

# Willie Colón

(April 28, 1950 – February, 21, 2026)



Willie Colón (courtesy of Craft Latino) – [click here](#) to download photo

Today we bow our heads as the world mourns the loss one of the greatest artists of our time—the incomparable Willie Colón: legendary trombonist, visionary composer, master arranger, emotive singer, bold producer, fearless director, and tireless innovator.

We are heartbroken by the passing of an icon whose sound transcended the dance floor and defined an era. A pillar of Fania Records, Willie helped bring Latin music from the streets of New York to audiences around the world. His music declared identity, pride, resistance, and joy. His music was not just heard; it was lived.

Willie Colón was born and raised in the heart of the Bronx’s vibrant Latin community. Drawing deeply from his surroundings, he channeled the rhythm of the streets, the poetry of everyday survival, the ache of teen angst, and the fierce hope of a people determined to be seen—all of which found a home in his sound. From those roots grew a profound devotion to culture, heritage, and truth. He did not simply represent his community; he amplified it.

Willie Colón’s genius announced itself early—his first contract was signed by his mother when he was just sixteen—and it never stopped evolving. From his groundbreaking debut *El Malo* (1967) to the raw brilliance of his unforgettable collaborations with Héctor Lavoe and Rubén Blades, his role in the Fania All Stars among many others, he redefined salsa—musically daring, socially conscious, and unapologetically bold. His collaborations with legends such as Celia Cruz, David Byrne, Soledad Bravo, and Ismael Miranda further revealed the breadth of his artistry and the depth of his influence.

With more than 30 million albums sold, multiple Platinum records, and 11 combined GRAMMY® and Latin GRAMMY nominations, Willie Colón stood among the most successful salsa artists of all time. Yet numbers cannot measure the true scale of his legacy. His Lifetime Achievement Award from The Latin Recording Academy® (2004), his induction into the International Latin Music Hall of Fame (2000) and the Latin Songwriters Hall of Fame (2019), along with *Billboard* magazine’s recognition of him as one of the 30 most influential Latin Artists of All Time (2015), only begins to tell the story.

Beyond music, Willie was a voice for his community—an activist and a public servant. He understood that rhythm could move people, but also hearts—and that songs could spark change.

Bruce McIntosh, VP, Latin of Catalog, Craft Recordings, reflected on Willie's enduring impact, stating, "Willie was much more than an iconic artist; he was a true visionary that forged a new genre of Latin music that we all love today called Salsa. His legacy is etched into the very soul of Latin culture. He will forever be 'El Maestro.'"

Today, the Fania Records, Craft Recordings and Concord family mourn the loss of a true music icon, but his echo will resonate with generations to come.

#### **About Willie Colón:**

William Anthony Colón Román is an outstanding trombonist, composer, arranger, vocalist, producer, and bandleader. He hails from the South Bronx and is the son of Puerto Rican parents. He played trumpet as a young teenager but switched to trombone after discovering the sounds emanating from Barry Rogers and Mon Rivera recordings. He was 16 years old when he began his recording career with Al Santiago, former owner of the prosperous Alegre record label. Willie's first album was being recorded for Santiago's Futura Record label. While the album was in progress Al's medical conditions forced him to find a label that would release the album which would eventually be released as El Malo for Fania Records. Willie signed with Fania while being pursued by this writer and brother, Richard Marin for Decca Records. Fania's co-owner, Johnny Pacheco, recognized the talented Colon as a diamond-in-the-rough and chose Willie to lead a parade of sensational hits that would endure a couple of decades. El Malo became a smash hit that sold hundreds of thousands of copies and launched the flourishing career of a talented kid with aspirations and the ambition to be a leader in the world of salsa music.

Of special importance among Willie's dozens of albums is El Juicio and La Gran Fuga (The Big Break). El Juicio was released in 1972 and features Hector Lavoe, Willie's lead singer at his peak. The band was carefully chosen by Willie and includes Willie on trombone; Eric Matos, trombone; Louie Romero, timbales; Joe Torres, piano; Jose Mangual Jr., bongos; Milton Cardona, congas; Gene Golden, percussion; and Santi Gonzalez on bass. The coro includes Justo Betancourt and Johnny Pacheco. Wanted By FBI/The Big Break – La Gran Fuga was released in 1970 and includes Hector Lavoe on vocals, Willie Colon and Willie Campbell on trombones, Louie Timbalito Romero on timbales, Professor Joe Torres on piano, Milton Cardona on congas, Jose Mangual Jr. on bongos and Santi Gonzalez on bass. Perhaps the one moment that best encapsulates the transcendental qualities of this album is "Panameña" – when the tune stops on its tracks, Lavoé introduces la salsa de Puerto Rico, el Aguinaldo, and all hell breaks loose, thanks to Colón's roaring trombone and the jerky piano lines by the maestro, Professor Joe Torres. —Bobby Marin

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