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The Year 1898 in the Music of the Caribbean: Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Machinations of the U.S. Music Industry

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This paper analyses the impact that 1898, with the subsequent occupation and intervention in Cuban affairs and the occupation and treatment of Puerto Rico as a colony by the United States, had on the music of these Caribbean nations. Among the key factors discussed that affected musical production are the commercialization of music by American recording corporations and the massive migration of musicians, especially Puerto Rican musicians, to the United States. New York, like the Caribbean before it, would become the entrepôt for musicians and musical styles, especially for Puerto Ricans. Out of this fertile mix new musical styles, such as salsa and Latin jazz, would be created.

[Key words: 1898, Caribbean migration, Caribbean music, Puerto Rican music, New York, commercialization]
We are accustomed to think of the year 1898 in somewhat apocalyptic tones, much as those with more religious inclinations might view the year of the millennium, 2000. This vision of '98 may be in some ways influenced by the Spaniards, who for over a century have been crying about '98 as though it were a national tragedy. Fortunately, the situation in Spain has changed so much that those brilliant intellectuals who never tired of weeping over the fall of the empire are today viewed with a certain curiosity, since Spaniards today feel that they didn't only lose out at that time, they stood to gain as well. For them 1898 is more a symbol of a generation of intellectuals, off the mark on many issues, but nonetheless brilliant. At the same time, the U.S. gained in the short run in material terms what it lost in prestige, so that by now no historian of sound judgment would conceive of the Spanish-American war as a glorious page in the history books. Cuba and Puerto Rico, who were the ones who lost the most in the short and medium terms, could see within a few decades those events as not only having fatal consequences (which of course they did), but also as another chapter in the history of their entry into modernity. Yet rather than engaging in a partisan political interpretation of the matter, let's focus on the issue at hand: nuestra música.

Indeed, one of the decisive facts for the subsequent history of Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean music stems from the Spanish-American War, which led to the occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico by the U.S. armed appropriation of all economic sectors of the Island, beginning with the land itself and the sugar industry, which had been destroyed by the war and purchased at ridiculously low prices.

But what interests us here is what all of this meant for the music, in the short term of course, but especially over the long term. First off, it is important to consider Cuba's central role in this U.S.-impelled process, since in my view Cuba was converted into a kind of pilot experiment for U.S. strategy in Latin America. And, indeed, Cuba offered the ideal conditions for such a role, with music providing one of the best examples.

There can be no doubt that Cuba had a huge variety of musical genres and styles, as well as a potential for astute and opportunistic exploitation. This musical abundance stemmed in large part from the exceptional development of Cuba's colonial creole society in the 19th century, along with strong European influences. But it also derived from Cuba's dubious honor of being the very last Latin American country to put an end to the slave trade and abolish slavery, which happened in 1886, an event that served to strengthen the presence of ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Carabali, and Arará, whose music had already become an important (even though semiclandestine) force by the beginning of the 20th century. One must also consider the existence of the quite different poles — almost two separate musical countries — within the island: the western part, with its strong Yoruba and Abakuá elements, and the eastern part, Oriente, which exhibited more Bantú and...
Before long we see Puerto Ricans in all spheres of New York music, in both white and black jazz bands. The "Latinized" since the beginning of the century. Hollywood sound films would then be the fourth means of diffusion, not only for live music, but also for music already recorded by American companies.

Cuban music in the 20th century thus experienced its exceptional international expansion thanks to the powerful U.S. culture industry. Cuban music was spoken of as the "chosen music" due to such factors as the U.S. economic control of the island; the emergence of a dependent but enterprising bourgeoisie (to which was added the new political class headed by "generals and doctors," as Carlos Lobería puts it); massive U.S. investments, which included the important area of tourism; and of course the unusually wide variety of available genres and styles, some of them, like the omnipresent habanera, already internationalized during the 19th century. Puerto Rico by contrast received already internationalized during the 19th century. Puerto Rico early on, during the U.S. occupation, was the "mecca of good professional musicians," as described by John Storm Roberts in his by now classic books), there was a clear prevalence of Cuban composers and rhythms or genres. The '20s and '30s saw the prominence of pieces by Nilo Meléndez, Ernesto Lecuona, Sánchez y Fuentes, Moisés Simón, Gonzalo Roig, and Eliseo Grenet, and musical genres like the son, the bolero, the rumba (and the conga) for ballroom consumption, the latter two of these created by white, middle-class, and very professional composers who achieved immense popularity among all social sectors from many countries (a process similar to that of some composers of plena in Puerto Rico). In the 1940s through '50s, we see the mambo, Afro-Cuban jazz, the cha cha as well as black orchestras like those of Alberto Socarrás, Marcelino Guerra, and Machito, and of course major exponents of Latin music such as Arsenio Rodríguez and Miguelito Valdés. It was perhaps only in the field of composition that figures as noteworthy as Rafael Hernández and Pedro Flores have gotten their due. Even so, the Puerto Rican legacy served as the central core, along with that of the Cubans, in the universalization of the Caribbean current in popular music.

It is worth recalling certain historical landmarks. For instance, sixteen Puerto Ricans, among them none other than Rafael Hernández and his brother Jesús, took part in the formation of the famous Hellfighters military band (Infantry Regiment #369) during World War I, a band led by the African-American musician James Reese Europe. Europe convinced his superiors that Puerto Rico was the
a prime example), while the Puerto Ricans were generally the sidemen or studio musicians, except for a few exceptional cases. This situation held, even though such major figures as Rafael Hernández and Pedro Flores, along with Bobby Capó, Daniel Santos, Ruth Fernández, and others, were idols in Mexico and all of the Caribbean, including Cuba. But in the Mecca of our music, the Palladium Ballroom of the 1950s (on Broadway and 53rd Street and one block from Birdland, the Mecca of jazz), two of the three signature orchestras, those of Tito Puente and Tito Rodríguez, were Puerto Rican. And we’ve already seen that not all of Machito’s “Afro-Cubans” were strictly Afro-Cuban.

It’s no surprise, then, that after two revolutions — the Cuban revolution and the British invasion — had the effect, for different reasons, of diminishing the impact of Caribbean music; it was above all the Puerto Ricans who were called upon to create the first style of pan-Caribbean music, salsa, whose roots are not only in earlier Cuban music but also in what we have seen to be the diverse repertoire of the Puerto Rican groups in New York since the 1930s. I believe that this highly significant phenomenon has not been sufficiently studied or researched.

Yet there is still another point that usually goes unnoticed. After the eruption of salsa, with its ups and downs, we sense that it wasn’t the music of Puerto Rico that was the most maligned by the events following from 1898, but rather the music of the rest of the Caribbean, no matter whether it came from the other Antillean islands or from the other Caribbean island like Jamaica invaded the world with reggae, and the Dominicans merengue left its national borders behind to affect us all, while those from the Continent earned their place in salsa, and the Argentines claimed their own in Latin jazz, which is no longer just Afro-Cuban or Afro-Boricuan.

And now, the question remains: after so much good music resulted from developments after 1898, what can be said about that particular year?

To sum up, the captains of the music industry took advantage of our music and with it became even bigger multi-millionaires, a process which I described many years ago as “musical colonialism.” Today I prefer to say that we have actually won a major battle. The music of the Caribbean, in the vestibule of the New World, has turned out to be a major influence in North America and is triumphing in Europe, Japan, and even in Africa. All over the world it is a sonorous ingredient of everyday life, just as the world’s diet has as indispensable parts the foods corn, potato, chili, and tomato, all of which the Europeans “discovered” in this Orbe Novo (New World) in the 16th century. With multinational corporations or without them, with or without Internet and globalization, our music is here to stay. Who would have thought that the bolero, like the tango and even the habanera,