other venues. *Ballroom Dance* magazine recognized La Caravana's promotion of Pachanga nights with an article titled "Pachanga at the Caravana," stating that "as early as October 1960, Johnny Pacheco and Charlie Palmieri and others were making the new music and the club's patrons were doing the new dance."[64]

In 1961, a group of six dancers, *Los Pachengueros*, was formed by patrons of La Caravana. Sponsored by the club, the group demonstrated new steps and patterns of the Pachanga dance and even gave sold-out performances in other nightclubs on Long Island and in the Bronx.[65] In the same year, Charlie Palmieri and his orchestra "*Charanga La Duboney*" recorded their album *Pachanga La Caravana* live in the club. The backside of the record cover reads:

> The Caravana Club is so the nite-club trade what "off-Broadway" productions are to the theatre trade…good entertainment in an off-the beaten-track locale. Featured at this Bronx club is Charlie Palmieri for dancing and the Caravana Club Pachanga Dancers for entertainment. The Caravana Club's fame as the Home of the Pachanga is well deserved and the Duboney Orchestra is the prime example of the excellent musical fare offered. So "damas y caballeros" Pachanga it up…

With this record, the club's reputation was established as the "Home of Pachanga."[66]

La Caravana also played a significant role in the careers of many Latin musicians, including Johnny Pacheco, whose first album was produced by Alegre Records in 1960, after Albert Santiago visited La Caravana on Federico Pagani's invitation to hear Pacheco perform. Pacheco's band, "Pacheco y su Charanga," soon became one of the most popular charanga groups of the era.[67] Other musicians who played La Caravana included Yayo el Indio, Juanito Sanabria, Dioris Vallandares, Carlos Pizarro, and Mongo Santamaria.[68]

La Caravana closed in 1962 and re-opened as the Bronx Casino in 1963 under the management of businessman Raul Quintana and Angel Maceda, who maintained the venue's reputation in the Latin music and dance scene. On opening night, Eduardo Davidson, known as the "King of Pachanga," Jose Quijano, and Rey Roig, performed a selection of Latin and Puerto Rican music.[69]

With their increasing popularity, Charlie Palmieri, Eddie Palmieri, Joe Quijano, Johnny Pacheco, and Ray Barretto performed regularly at the Bronx Casino, alongside other legends of Latin music such as "mambo kings" Tito Rodriguez, Machito, and Tito Puente as well as Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians and bands with international recognition including Ismail Rivera, Rafael Cortijo and La Sonora Matencera.[70]Similar to Palmieri's *Pachanga at La Caravana*, the Bronx Casino also inspired an album: *Johnny "El Bravo" Lopez and His Super Combo at the Bronx Casino*. Performing there was a prestigious experience, as the back cover

of the album explains:

> This record contains the hits that El Bravo played during his third trip to New York, featuring at the fabulous Bronx Casino, in which place his success only similar to the performances of the great orchestras that have appeared in this popular ballroom that uses only top names on the dance affairs.

In 1973, the Bronx Casino closed. Two years later in 1975, it reopened as El Cerromar, again under the management of Federico Pagani.[71] Like La Caravana and the Bronx Casino before it, El Cerromar became a venue for Latin Music performers and future stars, where new groups showcased their talent including Orquestra Guarare, El Ritmo Tropical de Cuba, Orquestra Sabor de Angel Canales and Hector Rivera's "Conjuncto Llave."[72] El Cerromar remained open until at least 1980.[73]

Later History of the Bronx Opera House

It appears that the theatre of the Bronx Opera House was vacant even before the closure of El Cerromar.[74] In 1978-79, the Landmarks Preservation Commission considered a proposal to designate the Bronx Opera House and its theater interior as an individual and interior landmark, based on its architectural qualities and history as a legitimate theater. The building's owner had defaulted, and the mortgagor opposed designation. The Commission voted not to designate the building at that time.[75] Subsequently, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development temporarily sealed the building at the request of the preservation advocacy groups organized under the name of "South Bronx Cultural Center Fund". The local community and elected officials started a campaign to save the building. Mayor Edward Koch also supported the fund-raising for the preservation of the building and its conversion into a cultural center and public library.[76]

In 1981, New York City took over the ownership of the Bronx Opera House in a tax proceeding, and the building remained vacant until 1983, when it was auctioned.[77] Between 1984 and 2008, the building was used as a Pentecostal church, Templo de Renovacion Espiritual.[78] In 2008, a project to convert the building into a hotel was approved.[79] Between 2009 and 2011, the rear portion of the building, where the theater auditorium was located, was demolished and a new three-story office building was constructed in its place (not included in designation).[80]

The front building, which contained the public face of the Bronx Opera House, and where the former main entrance, theater lobby, restaurants and most importantly the Latin music clubs including La Caravana, the Bronx Casino, and El Cerromar were located, was sensitively rehabilitated and converted into the Opera House Hotel in 2012-2013.[81] In converting the building to a boutique hotel, the property owner was inspired by a discovery of 1912 playbills and posters and other historical documentation on site, and carefully restored the façade, including extensive cleaning, recreation of historic features, and installation of new windows and lighting.[82]

Today, the beautifully-preserved building is significant not only for its architectural merit and early history as a legitimate theater, but also for its cultural significance related to its specific connection to the Bronx's innovative and influential Latin music and dance scene in the 1960s and 1970s.[83]

Conclusion

For over 100 years, the Bronx Opera House has been

a beloved center of entertainment and culture that has enriched the lives of the citizens of the Bronx and New York. In its early years, it served as a popular theater where some of the most renowned Broadway stars of the early 20th century performed. Later, it became a hub for Latin music and dance, serving as a social gathering place for the community and a venue to express their cultural heritage. Hosting a succession of major Latin music clubs, the Bronx Opera House was instrumental to the development of New York's Latin music scene that helped spark a dance revolution with its famous acts.

Today, the Bronx Opera House still stands as a testament to its storied past and continues to contribute to the liveliness of the hub as a hotel. Its intact and elaborate façade is a reflection of its historic use as a theater, and a marker of its significance to Latin music and culture. The building remains an important part of the community, serving as a reminder of the rich history and cultural heritage of the Bronx and its central place in Latin music history.

Endnotes

[1] In 1940, the Puerto Rican population living in the New York City was 61, 463. This number raised to 254,880 in 1950, 612,574 in 1960, and 811,843 in 1970. Sherrie Baverm Angelo Falcon, Gabriel Haslip-Viera, *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press), 27, 29, 66.

[2]Sources for this section include historic photographs from New York City Department of Taxes Photograph (c. 1938-43), Municipal Archives; New York City Department of Taxes Photograph (c. 1983-88), Municipal Archives; "The Bronx Opera House," *The Livable City, a Publication of Municipal Art Society* (December 1979), Vol. 6, Number 3; "Bronx Opera House," The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, York Public Library Digital Collections, Accessed June 22, 2023 from https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b153a765-7eba-f909-e040-e00a18062ff0; "Bronx Opera House," *Architecture and Building* (April 1914), Vol. 46, No. 4, 152.

[3] Much of the information in this section is compiled from the following: Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Haffen Building Designation Report* (LP2388) (NY: City of NY, 2010) report prepared by Theresa C. Noonan, LPC; (*Former) Dollar Savings Bank Designation Report* (LP-2370) (NY; City of NY) report prepared Theresa C. Noonan, LPC.

[4]Eugene J. Boesch, Ph.D., Archaeological Evaluation and Sensitivity Assessment of the Prehistoric and Contact Period Aboriginal History of the Bronx, New York, July 19, 1996.

[5] The Borough of the Bronx came into being in 1898, with New York City's consolidation. It was part of New York County until 1914, when Bronx County was created. Gary D. Hermalyn and Lloyd Ultan, 25-30; Kenneth T. Jackson ed., The Encyclopedia of New York City (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 142-146. Also see See Gary D. Hermalyn, "Annexed District" and "North Side," Jackson, 39, 854.

[6] By 1902, booster groups pushing for improved rapid transit connections with Manhattan included the North Side Board of Trade, Twenty-Third Ward Property Owners' Association, South Bronx Association, University Heights Association and Bronx East Side Association; "Rapid Transit for the Bronx," New York Times, August 26, 1902, 3.

[7] Adapted from: Evelyn Gonzalez, The Bronx (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 4-6

[8] Adapted from: Gonzalez, 73-74; Bronx Home News, April 3, 1908, December 7, 1913; Record and Guide, (November 4, 1911). Lots in the Hub had sold for slightly more than $4,000 in 1901. Ten years later, these lots were selling for $30,000 each.

[9] "The Hub" is the unofficial name given to the intersection of East 149th Street, Melrose, Willis and Third Avenues, it is believed to have been coined around 1896 when Melrose Avenue was cut through to join Willis Avenue, some believe that the term was used as early as the 1880s. Bronx Press-Preview, The Bronx In History, John McNamara, October 1991, Page 19

[10] Other theatre buildings in the Hub were The Bronx Theatre (later known as Miner's-in-the-Bronx and Loew's Victory Theatre) by George Keister and Keith's Royal Theatre, both were later demolished.

[11] "New York, New York City Municipal Deaths, 1795-1949"database, *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:2WY3-W6L : 3 June 2020), George W. Keister, 1945. (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:2WY3-W6L: 3 June 2020), George W. Keister, 1945.

[12] Daniel Van Pelt, *Leslie's History of the Greater New York, v.3* (New York, USA: Arkell Pub. Co., 1898), 640.

[13] Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice: New York City 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records), 1979

[14] George Keister, "Fads in Architecture", published in *The Architectural Record*, volume VI (July-September 1891), 45-61

[15] Colonial Theater (1905, 1887 Broadway), Loew's Yorkville Theater (1905, 157 East 86th Street), Astor Theatre (1906, 1537 Broadway), Miner's (Loew's Victory) Theater (l910, 3024 Third Avenue, Bronx), Second Avenue Theatre (1911, 33-35 Second Avenue), Jefferson Theater (1912, 214 East 14th Street), Chaloner Theater (1921, 401-409 West 55th Sreet) and Earl Carroll Theatre (1921, 753-759 7th Avenue).

[16] Other surviving theatre buildings, designed by George Keister include Selwyn Theatre (1917) at 240-248 West 43rd Street; Benson Theater (1920) at 2005-11 86th Street, Brooklyn; Chester Theatre (1928) at 1938 Boston Road.

[17] Much of the information in this section is compiled from the following: John McCabe, *George M. Cohan: The*

Man Who Owned Broadway (New York: Doubleday, 1973); Ward Warehouse, *George M. Cohan: Prince of the American Theatre* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1943); David Ewen, Popular American Composers from Revolutionary Times to the Present: A Biographical and Critical Guide (New York: H. W. Wilson Co, 1962); Gilbert Seldes, "Song and Dance Man", *The New Yorker*, March 17, 1934, 27.

[18] Jerry Cohan was a staple act in the vaudeville scene of the 1870s, playing both harp and violin, and Helen "Nellie" Cohan was a vaudeville performer who also wrote a number of songs and vaudeville sketches. George Cohan wrote plays and songs for "Four Cohans" at age 13, and made a name for himself as the star of the play *Peck's Bad Boy*.

[19] "Cohan 'explains' split with Harris", *The New York Times*, April 9, 1934, 20.

[20] "Architectural Terra Cotta", *Real Estate Records and Builders'Guide*, March 25, 1911, 544; "Klaw and Erlanger Take Cohan Houses", *The New York Times*, July 4, 1913, 7; and "Some Interesting Facts Concerning Sam H. Harris", *Times Union*, August 30, 1925, 60.

[21] "Bronx Combination House next for Cohan & Harris", *Variety, Vol. XXV, No. 5*, January 6, 1912, 7.

[22] Official Website of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/father-duffy-square/monuments/282, retrieved on March 31, 2023

[23] Hortense Tobias Manning, *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1987), 33; Raymond G. Carroll, "The Subway Circuit", *The Deseret News*, January 6, 1923, 5.

[24] The New York times advertised the shows on the "subway circuit" venues regularly between 1917 and 1953.

[25] Raymond G. Carroll, 5.

[26] Joseph G. Herxberg, The Bronx had everything, including own shows, September 4, 1972

[27] The number of the theatres in the "Subway Circuit" varied in different years. See *The New York Times*, February *12, 1928*, 2; *The New York Times*, January *23, 1921*, 6X; *The New York Times*, February *17, 1918*

[28] Application for the Erection of Brick Buildings Plan No 580, July 13, 1912, Bureau of Buildings for the Borough of the Bronx;"Theatres", *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, Vol. 89 (June 8, 1912), 1245; "Theatres", *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, Vol. 90 (July 20, 1912), 130; *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, Vol. 90 (July 20, 1912), 498; and "Amusement Notes," *The Standard Union*, September 9, 1912, 13.

[29] Some other theater buildings showing the same massing scheme includes Apollo theater and Selwyn Theater, having front mass for commercial use and public face and rear building having the auditorium.

[30] "The Building in 149th Street", *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, Vol. 89 (June 1, 1912), 1188.

[31] Architect George Keister's Building Drawings, Plan No 580, June 1912, Bureau of Buildings for the Borough of the Bronx; and "New Bronx Play House," *The New York Times*, August 24, 1913, 84.

[32] Application for Slight Alterations and Architect Harry T Howell's Building Drawings, Plan No Alt. 34-16, January1916, Bureau of Buildings for the Borough of the Bronx.

[33] "New Bronx Opera," *New Rochelle Pioneer*, August 23, 1913, 8; "Fine Feathers, Bronx Opera House Opens Season with Broadway Success," *Times Union*, September 2, 1913; "Bronx Opera House to Open", *The Brooklyn Citizen*, August 18, 1913, 9.

[34] "Amusements," The South Bend Tribune, September 29, 1913; "Great Play, Justice for Next Week at Bronx Opera House," The Daily Argus, September 13, 1916; "Julian Eltinge Xmas Play at the Bronx Opera House," *Mount Vernon Argus*, December 23 1916, 4; "Miss Ethel Barrymore at Bronx Opera House," Mount Vernon Argus, December 22, 1923, 11; "Peter Ibbitson at the Bronx Opera House," Mount Vernon Argus, November 17, 1917, 2; "Plays for the Coming Week," *The Evening World*, March 13, 1915, 6.

[35] *Mount Vernon Argus*, February 27, 1926, 13.

[36] "Sam H Harris Has 12 New Productions: His Contract with George M. Cohan Expired Yesterday," *New York Herald*, July 1, 1929, 11; and "The Cosmopolitan Opera Association has leased the Bronx Opera House," *Daily News*, September 8, 1929, 57.

[37] Mount Vernon Argus, February 27, 1926, 13.

[38] "Girl Heard Attackers Challenged", *Daily News*, May 6,1943, 4; "Theatre Loses Kicense," *New York Times*, April 6, 1943, 23; *La Prensa*, February 12, 1955; *La Prensa*, January 21, 1939; *La Prensa*, January 6, 1961; "Bronx Gentility Lost in Modern Bustle," The New York Times, September 4, 1972,17; Correspondance between Bronx Buildings Department and South Bronx Community Planning Unit regarding architectural

drawings of the Bronx Opera House (Bronc Theater), October 1, 1973, Bureau of Buildings for the Borough of the Bronx.

[39] New York City Telephone Directories, Bronx Address Telephone Directory, March 1941, and April-December 1954.

[40] Bronx Address Telephone Directory shows two separate addresses for the movie houses and the Friendship Club. Also see: New York City Telephone Directories, Bronx Address Telephone Directory, March 1945, and May-December 1950; "Friendship Club to Open in Flatbush" *The Brooklyn Citizen*, March 4, 1947; 0; "Bx. Friendship Club to Open Brooklyn Branch for folks over 28"*, Daily News*, February 26, 1947; Daily *News*, February 4, 1949; Bronx Friendship Club Lecture Series to Saturday Night Program Tonight"*, Daily News,* April 15, 1950.

[41] *Daily News*, October 27, 1945, 78; *Daily News*, August 11, 1943, 51.

[42] Bronx Address Telephone Directory shows two separate addresses for the movie houses and the Tara Ballroom. Also see: New York City Telephone Directories, Bronx Address Telephone Directory, August 1956; Roberta L. Singer and Elena Martinez; "A South Bronx Latin Music Tale," *Centro Journal*, V. xvi, n. 1, (Spring 2004), 181; John T. Ridge, "Dance Halls of Irish New York," *New York Irish History*, v.19, 2005, 50.

[43] Sources for this section include Elena Martinez and Ned Kaufman, *Casa Amadeo, Antigua Casa Hernandez National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (Washington: United States Department of the Interior, 2000); Max Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom: Latin Music in New York* (New York: Schirmer, 2002); Roberta L. Singer and Elena Martinez, "A South Bronx Latin Music Tale," *Centro* (Spring 2004), 177-201; and Christopher Washburne, *Sounding Salsa: Performing Latin Music in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

[44] Salazar, 2.

[45] Salazar, 4.

[46] Washburne, 14.

[47] This section is primarily based on the same sources as the previous section.

[48] Singer and Martinez, 183.

[49] 1970 United States Census; Library of Congress, Immigration and Relocation in US History, "Migrating to a New Land", https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/puerto-rican-cuban/migrating-to-a-new-land/

[50] Singer and Martinez, 180.

[51] Juan Flores, *Salsa Rising: New York Music of the Sixties Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 62.

[52] Singer and Martinez, 182.

[53] Singer and Martinez, 192.

[54] Singer and Martinez, 177.

[55] Washburne, 20.

[56] Nina Siegal, "In the Footsteps of Mambo Kings," *The New York Times*, Sep 8, 2000, E1, E24.

[57] Bronx Address Telephone Directory shows the Latin Music Clubs at 442 149th Street, the address of the front building. Also, a letter and drawings for an application to the Department of Buildings (BN 66/63, dated April 16, 1963) describe and shows the alterations at the Bronx Casino at second-story banquet hall.

[58] Nina Siegal, E24.

[59] Max Salazar, "Federico Pagani," *Mambo Kingdom: Latin Music in New York,* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2022).

[60] Roberta L. Singer and Elena Martinez, 188.

[61] Sidney Trott and Bernie Sager, "The Story of Pachanga-Charanga," *Ballroom Dance Magazine*, July 1961, 5; John E. Lucchese, "La Pachanga," *Ballroom Dance Magazine,* May 1961, 7*;* Don Brynes and Alice Swanson, "Let's Dance 'La Pachanga,'" *Ballroom Dance Magazine,* November 1960, 23.

[62] B. W., "Pachanga at the Caravana," *Ballroom Dance Magazine,* August 1961, 11.

[63] *La Prensa*, December 5, 1959; *La Prensa*, January 15, 1960; *La Prensa*, February 12, 1960; *La Prensa*, April 6, 1961.

[64] B. W., 11.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid

[67] Ibid.

[68] "Nictambulerias", *La Prensa*, March 29, 1959; *La Prensa*, February 23, 1962.

[69] "Abre Hoy El Bronx Casino," *La Prensa*, January 18, 1963.

[70] Other notable names performed in the venue includes Marcellino Guerra, Mon Rivera, Willie Rosario, José Fajardo, Tony Pabón, Monguito, Vicento Valdes, Orchestra Broadway, Orlando Contreras, Pete Rodriguez, Belisario Lopez, Sonora Borinquen, Alberto Beltran, Rey Roig, Frankie Figueroa, Gilberto Sextet, Tipico Cibaeno, Fernando Levya, Alfredo Valdes, Mike Enserat, Kako, Orquesta Pamamericana, Louie Ramirez, Raul Marrero, Celio Gonzales, Conjunto Sensacion, Willy "El Baby," Linda Leyda and Pupi Lergarreta. See Nina Siegal, E24; *La Prensa*, January 17, February 12, 21, November 22, 1963; *El Diario-La Prensa*, January 12, 19, March 20, 29, April 17, June 14, July 5, 26, September 11, 18, November 11, December 11, 18, 24, 1964; *El Diario-La Prensa* January 10, 22, February 5, September 3, 10, 17, October 8, 15, 22, 29, 1965; *El Diario-La Prensa*, January 1, 7, 14, 28, February 20, 25, March 11, 18, 25, April 1, 8, 15, 22, , May 27, 1966; *El Diario-La Prensa,* January 12, 19, 26, February 2, 1969;, July 6, August 3, 10, 17, 1969; and *El Diario-La Prensa,* January 11, 1970.

[71] Max Salazar, "Grace Notes," *Latin Times*, October 1976,26.

[72] Ibid.

[73] New York City Telephone Directories, Bronx Address Telephone Directory, 1980; Nina Siegal, E24.

[74] Landmarks Preservation Commission Archives, Bronx Opera House Research Files.

[75] Ibid. Subsequent to the public hearing on May 2, 2023, the Research staff discovered files indicating that the Commission had held a public hearing on September 12, 1978 on the proposed designation of the Bronx Opera House as a landmark and an interior landmark, and voted on March 29, 1979 to deny designation. The files are incomplete, but it appears it was being considered for its architectural qualities and for its status as a legitimate theater. The mortgagor (the owner had defaulted) opposed designation for economic reasons, the building was no longer a theater, there were few tenants and there were a lot of back taxes owed, and threatened hardship. Also see

[76] "Public urged to help save Opera House," *Daily News*, November 11, 1979, 19.

[77] " Some Municipal White Elephants Are Now Hot Properties, *The New York Times*, September 11, 1983; Certificate of Occupancy, New York City Department of Buildings,1982 and 1983; "Record Bid at City Realty Sale," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1983, 29.

[78] New York City Telephone Directories, Bronx Address Telephone Directory, 1986; Deeds 537/1031, March 1, 1984, and 2007000345822, June 21, 2007, New York City Department of Finance, Office of the City Register; Google Street Views of 436-442 E 149th Street, Bronx, October 2008, April 2009.

[79] Application for Alteration, Job No 210049516, November 26, 2008, New York City Department of Buildings.

[80] Google Street Views of 436-442 E 149th Street, Bronx, April 2009, June 2011, June 2014.

[81] "Developer Restores Theater as Boutique Hotel in the Hub," *Daily News*, April 15, 2012, 33.

[82] The property owner provided the summary of the restoration work.

[83] The building's cultural significance was not yet recognized when the building was first considered as a landmark in 1978.

Findings and Designation

Bronx Opera House

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Bronx Opera House has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City, state, and the nation.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Bronx Opera House and designates Borough of Bronx Tax Map Block 2293, Lot 46 in part as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.

Bronx Opera House, 436-442 East 149th Street
Bilge Kose, June 2023

Bronx Opera House
Bilge Kose, June 2023

Bronx Opera House
Bilge Kose, June 2023

Italian Renaissance Revival style third-story middle bay tympanum containing cartouches with interlaced "C & H"
Bilge Kose, March 2023

Bronx Opera House
Bilge Kose, June 2023

Bronx Opera House | LP-2667
Brook Av
E 149 St
Not part of landmark site
Legend
Proposed Landmark Site
Block 2293, Lot 46
Building Footprints
New York City Tax Lots
Address: 436-442 East 149th Street
Landmark Site: Borough of Bronx, Tax Map Block 2293, Lot 46 in part
Calendared: February 14, 2023
Public Hearing: May 2, 2023
Designated: June 13, 2023
Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 22v1, Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, DHW, Date: 6.13.2023