



When the Spirits Dance Mambo: Growing Up Nuyorican in El Barrio

Marta Moreno Vega

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When rock and roll was transforming American culture in the 1950s and '60s, East Harlem pulsed with the sounds of mambo and merengue. Instead of Elvis and the Beatles, Marta Moreno Vega grew up worshipping Celia Cruz, Mario Bauza, and Arsenio Rodriguez. Their music could be heard on every radio in El Barrio and from the main stage at the legendary Palladium, where every weekend working-class kids dressed in their sharpest suits and highest heels and became mambo kings and queens. Spanish Harlem was a vibrant and dynamic world, but it was also a place of constant change, where the traditions of Puerto Rican parents clashed with their children's American ideals.

A precocious little girl with wildly curly hair, Marta was the baby of the family and the favorite of her elderly abuela, who lived in the apartment down the hall. Abuela Luisa was the spiritual center of the family, an espiritista who smoked cigars and honored the Afro-Caribbean deities who had always protected their family. But it was Marta's brother, Chachito, who taught her the latest dance steps and called her from the pay phone at the Palladium at night so she could listen, huddled beneath the bedcovers, to the seductive rhythms of Tito Puente and his orchestra.

In this luminous and lively memoir, Marta Moreno Vega calls forth the spirit of Puerto Rican New York and the music, mysticism, and traditions of a remarkable and quintessentially American childhood.

“Viva Marta Moreno Vega! With honesty, humor, and love, she relives her coming-of-age in Spanish Harlem—the highs and the lows—eloquently documenting how deeply rooted West African cultural traditions are in her rich Puerto Rican heritage. Marta Vega's memoir makes me want to mambo.” —Susan Taylor, editorial director of *Essence* and author of *Lessons in Living*

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