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Weissman Was My Destination

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Weissman Was My Destination

Aldemaro Romero Jr.

“The moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise.
It is not that we seize them, but that they seize us.”

Ashley Montagu, British-American anthropologist

The date was Monday, August 8, 2016. The coeditor of this book, Gary Hentzi, and I visited Baruch College’s archives to get an idea of the kind of photographic resources we would have available to use as illustrations. We were impressed by how much material the archives contained and by how well organized they were. The director of the archives, Sandra Roff, and her staff walked us through the collection and occasionally showed us a particular picture that they thought could be of interest.

“Here’s one you might find curious,” she said. “This is the building that used to be where the Vertical Campus is today.” And when she mentioned the name of the original owner of the building I got goosebumps. “Too good to be true!” I said to myself. I felt I needed to check the facts.



*My father and I in Riverside Park in 1953
(Aldemaro Romero Jr., personal collection)*



*Old RCA Victor Building before it was demolished to build the Vertical Campus
(Baruch College Archives)*

My first visit to New York City was on December 6, 1952. I was fourteen months old. The reason for the trip was that my parents had moved to the Big Apple, where my father wanted to live for many reasons. One was that he wanted to advance his musical career.

Aldemaro Romero Sr. was born in a major Venezuelan industrial town called Valencia on March 12, 1928. When he was thirteen, he moved to Caracas and began his musical career as a pianist, a composer of popular music, and an orchestra conductor, the latter at the age of nineteen. Having been denied admission to the only school of music in Caracas, he decided in 1951 to move to New York, which was the mecca

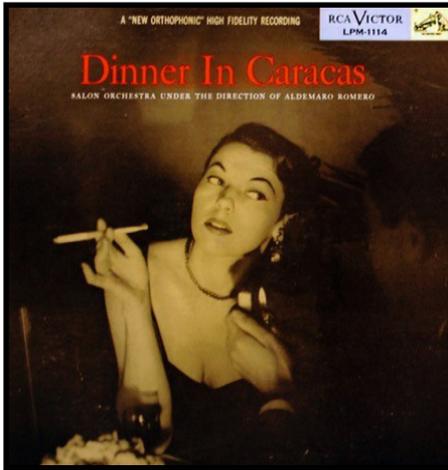
of popular music at the time. He wanted to learn more about music, so the choice was a logical one.

Our first address was at 73rd Street and Broadway. To earn a living while learning more about music from others, my father performed in many different locations around New York City, most of which are just distant memories now. They included the Chateau Madrid (511 Lexington Ave at 48th Street in the Lexington Hotel), the Copacabana (268 West 47th Street in Times Square), the Sugar Cane Club (135th Street and 5th Avenue), the Bandbox Theater (57th Street near 3rd Avenue), the Strand Theater (Broadway and 47th Street in Times Square), the Manhattan Center Hammerstein Ballroom (311 West 34th Street), and the Teatro Puerto Rico (490 East 138th Street), among others. In many cases, he was accompanying other artists; in others, he was the band leader of his own group, The Al Romero Quintet, which played Latin Jazz and comprised vibraphone, sax, bass, and percussion, with my father at the piano.

As he was playing all around New York, so we were living in many places, to the point where many of my father's fellow musicians joked that they had to keep a separate address book just for my father. Yet we always lived on the West Side of Manhattan. A few pictures of me as a small kid show buildings still standing by Riverside Park in the background.

I do have some memories of the time when we lived in New York City, like the floor plan of the last apartment we occupied (when I was four years old), the mailman picking up letters from the USPS mailbox on the street, and my trips on the subway. Other things I remember were my father always writing music, playing the piano, reading the classics, and playing classical music records, particularly on Sunday mornings.

He was determined to learn by himself or from whomever he could. His first long-term musical contract was as an arranger for the RCA Victor label, which together with Columbia Records was one of the major music labels in the world. He wrote arrangements for such



Cover of Dinner In Caracas

musical luminaries as Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Stan Kenton, and Tito Puente, among others.

His big break came when he recorded his first album, *Dinner In Caracas*, on December 12 and 13, 1954. This LP contained Venezuelan music arranged for a large orchestra, something that had never been done before in Venezuelan or any other

Latin American music for that matter. It became a huge hit, beating all sales records in Latin America. It was so popular that RCA Victor extended his contract to have him record many other albums, not only of Venezuelan music but also of music from other Latin American countries.

Despite his success in New York, we returned to Venezuela in 1955 because my mother was fed up with my father working all day and then leaving at night to perform. She felt lonely and somewhat preoccupied with my health (which at that time was rather frail) and had little support from the rest of the family in Venezuela, given that we were living in the Big Apple, although few people called it that at the time.

Of course, I knew all this history before I signed the contract to become the dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College in March 2016. What I did not know was what I learned when visiting the college's archives—that the location of the Newman Vertical Campus today is where the RCA Victor studios were located in the 1950s. This was where my father recorded his first album, *Dinner In Caracas*. So I started to ask myself,



Publicity shot by RCA Victor of Aldemaro Romero Sr. circa 1954

could it be possible that I was now working at the same exact geographic location where my father began his recording career?

Although as a scientist I am not a believer in supernatural phenomena or in anything that cannot be explained by science, I could not help thinking, “Maybe Weissman was my destination!”