Berrios-Miranda, Marisol
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The City University of New York
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Salsa Music as Expressive Liberation

MARISOL BERRIOS-MIRANDA

In the span of a single decade, the 1970s, young people in urban centers all over Latin America came to embrace salsa music as their preferred musical style and expression. Salsa's unprecedented international popularity resulted from the confluence of several distinct social conditions and historical events: the Puerto Rican dilemma of colonial status, the civil rights and black pride movements in the U.S., the Cuban revolution's promise of upliftment for the lower classes, urban migration, and the need for a Latino alternative to the hegemony of Anglo rock. In this paper I will argue that salsa's popularity needs to be understood in terms of a musical sound and a social style that responded effectively to these circumstances, captured beautifully in the film *Our Latin Thing*. I propose, furthermore, that the colonial dilemma of Puerto Ricans in the island and in New York motivated their creative contributions to salsa, which they experienced as a form expressive liberation and decolonization.

[Key words: salsa, liberation, decolonization, musical style, power relations, 1960s, youth culture]

ABSTRACT

Top, left to right: Photograph of a poster of the *Fania All Stars Live at the Cheetah* album; Photograph of a poster for *Our Latin Thing*; Poster of the back-cover of the *Fania All Stars Live at the Cheetah* album.

Second row, left to right: Salsa dancing in Seattle (February 2003); El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico at the Fiestas de la Bahía, San Juan, Puerto Rico (June 2003).

Third row, left to right: Photograph of a picture of Cortijo and Ismael hanging at the Balcón de Zumbador in Barrio Obrero, Puerto Rico (July 2003); Dancing salsa at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Washington, D.C. (July 2004).

Bottom, left to right: Salsa dancing in Seattle (February 2003); El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico playing at the Fiestas de la Bahía; Salsa dancing in Seattle (February 2003). All photographs courtesy of Marisol Berríos-Miranda.
Our latin thing
August 21 1971. The narrator’s voice from the film Our Latin Thing says:

“Hello, hello, okay: everybody happy? YEAH! Everybody hot? YEAH! [the clave sounds three times: pa..pa..pa...pa..pá, pa..pa..pa...pa..pá, pa..pa..pa...pa..pá] Can you hear the clave, what’s going on? Cheo Feliciano gives the signal, and Ricardo Rey sets his ten magic fingers twinkling on the keys, letting loose those volleys of sound that strike into the deepest part of our beings. Our hair stands on end, hot and cold shivers run up and down our spines. The entire orchestra strikes up. The trumpets pierce our ears with indescribable pleasure; we want to embrace the whole world. We jump for joy, whistle, dance. Why are you crying? I’ve no idea..., and couldn’t care less”  (Calvo-Ospina: 1995: 64).

The film Our Latin Thing/Nuestra Cosa Latina (1971), filmed at the Cheetah club in Manhattan, for the first time showed Latin Americans outside the United States the realities of life in New York. Our Latin Thing was the first documentary that portrayed salsa as an expression of Latin American urban social identity. There was the famous Barrio and its ancient tenements, with people crammed onto every inch of the buildings, their patched clothing hanging out to dry in the windows. It showed us all the wretchedness and isolation people had refused to believe could exist in the “capital of the world” (Calvo-Ospina 1995: 53).

The film also documented the emergence of something that Puerto Ricans had been searching for throughout the 1960s: a musical sound, similar to the harmonic and rhythmic patterns of the Cuban son, but which marked the beginning of a new style. This new style came to be called salsa, and in the span of a single decade, the 1970s, people in urban centers all over the circum-Carribbean and Latin America—New York, San Juan, Los Angeles, Caracas, Maracaibo, Cali, Medellín, Lima, San Salvador, Panama City, Mexico City, Managua—embraced salsa music as their preferred musical style and expression. Salsa’s unprecedented international popularity resulted from the confluence of several distinct social conditions and historical events, including
and Billos Caracas Boys; salsa also followed the model of the Cuban *conjunto*, typified by Arsenio Rodríguez; but salsa musicians also learned to be flexible, many of them playing in scaled down combos, like Joe Cuba’s six-man band, which were more financially viable in small clubs and community centers, and which incorporated R&B influences to entertain mixed African-American and Puerto Rican audiences in New York. The typical salsa band today features a rhythm section of bass, piano, *congas*, bongos, and *timbales*, a horn section of variable size, and one or more singers.

Salsa distinguished itself in part by the instrumentation and sonority of the ensemble. The hallmark of salsa’s instrumental sonority is the trombone, which Eddie Palmieri famously substituted for a trumpet in his band, La Perfecta, nicknamed La Trombanga by his oldest brother Charlie Palmieri, in the early 1960s; the switch resulted in a deeper and rougher sonority than earlier Latin horn sections. The rhythm section also has a distinctive sound. Although salsa bands employed many of the same rhythms and instruments used in the son, mambo, and guaracha (grounded in their relationship to the clave), they developed a type of rhythmic lock between timbales, congas, and bongos in a steady composite that sounds almost like a single instrument. Bass and piano likewise tended to play more consistent rhythmic patterns than in the Cuban *conjunto*. *Suena máquina* (sounds like a machine) has become a way of describing the salsa sound.

As in much other Latin music, singing was the most important focus of salsa performance, particularly the improvised *inspiraciones* of the lead *sonero*, even though records and concerts were usually promoted under the name of the band or band leader. While singers in salsa, as in any music, are distinguished by their individual styles, salsa singers in general have developed certain idioms and traditions of their own. Many singers used patterns and mannerisms borrowed from the Puerto Rican *seis* (or what is more generally known as *jibaro* music) in their improvisations, the work of Héctor Lavoe and the rhythmic virtuosity of the “Sonero Mayor” Ismael Rivera being prominent examples. Salsa bands also featured entertaining choreographies for the two or three singers who front the band (modeled especially on Cortijo’s Afro-Puerto Rican ensemble featuring singer Ismael Rivera) and this, along with a greater emphasis on vocal harmony, has become a hallmark of salsa style generally. Presented in this compelling and danceable musical frame, salsa’s lyrics spoke to the struggles of the poor and the stuff of life itself, and it went beyond popular entertainment to become a movement for social change and national recognition.

On each one of these levels salsa music provided an experience of liberation for its urban working class public. First, like other genres of music, salsa represented a refuge for Latinos after work and on weekends, at home and in dance halls, offering liberation of the body and mind through the experience of dance. Second, as music from the people to the people, salsa challenged oppressive hierarchies of cultural and musical
Justice

Justicia tendrán, justicia verán en el mundo los desafortunados con el canto del tambor, del tambor la justicia yo reclamo.

Su sombra nunca lo alcanza... his shadow never him catches...

Su paso no lleva prisa his pace is not hurried

Su alimento es la esperanza his nurishment is the hope

Del callejón y la pena of the alley and the sorrow

De la miseria y del hambre of the misery and the hungry

hijo del grito y la calle son of the scream and the street

And in his face is drawn

Que prometian futuros That promised a future

Con las viejas papeletas With the old plasted flyers

Y vuelve a ver las paredes And again sees the walls

llega hasta el zaguán oscuro gets to the dark alley

Pablo Pueblo

Regresa un hombre en silencio
De su trabajo cansado
Su paso no lleva prisa
Su sombra nunca lo alcanza
Lo espera el barrio de siempre
Con el farol en la esquina
Con la basura alla en frente
Y el ruido de la cantina

Y en su cara se dibuja
la decepción de la espera

Pablo Pueblo

llega hasta el zaguán oscuro
Y vuelve a ver las paredes
Con las viejas papeletas
Que prometian futuros
en lides politiqueras
Y en su cara se dibuja
la decepción de la espera

Pablo Pueblo

Y en su cara se dibuja
la decepción de la espera

Justice

Justice will have, justice will see, in the world the unfortunate, with the singing of the drum, listen to my drum, justice I'll reclaim.

Justice will have, justice will see, the world and those discriminated against, rewards they will have, they will not, they will not be damaged.

If there were no tirany
We'll be brothers

Sweet peace and harmony
happiness, you will see...

Oh, when will justice arrive

Pablo Pueblo

Returns the man in silence, from his job, tired
his pace is not hurried
his shadow never him catches
His forever barrio awaits him

With the street corner lantern in front there the garbage
And the noise of the cantina

Pablo Pueblo

gets to the dark alley
And again sees the walls
With the old plasted flyers
That promised a future
In political matters
And in his face is drawn
the deception of the waiting
Of course salsa did not immediately dispel the negative stereotypes associated with barrio life, but through salsa Latinos began to form new social and aesthetic alliances that gave the barrio a new place in progressive social and intellectual movements. Salsa's popularity challenged the hegemony of English language rock and roll, for one thing, becoming for many a symbol of Latino culture that crossed national boundaries. As a symbol of Latino pride, salsa's appeal soon extended beyond the working class communities in which it originated. Even more importantly, salsa musicians and their audiences took new pride in the African roots of the music, and salsa became a symbol of racial integration as well. The popularity of salsa followed close on the heels of the civil rights and black power movements, and appealed to Puerto Ricans who actively rejected the racism that had sometimes turned white and black Puerto Ricans against each other in the dog-eat-dog world of New York City. Even before salsa, New York Puerto Ricans had made a symbolic alliance with African-Americans through musical genres like the boogaloo and Latin soul (see Flores 2000), and this racial consciousness was reinforced through salsa, affirming a cultural and political solidarity between Puerto Ricans/Nuyoricans and African Americans. This solidarity, referred to as “diasporic intimacy” by Paul Gilroy, is echoed by George Lipsitz:

Their efforts (of these diasporic groups) are only a small part of an international dialogue built on the imagination and ingenuity of slum dwellers from around the globe suffering from the effects of the international austerity economy imposed on urban areas by transnational corporations and their concentrated control over capital (1994: 27).

Two Puerto Rican innovators whose music paved the way to the new racial inclusiveness of salsa were singer Ismael Rivera and timbales player Rafael Cortijo, who took the Afro-Puerto Rican bomba and plena they had grown up with in the island and incorporated them in the Cuban-style conjunto ensemble. These musicians were from Santurce, the largest and one of the most important Puerto Rican barrios. Ismael Rivera remembers how the black power movement reverberated in that community in the 1960s:

...we played for huge crowds on weekends and there we did our thing... and people went to see us and they liked it... I don’t know, they said we played differently... I don’t know... I guess it was the hunger.
part of their own cultural vocabulary, and connected more closely with their African cultural heritage.

Salsa music at its beginning was thus inextricably associated with cultures that were commonly conceived of as “low and outside,” to use Hall’s phrase. For some people this made salsa music itself low and outside, but in general salsa proved such a potent musical force that it gained popularity beyond the marginalized communities from which it first sprang. And as the music came to international prominence in the media and entertainment business, salsa brought messages of barrio struggle and black pride into mainstream popular culture throughout Latin America and the world. The international stature and visibility of salsa liberated millions of urban Latinos from the oppressive illusion that their culture had no value. In the broader society it posed a challenge to prevailing hierarchies of culture that is advancing still today, as I can illustrate with an anecdote from my personal experience.

Between 1975 and 1981 I studied music at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras. I was a passionate salsa lover, and listened to the music constantly with family and friends, but I understood that I had come to the university to study classical music, not popular music. Even so, I wished I could play like Richie Rey, and I taught myself piano montunos by ear. Once, when I tired of practicing my Kavalevski piano sonata, I slipped into a salsa montuno for a change. Soon I heard a knock on the door, though, and the scolding voice of my teacher: “Now, now, Marisol, don’t get distracted with that salsa stuff, concentrate on the music.” On this occasion and many others I was encouraged to believe that salsa music was not to be compared with European art music, if salsa could be considered “music” at all. Just a few years later, however, while studying for my master’s degree at San Jose State University in California, I was amazed and delighted when my jazz studies teacher showed us a video of Tito Puente and Luis “Perico” Ortiz. It was the first time it had occurred to me that salsa music had a place in an institution of learning, and it was a turning point in my academic career. If there had never been a musical movement called salsa, I doubt my teacher at San Jose State University would have heard of Tito Puente. I would have still inherited a love of Latin dance music from my family and my community, but I doubt I would have written a doctoral thesis about it. If I am able to play some small role in integrating this music into the academic canon, it is because of what salsa musicians achieved in the 1970s.

Liberation from Colonial Dependence

Despite the commonalities of urban life throughout Latin America, and the shared joy that barrio dwellers took in seeing their life and their cultural style represented in salsa, the relationship of Puerto Ricans to salsa was unique because of their colonial status. The Puerto Rican experience of urban migration was aggravated by the experience of colonial status. The Puerto Rican experience of urban migration was aggravated by the process of decolonization, and in Puerto Rico and in New York many Puerto Ricans identified with the fight of black Americans for protest colonialism and to claim better living conditions, as urban growth accelerated. Puerto Ricans in the island mobilized during the 1970s to United Nations Assembly. The struggle of the people. The African rhythm's intensity keeps the people engaged, and what will determine if the music lives or dies is the politics of the people. The African rhythm's intensity keeps the people engaged, and what will determine if the music lives or dies is the politics of the people. The African rhythm's intensity keeps the people engaged, and what will determine if the music lives or dies is the politics of the people.
One form this counter-reaction took was so-called salsa romántica. In the late 1980s new performers began to dominate salsa record sales and radio play with a brand of salsa that was the antithesis of what in retrospect came to be called the salsa dura or salsa brava of the 1970s. Salsa romántica was marketed by the formula of the North American music industry, selecting star singers to promote, rather than the bands and bandleaders that were more traditionally the headliners in Latin dance music. Singer such as Eddie Santiago and Jerry Rivera seemed to be chosen for their charm and good looks more than for their vocal and improvisational talents, and they recorded with relatively anonymous bands, playing slick formulaic arrangements with none of the edgy sonorities of earlier salsa. Salsa romántica also represented a whitening of the music, both in the relatively light complexities of the singers and in the musical sound and structure, which lost much of its timbral contrast, percussive force, and improvisation. Through salsa romántica, the establishment reasserted its control over, and reaped the profit of an upstart musical movement, blunting salsa’s revolutionary impulse. The reasons for this development were no doubt complex, and, as in any case of musical appropriation, greed was a big part of what drove it. But it was also an act of resistance to salsa’s social, political, and racial messages.

This is particularly clear in the case of the Cuban-American music establishment in Miami, which has moved to marginalize some of salsa’s more politically outspoken artists. In 1997, for example, a performance by Puerto Rican salsa singer Andy Motañez in Miami’s Calle Ocho festival was cancelled because the organizers were offended by Motañez’ friendly relations with Sylvio Rodríguez, a famous nueva trova singer from socialist Cuba. Puerto Ricans, in retaliation, came out in throngs to the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in San Juan to heckle “The Queen of Salsa” Celia Cruz (who had previously claimed that salsa was nothing new, merely a version of traditional Cuban dance music). In 2001 salsa pioneer Willie Colón published a letter in the New York Times (Colón 2001), denouncing the establishment of a separate Latin Grammy awards ceremony as a Miami Cuban plot to marginalize Puerto Rican musicians (the 2002 Grammies seemed proved him right).

In the light of such events, debates about whether salsa is really something new or whether it is just a new version of the old Cuban music, take on a significance that is more than academic (see Berriós-Miranda 2002). Some Cubans have characterized salsa as música cubana mal tocada, (Cuban music poorly played), and Cuban claims to the music have been strengthened by the works of some American ethnomusicologists in the late 1980s and 1990s. Most recently, Cubans in South Florida have put their financial and media power behind the effort to reclaim salsa as a Cuban music, a force that is epitomized by the crossover success of Cuban-American singer Gloria Estefan, and by the fascination many Anglo-Americans have with Cuban history and culture, as witnessed recently in the popularity of the Buena Vista Social Club CD and the movie of the same name.
The advent of salsa also brought a new enthusiasm for incorporating local rhythms, such as those of the Puerto Rican bomba and plena, into this pan-Latin idiom (Berrios-Miranda 2003). Contrary to common knowledge, the first Puerto Rican musician to use a trombone in a conjunto style Latin band was Mon Rivera in his band (Valentín-Escobar 2002).

These musicians were: Ray Barretto on congas, Willie Colón on trombone, Roberto Roena on bongos, Bobby Valentín on bass, Santos Colón on vocals, Héctor Lavoe on vocals, Puppi Legarreta on trumpet, Ismael Miranda on vocals, Pete “El Conde” Rodríguez on vocals, Bobby Cruz on vocals, Ricardo (Richie) Ray on piano, José (Cheo) Feliciano on vocals, Yomo Toro on cuatro, Reinaldo Jorge on trombone, Roberto Rodríguez on trumpet, Adalberto Santiago on vocals, Héctor “Bomberito” Zarzuela on trumpet (Puerto Ricans); Orestes Vilató on timbales (Cuban); Johnny Pacheco on flute, and musical director (Dominican Republic); Larry Harlow on piano and Barry Rogers on trombone (Jewish Americans); and Larry Spencer on trombone (Anglo American).

Afincacu is the adjective that describes the quality of the performance among musicians or between music and dancers.

The ‘old Latin sound’ refers to the sound of Latin orquestras like Billo’s Caracas Boys, the Orquesta de César Concepción, the Sonora Matancera, Orquesta Casino La Playa, and Orquesta Aragón, among others. These orquestras had more weight put into the melodic and harmonic aspects of the songs, while the new salsa sound was definitely going to emphasize the rhythmic aspect, specifically the combination of conga, timbales and bongos, the trademark of the salsa sound. Also these orquestras were much larger in terms of its members than the new salsa bands.

Rumba is a terms of several meanings. It can denote a musical genre as well as a party; a fiesta. It is quite common in Latin American cities to say “vamos pa’ la rumba” meaning “lets go to the party.”

Clemente and Cepeda were black Puerto Rican baseball stars whose accomplishments in the U.S. major leagues were a source of intense pride for Puerto Ricans.

My mother told me that Romaní was a black defense attorney who won important cases dealing with Afro-Puerto Ricans civil rights.

I am indebted to Professor Olly Wilson (1992) for his work in articulating these “African conceptual approaches” to making music and for his guidance in applying them in my scholarship.

For a thorough explanation of this relationship see Glasser (1995: 52–85).

This dogma taught in Puerto Rican schools from 1st grade on. This I heard many times “Repeat after me: Puerto Rico is a small island with no natural resources.”

The idea of conscience formation through play and fun is a subject in need of further research.

The 2002 Latin Grammy Awards served as a showcase for the Estefan conglomerate in Miami and the promotion of their Sony label recording artists.

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