



## Pedro Aguilar

Ex-boxer whose extravagant hip-swivelling and sensuality saw him crowned the Mambo King.

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Pedro Aguilar, known as “Cuban Pete”, who died in Florida on January 13 aged 81, was hailed as “the greatest mambo dancer ever”, making an indelible impression in 1950s New York with his beautiful Italian partner and wife, Millie Donay.

Their erotic duet *Love for Sale* — to which their racial mix added a provocative extra dimension — became a famous attraction, and they were invited to dance for Presidents Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson and for the Queen.

Although Puerto Rican by birth, Pedro Aguilar was nicknamed “Cuban Pete” by Desi Arnaz, the Cuban-born husband of the actress Lucille Ball, after the title song of his own 1946 movie. A rangy figure with exceptionally loose joints and uncommon pelvic freedom, Aguilar was credited with enriching Latin dance with a host of new moves, many derived from his short but stellar partnership with Donay.

Pedro Aguilar was 22 and an impoverished young boxer who enjoyed dancing at

weekends when he met the 15-year-old Millie Donay, an outstanding Lindy Hopper, at New York's newest dance club, the Palladium. Weekly dance contests were held for \$12.50 prizes, and their youthful fusion of Lindy Hop's jiving athleticism and the slithery sensuality of Cuban dance was an instant winner. For six years, from 1950 to 1956, "Cuban Pete and Millie" became the talk of the town.

The couple's eye-catching looks, chemistry and infectious athletic brilliance embodied the Cuban dance craze that flooded New York from the late 1940s, and their love affair and subsequent marriage challenged the racial taboos of the time.

Batista's Cuba was the stars' holiday isle, and the Palladium the prime stage for its music and dance — regulars at the ballroom included Marlon Brando and Bob Hope. Aguilar himself recalled: "They all came to the Palladium dragging their minks and jewels."

Although Cuban Pete and Millie performed a wide range of Latin styles, it was above all the mambo with which Aguilar became identified. He was considered its exemplar in his speed of foot and extravagant hip-swivelling. Mambo, a traditional Cuban song-form, was invented as a dance in 1943 at Havana's Tropicana club by Perez Prado, who added to its sensuous African pelvic pulse the more improvisational steps of New York jazz, to which Havana's mafioso casino-owners were devoted. When Prado moved to New York, he cannily marketed his new dance as the essence of Cuba.

Pedro Aguilar, born on June 14 1927 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, was meanwhile growing up in orphanages and a series of foster homes in New York's Barrio district. His mother, to whom he became reconciled in his mid-teens, taught him Latin dance steps, while he set out on a career as a professional boxer.

He trained at the same gym as Sugar Ray Robinson, and had some 60 fights as a youth, but was urged to switch to dancing by a musician when one weekend he turned up, cut and battered after a defeat in the ring, to dance at a ballroom.

Aguilar took classes at Katherine Dunham's studio and visited Cuba to learn more, becoming friends with Batista's nephew. "Dance pulled me away from all the bad things that happened to me as a kid. I discovered myself through dance, and learned how to love," he later said.

His first professional dancing job in New York was as one of the Mambo Devils trio, but it was in linking his mambo to Millie Donay's Lindy Hop that he made his name as "Cuban Pete". "You must not dance to the music but inside the music," he would say.

The couple's innovative combination inspired Aguilar to invent new variations for the mambo — jive backbends, tap steps and acrobatics, including a remarkable move when he slid into splits on the floor and back up again in a single sweep. The voluptuous young Donay, invariably sheathed in a skin-tight dress, pioneered a signature body roll whereby, as she swayed in serpentine fashion, she turned her back on the audience and tapped her bottom.

Their fame in New York surpassed even that of Sugar Ray Robinson, as the boxer discovered when he booked Cuban Pete and Millie Donay for his show and realised that their ovation was louder than his. Furious, he fired them — but they were promptly rebooked to headline the Apollo Theatre with the Platters. Their celebrated dance to

Love for Sale was broadcast on a Nat King Cole television special at the Apollo; despite the enthusiasm of the public, it was a performance so erotic that they were reprimanded by their agent.

The couple had a daughter, but their marriage soon ended, and with it, in 1956, the partnership, though the pair danced together at the White House for President Eisenhower and the Queen in 1957, and again in the 1960s for President Johnson. As Mambo lost popularity to rock 'n' roll Aguilar moved to Los Angeles to work for Warner Brothers in various capacities, including bit parts in films such as the Western *The Scalphunters* (1968).

In 1992 Warner's asked Pedro Aguilar to advise and choreograph on their film *The Mambo Kings*, teaching traditional Cuban mambo to the leading actors, Armand Assante and Antonio Banderas.

Aguilar and Millie Donay reunited to film a duet, and the film's success launched a new interest in mambo. The tune Cuban Pete became the hit song of Jim Carrey's 1994 film *The Mask*, and the 70-year-old Aguilar began a new 11-year performing partnership with Barbara Craddock. In 2000 he collaborated on a mambo-ballet production,

*Mambo No 2 am*, with Miami City Ballet.

After divorcing Millie Donay, who died in 2007, Pedro Aguilar married twice more; his children of the three marriages, two daughters and a son, survive him.



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