

## New York Daily News - <http://www.nydailynews.com>

### Follow conga line to Qns. - for culture

Sunday, July 9th, 2006

It's hard to believe, but after 10 years of the Latino Cultural Festival in Queens, there are still people who think that outside of Manhattan, the arts and culture scene is nothing more than a vast wasteland. They don't know what they are missing.

There is an impressive roster of star performers in this year's festival, which runs through Aug. 26, but without a doubt the high point will be the July 29 performance of the Afro-Cuban music and jazz legend, percussionist Cándido Camero Guerra. "'Camero' for my father and 'Guerra' for my mother," he said with a wide smile. "I recognize both because without them 'no Cándido.'"

Born in Cuba 85 years ago, he came to New York on July 4, 1946. Always elegantly dressed in well-cut suits and silk ties, Camero is the father of the modern way of playing the conga drums. And he is still going strong as a performer.

"Before Cándido, no one played more than one drum at the same time," said Grammy-winning percussionist, Bobby Sanabria, who will perform at the festival one day after Camero. "He was the first to play two or three conga drums at the same time, the way we do it today."

A Camero performance is a special treat. He needs a cane to walk, but once he stands behind the congas, the legendary musician is a tireless young man once again.

"I look 100 when I walk," he said with characteristic good humor. "But when I play, watch out! I become 20 again."

The festival, sponsored by JP Morgan Chase, has taken place every summer since 1997 at the Queens Theatre in the Park at Flushing Meadows-Corona Park.

It is a unique event, a whirlwind tour through the richness and diversity of the cultures of Latin America and Spain.

"Our commitment to the festival was strong from the beginning. It was never a 'pilot program' for us to decide if we would go ahead with it the following year," said Jeff Rosenstock, the theater's executive director. "We knew we wanted the festival to continue, in part because we wanted to bring Latinos - 25% of Queens' population - to our theater. Ten years later we can say that 25% of the theater's audience is Hispanic."

Of course, much more than good intentions and good luck were needed for the festival to become a success. It has taken a lot of hard work and enthusiasm by Rosenstock and the theater staff. In 1999, Mexican-born Claudia Norman came on board as festival director.

"We have two main goals: We want to be the meeting point where the community has the opportunity to learn, see and experience - in 12 days - the best of Latino and Latin-American culture, and to function as an important platform for artists," Norman said. "After all, we are the largest and most diverse Latino festival in New York City, offering a wide range of culture, from traditional and folkloric to new and popular voices."

In a few days, from July 26 to Aug. 6, New Yorkers will be able to enjoy Camero's art; Soledad Barrio's fiery flamenco dancing; Peruvian singer Eva Ayllón's strong and passionate voice; the acclaimed Colombian film "Bolívar soy yo," directed by Jorge Alí Triana; the energy and originality of Cuban singer, Albita; the internationally known group Inti Illimani, one of the main exponents of the Chilean New Song movement, and much more.

Definitely, come to the festival and feel sorry for those who still think there is no culture outside Manhattan.

"We welcome every community, every culture, every group," Rosenstock said.

Information and tickets at (718) 760-0064 or [www.queenstheatre.org](http://www.queenstheatre.org). =