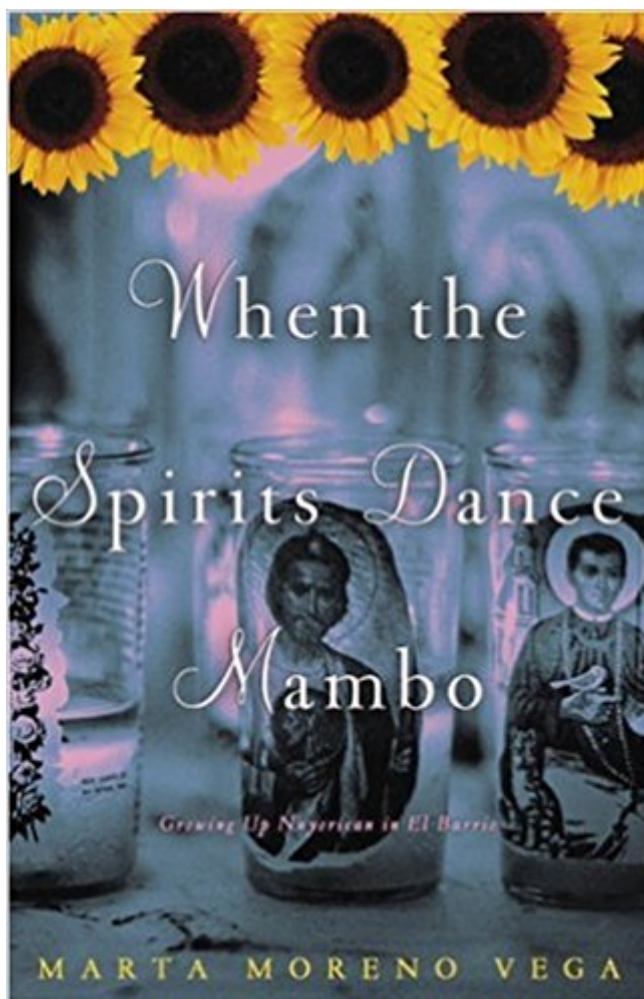


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# When The Spirits Dance Mambo: Growing Up Nuyorican In El Barrio



## Synopsis

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*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this vivid work, which shares its title with a 2002 documentary Vega produced, two tales flawlessly merge: one recalls an Afro-Puerto Rican girl's upbringing in 1950s Spanish Harlem; the other explains the background for the author's eventual status as a priestess of the Santeria/Lucumi religion. What could have been a familiar coming-of-age story is made fresh with Vega's painterly detail and use of background music (Celia Cruz, Machito and Tito Puente's sounds are present throughout). The sorrows of early school ("the classroom was a joyless cell") give way to double-dutch jumping, puberty, Vega's first crush and her emerging interest in preserving her family's traditions. "Music," her grandmother Abuela, an espiritista (a sort of spiritual psychic), tells her, "is the food of the soul, and the right music calls the spirits." At Abuela's apartment, Vega learns of the orishas (gods and goddesses) and observes Abuela's *veda* (altar); together, they visit the *botanica* for healing oils. Lovelorn at 14, Vega confides in Abuela, who summons a spirit named Juango to command her body. "Trying to understand Juango was difficult enough, but talking about sex with a spirit possessing my grandmother's body was startling." And thus the author's future path begins. The spiritual and musical journey Vega takes readers on is informative and inspiring, even for the uninitiated. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Adult/High School "Cotito" was the favorite of her grandmother, a high priestess of the Yoruba religion, whom she helped tend her altar. She accompanied Abuela to the botanica in East Harlem and witnessed the occasional possession by spirits. As she grew older, Vega found that these traditions could suffocate as well as nurture. Her parents' acceptance of machismo led to a double standard in the treatment of brother Chachito and his sisters. Mami, a trained nurse, was not to work outside the home because such women "get ideas" and cheat on their husbands. When she disobeyed, Papi's anger and violence were said to be the result of his love. Cotito silently decided that she didn't want such a love, just as she refused to lie to cover for her brother's philandering. Racism was found in the outside world (school, police) and at home: the children were expected to marry lighter-skinned Latinos, and Chachito jokingly called Cotito a "real African." Smart and perceptive, she became a strong young woman, and worked steadily toward her goal of becoming a teacher. At the mostly white arts high school, she and an African-American friend demanded that music from their cultures be included in music appreciation class. While rejecting the negative, she

embraced the many positive aspects of her heritage and the love of her family. Cotito is as frank about her own shortcomings as she is about those of others. A vibrant, honest coming-of-age memoir that celebrates culture and community. — Sandy Freund, Richard Byrd Library, Fairfax County, VA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Wow is all I could say as I kept my eyes glued to the pages. It brought back so many stories that I use to hear about the old times. When spiritual practices were once actively practiced in the African American community even though the story is about Nuyoricans. I really appreciated how she included in her story about the great salsa singers and how they would perform at the Apollo Theatre. I won't tell you everything she writes about but, I can say that Vega painted a wonderful picture of her childhood. That makes you easily relate to her experience of being a brown-skinned Latina in the middle of the 20th century. Her story however, makes you want to have a rich relationship with her Abuela (Grandmother), who was the glue of her family. She also paints a very descriptive story of how it was growing up as a Nuyoricana in East Harlem. There is also a great wealth of information in this book regarding Afro-Puerto Rican practices, which makes the book even more exciting. As others have expressed, I hated to put this book down and definitely hated for it to end. Since reading this book I have recommended it to others because it is a great memoir.

One of my absolute favorite books on the Afro- Latina/Boricua experience in the United States. It's an amazing coming of age story and it's filled with so much vivid imagery. I highly recommend.

Had to get for school but was pleased with speed I received.

"When the Spirits Dance Mambo: Growing Up Nuyoricana in El Barrio" is an excellent read in my opinion. As a student of African spirituality I gathered so much information from reading this book and from the words of wisdom Ms. Vega so lovingly remembers from her Abuela. I got a notebook and a pen and diligently took notes on such things as how to spiritually cleanse a house and what incense to use to keep unwanted spirits away. Like a previous reader I cried at the end of the book especially since Ms. Vega is the only one in her nuclear family left; all of her immediate family is now in the spirit world and in the case of her older sister, Socorro there is no date or details of her untimely death. Ms. Vega skillfully depicts in her memoir the co-existence of both the spirit and the human worlds and shows us that even though loved ones have passed on they are still here to

protect us. This book really shows the importance of the human spirit in our family and communities which seemed so prevalent in the 1950's and 1960's when Ms.Vega grew up in El Barrio but is sadly lacking in families and communities today destroyed by drugs and violence. I especially liked Ms.Vega's descriptions of how spirit guides and the spirits themselves possess a "medium" of which abuela is one and how the Puerto Rican families in El Barrio really relied on the wisdom and guidance of these spirit guides. This book also shows how music and spirit are intertwined whether used in worshipping the African deities are on the stages of major concert halls like the Palladium and Apollo Theaters. This memoir is one that is unique amongst most family memoirs because this one focuses on ancestral and familial spiritual ties that make us who we are. Very well done Ms.Moreno.

Kudos to Marta Moreno Vega for this beautifully written, heartfelt memoir. *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* brings to life the hopes and dreams of Puerto Ricans living in East Harlem in the 50s and 60s. The book opens with young Marta and her sister Chachita huddled under the bed covers with a telephone. Their brother is on the line, and he's at the Palladium club, listening to live mambo music by some of the worlds best musicians. He holds up the receiver of the pay phone so his sisters can experience the music. In Marta's world, the mambo, and the other songs and rhythms of the Caribbean, is everything. Her elderly grandmother--the most extraordinary character in this book--tells her that music is the connection between people and the spirits who guide and protect them. Her parents--a hard-working immigrant couple--are transformed into an elegant lady and gentleman when they dance together in the family's living room. This memoir is an excellent coming-of-age story that reminded me a little of Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, but the emphasis on music, and on the mystic Santeria religion, makes it a much more rewarding read. You come to know and love the Morenos and especially Marta's abuela. It's an amazing portrait of one author's past told through words and music. I highly recommend this book.

This book was entertaining and an eye opener into the wonderful Afro-Puerto Rican culture in Spanish Harlem. The characters were so moving and her description of events, both happy and painful, were colorful. The book takes the readers to a rich and cultural unique community of Puerto Ricans in New York City. It explains that the community has been around since the turn of the 20th Century and that Puerto Ricans had a thriving community in East Harlem. Ms. Moreno Vega lets us know the issues that take place because of racism and sexism, and even self hatred of one's heritage. And there is the relationship with her abuela and the tradition of Santeria/Lucumi that she

was taught that was so much a part of her childhood. It is a wonderful coming-of-age book. I immediately parted with the book (gasp) and sent it to my sister, who then passed it on to her teenage cousin. We all just felt so enlivened by the book, that we each say it's one of our favorites. I would recommend this book to anyone because it is surely a treasure that needs to be discovered by more people.

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