

Focus on Film

Documentary

The Mamboniks

Monday, May 6, 2019 @ 7:00 p.m.

Director: Lex Gillespie, 2018 USA
Running time: 87 minutes, English

Lox and bagels meet salsa and bongos!

This documentary directed by Peabody Award winner Lex Gillespie tells a little-known story about Jewish dancers from New York City who fell in love with the Cuban Mambo in the 1950s, before Fidel Castro's revolution.

Set in Havana, Miami Beach and New York, this fun and upbeat film features a lovable collection of dancers, musicians, disc jockeys, club owners and record company moguls that tell the story of the musical and dance invasion that came from Cuba in those years.

While most people in America were dancing to the music of Elvis Presley and early rock-n-roll, these free-spirited dancers in New York City swayed to a very different beat. They fell for the mambo, a hot dance from Havana. Like the beatniks back then, because of their love for this Latin dance, mambo, they earned a nickname: the Mamboniks. Now retired, they met again in a South Florida deli and told their stories with humor and heart.

For many Mamboniks, the affinity for Latin sounds was more than just pure fun and entertainment: in the years after World War II, dancing helped Jews banish the horrors of the Holocaust and find joy once again.

At a time when America was racially segregated and anti-Semitism was commonplace, this film shows how two different cultures, Jewish and Latin, met on the dance floor without any bias, without any rancor. The Afro-Cuban sounds of Tito Puente and Celia Cruz, two famous and well-known musicians, went from the clubs of Havana, Cuba, to the neon-splashed clubs of New York City.

This film shows a positive story of building bridges between cultures and communities, a vital message for our difficult and divisive times. At its heart, it is about much more: it's about the power of music and dance to bring people together.

Reviewed by Noemi & Jose Mirkin
(with excerpts from FC Films)

THE LENORE MARWIL
DETROIT JEWISH
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