

El Cantante

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Last week, we had the premiere of “*El Cantante*,” a movie sponsored by the Puerto Rico Film Commission, on the life of Héctor Lavoe, featuring Marc Anthony as Héctor and Jennifer López as Héctor’s wife Puchi. The premiere was held with Hollywood protocol at the Raúl Juliá Theatre in the Museum of Puerto Rico and was attended by Gov. Acevedo Vilá, members of his cabinet, a strong representation from the entertainment media, our principal producers and a good number of salsa singers among whom were Cheo Feliciano, Ismael Miranda, Roberto Rohena, Domingo Quiñones and Víctor Manuelle.

My wife Nelsa and I were invited to go by Faelo Vassallo along with Ico Zayas, the mayor of Ponce, and his wife Nancy. I was glad we went. It was a major event for Puerto Rico and it brought back a lot of memories for me.

Salsa erupted in New York and Puerto Rico during the decade of the ‘60s and was coming on strong during my first term as governor that extended from Jan. 2, 1973 to Jan. 2, 1977. At the time, our young people referred to themselves as *salseros* or *rockeros*. Those who liked salsa were *salseros*, those who liked rock were *rockeros*. My oldest son, Rafa, was, and still is, a *salsero*. I was more into politics than into music at the time, but Nelsa López and Rafi Cuna, two young persons involved in music who had been with me on the campaign trail in 1972 convinced me we should have a series of salsa concerts in La Fortaleza. As I usually did with people that brought good ideas to me, I asked them to execute their proposal and they went ahead and mounted the concerts recruiting important salsa bands, such as Fania All Stars, Roberto Rohena and the Apollo Sound, Raphy Leavitt and La Selecta, and others. The concerts were a huge success and I became familiar with salsa and with the *salseros*.

During the decade of the ‘80s, salsa circled the globe. You had La Sonora Ponceña playing in Japan, Japanese group Orquesta de la Luz playing all over, El Gran Combo touring Europe and Lalo Rodríguez’s “*Devórame otra vez*” was No. 1 on Spain’s hit parade. Salsa had made it big time.

I was re-elected governor in 1984 and again in 1988. In 1987, we received the visit of the king of Spain and during his visit the king invited Puerto Rico to participate in the World Fair to be held in Sevilla to commemorate the fifth centennial of the discovery of America. World fairs are forward-looking events that provide the participating nations and corporations the opportunity of projecting themselves, their culture, their capabilities, their natural habitats and their products to the millions of visitors who attend. We agreed to participate. When we were in the planning stage, I made a decision that turned off most of those who were collaborating with me in the project but which turned out to be crucial in making our pavilion one of the most popular and most-visited spots in the fair.

The Pavilion was to have a theater, which would be open to the public, and my colleagues wanted us to present the Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra on that stage. We have a great symphony orchestra but I was clear, however, that what we should present were our salsa orchestras, which had gained widespread international popularity. I insisted on this and salsa became the magnet that attracted the crowds to our pavilion like no other in the fair.

We are a musical people. We are known worldwide by our music, by our composers like Rafael Hernández—London’s Big Ben plays “*Campanitas de Cristal*”—or by our singers like Ricky Martin. We are universal in our music and salsa and our *salseros* have made a major contribution to the musical expression of our culture throughout the world.

Héctor Lavoe was probably the best of our salsa singers. His voice was unique for several reasons: it had a powerful and commanding quality to it and when he sang you couldn’t miss it; in the way he phrased the songs he sang he conveyed all sorts of feelings and, once he began to sing, he connected with his audience and his audience with him because it had such an agreeable tone. No one could interpret like Héctor.

He had a tragic life. Drugs and, eventually, AIDS deprived us of his talent while he was still in his 40s. His marriage to Puchi was very complex: two pain-driven individuals hacking it out amid fame.

Marc Anthony and JLo rendered a brilliant performance portraying Héctor and Puchi. It is a serious piece of work that denotes many hours on their part to delve into two difficult personalities. Héctor, having been a major star for so long, is well-known and Marc did a wonderful job with Héctor’s mannerisms and stage performance on the one hand while on the other hand portraying the deeply troubled soul of the singer. JLo was magnificent as Puchi, who was stronger as a person than Héctor but was as profoundly troubled and, who, unlike Héctor, had an extremely complex and combative personality.

The film is a tribute that Héctor deserved. He gave us the best of the talent that God gave him, he sang the songs that gave us happiness or carried a message, such as “*Periódico de ayer*” that helped us endure the hardships of love and life. He was “*El Cantante*.” He made us sing with him “*¡que cante mi gente!*.” For this, we must be grateful and must accord his talent the respect and appreciation it is due. No matter drugs or AIDS or whatever personal failings he had, his songs will be a legacy that will continue to move generations yet unborn.