

# Centro Journal

Centro Journal

City University of New York. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

ISSN: 1538-6279

LATINOAMERICANISTAS

2004

Leonardo Acosta

PERSPECTIVES ON "SALSA"

*Centro Journal*, fall, año/vol. XVI, número 002

City University of New York. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños

New York, Latinoamericanistas

pp. 6-13

# Perspectives on “Salsa”

LEONARDO ACOSTA

TRANSLATED BY JUAN FLORES

## ABSTRACT

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 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]



*Chano Jams*  
Collage, 52" x 40"  
2002  
MARCOS DIMAS

**S**ince 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 Tito Rodríguez. The third, though, was Machito and the Afro-Cubans, which was no doubt the most important of the groups, and the one that served as the model for Afro-Caribbean music in its time. And if we add to these the presence of other illustrious Cuban musicians and singers in the United States it is easy to understand why it was our music which for many

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 ‘roll in the 50s and nourished rock itself in the 60s.

The newest Cuban rhythms no longer got to New York, and the success of Brazilian *bossa nova* and of the *pachanga* turned out to be of passing interest in the face of the overwhelming wave of rock. On the other hand, people in the US never really talked about popular Cuban music, but of the mambo or cha cha.

And nobody showed up to replace the earlier musical generation with something new. Meanwhile, talented musicians in New York, the center for the diffusion of Cuban music, got ready to fill the void: their names were Johnny Colón, Héctor Rivera, Joe Cuba (Gilberto Calderón), the Palmieri brothers Charlie and Eddie, Joe Bataan, Ray Barretto, Willie Bobo, Bobby Marín, King Nando, Rafi Pagán and Larry Harlow.

In those years, the mid-60s, a new dance style emerged among the African Americans called the boogaloo, which inspired the Latinos to create the fusion known as Latin boogaloo. The proponents of this new fad were Richie Ray, Johnny Colón, the Lebrón brothers, Joey Pastrana, Pete Rodriguez, Willie Colón, Ray Barretto and the Joe Cuba Sextet with Jimmy Sabater and Cheo Feliciano. Some of them even used lyrics in English and Spanish, and were able to cross the boundaries between the different cultures. Significantly, in 1967 they managed to have an impact on African Americans, since in the midst of the Civil Rights movement some of the lyrics of Latin boogaloo voiced solidarity with their cause. There were even some numbers that became hits at a national level, and a musician like Joe Cuba and his band were the first Latin musicians to make it onto the *Billboard* charts of top-selling hits. As César Miguel Rondón points out in his book *El libro de la salsa* (1980), the immediate success of boogaloo and the heyday of improvised jams (*descargas*) contributed further to the marginalization of the great bands of the 50s as well as the traditional Cuban musical genres. The reaction was not long in coming, and some of the “monsters” of this current, like Tito Puente, along with some of the industry people and disk jockeys,

conspired against boogaloo, which eventually died out.

Shortly thereafter, at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s, certain changes in the rhythms, orchestration and musical orientation paved the way for what soon came to be called salsa, which according to music writers Charley Gerard and Marty Sheller “overcame the competition by virtue of the new technology of the recording studio.” Salsa was no doubt the first style of Latin music in which the production process itself took on central importance. Salsa was received to enormous acclaim thanks to the promotion it enjoyed on the part of those who had a financial interest in its success. In large measure, salsa came to be the creation of Fania Records. Toward the end of the 60s Fania began to distribute records with its own label and those of the small independent Latin music companies. Fania had an interest in controlling the direction of the music that it helped to popularize and which it distributed so successfully throughout the world.

In line with this tendency, there was an effort to persuade the artists not to stray from the sound which was characteristic of those who were intent on making it known and recognizable. Fania insisted on the commercial twist that it effectively gave to the music. With all the ups and downs and shifting fortunes, under the artistic direction of Johnny Pacheco that label was able to achieve a heyday for the Cuban *charanga* in New York (a trend initiated by Palmieri), and more generally the prevalence of what Rondón (in *El libro de la salsa*) called the Sonora Matancera tendency. In the long run, though, Fania lost its hegemony because it was putting obstacles in the way of the more progressive currents of the musical developments called salsa.

### 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, Rosendío Ruíz 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 the Cubans and made it impossible for them to lodge legal claims of any kind.

On the other hand, there also emerged a politicized salsa, as in the releases of Rubén Blades and Willie Colón, which was wholeheartedly accepted in Cuba. Furthermore, the cultural blockade against Cuba, and in particular against our musical groups, began to thaw around 1978. CBS recorded an album by Irakere

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.

**B**y 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 “singer-songwriters” (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. Meanwhile, in Cuba dance music continued to languish, making for a kind of paralysis, unprecedented in the history of our music, which had begun to set in around 1968–70 when young people only seemed interested in *Nueva Trova* or heavy metal and other styles of rock. That it was actually a somewhat artificial situation was made evident in a 1979 TV show

called *Para Bailar*, which showed very clearly the continuing interest in dance rhythms. What it showed, in fact, was that Cuban youth had become “distanced” from their music only because there were no places to dance, and because the bands had nowhere to play to a dance audience.

Almost imperceptibly the conditions were being created during the 1980s for what could be declared a genuine explosion of Cuban dance music groups. These bands were adept at taking advantage of the most confined space and the slightest occasion available to them in those years. In this regard, we can make note of developments such as the following:

1. The so-called Jazz Latino Plaza festivals, where musicians and groups had a chance to show their strength and get to know each other, while tending also to move from Latin jazz to dance music.
2. The arrangement of some clubs and other spaces for dancing.
3. The resumption of international tourism.
4. The creation of TV shows like *Mi Salsa*.
5. The opening to the outside world, which allowed for our musical groups to play live in diverse settings throughout the Americas, in Europe and in Japan.
6. The growing interest on the part of record companies and radio stations in a range of countries in our latest dance music, such that some songs and bands rose to the peak of their popularity, including in New York.
7. The international rebirth of salsa and Afro-Cuban music, to the point where there emerged highly competent practitioners in the Scandinavian countries, Spain, Switzerland, Holland and Japan. Such far-flung popularity helped to break the impasse of the 1980s.

### Components and contributions of salsa

With all of this said, we still seem to have side-stepped the key question, which is the actual debate about salsa and the arguments advanced as to its nature. Is it then true that salsa is no more than an amalgam of traditional Afro-Cuban rhythms? If that's the case, the polemic could really end before it starts, since just about every *salsero* would acknowledge that the base of this music is the Cuban son and other important components, like the *guaguancó*, mambo and cha cha, which are also from Cuba. As for other Afro-Caribbean rhythms, it is true that some musicians have achieved excellent fusions with plena and bomba, *merengue*, *cumbia* and *joropo*. But these are isolated cases, outside of the norm, and it would be hard to talk about a musical genre that isn't Cuban and constitutes an integral part of salsa. In addition, the boom of the merengue has only gone to highlight and deepen the gap already evident between that genre and salsa, and in fact both sides emphasize their differences in an exaggerated and sometimes hostile way, one healthy exception being Juan Luis Guerra and 440.

The contributions of the *salseros* therefore lie elsewhere. In the days when you were either a *salsero* or an anti-*salsero*, in other words, when the use of reason had been suspended, the great Armando Romeu gave a few talk—or rather, master classe—where he illustrated the major differences, at least at that time, between salsa and the music that we practiced here. With simple, basic examples, he explained the differences having to do with timbre and orchestration: there they had changed and modernized the wind sections, while maintaining the traditional rhythm; here it was the opposite, characterized by the introduction of electric base and keyboard. Twenty years later we would say that in general terms

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. Andy, 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.

*over Dub*

