



Willie Hernandez

May 12, 1947 - April 17, 2025

Flautist, tenor saxophonist, and musician extraordinaire, Willie Hernandez is, and shall ever remain, one of the great unsung heroes of Latin music in New York City. Born Guillermo Hernandez, May 12th, 1947, in Manhattan, USA. Willie started playing flute and fife at age eleven when he joined the St. Anselm Fife, Drum and Bugle Corp. He attended Morris High School in the Bronx and was part of the HS band. By Senior year, he was gigging nights and weekends with his classmate, Philip Pizarro y su Conjunto, feeding his passion for salsa music, particularly the charanga genre.

Later, Willie studied tenor sax privately with the renowned José “Chombo” Silva, who mentored him on the instrument and became a close friend as well as a profound musical influence. Meanwhile, despite his love for the tenor sax, Willie acquired a reputation for his fiery flute solos atop such working bands as Riverside Sextet, Orquesta La New Yorker, Ray Davila and Steve Colon’s Charanbrass. Later, Willie signed on as a lifelong member and featured artist with Ralphy Sabater’s Charanga band.

Out of school, Willie worked for ASCAP as a Purchasing Agent, day-jobbing there 28 years, as well as a Membership recruiter - in what he called “a wine-and-diner” - of salsa greats like Bobby Valentin, Papo Luca, and Cheo Feliciano, to name but a few. “Wine ’em, dine ’em, and sign ’em,” he used to say, clearly proud of his contributions. Willie was instrumental in establishing ASCAP’s Puerto Rican office, where he signed composing giants, Tite Curet

Alonso, Glenn Monroig, Jose Noguerras, who composed and arranged so much of the salsa music we enjoy today.

Despite his freelance work with the likes of Willie Colon, Tito Ramos, Gil Suarez, Orlando Marin, and Louis Smalls, Willie frequently still lent his talents and leadership to local bands such as Mambo NYC, Grupo Internacional, Casa Mantequilla, among many others, and gracing clubs all over town with his joyous sound.

Willie died in St. Augustine, Florida on April 17th, 2025, after a 31/2 1/2-year-long battle with Lewy Body Dementia. He is survived by his wife and life-long partner, Evy Ramos, his brother, Bobby,

nephews, grandchildren and a list of loving friends and fans too long to enumerate. His wit, his humor, his ability to bring out the best in his fellow musicians will be sorely missed by all who knew him. Rest in peace, Maestro...

Those desiring may leave messages of sympathy and encouragement by going to his tribute page at, <https://www.stjohnsfamilyfuneralhome.com/obituaries/willie-hernandez-2/#!/TributeWall>.

St. Johns Family Funeral Home of St. Augustine is assisting the family with arrangements.

Tribute Wall

RR

“ Charanbrass



Rolando Ramos - May 30, 2025 at 10:45 AM

RR

“ I was playing stickball in my neighborhood in the Bronx and a Volkswagen drives up towards me as I'm ready to hit the ball! The guy driving says; is your name Roland? I say yea, he says my name is Willie Hernandez and I hear you play congas! Would you like to do a gig? I say hell yea He says go home take a shower and put on dress clothes, No Sneakers, lol. I'll be waiting here for you! This was the first gig of my professional career, I was fifteen and I played with Charanbrass for five years! Willie was my introduction to Charanga music. Willie will Always be in my heart. A great friend and an amazing Musician R.I.P. my friend 🙏

Rolando Ramos - May 30, 2025 at 10:44 AM

OD

I remember playing with a band headed by Ralphy Sabater and performed in some of those stickball block parties

Orlando Diaz - June 11, 2025 at 04:44 PM

OD

Very old friend. Helped me out before i moved to Florida. I was hoping to reconnect when i found this. Rest In Peace my brother

Orlando Diaz - June 11, 2025 at 04:45 PM

JT

“ I grew up with Willie, we called him "Papo", on Prospect Avenue in the South Bronx in the 1950's and 60's. He was the best punchball player in the neighbor and always a great friend. He encouraged me to joint the St. Anselm's Fife, Drum and Bugle marching band where I learned to play the bugle and later the trumpet. I cherish the great memories of marching in parades and will always appreciate Willie's role in getting me involved in music. I later represented Willie in some legal matters and last had lunch with him years ago where he spoke of this fascinating life in the Salsa music scene. He will be greatly missed but his kindness and deep concern for his family and friends will never be forgotten. José Luis Torres.

José Luis Torres - May 29, 2025 at 07:13 PM