

Ismael Rivera

Ismael Rivera (born October 5, 1931 – May 13, 1987) was a Puerto Rican singer, known as **“El Sonero Mayor”** and one of the most influential figures in the history of salsa music. Rivera is often celebrated for his improvisational skills, soulful voice, and the deep cultural impact he left on Latin music. His unique style blended traditional Afro-Puerto Rican rhythms with the evolving sounds of salsa, making him a beloved icon in the genre.

Ismael Rivera was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, a borough of San Juan, to a family with deep Afro-Caribbean roots. Growing up in the vibrant Puerto Rican music scene, Rivera was exposed to a variety of genres, but it was salsa, and its precursors like son, guaracha, plena, and bomba, that deeply influenced his musical career. His early exposure to these musical traditions would later shape his distinctive voice and unique delivery. Rivera’s love for music began at a young age. As a teenager, he was already participating in local choirs and listening to the radio broadcasts of jazz and tropical music. It was during his time in the Puerto Rican capital that he began to develop his musical prowess, initially performing in small local groups and with local singers. By the early 1950s, Rivera’s vocal talent began to catch the attention of professional musicians. Ismael Rivera’s professional career began in earnest in the early 1950s when he joined the orchestra of Arsenio Rodríguez, one of the most prominent Cuban bandleaders of the time. Rivera quickly became known for his ability to improvise and his energetic performances. His work with Arsenio Rodríguez, who is often credited with modernizing Cuban son, was critical in shaping his musical direction and expanding his reputation in the Latin music world. In the mid-1950s, Rivera started performing with other prominent musicians and big bands, including **La Sonora Ponceña** and **El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico**, though it was with the renowned band La Sonora Matancera that he achieved his first major breakthrough. Rivera joined the group in 1955, and his vocal style—characterized by powerful improvisation, witty lyrics, and impeccable timing—soon became one of its defining features.

While with La Sonora Matancera, Rivera gained significant popularity throughout Latin America, particularly in Cuba, Venezuela, and Colombia, thanks to their hits such as **“Ave María Lola”** and **“Casi Te Envidio”**. His reputation grew steadily, and by the early 1960s, Rivera was one of the most recognized salsa singers in the world. In the 1960s, Rivera’s career took a pivotal turn. In 1962, after leaving La Sonora Matancera, Rivera formed his own group, La Fuerza Latina. This marked the beginning of his era as an independent artist. He was now able to experiment more freely with his sound and creativity. Rivera’s recordings with his own band highlighted his ability to innovate within the salsa and Afro-Cuban traditions while still remaining grounded in the deep



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roots of Puerto Rican folk music. It was during this period that Rivera earned his nickname, “El Sonero Mayor”, a title that recognizes his unparalleled improvisational skills in the art of soneo—the art of spontaneous, vocal improvisation during a performance. This skill became the hallmark of his music. Ismael Rivera’s ability to “play” with words, turning every line into a moment of expression, set him apart from his contemporaries.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Rivera enjoyed a series of commercial successes, releasing a number of influential albums and singles that remain classics to this day. His albums, such as **“Mi Amor” (1968)** and **“Ismael Rivera y La Fuerza Latina”(1972)**, helped to solidify his reputation as one of the greatest salsa singers of his era. As an Afro-Puerto Rican artist, Ismael Rivera’s music was deeply influenced by his heritage. His lyrics often celebrated African traditions, Afro-Puerto Rican culture, and the struggles of Black people in Puerto Rico and throughout the Caribbean. Rivera was known for singing about life in Puerto Rico, love, family, and cultural pride, often infusing his music with references to the bomba and plena traditions, two indigenous Puerto Rican music styles that are closely tied to African heritage. One of Rivera’s most well-known songs, **“El Nazareno”**, reflects his deeply rooted faith and spirituality, combining religious themes with his Afro-Caribbean identity. The song tells the story of the passion of Christ and was written in a way that blends religious reverence with the rhythm and energy of salsa. His ability to incorporate Puerto Rican identity into his music made him a voice for the Afro-Puerto Rican community, and he is still revered as a cultural ambassador for the Afro-Latin experience. Despite his success, Rivera’s life was marked by personal struggles, particularly with drug addiction. He became a notorious figure in Puerto Rican music circles due to his substance abuse, which led to multiple incarcerations. This turbulent period in his life, which began in the late 1960s, caused him to disappear from the public eye for several years.

Ismael Rivera passed away on May 13, 1987, from cancer, leaving behind an indelible legacy in the world of salsa and Latin music. His death was mourned not only by his fans but also by many musicians who considered him a mentor and a living legend. His influence can still be felt in contemporary salsa, with numerous musicians citing him as an inspiration. Rivera’s contributions to Latin music have earned him a lasting place in history. He is often remembered for his unique blend of humor, spontaneity, and emotional depth, as well as his ability to connect with audiences through his raw, honest performances. His signature **voice** and **improvisational skills** continue to serve as a model for many Latin musicians. In 2003, Rivera was inducted into the International Latin Music Hall of Fame, further cementing his status as one of the pioneers of salsa.