This interview with
EDDIE PALMIERI
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 12, 2021

Library of Congress: In many circles you are known as the "Father of Salsa," is that a label you accept?

Eddie Palmieri: You know, that word, "salsa," I stay away from it. It is really Afro-Caribbean music and, before that, it was known as "Afro-Cuban" music…. The Cuban sound came [to the US] in the 20s, the 30s, and up through the 50s. The Mambo and then the Cha-Cha-Cha. But then Castro came to power in 1959, changed the country's doctrine, and the umbilical cord, so to speak, to that country for the music was cut.

Puerto Rico became the new source—Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, all those musicians were Puerto Rican. They brought the structure to New York.

So, I think Afro-Caribbean is the right word.

LOC: You have made many albums during your long career, when I mention "Azucar Pa Ti" to you though, what immediately comes to mind?

EP: I think of "Azucar" [a cut on the album]. It was completely different than so much of what was being done at that time. I was very, very fortunate to have just signed to Roulette Records, which had a subsidiary, Tico, which is who I recorded for. Teddy Reig was my A&R man, what we call "producers" now; he used to manage Count Basie….

After a year and a half of playing "Azucar" in New York clubs, we had made it *great.* But I thought I'd NEVER be able to record it; that composition is not the norm. Most [songs] at that time were two minutes and 45 seconds at the most. "Azucar" was nine minutes and 30 seconds! My solo alone was two-forty! Finally, Teddy said, "Just record it."

"Azucar" becomes really unique after the piano solo—it is completely Latin jazz then, it's a combination of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-jazz.

It became our biggest hit and it always closed our shows. They'd announce though, "If you want to dance to this, wait until after the piano solo or you'll never make it!"

LOC: How did you first meet Barry Rogers?

EP: He played as part of a social club with a friend of mine. They were playing at the Tritons on Tuesday nights with Johnny Pacheco; Johnny was in charge of the Tuesday jam sessions. Johnny played with my brother at the International in 1958.

So they had these jam sessions on Tuesday nights on Southern Boulevard. I went there to hear them.

That was late 1961; by 1962 we were recording. I was forming my own orchestra. We already had George Castro playing the flute and we needed a trombone. We had so many great musicians like Manny Oquendo, Tommy Lopez and, of course, our vocalist, Ismael Quintana. We called them "La Perfecta."

LOC: What role do you think this album specifically has played in the development and popularization of Latin music, especially in the US?

EP: "Azcar Pa Ti," and the orchestra, did become important. It went through the world of the African-Americans--everyone had a copy of "Azucar" under their arm. Then it went through all the nightclubs, every night in New York.

"Azucar" was just beyond everyone's comprehension then. You never saw an orchestra with that many trombones up front. Someone said if Barry keeps playing like that he's going to die!

The sound put everyone in shock. And it made trombones popular--all the trombones got taken out of the pawn shops! It was not typical dance music—we changed it. And we made it more exciting. And no matter how many times we played "Azucar," people always wanted it.

It's my great honor [to be on the Registry]—and I accept it in the name of great musicians in that band.