



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

By 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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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

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 *bóveda* (altar); together, they visit the *botánica* 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.

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From School Library Journal

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*

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From [Booklist](#)

As fluidly as a Latin dance band shifts from a swaying ballad into a hip-twitching mambo, so Vega's passionate memoir of growing up in 1950s Spanish Harlem expresses both the burdens and joys of her Puerto Rican heritage. Although despising the machismo that keeps her mother prim and servile, forces girls to contain their sexuality, and ultimately condemns her sister to a loveless marriage, Vega is energized by the tropical rhythms heating up Harlem's legendary dance halls and comforted by her grandmother's mystical connection to Afro-Caribbean spirits. Coming-of-age stories chronicling the struggles of first-generation Latinas are not in short supply, and some clunky phrasings ("Memories are the musical notes that form the composition of our souls") suggest that Vega's training in writing has been secondary to her work as a

scholar and priestess of Santeria. Still, readers who enjoyed Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Esmerelda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) will find the experiences limned here affecting; her recollections will also be of interest to researchers in gender and Latin American and Caribbean studies. *Jennifer Mattson*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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