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Contesting that Damned Mambo: Arsenio Rodríguez, Authenticity, and the People of El Barrio and the Bronx in the 1950s

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From 1948 to 1966 the Palladium Ballroom, which was located at 1692 Broadway, off the corner of 53rd Street, was known among Latino and non-Latino audiences as the mecca of Latin dance music in New York City. In the early 1950s it became specifically recognized in the American mainstream media as “the home of the mambo,” which featured fiery amateur and professional mambo dancers as well as the mambo big bands of Frank “Machito” Grillo, Ernest “Tito” Puente, and Pablo “Tito” Rodríguez. Its importance to the popularization of Latin dance music in the United States is undeniable, but, perhaps even more important, the Palladium and the music of its principal protagonists have constituted a dominant place in both the Latin imaginary of American popular culture and the historical canon of Latino popular music and culture in the United States. As a result, the entire landscape of Latino music, dance, and culture in New York City during the 1950s has been largely ignored or overlooked. For example, various dancehalls, cabarets, and social clubs that were located in East Harlem or “El Barrio” and the Bronx were the sites of a vibrant music culture whose importance to resident Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians and dancers equaled, or even surpassed, that of the Palladium. Black Cuban composer and bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez (1911–1970) was especially important to this milieu for his Cuban music repertory and unique *son montuno* style. He and his music were particularly influential among the first generation of salsa musicians, many of whom spent their formative years in El Barrio and the Bronx performing with Arsenio’s *conjunto* and listening to its recordings.¹ As Willie Colón noted, “I always listened to [Arsenio’s] records and he was our principal teacher. From him we took the feeling of Cuban music, of the orthodox *son*, for the lack of a better word” (Padura Fuentes 1997: 53). The fact that Arsenio was blind (the result of a childhood accident) added to his beloved status among Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos in El Barrio and the Bronx.

Arsenio formed his first *conjunto* ensemble and popularized his *son montuno* style performing primarily for the black working class in Havana, Cuba, in the early 1940s. He expanded the old *septeto* combo—which included a lead singer (doubling on *clave*), two second voices (doubling on maracas and guitar), one trumpet, *tres* (a traditional Cuban guitar consisting of three double-coursed strings), double bass, and *bongó*—by adding a piano, trumpet section, and one *tumbadora* (or conga drum).² Although his *conjuntos* in Havana and New York City performed various types of Cuban dance music, including *son*, *son montuno*, *guaracha*, and *guaguancó*, I use the term “son montuno” to refer to his *conjunto*’s overall style of performing Cuban dance music. The following four fundamental aspects collectively distinguished his *son montuno* style from the styles of his contemporaries in Havana and New York City: the use of *contratiempo* or highly syncopated rhythmic and melodic patterns, especially for the bass; call-and-

¿Quién es Quién en el Mambo?

In June 1947 Arsenio Rodríguez and his brother Raúl Rodríguez made their first trip to New York City with the hope of having Arsenio's eyesight restored by Dr. Ramón Castroviejo, an eye specialist. Although Dr. Castroviejo's prognosis was negative, Arsenio's appraisal of the Latin dance music scene, which was dominated by "rhumba" at the time, led him to return to New York City, form a new *conjunto*, and attempt to popularize his unique *son montuno* style among the city's Latino and non-Latino dance audiences. Upon his return in 1950, however, Arsenio was surprised, as he later recounted in *Bohemia*, to find that "[New York City] was filled with 'mambo kings,' 'emperors of the mambo,' 'rajas of the mambo.' And I said to myself, 'then, I'm just a soldier of the 'mambo'" (Cubillas Jr. 1952). Indeed, Arsenio had witnessed the pre-mambo period and the initial stage of mambo mania in New York City. He had also contributed to the emergence of the mambo in Havana, where his *son montuno* style and a new style of *charanga*³ music, both of which featured highly syncopated rhythmic patterns, had become popular, particularly among the black working class, in the early 1940s. While *charanga* musicians, such as those in Antonio Arcaño's group, used the term "mambo" to identify the final syncopated section of their *danzón*⁴ arrangements, Arsenio referred to the similarly syncopated final section in his music as *diablo* (devil). Cuban musicians used other terms to describe these new styles in general, including *nuevo ritmo* (new rhythm), *música moderna* (modern music), and *estilo negro* (black style).

Eventually, arrangers for mambo big bands in New York City and abroad, for example, Dámaso Pérez Prado in Mexico City, adapted similarly structured syncopated sections, while inflecting the melodic and harmonic material with orchestrational techniques from the jazz repertory. Yet the styles of Arsenio's *conjunto* and other Cuban groups as well as their contributions to the development of the mambo went unrecognized, especially in the print media in the United States. With the international dissemination and popularization of the mambo, beginning around 1950, Arsenio felt the urgency in claiming ownership of the mambo, which he expressed in several occasions. In *Bohemia*, for example, he characterized Stan Kenton's influence on mambo big band arrangers (e.g., Tito Puente and Dámaso Pérez Prado) as a "dilution" of the original mambo. He also expressed his frustration with being marginalized or overlooked by the American commercial music industry:

I want to destroy that damned mambo which is putting an end to Cuban composers, since no one wants to buy their *boleros* and *guarachas*. We are possessed by mambo mania. I was the Dr. Frankenstein who created the monster, and now

Arsenio's claims, however, were made in vain as the mainstream American press cemented into the American consciousness Pérez Prado, Tito Puente, Joe Loco, Tito Rodríguez, and others as the "kings of the mambo." For instance, promoter Federico Pagani advertised Arsenio and Pérez Prado's show in *El Diario de Nueva York*, one of New York City's major Spanish-language newspapers, as a "frente a frente" between "El Rey del Mambo" Pérez Prado and Arsenio Rodríguez y Su Conjunto de Estrellas (see Fig. 1). In the *New York Daily News*, however, he advertised the show as "The King of the Mambo" Pérez Prado's "first New York appearance," without mentioning Arsenio's *conjunto*, hence suggesting that including Arsenio's name in the *New York Daily News* advertisement would be inconsequential to drawing the non-Spanish speaking public of New York City (see Fig. 2).⁶ By 1950, RCA Victor had switched Pérez Prado from its specialized international label to its American mainstream pop label, making him the only Latin recording artist on the company's pop label (RCA 1950). By August 1951 he had signed a five-year contract with the booking agency Music Corporation of America and begun a hugely successful tour of California (Ban by Church 1951; Gleason 1951). Meanwhile, mainstream American magazines were calling Pérez Prado the "Latin-American Kenton" (Record Reviews 1950), "El rey del mambo" (El Mambo 1950), and the "originator" of the mambo (The Mambo 1951).

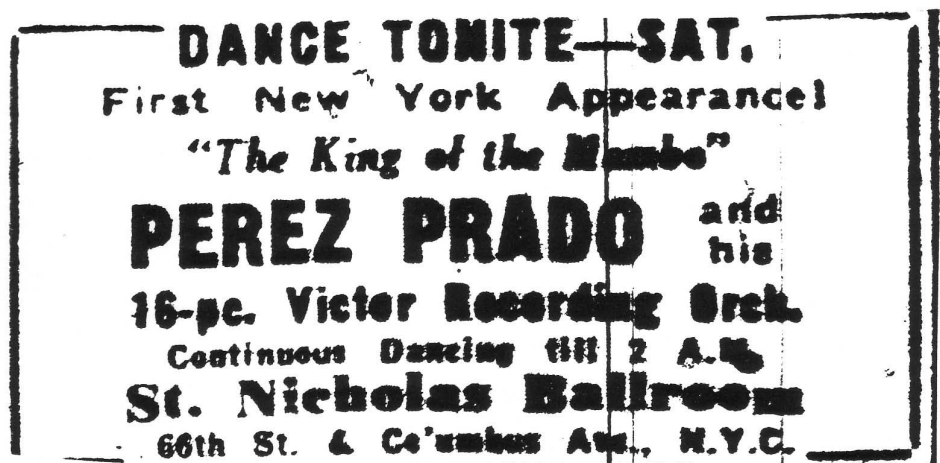


Figure 2

From 1953 to 1955 the mambo's popularity reached its apex in New York City and across the country. In 1953 the independent Tico Recording Company, located in New York City, marketed its three best-selling artists—Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, and Joe Loco—as the "3 Aces of the Mambo" in the popular jazz magazine *Down Beat*. Meanwhile, these leaders were performing regularly in cities across the country, including Miami, Pittsburgh,



Stebbins Avenue in the Morrisania district and on Prospect Avenue on the South Bronx and Hunts Point border (Greenbaum 1986: 20; Jonnes 1986: 329).

Throughout the 1950s Arsenio lived in El Barrio with his wife Emma Lucía Martínez (who was born in Puerto Rico) at 152 E. 116th Street, between Third and Lexington Avenues. He also regularly stayed in the Bronx with his brother Israel “Kike” Rodríguez and his family, who lived at 811 Tinton Avenue, between E. 160th and E. 161st Streets (Coén 2000; Rodríguez 1998;

Travieso 1999; Valdés Jr. 1997).¹² Raúl Rodríguez also lived in the Bronx, and between 1956 and 1958 he owned the El Dorado restaurant on E. 163rd Street and Intervale Avenue (Rodríguez 2000b). The area in and around Westchester Avenue, Southern Boulevard, Prospect Avenue, and E. 163rd Street, which adjoined the South Bronx and Hunts Point, was known for its numerous resident Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians, which in addition to Arsenio included Marcelino Guerra, René Hernández, Fernando “Caney” Storch, Alfredo Valdés, José “Joe Loco” Estévez Jr., and Pablo “Tito” Rodríguez. Other Latino musicians, who would spearhead the popularization of *pachanga*, *boogaloo*, and salsa, beginning in 1960, also lived here, including Charlie and Eddie Palmieri, Manny Oquendo, Ray Barretto, Alfredito Valdés Jr., Hector Rivera, and many more who learned from observing Arsenio’s *conjunto* and listening to its records (Boulton 2000; Marin 2000; Valdés Jr. 1997).

Arsenio saluted the music culture of El Barrio and the Bronx in the lyrics to two of his songs—“Como se goza en El Barrio” (El Barrio Is a Lot of Fun) and “El elemento del Bronx” (The People of the Bronx)—which his *conjunto* recorded with Tico in 1951 and which were later released on the 10" LP *Arsenio Rodríguez y Su Orquesta: Authentic Cuban Mambos* in 1955. The lyrics to “Como se goza en el Barrio” describe a lively street scene stretching from 98th to 125th Streets, along Lexington Avenue. The song concludes with the following lines: “Si quiere bailar lo bueno, camina y venganse al Barrio. Los que viven en downtown vienen a gozar al Barrio” [If you want to dance to good music, walk to El Barrio. Those who live downtown come to have fun in El Barrio]. In these lines, however, Arsenio more than saluted El Barrio’s music culture. He was urging dancers from “downtown” (or the Palladium) to come to

club was to provide members and their family and friends with social and recreational activities, mostly involving the celebration of Cuban patriotic holidays. Such annual celebrations and formal dances included “La Cena Martiana” (January), which commemorated José Martí’s birthday, Antonio Maceo’s birthday (July) and death (December), Cuban Independence Day (20 May), carnival (February), “El baile de blanco y negro,” which required black tuxedos for men and white gowns for women, and “Homenaje al excursionista” (August), which was a dance whose guests of honor were invited from Cuba. The club also hosted birthday parties for members and their families and King’s Day and Easter celebrations for their children. In addition, members organized a dance troupe that specialized in Cuban *son* and *danzón* dancing. Most of these events were held at the club, whose size could only accommodate about one hundred persons total. As a result, club officials were unable to hire big bands because of the club’s limited capacity, the funds from which would have been needed to pay for such bands. The club did, however, present solo piano and poetry recitals and, on occasion, small musical groups.

In January 1957, for example, the club celebrated José Martí’s birthday. The political situation in Cuba had worsened after Fidel Castro in the prior month began the second phase of his revolution against the Batista dictatorship. Arsenio attended the club’s celebration and, together with Puerto Rican singers Luis “Wito” Kortwright and Candido Antomattei (who were members of his *conjunto*), debuted “Adórenla Como Martí” (Love Her As Martí Did), one of Arsenio’s most well-known political songs (see Fig. 3, p. 154). In this song’s lyrics Arsenio implores all Cubans, namely, the warring factions, to resolve their differences in peace and love, and to unite the country so that the sacrifices of the Cuban independence patriots would not have been in vain. The audience was moved and enthusiastically applauded Arsenio’s message of reconciliation (Alvarado 2000).

Arsenio regularly performed for the club for a modest fee, as he had done for the black social clubs in Havana. He varied the size of the *conjunto* according to how much the club was able to pay. Sometimes, he even performed for no fee at all. The club’s officials recognized Arsenio’s cooperation by regularly hiring his full *conjunto* to perform for the club’s larger events, which were usually held at the Hotel Diplomat at 108 W. 43rd Street in Times Square, Manhattan. In any case, the Club Cubano’s celebrations always involved Cuban music, whether it was played on a record player, a *trío*, or an informal jam session, such as one that included Machito, Wito Kortwright, Arsenio, and others in 1959 (see Fig. 4, p. 154).

The social club’s objective in celebrating important Cuban holidays and, with it, Cuban music made it one of the very few locales in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s that featured Cuban *son* and *danzón* music and dancing. Puerto Rican Israel Berrios, who played guitar and sang second voice in Arsenio’s *conjunto*, stressed the

conjunto and Gilberto Valdés's *charanga* were instrumental in creating an alternative milieu for Cuban immigrants, in particular, one that reflected the musical landscape of Havana.

During the 1950s these and other locales in El Barrio and the Bronx served a vital role in the constitution of a unique music culture in which, as Luis "Máquina" Flores and Sara Martínez Baro stated, "everyone knew each other." Hence, community as well as musical style and repertory distinguished the music culture of El Barrio and the Bronx from the Palladium and its "spatial logic," which Robert Farris Thompson described as "an outer circle of rich visitors and celebrities seated at tables . . . an inner circle of Latino and black dancing connoisseurs seated on the floor communally, and, in the sovereign center, the star dancers themselves" (Thompson 2002: 341). And central to the music culture of El Barrio and the Bronx was Arsenio's *conjunto*, whose music resonated with the nostalgic feelings for "home" (i.e., Cuba and Puerto Rico) and national identities that were shared among many Cuban and Puerto Rican immigrants of El Barrio and the Bronx. As the final section will discuss, Arsenio's music also factored into a discourse of authenticity and tradition, whereby musicians and others distinguished his *son montuno* style from the "modern" mambo big bands of the 1950s.

Modernity and Arsenio's "Típico" Style

Tito Puente, Pérez Prado, and others have been widely identified as the "modern" mambo practitioners of the 1950s. The idea of a "modern" mambo style, however, presupposes the progressive development of the music toward an ideal model of Western modernity, which, according to many writers, was achieved through the incorporation of jazz harmonies, voicings, phrasing, and big band instrumentation (e.g., see Galán 1983: 342, 344; Loza 1999: 135, 142, 163; Roberts 1999: 102; Rondón 1980: 3). Leaders and musicians of mambo big bands, themselves, advanced the notion of a "modern" mambo style, the jazz elements of which constituted the "modern" or "progressive" components of the music, while the rhythmic elements constituted the "authentic," "traditional," and "Latin." In explaining the popularity of the mambo in a 1954 article published in *Down Beat*, Tito Puente stated:

Rhythm is what you dance to, and the mambo is popular because its strong rhythms make for good dance music. What is making it even more successful is the combination of jazz elements with the mambo. . . . [I]n my band, I use certain aspects of jazz. In our arranging, we use some of

For others, however, Arsenio's *conjunto* and *son montuno* style did not have the same meanings, particularly for those accustomed to mambo as performed by big bands. Pianist Ken Rosa, for example, was at first uneasy with the *conjunto's* unfamiliar instrumentation and style:

It was a combination of instruments that I was really not accustomed to. I liked the combination, which was the big band: saxophone, trumpets. That's what I was used to. Arsenio had trumpets, himself on *tres*, and then he had more than one vocalist. The rhythm section sounded different from what our New York Cuban rhythm sections were sounding like. I was not familiar with it. I wasn't really comfortable with it at that time (Rosa 1999).

New York-born Puerto Rican and percussionist Joe Torres, on the other hand, welcomed the freshness of his style:

A lot of people were not exposed to *conjunto* style of music. So it was really innovative to a lot of people in New York because most of the [Latinos] in New York were Puerto Rican. So we had a different style of playing it [i.e., Cuban dance music]. We were more used to the big bands, like [Anselmo] Sacasas, . . . Marcelino Guerra, Machito. That's what we were used to. So when you heard a *conjunto* like Arsenio's it was really a novel thing and really exciting (Torres 2000).

Percussionist Ray Romero also emphasized that Arsenio's style was entirely unique in New York City (Romero 2000).¹⁹

Mambo dancers, in particular, had difficulties dancing to Arsenio's style of dance music. According to percussionist Frankie Malabe, the *conjunto* "had a tough, no-nonsense way of performing the music, and people complained that they couldn't dance to it" (Gerard with Sheller 1988: 78). Ray Romero added that while many musicians appreciated the musicality of Arsenio's *conjunto*, its style was not popular among most mambo dancers (Romero 2000). As Ray Coén explained:

Completely different! In Cuba the music such as *son montuno* is slower. The only genre that is more or less fast is *guaracha*, and maybe *guaguancó*. One sweats too much in Cuba. It's too hot. That's why Pérez Prado wasn't a hit in Cuba because [his style] was too fast. In New York the music is faster, life is faster; everyone walks quickly to work, wherever. They told Arsenio that he had to play faster (Armenteros 2000).

Mario Bauzá, director of Machito's big band, confirmed that the *son montuno*'s moderate tempo accounted for its obscurity among mainstream mambo dancers. Moreover, he suggested that in order for dancers to have understood the style, they had to have been "Cuban" and "black":

I warned him: he played in a tempo that in order to dance to you had to be Cuban, a dancer, and black, because it was too slow. He played that way in Cuba for blacks only at the Tropical and places like that. But Arsenio didn't want to pick-up the tempo, and that's why he never had the success here [in New York] that he deserved, since his style of music was never fully understood (Padura Fuentes 1997: 41).

Indeed, in the early 1940s, Arsenio fashioned his *son montuno* style according to the aesthetic predilections of the black working class of Havana. Moreover, Arsenio's importance to the people of El Barrio and the Bronx paralleled that of his importance to Havana's black working-class. First, his audience in El Barrio and the Bronx consisted of primarily working-class Cubans and Puerto Ricans of color (Coén 2000). And, second, this audience favored music, like *son montuno*, that facilitated social dancing or, as Joe Torres noted, "a nice tempo that you can dance to all night," in contrast to the frenetic mambo milieu of Manhattan's dancehalls, which tended to favor exhibition dancing. Similarly, in Havana, the black working class favored his slower *son montuno* style over the faster styles of other Cuban *conjuntos* such as Conjunto Casino and La Sonora Matancera, which performed mostly for the white middle and upper classes. But while racialized discourse predominated in Havana and accounted for the signification of Arsenio's style as *estilo negro* or a "black style" (as opposed to the "white" styles of La Sonora Matancera and Conjunto Casino) by Cuban musicians and dancers, the discourse of tradition-modernity determined

Postscript

Although it is unclear, the Park Palace/Plaza and the Tropicana probably closed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, respectively. The Club Cubano Inter-Americano, however, continued to organize social functions featuring Cuban music and dancing into the 1970s. But beginning in the mid-1960s, the Club Cubano's directors began to hire younger groups—such as those of Johnny Pacheco, Larry Harlow, Ray Barretto, and Willie Rosario, as well as Orquesta Típica Novel, and Orquesta Broadway—more regularly than Arsenio's.²³ Evidently, the club's directors, who were Arsenio's contemporaries in age and first-generation immigrants, began to hire groups who would attract second- and third-generation Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other Latino dancers to its dances.

By 1969 Arsenio had moved to Los Angeles to live with his brothers “Kike” and Raúl and continued to perform sparingly with a *conjunto*. On Monday, December 28, 1970, Arsenio suffered a fatal stroke and was taken to Queen of Angeles Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. The stroke was brought on by his diabetes, which he had been suffering from since at least the early 1960s. On December 30, Arsenio stopped breathing and was pronounced dead. On January 3, 1971, his body was flown to New York City. His wake took place two days later at Manhattan North Chapels on 107th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. Arsenio Rodríguez's body was eventually laid to rest at Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, Westchester County, New York, on January 6, 1971.



mambo dance styles see Luis (1958), Ohl (1958) and Thompson (1958; 1959).

²³ Most of these dances were not publicized in *El Diario-La Prensa*. See Club Cubano Inter-Americano, 1946–1996, *Club Cubano Inter-Americano Records*, 2 Boxes (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture).

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