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Howard Mandel's freelance Urban Improvisation

# Eddie Palmieri sets Jazz at Lincoln Center afire

[Eddie Palmieri](#), the genius and prophet of Afro-Caribbean jazz, showed [Herbie Hancock](#), maybe Wynton Marsalis and certainly the roaring audience at [Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Hall](#) a thing or three last weekend. His band [La Perfecta II](#), reconstituting the instrumentation and compositions for mambo, cha-cha and pachanga dancing Palmieri introduced in 1961, blew the lid off the joint as I've heard no other band do since it opened in 2004, establishing Latin music's [clavé rhythm](#) for all time at the core of what Marsalis likes to call "the [house that swing built](#)."

Swing they did, La Perfecta, swing *hard*, with style, precision and vengeance much more driving, cool *and* fiery than anything else taken for swing today. If only the Rose Hall seats could have been pushed aside for dancing. Swing, swivel, dip, cut, twist, step, shift, glide, gesture -- faster, faster, faster -- in perfect syncopation with the polyrhythmic percussion, the riffing trombones and trumpet, the steely-plucked trécs and full-bodied but sparely applied flute.

Palmieri at the piano -- age 73, dapper in suit and yellow tie, busy cueing his horns, supporting his elegant yet impassioned male singers, goosing the tempo kept by his deft young bassist and veteran conga player, breaking into unpredictably funky or classical, flowing or staggered keyboard solos -- is probably the last surviving bandleader in America today who makes "swing" transcend its historic import to render big band virtuosity, intensity and density at highest speeds more immediate than tomorrow's pop. His music isn't contemporary, it's *immediate*, and thus timeless.

He expands on an extraordinary American idiom -- check out this clip from a [Fania All-Stars](#) session of Palmieri, the "Sun of Latin Music" with fellow keyboardists Larry Harlow and Papo Lucca, Johnny Pacheco playing flute and Ismael Quintana singing lead:

Born in New York's Spanish Harlem of Puerto Rican heritage, Palmieri is a 9-time Grammy winner with [almost 40 albums](#) to his credit and a gift for recognizing the best of new musical talents that rivals Ellington's, Blakey's or Miles Davis's. He came up under the wing of his keyboardist brother [Charlie Palmieri](#), worked the Palladium theater when he was 15 and has never stopped tinkering with, adapting and advancing a tradition he's too proud of to allow it to grow old and dull.

Maybe no one dances the pachanga any more, but Palmieri and his players didn't let that stop them: they rev up each chart that might be supposed a bit dusty with utter confidence that the music will rouse anyone who hears it. I had brought a class of Turkish exchange students from [Bard High School/Early College](#), and though they weren't steeped in Afro-Caribbean or [Nuyorican](#) culture, these kids seemed as struck by the music's power as the rest of the Lincoln Center audience -- which several times erupted in cheers.

There was a lot to cheer: that Palmieri was playing Jazz at Lincoln Center for the first time, that the house for the first night of two was packed; that Herbie Hancock, progressive yet sometimes too cautious or mellow, was in a front row. But it was the music itself that turned us out. Afro-Caribbean jazz as Palmieri designs it is greater than the sum of its parts but make no mistake, those parts are great.

[Herman Olivera](#), the tall lead singer, was well dressed and choreographed (they all were) but his vocal improvisations conveyed urgency as well as maturity. [Nelson Gonzalez](#), the slight, graying guitarist, seemed stoic until he whipped out a chordal solo that burst all harmonic bonds. Trombonist [Jimmy Bosch](#)

and trumpeter [Brian Lynch](#) (one of Palmieri's [closest collaborators](#)) took turns topping each other with scorching, meaty solos. Flutist [Karen Joseph](#) knew her idiom thoroughly, bounding over the multiple layers of rhythmic and melodic action. The sections' synchronization was tighter than the Rockettes', though each musician exuded their own personality.

And Palmieri's keyboard work, which has often seemed to me frustrated by the limits of his chops, instead was utterly accomplished. Latin jazz piano is a genre unto itself, with current wondermen including [Gonzalo Rubalcaba](#), [Chucho Valdez](#) and [Michel Camilo](#). What Palmieri played linked the montuno to New Orleans' rhythm 'n' blues, to Thelonious Monk, McCoy Tyner and Joe Zawinul. I heard both Ellington and Basie lead their orchestras live, but never with so much juice or juju. I hope Hancock took note.

Too bad [Wynton](#) wasn't there to hear La Perfecta II, but he probably got a full report. He was preparing, no doubt, for his own concerts this week with Willie Nelson and Norah Jones. If those three could generate the heat and light provided by the [Sun of Latin Music](#) -- and I can't resist embedding the clip below of the Palmieri brothers during their Afro-Latin funk phase, circa 1972 -- they would put an end to any questions about the health and future of jazz.

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## 1 Comments

By drh160 on [February 9, 2009 11:00 AM](#)

Both nights were filled with great energy, amazing music and most importantly - a group of legends. I can't wait until they bring Palmieri back - I'll certainly be there with bells on ready to get my "clave" groove on through the night.

HM: The thing about those "legends" though is they proved worthy now, not merely in memory. Complete naifs could (and did) attend and be compelled by what was happening there and then in Rose Hall, without reference to another place in an earlier time.

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I'm a Chicago -born and New York-based writer, editor, author, arts producer for National Public Radio -- for more than 30 years, a freelance arts journalist working on newspapers, magazines and websites, appearing on tv and radio, teaching at New York University and elsewhere. I'm president of the [Jazz Journalists Association](#). [more](#)