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Reseña de "Straight Outta Puerto Rico: Reggaeton's Rough Road to Glory" de Directed by James Chankin and Leigh Savidge
The City University of New York
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the study of Arsenio’s life and work is a heightened attention to the interaction between different local groups and institutions across and within national borders. New York City, in particular, is a favored site for transnational (not to mention translocal, tranethnic, etc.) analysis, full of localities that may be temporary, performative, in transit. The exigencies of life as a musician dictate, to a great extent, how one must travel. Arsenio had to “ramble,” just like his musical kin to the north and west.

Garcia also emphasizes things that tend to get left out of biographies of famous musicians—the integral roles of dance, spirituality (Palo Monte in this case), and the transnational flows of culture that sustain particular musical traditions (e.g., the Cuba/Curazao connection). Many will find that the book provokes further interest in the role of Palo Monte in Cuban music. The material is tantalizing, as not much has been written about this topic in English.

Whereas dance is traditionally thought as optional or external to the music, in Arsenio’s mambo the musicians are locked into the dancer’s footwork by the emphasis on contratiempo. Generally, it is not obvious how important dance is to son montuno, but Garcia makes a strong argument about a subtle phenomenon that would escape the untrained eye and ear. His analysis of how the dance steps interlock with the off-beat phrasing of the music is especially noteworthy.

Overall, *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music* is a terrific biography that painstakingly traces Arsenio’s profound contributions to the growth of Latin popular music. The book was awarded a 2007 Certificate of Merit for Best Research in Recorded Folk, Ethnic, or World Music from the Association for Recorded Sound. Published in the Temple University series “Studies in Latin American and Caribbean Music,” it combines strong ethnomusicology, musical analysis and notation, and great contextualization of people, places, and sounds. While the writing is a bit too dry to attract many readers beyond his core audience, the book is deeply informative and most appropriate for serious researchers. Some of the most interesting material (for general readers) appears tacked on at the end of the book and in the endnotes, but this also rewards those who follow through to the end.

While many salsa lovers have at least heard of Arsenio Rodríguez, they will learn a lot from this book. I would expect many readers with strong interests in Latin/Caribbean music, the African/Congolese diaspora, Cuban studies, and U.S. Latino studies to find this book a good and rewarding read.

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**Straight Outta Puerto Rico: Reggaeton’s Rough Road to Glory**

Directed by James Chankin and Leigh Savidge  
Produced by James Chankin  
Santa Monica, CA: Xenon Pictures, 2008  
71 minutes; 19.98 [dvd]

**REVIEWER: Marisol LeBrón, New York University**

*Straight Outta Puerto Rico: Reggaeton’s Rough Road to Glory* is the first feature-length documentary to trace the genre’s evolution from its “underground” years in Puerto Rico to its current international success. The film is in many ways an unapologetic rags-to-riches story that attempts to explain how reggaeton overcame incredible
obstacles, including social marginalization and censorship, to become an international musical phenomenon. Although *Straight Outta Puerto Rico* can at moments seem naïve and formulaic, a willingness to engage the subject and dig beneath the surface reveals a useful primer explaining *reggaeton* and a valuable teaching resource.

*Straight Outta Puerto Rico* begins by situating *reggaeton*’s development within Puerto Rico’s economic climate during the 1990s. The film establishes *reggaeton* as a creative response to the economic and social disenfranchisement of Puerto Rico’s poor and often black urban youth (although the intersections of race and class are largely left implied rather than explicitly stated). Opening with footage from La Perla, which since Oscar Lewis’ depiction of the barrio in *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* has become shorthand for urban neglect and poverty, the film tries to firmly situate *reggaeton*, especially early underground, as a product of *la calle*. Images of Puerto Rico’s formal economy—American corporations, fast food franchises, pharmaceutical firms, and tourism—are juxtaposed against Puerto Rico’s informal economy—lotto, cockfighting, food vendors, artisans, and narcotics. Here Puerto Rico’s informal economy is clearly being hailed as the incubator for *reggaeton* aesthetics and culture. Interviews with journalists and political commentators clearly contextualize how the rise of Puerto Rico’s informal economy can be attributed to the government corruption, neglect, and infighting that dominated the Puerto Rican political landscape during the 1990s. *Reggaeton* is positioned as part of Puerto Rico’s vast informal economy and a result of under/unemployment, particularly among the island’s youth sector. Although Puerto Rico’s political and economic restructuring of the 1990s under then-Governor Pedro Rosselló is given considerable attention, the film fails to engage with the island’s (neo)colonial status and its implications in a meaningful way. Providing some background on Puerto Rico’s incorporation into the United States as a commonwealth territory could have strengthened the film’s claims about the unique political and economic factors at work in Puerto Rico that gave rise to *reggaeton*.

*Straight Outta Puerto Rico* importantly acknowledges the crucial role that *circular* migration and diasporic contact zones played, and continue to play, in the shaping the genre. The film demonstrates that Puerto Ricans via New York City played perhaps one of the most foundational roles in the development of *reggaeton* sounds and culture. Influential producer DJ Nelson remarks that he was constantly traveling back and forth between Puerto Rico and New York City because it was the only place where he could buy the equipment he needed to make his music. Other artists similarly commented on the impact of cassettes and mixtapes from New York City in changing the Puerto Rican music scene. The circular migration between New York City and Puerto Rico during the mid-late 1980s created a pathway for the hip-hop sounds of groups like Public Enemy, Run DMC, and Eric B. and Rakim to reach the island. Theses sounds eventually planted the seeds for Puerto Rico’s Spanish Rap scene, which Vico C helped to pioneer. Simultaneously, reggae exploded onto the New York City music scene in a big way. It was in New York City where Panamanian *reggae en español* artist El General began versioning reggae songs and transforming them with Spanish language lyrics. The sounds of Panamanian reggae artists such as El General, Aldo Ranks, and Renato were soon among the cultural remittances making their way into Puerto Rico’s soundscape. The film shows that *reggaeton*’s Jamaican influence is perhaps most clearly heard through the “dembow” beat, popularized by reggae artist Shabba Ranks’ song of the same name, which forms the backbone of many *reggaeton* tracks. Tellingly,
the dembow riddim most likely reached Puerto Rico via reggae mixtapes from New York and Panamanian reggae en español tracks, again illustrating the central role of diasporic contact zones in reggaeton’s history.

*Straight Outta Puerto Rico* traces reggaeton’s multiple circuits and the rich interplay between various genres and locations without validating the narrow battles over claims to reggaeton that have ensued in recent years. *Straight Outta Puerto Rico* tries to convey what Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez, editors of the anthology *Reggaeton*, have termed reggaeton’s “socio-sonic circuitry,” or intersecting and multidirectional movements.

In highlighting the role that diaspora and circular migration play in reggaeton, the film forces its audience to take seriously the impossibility of constructing a hermetically sealed Puerto Rican nation. The film challenges nationalist assumptions about cultural purity and instead asserts that reggaeton is a Puerto Rican product precisely because it accounts for, and incorporates, expressions of puertorriquenidad that are not spatially bounded.

While reggaeton might now be embraced as Puerto Rico’s biggest cultural export, *Straight Outta Puerto Rico* demonstrates that this was not always the case. *Straight Outta Puerto Rico* provides valuable documentation and testimony from artists, producers, record distributors, and storeowners about the genre’s literal trials and tribulations.

In February 1995 the Drugs and Vice Control Bureau of the Police Department of Puerto Rico raided a number of record stores in the San Juan area. The police confiscated hundreds of underground tapes and issued citations to sales clerks arguing that the records violated obscenity laws and incited youth to commit acts of violence and consume illegal drugs. Zero-tolerance policing and targeting of those who fit “the rapero stereotype” was the norm in the period directly following the police raids. Reggaeton artist Mexicano 777 recalled that listening to reggaeton in one’s car would often result in getting pulled over in order to have the tape confiscated. Students’ backpacks were routinely searched and if they were in possession of an underground cassette it would swiftly be confiscated. The seizures took place without prior approval from the courts, and as a result the ban on reggaeton tapes was overturned. Although the case was overturned, reggaeton continued to provoke heated public debate over obscenity and the limits of artistic freedom. *Reggaetonera* Lisa M points out that from the outset the record seizures were about policing culture and taste in the public sphere. She notes, “In the beginning they said that reggaeton is not good for Puerto Rico, but the people want reggaeton.”

*Straight Outta Puerto Rico* fails to explicitly link the policing of the public sphere and attack on civil liberties that played out during the 1995 tape seizures to Rosselló’s broader *Mano Dura* policies. The militarized style of policing that was central to “Mano Dura” disproportionately targeted not only raperos, but also those of the poor and working classes and racial and sexual minorities more generally. As scholar Raquel Z. Rivera notes, “Policing and restricting underground could... be easily portrayed by government authorities as a logical extension of anti-crime State policies.” The policies of “Mano Dura” are very clearly implicated in Puerto Rico’s neoliberal restructuring during the 1990s. Neoliberal reforms instituted during this period led to the informalization of labor that the film points to as the material circumstances that bred reggaeton. Although the film doesn’t draw out the role of economic reform as an important catalyst for the policing of underground, and the public sphere more generally, *Straight Outta Puerto Rico*’s archival footage and interviews provide a rich entry point into these discussions.
The increased public scrutiny over reggaeton’s lyrical content prompted the release of “clean lyrics” records as a means to avoid more government intervention and secure access to wider distribution networks. Starting with the mixtapes Playero and The Noise, DJs would release two versions of the same album, one that censored explicit content and one that was left uncensored. This move, without a doubt, paved the way for underground to receive airplay and eventually move aboveground. Gus López, President of Machete Records, tells the filmmakers,

Record sales for reggaeton did take a hit after everything that happened politically. It’s almost like everything slowed down for the good because everyone knew that they had to clean up their act and come back with real music, original music, and they knew that they couldn’t count on just sampling anything. It was almost like a wash happened. Then in 1999 and 2000 things began to pick up again.

The “wash” that López alludes to had do with securing copyrights and “legitimate” distribution networks, and toning down some of the more “unsavory” aspects of reggaeton culture. These efforts on the part of artists, producers, and record labels made reggaeton a more profitable and marketable commodity within Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Just as reggaeton seemed poised to move aboveground and break into the mainstream music industry, the genre was once again the object of censorship and public outrage.

In 2002 Senator Velda González launched an effort to ban music videos depicting perreo (doggystyle) dancing from television airplay. While perreo was the central focus of her campaign she also chastised the reggaetoneros for their use of crude language and violent imagery and lyrics. Influenced by videos by hip-hop group 2 Live Crew and other artists in the Miami Bass scene, reggaetoneros began to emulate the styles of their videos. With scantily clad women performing sexually evocative dances and simulating sexual acts with the artists the music videos were soon decried as “pornovídeos.” An opportunity to censor the videos presented itself when authorities were notified by a parent that her daughter, a minor, was in a reggaeton video “inciting” sexual acts. Backed by the conservative watchdog group Morality in Media (also a major force behind the 1995 tape seizures), González launched a crusade to “protect [Puerto Rico’s] children and youth from the bad influence they were presenting.” The irony, as Raquel Z. Rivera and entertainment lawyer Daniel Niva point out in their interviews, is that the Senator’s efforts actually created more press and interest in the genre —rather than becoming social pariahs, reggaetoneros became the next big thing. Niva comments that he feels “very sorry for what Velda tried to do....By the year 2000 the state was not capable of controlling reggaeton anymore.” Although the state could no long control reggaeton, its scare tactics once again forced producers and artists to make their material less explicit and more palatable to the mainstream. Producer Jorge Orquendo argues, “Instead of holding it back [the scare tactics] promoted it even further, and I would say they did a great favor to the reggaeton movement.” While it is debatable whether sanitizing reggaeton was really a “favor,” many agree that it was this second so-called “wash” that would enable reggaeton to gain international notoriety.

The film ends on a high note celebrating reggaeton’s seeming dominance over the Latin music market and the emergence of superstars like Daddy Yankee, Wisin Y Yandel, Don Omar, and Tego Calderón. Because of Straight Outta Puerto Rico’s triumphant approach, the film largely fails to engage with issues of sexuality, gender, and race in a nuanced way, focusing almost exclusively on issues of masculinity and
class. Despite these glaring absences the film is still extremely useful as an entry point into more complex discussions of how race, sex, gender, class, and nation intersect not only within the genre of reggaeton, but also within Puerto Rico and its diaspora. The archival footage of early rap and underground performances alone makes this a valuable resource for fans and scholars alike.

REFERENCES

Jesús María Sanromá: An American Twentieth-Century Pianist

By Alberto Hernández
Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008
340 pages; $45.00 [paper]

REVIEWER: Edgardo Díaz Díaz, The City University of New York—John Jay College of Criminal Justice

A book-length assessment about the life and deeds of pianist Jesús María Sanromá (a.k.a. “Chuchú”) has been long overdue—until now, when one of his pupils, Alberto Hernández, fulfilled a great deal of the task with an unprecedented volume, Jesús María Sanromá: An American Twentieth-Century Pianist.

In the lifetime of Sanromá (1902–1984), the number of published essays or articles about his career (other than concert reviews) came to be relatively minimal if one considers his world-class stature as concert master of the piano. No more than twenty-nine publications in Puerto Rico and the United States are accounted for until 1990 by Donald Thompson and Annie F. Thompson (1990: 321). Even before the release of Hernández’s book in 2009, only Emilio S. Belaval, a lawyer, playwright and essayist, had written a 58-page essay about performances by Sanromá as a child-prodigy (Belaval 1952). But recent re-issuing of some of the pianist’s recordings may have triggered the appearance of countless of internet references and, with it, a surge of public interest in his legacy.

Hernández’s volume of about 340 pages is more about the performances and accomplishments by Sanromá between 1918 and 1952, than about his life and passion as a proud Puerto Rican before and after that period. Through the book, however, one sees a vast amount of data unearthed from the pianist’s family collection and memorabilia donated recently to the Archivo General de Puerto Rico. Although the materials of this collection still remain to be exhausted, Hernández included and digested to his best as much of it as he could possibly deal with, for the sake of English-language readers willing to appreciate the true magnitude of Sanromá as a world-ranked concert pianist. Hundreds of pages of data may have precluded for this book a just deliberation of the information, but one must at least praise Hernández for his feat in selecting key aspects of the legacy by Chuchú from such a vast memorabilia, for further elucidation.