

music

this week's essential reading

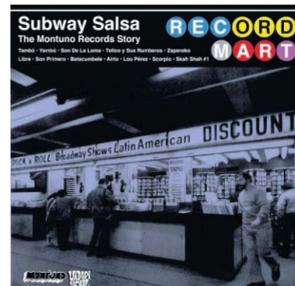
{ 'Doggy style' by Kenneth Capello, GQ

Despite many claiming that he epitomises the worst trends in music and culture, Capello examines why Miami club-rap superstar Pitbull is so popular }

Deep down below

A subterranean New York record store and the salsa culture that surrounds it are the subject of a fantastic new two-CD compilation, writes Andy Battaglia

The twisted innards of New York's Times Square subway station do not make for a particularly pleasant place to go shopping. It's not an altogether dreadful environment, but neither is it conducive to the life of leisure. The main objective for most who walk these thoroughfares is to get out or get on their way as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, there are a select few stores scattered through tunnels that splay out underground. One with an indiscernible name sells clothes, a slapdash mix of souvenir "New York" sweatshirts and discounted Puma trainers. Another stocks chintzy jewellery and silk scarves. Yet another turns family photographs into simulations of oil paintings, and not far from there lurks a tacky gift shop.



Subway Salsa: The Montuno Records Story
Various Artists
Dh98

This would be Record Mart, a music store with a rich lineage as one of the city's premier Latin-music shops. Its roots trace back to 1958, and it has served up salsa and the like ever since (save for an eight-year period around the turn of the century when it shut down because of station renovations, only to open again in 2007). Record Mart and the culture that



New York's Record Mart as it was decades ago. Courtesy of Jesse Moskowitz

surrounds it are the subject of *Subway Salsa: The Montuno Records Story*, a fantastic new two-CD set filled with infectious sounds from a city in constant motion. You don't need to be an aficionado of Latin music to get the fever, or even necessarily know what "salsa" really is. Just press play on track one and an abundance of vitality comes across loud and clear. Record Mart and the associated Montuno Records label, which started in the 1970s, owe much to the stewardship of Jesse Moskowitz, who grew up in New York and counted himself among "the hip Jewish kids in Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan" who "all loved Latin". ("Mambonicks", he later calls them in the liner notes.) From his underground shop, he started stocking as many Latin records as he could get his hands on – in an era when that meant getting actual "hands" on actual "records".

Record Mart became the centre of a network materialising around different forms of pan-Latin music in New York, where the clash and clang of people and things gives rise to styles that, at least in their primes, can't help but sound like nothing else. You can hear it in Subway Salsa's first track, *Coco My My*, a 1975 classic that churns with enough kinetic energy to power a whole two-CD set on its own. The percussion scatters everywhere, a bass line works to try out any conceivable note that might brighten its mood, horns blare with the intensity of a fanfare from a war that is somehow exceedingly festive and fun. And is that a random three-second allusion to the *Batman* theme song thrown in near the middle? Indeed, it is. Oddly, Record Mart neither looks nor feels especially ripe for romanticising. On display in its

windows is a motley mix of modern consumer ephemera, from candy-coloured sets of Beats by Dr Dre headphones and disposable cameras to voltage adapters for electronic goods from other lands. Inside are rows and columns of DVDs, for aspiring followers of therapeutic yoga regimens and fans of films like *Fame* and *Gumby: The Movie*. The music selection comprises stray pieces of vinyl (including a copy of *Subway Salsa* on inconspicuous display) and otherwise the cover-art booklets for many hundreds of CDs exhibited in plastic sleeves. Among the section headings: Salsa, Rumba, Afro-Cuban Jazz...

Drawing on the exchange of what an introduction in *Subway Salsa's* liner notes calls "occult knowledge and cultural legacies" at Record Mart, the label issued an eclectic mix of styles and sounds during the 1970s and 1980s. Clas-

sifications for some of them include such specific mantles as "guaracha-mambo", "montuno-pachanga", and "doo-wop baba rumba", but for the listener a little lost on what any of those might mean, a simple appreciation of the rhythm in the words goes a long way towards signalling the sensations that lie in wait. Some of them are gentle, like those prompted by Zaperoko's *No Quedo Ni El Gato*, a relaxed song that keeps its wiggling to a minimum and basks in notes from an acoustic guitar that fall like a nice spring rain. Others are bracing and charged, like those at work in Manny Oquendo Y Libre's *Bailala Pronto*, which throws out all sorts of convulsive percussion sounds and fiery flute lines that make a case for re-evaluating the kind of intensity expected of flutes in general. At one point near the middle, the song starts to break

down to focus for a bit on drums – played in empty space by what sounds like a slightly more refined relative of Animal from *The Muppets*. It's spirited, celebratory, and a little bit crazy, all the better for when the rest of the parts – perky piano, brassy horns, ebullient bass – enter back in and restore the crack symphonic whole. There's something psychedelic about the way the music on *Subway Salsa* moves. Piano, especially, figures prominently in close to every track, usually in constantly circling, cyclonic patterns that accrue power and speed through reiteration. It's dizzying, in all the best ways, with an ability to clear a receptive mind and replace whatever was in it with something lasting. The sensation spreads as well, to the extent that some songs sound like competitions among players in the band to see who can wow all the others the most.

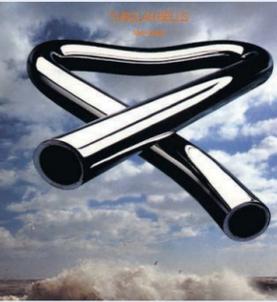
Son Primero's *El Avance* features one of those competitions, staged near the end of a song that starts off conventionally enough but builds and builds toward its climax. At one point the drummer veers out of conventionality and just starts pounding on things, with what sounds like a big smile on his face. Once he's done, a flute player comes in and plays an unhinged solo that at one point includes him strangely screaming through the tube at his lips. What he might be screaming is not easy to discern, but wondering about the meaning of it is a worthwhile exercise. It's hard to think of many better ways to pass the time. *Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, The Wire, Bookforum and more.*

playlist

Essential releases from four more labels that began life as record stores

Mike Oldfield
Tubular Bells (1973)

In 1972, Richard Branson founded Virgin Records and Tapes, a niche prog-rock record store in west London before branching out into music publishing a year later. *Tubular Bells* sold in its millions partly due to its opening track being used in *The Exorcist*.

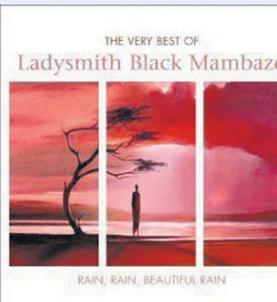


The Smiths
The Queen is Dead (1986)

Geoff Travis's Rough Trade also began life as a London vinyl shop before evolving into a label that housed the cream of the UK's indie rock scene. This included Morrissey and Marr's outfit, although the pair apparently loathed their label boss, with *Frankly Mr Shankly* reportedly being a thinly-disguised jibe at Mr Travis.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo
Rain Rain Beautiful Rain (2004)

While Gallo Records, which started out as a gramophone record outlet in 1926, grew to become South Africa's biggest record label, it wasn't until Paul Simon adopted the LBM's enchanting harmonies for his *Graceland* LP that its artists achieved the international acclaim they deserved.



Sean Paul
Dutty Rock (2002)

The roots of reggae label VP Records can be traced to a tiny Brooklyn store founded by Jamaican immigrant Randy Chin back in 1979. Over the years, dancehall stars such as Beenie Man, Buju Banton, Elephant Man and one-time Beyoncé collaborator Sean Paul have all found themselves under the VP umbrella.

