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Yo tengo sentido, tengo rima: Cano Estremera and the Art of the Soneo

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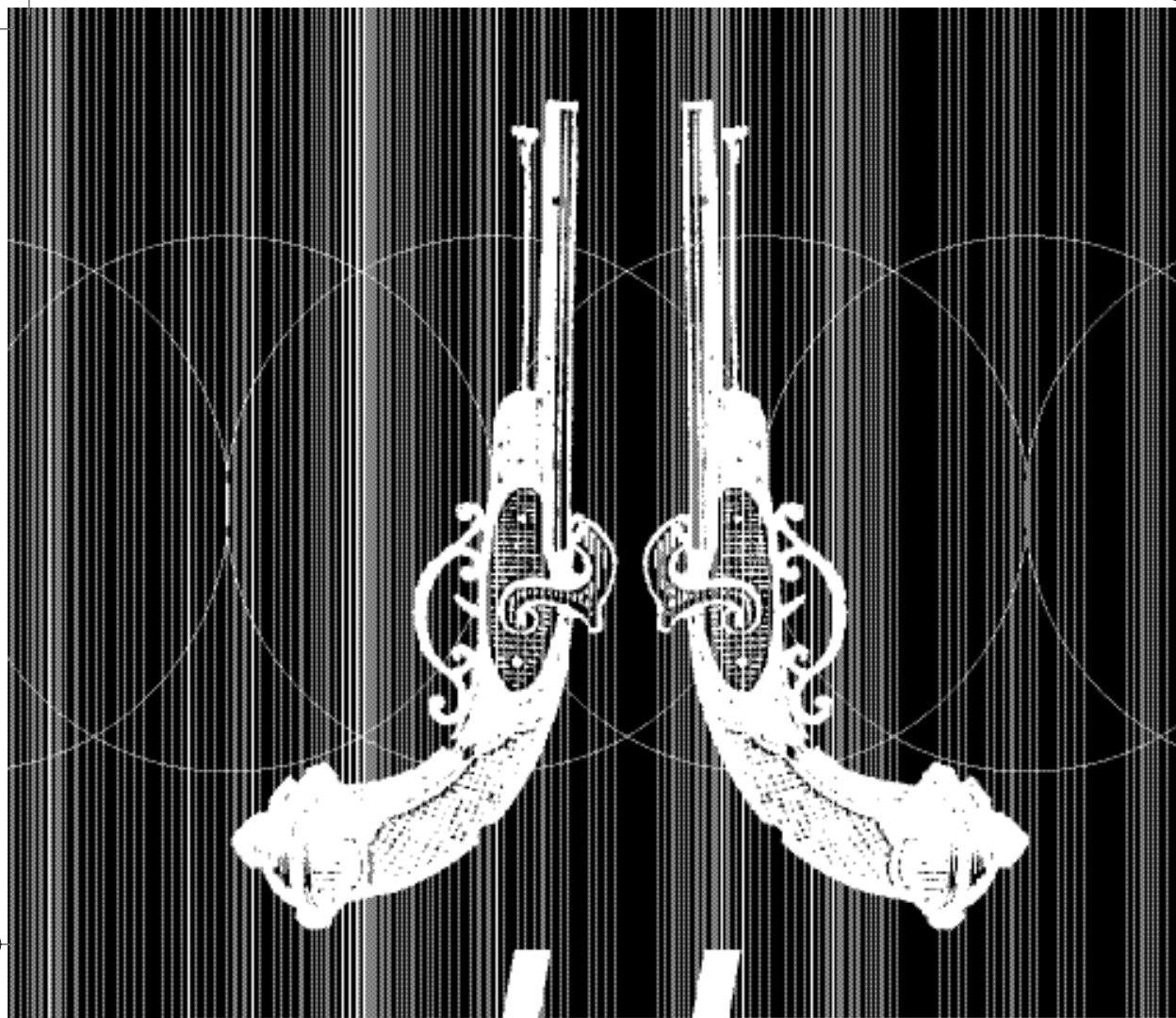
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El dueño
del sónico

Introduction

Calling himself *El dueño del soneo*, “the boss of vocal improvisation,” the Puerto Rican singer, Carlos “Cano” Estremera, is at the forefront of many innovations in *soneos*. For the uninitiated, a *soneo* is a vocal improvisation sung by a lead singer during the *montuno*, or call-and-response section in Afro-Cuban *son*-based musics, commercially referred to as salsa.¹ As he is always up for a good duel, planned or unforseen, the results of Cano’s *duelos* have been recorded both legally and illegally and spread throughout the world by salsa fans. Cano Estremera’s improvisational framework is a synthesis of previous *soneros* as well as singers and musicians from beyond the realm of salsa. His style can be summed up as unique and creative while remaining in the tradition of the *sonero*.

Dueño del soneo

Carlos Estremera was born in 1958 in Barrio Obrero, the working class section of Santurce, Puerto Rico. An albino, hence the nickname, *El Cano*, Estremera was socially stigmatized when school teachers mistook vision problems for ignorance. As a young person, his early musical activity was in the local folkloric genres of *bomba* and *plena*. He sang in a neighborhood salsa group before joining the folkloric group, Los Pleneros del Quinto Olivo, and later sang with Orquesta Mulenze, which signed on with Fania Records. In 1978, Cano began a musical

When I interviewed Cano at his house in Carolina, Puerto Rico, in August 2003, he agreed that because there is no systemization for singing salsa, the strict adherence to rhyme schemes found in folkloric musics is not found in salsa. For Cano, the *soneo* must indisputably rhyme with the *coro* (choral refrain); anything else is “subterfuge” (Estremera 2003). He explained that when a singer runs out of words to rhyme with the *coro*, s/he has a few options. The first, and easiest option is to rhyme a *soneo* with the next *soneo*, and ignore the *coro* until one can come up with something to get back to the rhyme of the *coro*. The second option is to rhyme the *soneo* within the *soneo*, ignore the *coro*, and rhyme with the next *soneo*. The most difficult technique is a triple rhyme where one rhymes within the *soneo*, rhymes with the *coro*, and then rhymes with the next *soneo*. Cano concluded that the *sonero*’s avoidance of the *coro* is due to a weak vocabulary and can be likened to a jazz musician having difficulty with a given tonality or set of chord changes.

In terms of content, the idea of staying within a song’s theme during all of the *soneos* is boring to Cano and in his opinion, to the audience as well. “How many ways can you say I love you in a song?” (Estremera 2003). People criticize him for leaving the theme, but they don’t realize that it’s done purposely. For Cano, it is best to bring up other themes, such as

and Charlie Parker, “people who truly improvise” (Estremera 2003). When I asked him if he transcribed or memorized solos and patterns from these improvisers, he indicated that he doesn’t. Instead, Cano internalizes broader concepts by understanding “the concept of improvisation that [these artists] have” (Estremera 2003). For Cano, these concepts include melodic ideas, melodic structure, harmonic structure, and lyrical structure. He points out that, for him, lyrical structure is important, because in salsa, not only do the soneos have to be melodically and lyrically distinct, they must also rhyme. To Cano Estremera’s ears, Miles Davis “rhymes” in all tonalities. He explained that the tonality of a given song will greatly impact a singer’s improvisations and any given singer, including himself, will perform better when a song is in a manageable key; this is why a singer will sound better on one day rather than on another day.

I was surprised when Cano explained that between family, work, and the problems of daily life, he has no time to set aside for practice. He laments the fact that great painters had patrons so that they could focus exclusively on producing art while he has not had similar support. Instead, Cano listens to as much as he can and incorporates it in performances. He does warm up before performing, but feels dissatisfied with his vocal range and voice quality.

But for Cano improvisation is more than technique; he told me, “everything

Improvisational techniques

Cano has a wide range of techniques that he uses when improvising. What follows are some specific techniques that he uses when improvising: (1) Singing over the coro. Cano does not like improvising over short *coros*, finding it too repetitive: “The audience can’t hear what it is that you are singing because the coro is on top of you,” he states (Estremera 2003). When encountering a short coro, he does not think about it as such, continuing to sing through it, making his soneos as long as he wants them to be.⁵ In his own words: “It’s like saying you guys want to sing on top of me but I’m not going to let you” (Estremera 2003). (2) Rhyming about rhyming. Cano will often sing about the quality of his opponent’s soneos, belittling their lack of quality:

Coro: Ahora sí, vamos a ver quién da más
Soneo: Yo tengo sentido, tengo rima,
chequea lo tuyo que no rima ná
[later] Tú no entiendes los soneos,
porque tu mente no es igual
[later] La manera en que tú rimas
es más fácil para cantar⁶

Coro: Right now , let’s see you gives
[sings] best
Soneo: I have meaning, I have rhyme,
check yours out it doesn’t rhyme
at all
[later] You don’t understand
soneos, because your mind is not
the same
[later] The way in which you rhyme
is much easier to sing

(3) Binarization of tertiary rhythms,

individually, then in competing pairs, and ultimately in a free for all that would pit each against the other simultaneously. At the conclusion, the audience would determine who was the best sonero of the bunch. Four singers engaged in competition: José Alberto “El Canario,” Cano Estremera, Lalo Rodríguez, and Domingo Quiñones.

Duelo al anochecer revealed a variety of improvisational styles and techniques, rhythmic virtuosity, and musical creativity. There were numerous humorous musical moments that showed quick thinking and depth of technique on the part of each of the participants. To the press, and during his soneos that evening, Canario reproached Cano for being vulgar. Listening to the concert, however, one can see that Domingo Quiñones initiated much of the vulgarity in the final “battle royale” between the four singers. In response to this criticism, Cano argues that most popular music has picant lyrics, and since salsa is popular music from the barrio, it should reflect the barrio’s language. Ultimately, there was no real winner at the event, but many fans claim Domingo Quiñones showed his talents more effectively than others and the audience chanted his name when asked who was the king. Cano Estremera felt that everyone won, in the sense that, after the concert, the public bought albums by the singers and attended later concerts.

Billed as a rematch between Cano and Domingo, a second event took place in February 2002. According to Cano, the idea lost momentum after this second

because people don’t see how what I sang to you had more quality from a melodic structure” (Estremera 2003).

Conclusion

Cano’s style is derived from a combination of study and intuition, an organic process that combines instinct and the learning of the craft. In this way it is similar to other improvisationally based musics. He is bothered that the process of improvising in salsa is not well defined, with the result that anyone can call themselves a sonero. In the marketplace, consumers purchase records by physically appealing singers who have not done their homework, helping to propel their stardom despite the lack of quality. Cano is also upset by the fact that so many singers arrive at salsa when they have not achieved success in other genres. The implication is that salsa isn’t a serious genre with technical expectations that require hard work.

As an improviser, Cano is preoccupied with not repeating himself: his biggest fear is stagnation and producing records that are copies of one another (Figueroa 2002: 31). When I asked him about composing specific vehicles for improvisation, he answered that he couldn’t compose. Despite his affinity with jazz, Cano is not interested in working in jazz, because commercial considerations undermine the usefulness of the medium. Although he looks to jazz for pattern-based improvisation, Cano is interested in getting away from patterns, pointing out to me that this is

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