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Perspectives on Salsa
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In this article, the author—a renowned Cuban writer on popular music—provides a helpful and balanced overview of the debate on the meaning and historical place of salsa. He gives a clear sense of the centrality of Cuban rhythmic traditions, particularly the son montuno, as well as the crucial role played by Puerto Rican musicians and the social base of the New York Puerto Rican community. While accounting for salsa’s multiple dimensions and international reach, Acosta forcefully dispels the widely-held view that salsa is a strict and unaltered continuation of Cuban musical traditions, or that its creative origins are to be located in the Caribbean rather than in the Puerto Rican and Latino communities of the urban U.S. [Key words: Cuban music, Puerto Rican music, salsa, tradition, change]
Since its beginnings and for more than two decades now, the music that we know as salsa has been the source of constant and countless polemics, both in New York and in Havana, as well as in Caracas, Cali and San Juan. Some of the main questions under debate are: Does salsa actually exist as an original form of music? Are we talking about a genre, a style, a musical current, or rather perhaps a way of making music? Does salsa have original elements, or is it a mere copy of Cuban music of the 1940s and 50s, especially the son? If it is more than a vogue or a commercial label, what are its contributions and in what ways does it differ from earlier Cuban music? And then, there is no getting around the question of who coined the word “salsa,” the term that immediately caught on and became internationally recognized?

The very development of salsa has been problematic. Nobody today can deny that its first exponents were Puerto Ricans living or born in New York. As early as the 40s and 50s the Latin music scene in New York featured a range of boricuas, and it is worth remembering that of the three bands that packed the Palladium, the legendary mecca of Afro-Cuban music and of the mambo, two of them were led by Puerto Ricans: that of Tito Puente and that of the widely mourned reasons won the favor of the Latin Americans and even among audiences black and white, not only in New York but throughout the United States.

Aside from Machito (Frank Grillo), his sister Graciela and the all-important Mario Bauzá, there were Miguelito Valdés, Arsenio Rodríguez, Chano Pozo, Chico O’Farrill, Anselmo Sacasas, René Hernández, Cándido Camero, Vicentico Valdés, Armando Peraza, Gilberto Valdés, Chocolate Armenteros, Mongo Santamaría, Marcelino Guerra and Chombo Silva, in addition to those who arrived in the late-50s like Israel López (Cachao) and José Fajardo. If we then factor in the importance of the recordings by legendary figures like Benny Moré and Orquesta Aragón it is understandable why the Puerto Rican and Nuyoricans dedicated themselves even more enthusiastically to Cuban music than to their own; it wasn’t until Ismael Rivera and Rafael Cortijo that attention was duly paid to the bomba and the plena.

In the 1960s Cuban rhythms and interpreters declined in influence for two main reasons: the break in diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba, which prevented the entry of Cuban musicians, and the British invasion, which seized the attention of young audiences all over the world and went to displace even African American musical traditions like jazz and rhythm ‘n blues, the popular genre that gave rise to rock ‘n roll in the 50s
The Cuban reaction to salsa

Whether on the island or in New York, Cubans railed against salsa ever since the term was first coined. Mario Bauzá, Machito, Cachao, all of them were united in denying that salsa was anything other than the music they had played in the 1940s. Tito Puente, who totally identified with Cuban music from the resplendent days of the mambo, cha cha and Afro-Cuban jazz, never tired of saying that the only salsa he knows is "tomato sauce."

In Cuba it wasn't only the musicians who voiced their displeasure but the journalists, musicologists and the whole apparatus for the diffusion of popular music, to the point where they even set up an unspoken prohibition against salsa. (As has often been the case, Cuban national radio helped to free us, at least to some extent, from another ridiculous music taboo: that which had previously been imposed against rock.) In any case, veteran musicians like Enrique Jorrín, Antonio Arcaño, Rafael Lay, Rosendo Ruiz Quevedo, Richard Egües and others all rejected salsa, assuming an attitude very similar to that of their counterparts in exile. It became nothing less than a matter of national honor. There were those who thought in terms of generational differences, but the negative reaction against salsa no doubt stemmed in part from the sad truth that the imitations and plagiarizing of Cuban styles and tunes on the part of some unscrupulous US-based musicians directly affected and sponsored a US tour, which included the group's participation in the Newport Jazz Festival. They also promoted the Encuentro Cuba-USA at the Karl Marx Theater, where along with Columbia Records' own jazz and pop stars the Fania All-Stars had an opportunity to play before Cuban audiences. Unfortunately, the lack of promotion compounded the wall of silence already in force, so that the event went almost unnoticed except for a few musicians who struck up friendly contact with the visiting salseros. The event didn't even occasion a controversy, as later occurred during the eventful visit of Oscar de León, which made for a political about-face on the part of the official musical apparatus.

By the 1980s the salsa scene in the US was on the decline; the Fania dynasty was falling apart and the critics were predicting the end of salsa. There set in the reign of the "singersongwriters" (los cantautores) and the darlings of that insipid, saccharine commercial music fittingly referred to as "Spanish pop" for it was nothing but a slavish imitation of the worst of English-language pop music. Some salseros tried to respond with what came to be called "erotic salsa," which was but another case of commercial promotion with little success.

In Venezuela, Colombia and Puerto Rico, on the other hand, the popularity of salsa was upheld, along with a genuine passion for Caribbean rhythms and musical groups true to the tradition.
there are differences in the way of playing and combining the percussion instruments, in the piano montunos, the use of the base, the arrangements and formats, the inflection and improvisation in the vocal parts, in the stage performance, and in the song texts. It is well known that the lyrics used by salseros reflect the everyday life and social struggle of the more or less marginalized Spanish-speaking minority in New York and other large cities of the US and the Caribbean. And the fact that the song texts of a musical genre or style have characteristics that are appropriate to that genre is significant, as is evident in the guaracha, the guaguancó, the tango, the ranchera, the blues, the bolero, and more recently the Nueva Trova. As for strictly musical differences, we have mentioned arrangements and formats: in the case of salsa there is the preeminence of the trombone, which stems from a Puerto Rican tradition ranging from Mon Rivera to Willie Colón and which is taking hold in Cuba in our times. Another example is the base, which in New York and the world of salsa follows that lineage established by Cachao, Julio Andino and Bobby Rodríguez, while in Cuba the guitar base is more common. Andy González rightfully laments this change, involving as it does the loss of depth and swing which the acoustic base lends to the Afro-Cuban rhythm sections, as well as to jazz. And, who has visited Cuba, attributes this loss to the fact that the so-called “baby base,” which is produced solely by the US company Ampeg and which has the advantage of electronic amplification without losing the base’s sound quality, never got to the island. And finally, as for the singers, from listening to some salsa vocalists it is clear that they owe a lot to the pleneros and other non-Cuban vocal traditions of the Caribbean.

In this way, and by means of the analysis of a highly selective discography, we are able to identify a range of contributions of this music to the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Caribbean tradition. Suffice it to say in this context that it is thanks to the “updating” (actualización) and “re-interpretation” of our music by the Nuyoricans and other Caribbeans that it has continued to spread around the world for three decades which have otherwise witnessed the isolation of Cuban music. By now we can attest to the fact that this contribution has been positive. Happily, with no loss to our own characteristics and in a spirit of innovation, in Cuba we have now taken on salsa as part of our common heritage, and no longer view it as something alien to be fought against. Yet there is no sign that there will be an end to the polemics surrounding a phenomenon born under conditions of struggle, as is clearly demonstrated by the controversy over who invented salsa and coined the term salsa in the first place. But that’s the subject of further debate, and maybe of another article.