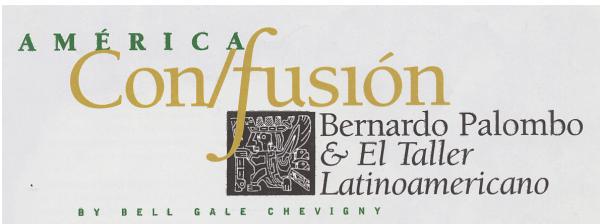


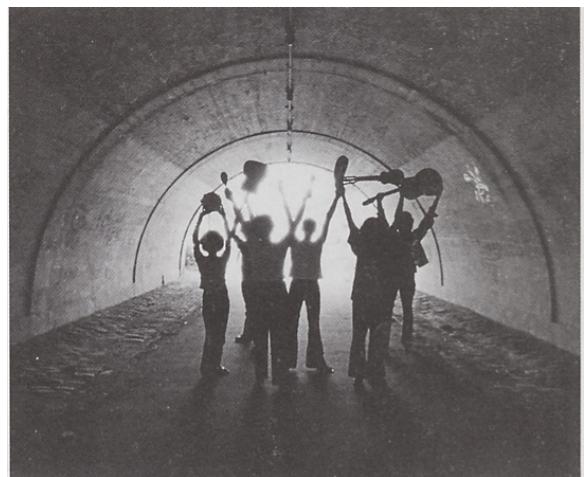
CultureFront:

Summer 1997



By Belle Gale Chevigny

"Whenever I hear about North American penetration in Latin America," Gabriel García Márquez has said, "I laugh into my coat lapels because the real cultural penetration is that of Latin America into the United States." Bernardo Palombo might have said the same, had he not been such a busy agent of this counter-invasion. Singer and composer, Palombo is also the presiding genius of a unique language school and cultural center in New York City, El Taller Latinoamericano (The Latin American Workshop), which he founded in 1979 and recently, after a five-year hiatus and against all odds, reopened on upper Broadway.



In the spring of 1996, a Spanish television crew tested García Márquez's thesis by tracing Caribbean music for a mini-series called *Cuento mi canto* (Telling My Song). After segments on the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia, Panama, Haiti, Jamaica, and Venezuela, the series culminates in the Caribbean capital - Nueva York. Seeking a guide here, the crew heard about an Argentinean named Palombo who knew all the music and its tangled history. When they found him, they talked all night and engaged him for the New York segment.

Taking García Márquez's point one step further, Palombo makes the North/Latin encounter reciprocal. The *Taller* has produced important double concerts: Pete Seeger with Argentinean singer Mercedes Sosa, David Byrne of the Talking Heads with

Argentinean singer-composer Leon Gieco, the Soldier String Quartet with the Bolivian folk-rock group Wara. Inevitably, this mutual penetration causes cross-fertilization. With his singing group, Talisman, Palombo is making a CD called *América Confusión*, a witty and original synthesis of Andean songs and Caribbean rhythms, "a crossover of mountain and ocean," as he says.

In producing a highly acclaimed concert at the Knitting Factory in lower Manhattan in July 1996, he cut another slice across the Americas. Philip Glass, "the maximal minimalist," as Palombo styles him, accompanied Tico da Costa, the brilliantly inventive folk guitarist from Brazil's northeast. Palombo introduced the two when he led Glass on a musical tour of South America. They had become friends but never performed together. "Musically it's an impossible combination," Palombo told me proudly. Hearing this, da Costa said, "As music is a terrain that, like a dream, is not logical, the impossible becomes possible. Philip's rhythm is repetitious, cerebral, mine is natural. It was like putting a computer in the jungle."

How did a penniless immigrant from the provinces of Argentina gain this Caribbean expertise, this impresario's skill, these alchemical arts? The answer lies in the adventures of a modern



pícaro and his *Taller* during the quarter century in which *Nueva York* emerged - the period, that is, when Puerto Ricans and Latino immigrants radically altered the consciousness and culture of the city. Palombo and the *Taller* share a mostly subterranean existence -- under-recognized, hand-to-mouth, playful, and serendipitous on principle. A pair of resilient New York City institutions, they reflect, sustain, and to some extent predict its popular cultural life. Their story is also a microcosmic history of popular/folk music going international.

Like thousands of New Yorkers, I met Palombo in one of his Spanish classes. It was in the early 1970s, shortly after he had arrived. Since then, he has elaborated his technique and philosophy, but his manner remains much as it was. At 48, still limber, black-maned, and bearded, he is a figment of perpetual youth culture, and he keeps alive appealing traits of hippiedom. Soft-spoken, improvisatory, generous, he has a wicked sense of humor. He dispenses with textbooks, and shapes discussion around student experiences. Whether talented or not, those in his classes are encouraged to sing in Spanish. His call-and-response conjugating drills use nonsense words to show how music and rhythm reveal tense and voice in Spanish verbs.

A student in Montefiore's Social Medicine program (where Palombo has taught every August since 1978) told me, "It's not about passing tests, it's learning to fly." Classes see Latin American films, take music field trips, and consume a final feast, featuring Palombo's *tortilla de papa* (potato pie). When I was in his class, he offered tips on collecting street-salvage and making a turnstile spin with foreign coins, riffs on history and etymology, and intriguing glimpses of his life.

Running into Palombo over the years, I have never seen him without a dozen schemes brewing and a smart, good-looking woman embroiled in them. Some schemes are grandiose, others playful, most evanescent, and several have left a wake of disappointment as he moved on. What is astonishing is how many friendships he has braided together and how many of his projects have borne fruit.

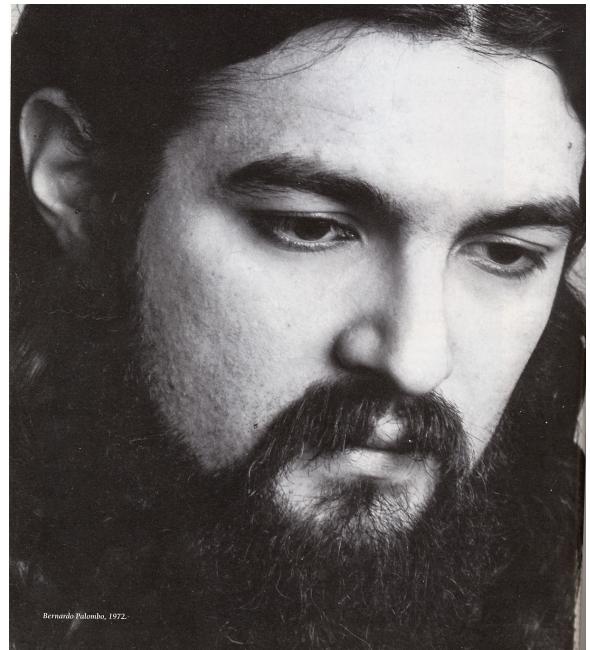
Mendoza

Recently, hearing his life-story, I realized how much he brought to the *Taller* from his youth in Mendoza, in the wine-rich Andean region of Cuyo. Palombo's first debts are to his grandfathers, who settled there. A high-born dandy in spats, Bernardo Blanco González broke from a long line of Spanish ambassadors to Argentina to become an eminent philologist. In 1927 he married Elena Goldberg, a Russian Jewish intellectual. Retreating from Perón's growing fascism, he taught at the progressive University of Cuyo. Their daughter Maren, nourished more by her parents' high expectations than by their affection, grew up in lonely splendor.

On a different quest, Efraín Palombo, a Sephardic Jew, left his native Greek island, Chios, to circle the globe with the merchant marine. Mendoza's olive trees and vineyards were so reminiscent of Chios that, around 1920, he consented to change his name to Alfredo (for his "saint's day") in order to stay. Driving a tram, he was drawn to María Ramírez, an Araucanian housemaid he saw on his route.

"*Abuela* María already had three kids when they married, and they had many more," notes Palombo. "*Abuelo* lived by selling lottery tickets, insurance, anything. And he was adventurous. He took my father to the circus and said in the intermission, 'I'll see you later.' He was gone for six months - he'd fallen in love with the horseback ballerina. *Abuela* María knew he'd come back. When I was a kid, he'd stand on the corner and make *piropos* - compliments - like little haikus."

On Olascoaga Street, the Palombos sheltered a large extended family in a big house with a parcel of land behind. "Everyone worked and brought in something. *Abuela* had her chicken coop, her chacra of corn, zucchini, and all the vegetables you need, and *Abuelo* cured barrels of olives the Greek way, on the roof. That



Bernardo Palombo, 1972.

promiscuity and funkiness would have horrified my other grandparents, but it attracted my mother. She met my father [also called Alfredo] when she was sixteen and ran away with him." The elder Palombos took in Maren and their son, but her parents wouldn't speak to him until four years later, in 1948, when Bernardo was born.

Bernardo had a blissful childhood among women, his mother his reading teacher, his aunt his singing instructor, and his grandmother filling his ears with Cuyano sayings like "*Menos pregunta Dios y perdona*" (God asks less and He forgives). He attributes his hedonism and social skills to *Abuelo* Alfredo, and his affinity for busy, informal, creative settings to that vital, crowded home. His passion for reading, language, and etymology, he owes to Blanco González, who, exiled during much of Perón's regime, stored his books at Maren's house.

Mendoza also gave Palombo his music. In the early sixties, poets, painters, and musicians inspired by Atahualpa Yupanqui and Violetta Parra gathered there to create a movement centered around song. The manifesto for what they called *el nuevo cancionero* (elsewhere known as *nueva canción*) argued against divisions between classical and popular art and in favor of combining all the arts in an authentically Argentinean culture. They also asserted that folk music ought to have social content, to represent the inhabitants as well as the landscape. Mercedes Sosa ("then a skinny lady from Tucumán," says Palombo) popularized all the new songs.

Never trained to read or write music, Palombo nevertheless composes, usually collaboratively, sometimes alone. He wrote the words to "*El vendimiador*" ("The Grape-harvester"), which ends "you will have a day of peace without work in a tomb next to the vines." The Mendoza Symphony's cellist, Damián Sánchez, wrote the music, and Los Trovadores, a group nationally-known in Argentina, recorded it. After other groups recorded more of their songs, Palombo was invited to lead a choir in a Catholic girls' school. "I was as happy as a dog with two tails, as *Abuela* Maria would say."

By default, Mendoza made Palombo anti-authoritarian. He recalls graffiti promoting Peronist nationalism ("*Ni vodka, ni Coca-Cola, tome mate'* -- Neither vodka nor Coke, drink mate) and anti-Semitism ("*Haga patria; mate un judío*" -- Improve your homeland; kill a Jew). People had migrated to Argentina from everywhere, but the hostility to difference made most say they were Argentinean and, of course, Catholic.

When Bernardo was five, a lady appeared in a cab, asking for Efraín Palombo. "We wondered, *Efraín? Abuelo* came out, she hugged him, crying, and they started talking. It wasn't Greek or English. We said, 'Abuelo, what are you talking?' Ladino,' he said. "I'm a Jew.' A jew!" This was his sister Estér from Flushing, New York; a postwar agency that traced Jews had found Efraín. "We hadn't known -- he used to buy me halvah but I thought it was Greek food. Some of my uncles didn't want to believe it. It's like they thought, the only Jew is the old man, not me.

Bernardo's parents, Maren and Alfredo, by contrast, inculcated a broad-mindedness in their children that set them apart. (Bernardo's sister married a black Dominican; his brother an African American.) When Eva Perón died, mourning was mandatory; Alfredo sported a red tie and lost his job. He would tear Perón's picture out of his kids' text-books, to their embarrassment.

Later, when Bernardo was expelled from Catholic school for defying a priest, and from military school for reporting officers infractions, he appreciated his parents support. Still later the Communist Party threw him out for criticizing its rigidity. Inevitably an indiscretion at the girls' school where he led the choir ended his privileges there. And for protesting the punishment of 27 priests who tried to effect liturgical changes mandated by Vatican Council II, Palombo was beaten up by thugs.

It was 1968, "the incubation of the nightmare" of the coming military dictatorship. "I could smell it. Marx was banned under the anti-Communist law. A book on cubism was confiscated at the Paraguayan border -- they thought it was about Cuba. They seized and destroyed Henry Miller's *Sexus*. I was a crazy fan of his." Working part-time with the transit police, Palombo heard officers instructing them to assault marching organizers on any provocation. "They instill fear first, then violence comes, and it's copied by the rest of the population. Mendoza had a lot of migrant workers, no problem. Then suddenly everyone started saying

Bolivians are dirty, Chileans thieves, Paraguayans carry knives."

Palombo, now twenty hatched plans to leave the country. He dreamed of "being an intellectual" in France like the self-exiled writer Julio Cortázar. But he lacked funds to go beyond New York. Taking along his Henry Miller novels for city guides, and an unusual pack of social talents and commitments, he said goodbye to Mendoza.

Nueva York

In New York Palombo shared the lifestyle, circa 1969, of the hundreds of Argentinean immigrants who crowded into cheap midtown hotels in Manhattan's West 40s. "We were a bunch of horny and desperate males, without English, work, or papers, needing money fast. There was a lot of fighting. Your passport could be stolen.

Sometimes I slept at Horn & Hardart's. I'd get work for two days at a time. It was a sordid life. Someone dropped by and asked, 'Where is your cat?' because I was eating tuna for cats. I didn't know. What doesn't kill you fattens you. Finally he found work at a Bedford Hills restaurant, Silvano's. Silvano gave him room, board, salary and a guitar. Weekends found "Bernard of Mendoza" singing Trini Lopez hits in Spanish.

When an INS raid left him hiding in the woods in his red busboy vest, he contacted a distant cousin who held a green card, married her, and moved into her Brooklyn apartment. They became lovers and when Pinita said she wanted a child, Palombo thought, why not? But preparing to support it meant exhausting work and wretched pay in assembly plants. Then Pinita learned she was having twins.

Abandoning his dream of joining Cortázar in Paris, Palombo consoled himself by reading translated installments in the Village Voice of the writer's *Cronopios y famas*, which he knew by heart in the original. Fortunately, he found more lucrative work, for the Voice ran ads for nude models at \$12 an hour, and these jobs led to a brief stint in porno movies. Meanwhile he sampled the counter-culture. He discovered LSD at a Frank Zappa concert at Fillmore East, and after a Living Theatre "Love-In" went home minus a shoe.

After the twins were born in August 1970, their parents' luck began to change. Palombo landed a job teaching Spanish as a second language at the New School for Social Research, Pinita sold some property, and they bought a three-story house in Queens. Learning the furniture pickup schedule of Queens Sanitation, they would pluck what they needed off the streets of Queens' better neighborhoods at one a.m.

When his parents, brother, and sister joined them, the twins were raised Latin American style. With no fixed jobs, they improvised. For a while the whole family crafted and sold hippie leather gear. Friends filled the house, some for a night, others for years, and the backyard *asados* are legendary. The house on Olascoaga Street was reborn in the hospitable exile of the counter-culture.

"I had a very limited idea of Spanish until I came to New York," Palombo says, savoring the paradox. Teaching Spanish all over Manhattan in 1970 was his way of learning the city and rediscovering his language. "In Argentina we think our way of talking is correct. Like they say, The ego is the little Argentine inside each of us.' But here I heard Venezuelans, Colombians, Puerto Ricans, Cubans all speaking differently, and I understood Spanish is not one language. Many ancient languages are incorporated into it. You find Quechua words in the Spanish of the Andes, the Cuban speaks in Yoruba rhythms. When the *gringo* says chiclet, he's speaking Nahuatl."

Palombo's teaching won him invitations to sing, which in turn won him more students. He came to know the left and the anti-war movement, particularly in relation to Latinos. The Puerto Rican independence movement was strong, if divided, and the Young Lords were modeling themselves on the Black Panthers. The Center for Cuban Studies had sprung up to support Fidel's revolution, and the U.S. Marine invasion of 1965 generated



sympathy for the Dominican Republic. Throughout the 1970s, Palombo immersed himself in the politics and music of these three Caribbean societies.

First and foremost, he discovered Puerto Rico. Palombo helped the Young Lords put their paper *Palante* into Spanish. In a protest music festival, he met Antonio Caban Vale, self-styled *El Topo* (The Mole). Hearing *El Topo*'s songs, Palombo felt a shock of recognition. The poetry reminded him of Yupanqui and the high-pitched guitar, the *quatro* of the *requinto* of Mendoza. Visiting the island, he identified with its culture, especially in the countryside. "The love of double meanings, the hospitality, and the music - it hits me like my own." He began to understand Nuyorican culture - and salsa. In 1976, with Puerto Rican bass-player Andy González composing and his *Conjunto Libre* performing, Palombo wrote salsa lyrics about the convergence of Latinos in the States; "*Imagen Latina*" was the theme song for the first Spanish TV program in New Jersey.

By then he was performing with *El Grupo*, known as the cultural arm of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, at scores of concerts and demonstrations. Songs by Palombo and Damian Sanchez were big hits. "*Canción por la flor y el fusil*," written in 1968 after the massacre of Mexican students in Tlatelolco, expresses Palombo's ambivalence about Christian forbearance in the face of Latin American realities: "Listen to me, I want to be a flower, but if not, I'll be a gun." In "*Te digo hermano*," his argument against machismo ("woman is your sister") spoke to the link between feminism and Latino identity that the Young Lords were struggling (intermittently) to forge. Poets joined in, Sandra Maria Estevez reciting, "My name is Maria Cristina, I am a Puerto Rican woman born in El Barrio," and confessing poignantly, "I speak two languages broken into each other."

In 1974 the Dominican Republic's "Seven Days with the People," a huge international music festival organized by the General Confederation of Workers, invited Palombo to participate. Playing with musicians from all over the Americas - Mercedes Sosa, the Dominican Republic's Sonia Silvestre, Lucecita of Puerto Rico - he discovered many were singing his songs.

Throughout the decade, Palombo taught Spanish at the Center for Cuban Studies. Visiting Cuba, he heard the *nueva trova*, the Cuban version of *nueva canción*, and, more generally, the pervasive influence of Africa in the island's music. "It taught me rhythmical complexity that Europeans often don't understand. It made my intimate way of composing more tribal. The call-and-response of African tradition helped me express community desires musically" But, troubled by Cuba's position on Eritrea, its authoritarianism, and its hypocrisy about homosexuality, he left the Center and soon after opened his own *el Taller*.

Palombo's domestic life had meanwhile become baroque. The most casual observer might wonder about the parade of girlfriends. Scheherezade ("Chiqui") Vicioso, Dominican poet and feminist activist, mused aloud recently on the period when Palombo lived in the Queens house with three women, one on each floor. I asked her how she as a feminist thinks of Palombo. She gave her deep laugh: "As a feminist, I don't think of him! I see him through the eyes of an artist!" Recalling that one of the women was a remarkable filmmaker, she speculated, "Maybe all three were extraordinary -- maybe they liked each other."

Palombo points out that they were as free as he, adding ruefully, "I was never able to manage that again." Palombo was an often absent father, and eventually Pinita met someone "older, responsible" (as he says wryly), divorced him, and took the twins away. In their teens, the boys would be drawn to the permissive, stimulating world of the second *Taller* -- but that lay in the future.

El Taller Latinoamericano

Creating *El Taller Latinoamericano* in 1979 and sustaining it through the years is Palombo's signature act. Centering on language instruction and musical performance, the *Taller* takes form around exchanges among his friends and acquaintances, North and South, famous and unknown. "Sometimes," he muses, "I think that the most important thing I've accomplished is gathering my friends."

New York has many places where Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other groups meet, but the *Taller* attracts gringos and Latinos with no agenda but community and creativity. "Growing up in a huge family makes me want to recreate that situation," Palombo says. "Every time there is real dialogue, a little community is born." The *Taller* is anti-sectarian, "a circle, not a line. We welcome any line that's respectful of people. We don't

embrace any politics, we do politics, the politics that happen when people interact."

Just as Puerto Rican pride and support for revolutionary Chile and Cuba dominated Palombo's activity in the 1970s, his *Taller* mirrored the positions of the left in subsequent years protest against the Argentinean junta and enthusiasm for the Sandinista revolution. Amnesty International helped the *Taller* present exhibits of Argentinean paintings, a performance by actor Norman Eriski, and a history of tango by playwright Alberto Adellach. (As Amnesty was denied access to Argentina, human rights activists like Marshall Meyer, the late beloved rabbi of B'nai Jeshrun, and the International Red Cross got political prisoners released; families of *Taller* students sponsored them and taught them English. From one such refugee, Palombo learned that his censored "Canción por el fusil" had been sung in jail.)

One evening, Casa Nicaragua and the *Taller* presented Julio Cortázar. In the poem, "Guia de viajeros," he accused Nicaragua of making him a poet. He scrawled the poem onto a napkin for Palombo, who set it to music. This song became the theme for Americas in Transition, a documentary about U.S. interference in Latin America with a score by Palombo and flautist Wendy Blackstone. In 1981 their scores for this film and for El Salvador: Another Vietnam were Academy Award nominees as Best Original Documentary Music Scores. Palombo's film-music work grew out of his success composing music for television's Sesame Street. Blackstone taught Palombo about jazz improvisation, and they performed for some years in Europe and the Americas.

By this time the growing *Taller* had moved from its original location at 151 West 19th Street to a space at 19 West 21st Street. Central American solidarity groups rented part of its 25,000 square feet. With an auditorium, an art gallery, a film-editing room, and offices, the second *Taller* was the biggest, most renowned, and longest lived. Its art and dance shows became hot news, and Lucy Lippard of the Voice found it a "stronghold" of Latin culture. It produced the first New York City concerts of Atahualpa Yupanqui and Mercedes Sosa. Singing with Seeger, Sosa dedicated the auditorium to Violeta Parra and Woody Guthrie. Years before Rigoberta Menchu won the Nobel Prize, she spoke at the *Taller* about the plight of the Quiche Maya.

The second *Taller*'s most spectacular production was "Misa 1984: A Celebration for Peace in the Americas" (also called "Peace Games") at St. John the Divine. Based on Nicaraguan Carlos Mejía Godoy's Campesino Mass, it included -- in the spirit of liberation theology -- lyrics about struggle and peace. This humanization of liturgy struck a chord with Palombo (perhaps because it advanced the work begun by the 27 Mendocino priests). Making the mass ecumenical, Palombo added a woman rabbi, a Miskito fertility dance, skating children, Andean pipers, a Balinese gamelan, and a band. Preparations went on all over the city for a year, he says, but the performers never rehearsed together.

The *Taller* arranged through its network for simultaneous masses or celebrations to occur in Nicaragua, throughout Latin America, and, through Cortázar's widow, Aurora, in France. Although Palombo's dream of linking events by satellite video proved impossible, what happened was astonishing enough. A musical parade with dancers on stilts circled Columbia University's campus, tripling in size as it went along. In the cathedral, musicians played different pieces of music, sometimes all at once, while the congregation sang what it pleased. As the sound grew wilder, some auditors, possessed, mounted the backs of pews. At the end, a collective scream of rapture went on and on. 'The bishops were dancing. It was like mass hysteria,' Palombo recalls tenderly like the magic moment the anarchists talk about.'

Daily life at the second *Taller* was often a three-ring circus, because Palombo attracts improbable encounters. "He's so laid back," one friend says, "that people come to him more than if he worked for it." He recalls the night when young rock bands "prepunk, with pink and blue hair and chains, completely unknown at the time, like the Dead Kennedys and the Beastie Boys" were rehearsing in the indulgent *Taller*. "Suddenly two big bodyguards with walkie talkies stepped off the elevator saying, 'Here comes the future president of Peru!' It was Alan Garcia. Someone had told him that the *Taller* could put him in contact with Ruben Blades." So Blades sang salsa in the Andes to support Garcia's campaign. Victorious President Garcia invited Palombo and a group of *Taller* students to a cultural celebration in Lima.

One Palombo story often segues into another. In Lima, he met a frustrated movie producer seeking ritual music for Philip Glass and finding only electric guitars. "I wanted to go to South America with someone who

could help me find musical material for the film *Powaqoatsi*," Glass told me. 'Bernardo had access to people, knew where to go, what to listen to, what would interest me. He was very good at that, and we studied a little Spanish along the way'

At the border of Peru and Bolivia -- a region the natives call by its pre-Colombian name, land of Aymara -- they attended a wedding ceremony for couples from many villages, each with its own band. "They had broken instruments that they'd learned to play in the army and been given because they were not functional," Glass says. "I began to try to imagine what it would sound like if they could actually play and had real instruments, and I wrote a piece like I'd never written before." For the film's opening song "Malambo," "I asked Bernardo to write lyrics for a children's song, and he got the children's choir of Brooklyn to sing it."

The *Taller* moved to the basement of a Russian Orthodox Church on East Second Street when it lost its lease in 1987. Finding itself at last in a neighborhood with a rich ethnic mix, the third *Taller* now responded to Lower East Side social needs and culture. Informational meetings on issues of immigration, nutrition, and health emerged, often serendipitously. For example, Palombo's Montefiore students came for an evening of music they called "The Night of the Dancing Doctors," and some returned to help answer the community's questions about the HIV virus.

Local painters, dancers, performance artists, and musicians filled the *Taller*'s calendar, attracting Jews, Colombians, Mexicans, Haitians, Italians, and others from across the city. In 1989 the *Taller*'s mural design for the F train's Second Avenue subway Station won an MTA contest, and the Colombian artist Turizzo painted it. Called "*Loisaida: Continente de Siete Colores*" in homage to the barrio's multiculturalism, the mural was wired to produce typical local music and street noises. Palombo's song, "*Siete Colores*," honored the event.

An absurd, sinister, and grueling battle with the church over asbestos removal a battle as byzantine as any Russian Orthodox icon was commemorated in a Stan Mack Real-Life cartoon in the *Village Voice*. The community mobilized to support the *Taller* but lawsuits, threats, and actual assaults finally forced them to close in 1991.

Talisman

The demise of the third *Taller* was devastating for Palombo. It meant the loss of a living space, a community, and a way of life. For a long time he felt defeated.

Palombo likes to say that his only capital is his friends. As he lives without regard to money he has been lucky in his friendship with Steve Brown, an entrepreneur, friend of the arts, and former Palombo student. Few people finding themselves homeless get to live in a castle, but Brown was able to contribute to Palombo's recovery by inviting him to live in his eighteenth-century chateau. This property, originally owned by Mme. Châtelet, Voltaire's mistress and patron, had been transported stone-by-stone to Upper Brookville, Long Island, in the 1920s. During a party, I climbed the chateau's winding staircase to a many-windowed tower holding nothing but a clavichord. In this retreat, Palombo told me, he sang and chanted his way back to sanity with his companion Dorothy Potter (they are practicing Buddhists).

It is Potter whom Palombo most credits for his new lease on life. A writer and editor, she had studied Spanish in the last *Taller* and lingered to learn songs and harmonize. 'She can take any part,' Palombo says, her voice has a silver quality like a flute." Then Teri Rasmussen, another *Taller* student, joined them. He taught them songs from his youth, and they having grown up listening to "girl-groups" of the 1970s, backed his solos with that texture. For the first time in years, Palombo began to think of a new group, and so *Talisman* was born. *Talisman*' is a Sanskrit word. It means charm, but also an interface between two realities. I think of it as linking north and south in a way everyone can understand," Palombo says.

Learning by chance of *Talisman*'s first concert at a Greenwich Village cafe, I and a hundred others braved a snowstorm to hear Palombo's familiar sobbing tenor encircled by virtuoso harmonies. Later Pete Seeger told them, as Potter recalls, 'that he hadn't heard singing like that since the Weavers.' A wonderful trio," Seeger confirmed, when I spoke with him. "Making these two strong women's voices so important was unusual and

appealing, he found. Seeger invited them to sing at Summer Stage in Central Park one year, at Lincoln Center the next.

Talisman also sang at Argentinean celebrations of the Mendocino Vendimia in New Jersey and Queens. "People went crazy when they saw Dorothy and Tern singing Argentinean *cuecas* and *tonadas* with perfect accents -- songs nobody sings any more but everyone knows," Palombo says. About "America Confusion," Talisman's CD-in-progress, featuring Argentinean folk music with Caribbean rhythms, he says, 'The music will be danceable to attract the young. It's a circle. There I was, a kid in Mendoza listening to Paul Anka and the Platters, and now these gringas are giving new life to Argentinean songs.'

Palombo also began composing again. "*Maria Manhattan*," about Latin women in New York, was a finalist in Billboard's 1995 pop song-contest. It was also selected as the theme-song for "*Latinas abriendo camino*," an educational video produced by the Hospital Workers' Union.

Renting the big third floor of an art deco building at 104th and Broadway Potter and Palombo took the plunge and revived what they now call simply *El Taller*. "It's more inclusive," Potter says, "We do so much that's not Latino -- Klezmer, reggae, classical, hip-hop." The space also adapts itself acoustically to recording, making practicable Palombo's new dream of capturing on tape the unique combos that happen at the *Taller* "We've lost so many amazing events in the past," he says. 'Now we'll have a record of all we produce.'

One evening last March, the *Taller* opened with a playful flourish as El Puerto Rican Embassy, in "a serious and surreal commentary on the cultural and political status of Puerto Ricans," as David González of the New York Times aptly noted. For \$10, you received a Spirit Republic of Puerto Rico passport with your photo snapped by Adal Maldonado; on the walls, his exhibit "Out of Focus Nuyoricans" hinted at his sense of their identity crisis. A founder of the Nuyorican literary movement, Pedro Pietri, sang his Spanglish National Anthem.

A sense of urgency prompted the *Taller* to hold a more formal opening on September 14, 1996, after President Clinton's signing of the anti-terrorist bill gave a green light to anti-immigrant passion. Though the English-speaking press had taken little notice, on August 20 el diario/LA PRENSA warned resident aliens in banner headlines, "*No salgan*" -- Don't leave the country, because you may not get back in. Returning travelers, especially hispanics, were being deported in escalating numbers for past convictions -- including, for the first time, misdemeanors. Palombo was reminded of his dark last days in Argentina as well as his own immigrant terrors here. The *Taller* decided to mount a concert to publicize the October 12th march for immigrant rights. Taking a da Costa melody, Palombo wrote a lyric about the harsh welcome aliens receive here, although most Americans are immigrants. Then the *Taller* filled the iron frame on its roof with a home-made billboard announcing that Pete Seeger would sing "*La Canción del Inmigrante*: The Immigrant's Song."

Preparing this concert brought out all that the *Taller* is about and also displayed immigrant resourcefulness. The 99¢ Store met most of the *Taller*'s needs. Shower-curtains became stage curtains and *Taller* artists converted vinyl tablecloths into 'stained glass' windows. As this colorful band around the building reminded someone of wrap-artist Christo, this show was called Christos of the 99¢ Store." A Mexican neighbor, an electrician, set up the lights and his three sons, hip-hop DJs, painted the place in exchange for its use.

'It was a success in advance," Tico da Costa told me, "because Bernardo's charisma brings together people from everywhere, from all classes." Da Costa confesses that his own criteria are more rigid. 'It's a little dangerous mixing so much. But Bernardo has the capacity to see value in things I don't, and he makes me listen and hear it too.'

The concert put this notion to the test with a potentially explosive mix. People surfaced from all the *Taller*'s historical strata. An Abraham Lincoln Brigade veteran came to hear Seeger and his Puerto Rican grandson, Tao Rodriguez, sing. There were fans of Tico da Costa, of Bolivian Juan Lazaro Mendolas, who plays jazz on the *quena*, and of Charlie King, who sang about Sacco and Vanzetti. The biggest draws were guitarist Luis Díaz, "*el famoso desconocido*," as Palombo calls him, whose brutal, raw poetry makes him wildly popular and unrecordable in the Dominican Republic, and the unequivocally famous Puerto Rican Roy Brown in his first New York performance in ten years.

Just when Roy Browns set of independentista songs so fired up his audience they were shouting for more, and the Dominicans were impatient to hear Díaz, Palombo reminded the crowd it was *Rosh Hashanah*. "I was nervous," he tells me later. "It was a risk. But I told them, At the *Taller* we celebrate all cultures and creativity from everywhere. Tonight people who know about migration and exile are celebrating their New Year. Matthew Turk will lead us in some traditional holiday songs.' People were surprised, but they sang with him. The main function of culture is to overcome the fear of the other. You know, Graham Greene said hate is the lack of creativity Any time two musicians from two different places get together, they open a ground for creativity And it's like jazz. It never happens the same way twice."

Muwassaha

One response to "The Immigrants Song" concert was el diario's inviting Palombo to contribute regularly to its Sunday cultural supplement, *7 días*. As for the *Taller* the community is using it for all sorts of things these days. Huge Dominican birthday parties take place there, as do immigrants' rights meetings. One day soon a group will administer the naturalization test there. "Since it's going to be right here," Palombo tells me, "I think I'll take it."

We talk then about how the new immigrants are changing the country and he looks for a book to show me a passage about the earliest recorded Spanish verse form. Called *muwassaha*, it developed about 150 years before the first manifestations of epic poetry in Spain. It is written in Hebrew or Arabic with a chorus, *la jarcha*, in primitive Spanish. "Look at that! All three languages at once! The languages of the people who lived together in Spain before 1492 [the year Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews and Moors and subsidized Columbus]. Now, just after the Quincentennial, it's like they're all together again in the States. Like 1492 has been turned on its head."

A few minutes later, he reflected on the rush of Latin American resident aliens seeking citizenship. "It's a huge change for people who always thought they would go back. And in another way not such a change -- we are more porous, adaptable, than others, because we're individually so diverse. Look at me, brought up entirely Catholic, with two Jewish grandparents, a third Araucanian -- in my diversity I'm like every Latin American -- but, ironically New York is one of the few places where we are free to celebrate it."

Bell Gale Chevigny's books include *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings* (expanded edition, Northeastern University Press, 1994), *Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America*, edited with Gari Laguardia (Cambridge University Press, 1986), and *Chloe and Olivia* (Grove Weidenteld, 1990), a novel.