The Soul of the Barrio

30 Years of Salsa

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Salsa was born in the 1960s and early 1970s, and embodied the moment's affirmative and sanguine spirit. It depicted creative Latinos confronting their social situation and literally dancing their way through adversity.

It is now 30 years since band leader Johnny Pacheco founded Fania Records as a fledgling Latin record company, contracting the up-and-coming New York dance bands and distributing his records to area stores from the trunk of his car. By 1970, with the input of entrepreneur Jerry Masucci, Fania had turned the New York Latin beat into the soundtrack for the Latino pride movement that spread from Spanish Harlem throughout the urban Caribbean Basin. Salsa--Fania's name for its product--went on to become the popular music of choice for some ten million Latinos. Its trajectory can serve as an index for much of what has happened in Spanish Caribbean culture over the last three decades. Salsa was never confined to the hermetic world of dance clubs and record studios. Rather, its style and its role in Latino culture have always been conditioned by changing demographic and socioeconomic patterns, the workings of the music industry, interaction with rival music styles, and changing political orders.

Salsa, like rock, was a product of the turbulent 1960s. The decade's spirit of questioning and mobilization took hold among minorities, including New York City's nearly two million Latinos--primarily Puerto Ricans, or "New Yoricans."

Latinos were inspired by the civil-rights and black-power movements and by the very economic progress they had recently made, which at once empowered them and heightened their sense of ongoing discrimination. The size of Latino community in Spanish Harlem and the Lower East Side ("Loisaida") had reached a critical mass, and they were ripe for cultural and sociopolitical self-awakening. Perhaps the most significant development of the era was a new sense of pride in being Latino. For the first time, Latinos on a mass scale came to reject the Anglo centric assimilation “ism” which had led so many to feel ashamed of their language and culture. The model of the civil-rights movement, the new interest in "roots," and, indirectly, the still-smoldering Puerto Rican independence movement made the barrio a cauldron of militant assertiveness and artistic creativity.

The new social consciousness called for a new musical movement, which could at once embrace Puerto Rican tradition and capture the spirit of the barrio in all its alienated energy and heightened sense of self-awareness. Fania Records, wit a combination of entrepreneurial skill, aggressive marketing, and energetic talent scouting, rode the crest of the socio stylistically musical moment, explicitly linking the fresh, new sound of the New York Latin bands to the buoyant spirit of the barrio. Curiously, perhaps, the chosen musical vehicle was neither stylistically new nor distinctively Puerto Rican; rather, it was essentially Cuban-style dance music a modern version of the son, which had dominated Cuban music since the 1920s. In the early decades of the century, the son had emerged as a medium-tempo urban folk idiom featuring vocals backed by sextets or septets of guitar, the guitar-like tres, trumpet, bass, and light percussion. In the 1940s the son was further Afro-Cubanized by the use of congas and faster tempos, and the incorporation of more horns and sophisticated, jazz-influenced harmonies an arrangements. It was the brassy, sophisticated, mature son of the 1950s that became the stylistic backbone of what came to be called "salsa."

However superficially paradoxical, the choice of Cuban dance music was in many respects quite natural and logical. This music had flourished for decades not only in Puerto Rico, but in New York City itself--the crucible of some of the most vital developments in Latin music, including the big-band mambo of the fifties. To some, labelling this music "salsa" seemed artificial, especially in the case of "salsa stars" like Tito Puente and Celia Cruz, whose musical styles had evolved 25 years before the term was coined. To Cubans who knew that many o Johnny Pacheco's hits were simply note-for-note renditions of Cuban records of the 1950s, the use of the rubric "salsa" seemed like an attempt to obscure the music's Cuban origins by capitalizing on the Cold-War quarantine of the island bands and recordings.

But if Cuban music constituted the core of salsa style, Newyoricans had re-signified the music in a way that largely justified the adoption of a new name, however commercial in origin. As the music was reborn as a symbol of Newyorican, and by extension, pan-Latino ethnic identity, its Cuban stylistic origins, like those of the rumba played by street drummers throughout the city, became essentially irrelevant. While Cuba was remote and isolated, salsa, in the words of a popular Spanish-language radio program, was el alma del barrio--The Soul of the Barrio.

Apart from the reliance on Cuban rhythms and forms, salsa has been far from stylistically homogeneous. Band leaders like Pacheco and Pete "El Conde" Rodriguez have perpetuated a tipico--traditional--style of old Cuban bands like the Sonora Matancera, using a conjunto with only two trumpets; their music, although not original, still retains its freshness and vitality. Most mainstream bands have cultivated a more modernized sound, adding more horns and more jazz influence. Representing the salsa vanguard have been, among others, arranger-pianist Eddie Palmieri, former teen prodigy Willie Colon (contracted b Fania at the age of 15), and Ruben Blades, perhaps the most talented of the lot.

Blades and his occasional collaborator Colon have devoted much of their time an energy to non-musical pursuits. Blades spent his youth in Panama, studied law until 1974, and then turned to music. He soon distinguished himself as a gifted singer and composer, and even embarked upon a modestly successful acting career In 1984 he returned to legal studies, earning an M.A. from Harvard, and returned to Panama in 1993 to lead his leftish-greenish Papa Egoro party in an ultimately unsuccessful bid for the presidency. Colon is currently running for a Bronx Congressional seat on a platform of reformist community activism; as he puts it "sometimes writing a song is not enough." It may seem remarkable that given their ongoing involvement in other fields, the occasional recordings of these two musicians are invariably commercially successful as well as critically acclaimed. But perhaps it is precisely their breadth of interests and talents that has lent their music its wider conceptual and aesthetic vision. As C.L.R. James wrote, "What do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?"

Salsa may have originated in New York, but it was an international genre from the start. While Puerto Ricans constituted the core, even in New York both performers and audiences were of diverse backgrounds. Aside from older Cubans like Machito and Mario Bauza, one could mention the Dominican Johnny Pacheco, the Panamanian Blades, the Argentine pianist Jorge Dalto, and, for that matter, Jewish-American arrangers Larry Harlow and Marty Sheller. Most importantly, salsa, in connection with the heightened sense of pan-Latino identity, soon spread throughout the Spanish-speaking urban Caribbean Basin. Aside from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, salsa established strong roots in Venezuela and Colombia, with enclaves of fans and performers in Mexico City, Lima, and elsewhere.

The case of Venezuela is representative. By 1970, salsa, whether performed by local or foreign groups, had become the favored music of Caracas popular classes, who related as much to its infectious rhythms as to its barrio-oriente lyrics. The local, predominantly white bourgeoisie tended to disparage salsa as musica de monos--monkey music--just as in Puerto Rico, affluent, Yankophilic rock fans (rockeros) deprecated salsa lovers by the similarly racist term cocolos--coconut-heads. But by the mid-1970s, salsa had won over Caracas middle classes as well, and Venezuela, buoyed by the rise of its own superstar, Oscar De Leon, had become the biggest single market for the music. Neighboring Colombia has since emerged as a new international hub, generating its own star acts, Grupo Niche and Joe Arroyo.

Salsa is quint essentially dance music, designed to be performed live at clubs, weddings, and open-air concerts where Latinos of all ages, races, and ethnicity mingle and enjoy their own artistic creativity as dancers--very often, virtuoso dancers. Accordingly, most salsa songs have dealt with the timeless topics of sensuality, romance, and praise of the music itself. (In its role as dance music, it should be noted, salsa has tended to reinforce, rather than critique, the gender relations of the barrio. Women are rare both as performers and industry personnel, and in dancing, of course, it is the

man who leads. The lyrics are occasionally mildly machista, though they display little of the crude and blatant sexism found in reggae, calypso, and hard core rap.)

Despite this primary function as dance music, in salsa's most vital period--the late 1960s and early 1970s--a significant minority of its lyrics contained powerful social commentary. The songs of Ruben Blades, for example, are particularly distinctive in the ways they confront, rather than obscure social reality. For his recording of the anti-imperialist "Tiburon" ("Shark") and his denunciation of U.S. hostility to Cuba, he earned both progressive credentials and death threats from Miami Cubans, who banned his music from local airwaves. The most characteristic of Blades' songs are vignettes portraying the vicissitudes of barrio life via epigrammatic character studies, typically at once humorous, critical and empathetic. His "Juan Pachanga" portrays a narcissistic dandy whose indulgences in wine, women and song fail to mask his inner loneliness and alienation. "Te Estan Buscando" depicts the plight of a naif who has run afoul of barrio loan sharks. In "Pedro Navaja," a sort of existential snapshot of barrio life, a petty gangster and a hooker shoot each other, for reasons unexplained and irrelevant. "Pablo Pueblo" depicts the joyless tedium of a worker' s life:

A man returns in silence from his exhausting work His gait is slow, his shadow trails behind The same barrio awaits him, with the light at the corner, the trash in front, and the music emanating from the bar... He enters the room and stares at his wife and children wondering, "How long does this go on? He takes his broken dreams, and patching them with hope, making a pillow out of his hunger, he lies down, with an inner misery.

In a lighter vein, Blades' "Numero Seis" describes the experience, familiar to all Spanish Harlem residents, of waiting for the number six subway train. Steering clear of both political sloganeering and the sentimental soap opera, Blades' songs at once entertain and enlighten, validating barrio life in their attempt to make salsa, as Blades puts it, "a folklore of the city."

Willie Colon has specialized in depictions of the darker side of barrio life, portraying its lurking malevolence with an ambivalent mixture of fascination a social-realist indictment that foreshadows gangster rap. While "Juanito Alimana non-judgmentally depicts a swaggering thug, Colon's 1973 "Calle Luna Calle Sol" warns:

Listen mister, if you value your life, stay out of trouble or you'll lose it... In the barrio of guapos, no one lives at peace, watch what you say or you won't be worth a kilo Walk straight ahead and don't look sideways.

By situating salsa squarely in the Hobbesian side of barrio life, such songs illustrate how the genre was indeed much more than recycled Cuban dance music. Salsa was in this sense far removed from Cuban songs about quaint and colorful Havana, or from the innumerable nostalgic Puerto Rican boleros and jibaro (peasant) songs romanticizing the idyllic and forever lost campesino life. The songs of Colon and Blades, rather than providing escapist sentimental fantasies showed creative Latinos confronting their social situation and literally dancing their way through adversity. Much of salsa's vitality, indeed, derives precisel from its spirit of exuberant affirmation--via style and language--in the face o socioeconomic marginalization.

This exuberance connected the music with a sense of international Latino consciousness. While salsa in general implicitly affirmed and embraced Latino ethnicity by the use of the Spanish language and Caribbean rhythms, many salsa songs from this period were explicit in their celebration of Latino pride and unity. Conjunto Libre's "Imagenes Latinas" is typical:

Indians, Hispanics, and blacks, we've been mixed into a blend with the blood of all races, to create a new future... From Quisqueya to La Plata, from the Pampas to Havana, we are blood, voice, and part of this American land Whether in the land of snow, or beneath a palm tree Latinos everywhere struggle for their freedom... This is my Latin image, my new song To tell you, my brother, to seek and find unity.

Salsa's first decade, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, was in many ways the most vital era of the genre. Songs about barrio life and urban survival intimately grounded salsa in the local and immediate, while its calls for pan-regional Latino unity made it dynamically international. Meanwhile, the music's affirmation of barrio identity reflected not only an acute awareness of adversity, but a fundamental optimism about the future, both on the local and global levels. In the United States, the signs of progress were manifold. The Young Lords had gained some prominence and influence, the Vietnam War was drawing to a close, the economy was expanding, colleges were adopting multicultural curricula, and progressive domestic policies were enacted by a series of White House liberals (including, by today's standards, Richard Nixon!). Internationally, the Latin American Left, despite ferocious repression thrived underground, animated by the Cuban model and, indirectly, by the Soviet and Chinese blocs which, by their very existence, suggested the possibility of alternatives to U.S. hegemony. Salsa songs like Ray Barretto's "Indestructible" conveyed the fundamental optimism of the era:

Take your destiny in your hands, Surge ahead, my brother, with the help of new blood If your soul feels weary, Think that anything is possible Because the new blood is an indestructible force.

In the 1980s, however, changing conditions led to a retrenchment of salsa's exuberant spirit, stylistic vitality, and commercial growth. With the advent of Reaganomics and its massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, the purchasing power of minorities declined, and salsa record sales slumped accordingly. Latinos recognized that the progressive and militant sixties and seventies represented not the dawn of a new era, but an historical chapter now eclipsed by a triumphant and jingoistic resurgence of the Right. On more immediate levels, salsa was paradoxically marginalized on the airwaves by the belated interest that the major record companies were finally taking in the Latin market. Rather than promoting what they perceived as an ethnically divisive and socially unsavory salsa, the majors pressured radio stations to a common-denominator romantic baladas. Julio Iglesias seemed to rule over Ruben Blades in the very homeland of salsa. Meanwhile, Latino pride notwithstanding, it was natural that many second- and third-generation Latinos were forgetting their Spanish, assimilating to hip-hop culture, and coming to see salsa as old-fashioned.

Another sort of challenge to salsa was posed by what musicians refer to as the "merengue invasion"-- a phenomenon that cannot be understood without some discussion of the Dominican Republic and its own music history. Within the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, the Dominican Republic had suffered a somewhat isolated and inhibited cultural development. For their part, Cuba and Puerto Rico had been closely intertwined as the twin colonies of Spain until 1898, and since the early twentieth century Puerto Ricans had adopted much of Cuban popular music, especially the son and bolero, as their own. Cultural ties were somewhat weaker with the Dominican Republic, which had been independent since the early 1800s. Throughout the nineteenth century, the evolution of a creole national culture remained hampered by poverty, political chaos, and an ongoing denial of the country's African heritage. Relative socio-political stability can only with the U.S. occupation from 1916 to 1924, which laid the foundations for the despotic 31-year dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo.

One of the very few positive aspects of Trujillo's regime was its fostering of national musical culture centered around the merengue. The merengue of the Ciba valley was a lively fast-tempo dance, sometimes played by rustic accordion-base perico ripiao (ripped parrot) quartets and sometimes by large saxophone-dominated ensembles influenced by swing-era big bands. Under the dictator's patronage and control, merengue became the national dance. Yankee commercial music, along with U.S. business, was largely kept out of the country and with Dominicans discouraged from emigrating or even traveling locally, Dominican musical culture flourished in its own isolated way.

Following the CIA-sponsored assassination of Trujillo in 1961, the country's leader for 25 of the next 33 years, the U.S.-sponsored Joaquin Balaguer, opened the country to foreign--primarily U.S.--investment. As multinationals like Gulf & Western bought vast tracts of land, hundreds of thousands of uprooted peasant flooded into shantytowns, especially in Santo Domingo, whose population doubled between 1961 and 1970. Along with the foreign businesses came foreign record companies and their music--rock, schmaltzy baladas, and salsa--putting local merengue on the defensive.

Merengue's relation to salsa is somewhat complex. Salsa, as we have seen, is an international genre, and in the Dominican Republic, as elsewhere, it functioned as a symbol of Latino cultural resistance to gringo Coca-Colonization. At the same time, however, Dominicans perceived salsa as something foreign--Cuban and Puerto Rican--in relation to the merengue. Most Dominicans blithely enjoyed all of the various competing musics, but for merengue musicians and cultural nationalists, a musical war was going on for the hearts and ears of the Dominican people. To make a long story short, by the late 1980s, a modernized and revitalized merengue, guided by bandleader Johnny Ventura and others, successfully marginalized its competitors. Moreover, merengue went on to invade salsa in its own heartlands of New York and Puerto Rico. Throughout the 1980s, hardcore salseros (Dedicated Salsa Dancers) watched with dismay as their favorite clubs and radio program switched to merengue, with its romantic lyrics, elementary choreography, simple harmonies and rhythms, and the gimmicky antics of its performers.

To a large extent, merengue has been personally carried abroad by the flood of Dominicans pouring out of the country, especially to New York City, where they now number about half a million. In New York and elsewhere, the Dominican bands undercut the salsa groups, and many young Latinos, intimidated by the choreographic pyrotechnics of veteran salsa dancers, feel more at home with the simple two-step merengue. Meanwhile, as happened with other Caribbean musics, the merengue world's center of gravity has shifted to New York, with its music industry infrastructure and concentrated population, leading bandleader Wilfrid Vargas to refer to the city as "a province of the Dominican Republic."

Merengue has become an international music in its own right, and to further complicate the geo-musical map, Dominican bands in Puerto Rico and New York are competing with Puerto Rican merengue bands. Meanwhile, Dominican music as a whole has acquired greater sophistication and professionalism. This trend is especially evident in the music of Juan Luis Guerra, whose output encompasses sentimental, if tasteful love ballads, sociopolitical commentary, and searingly danceable merengue and salsa.

As of the mid-1990s, the salsa-merengue war appears to have cooled off, and salseros (Dedicated Salsa Dancers) seem to feel that the situation has stabilized. A portion of the salsa audience may have been irretrievably lost to merengue, but many Dominicans have also replenished the ranks of salsa fans. Nevertheless, Dominican immigration has reconfigured Latin musical culture. For one thing, New York Latinos can no longer be thought of as primarily Puerto Rican, and Dominicans naturally take umbrage at the persistent habit of salsa singers and emcees to try to turn concerts into celebrations of Puerto Rican identity. For another, although sals is now more international than ever, it will not be able to rule as the chosen vehicle of Latino unity, but will have to share the stage with merengue and other musics.

Among these "other musics," mention must be made of a newcomer to the scene, namely Latin rap. The emergence of Spanish-language rap has been an inevitable development, with young urban Latinos in New York and elsewhere mixing with their African American neighbors and creating their own hip-hop fashions. As reggae, rap, and salsa radio programs crisscross the Caribbean, and satellite dishes bring MTV to the entire region, Latin rap has emerged as one more dynami hybrid in the margins and interstices of the music world. Like salsa, it is an international genre, with branches from Los Angeles to Puerto Rico, and performers from all over the hemisphere. In an age where the borders of culture are the sources for so much artistic creativity, the Latin rap of performers like Vico C and Gerardo is self-consciously eclectic, reveling in the mixture o Spanish and English street talk, and the fusion of reggae, hip-hop, and Latin rhythms.

Amidst the past decade's proliferating hybridity, salsa still enjoys its stable niches on the radio and in the club network. The big record companies have even invested in salsa, deciding that it has some commercial potential after all. At the same time, the genre seems to be in a sort of holding pattern. Struggling to retain their audiences, most salsa performers remain stuck in the un-remunerative, exploitative club scene, with little hope of breaking into the crossover "world beat" markets. Most significant has been the emergence of a tame, commercial, salsa-lite style which has marginalized the more innovative and dynamic sub-styles. By the late 1970s, salsa, whether in New York or Caracas, had largely abandoned its portrayals of barrio life and themes of Latino solidarity in favor of sentimental love lyrics.

Of course, salsa is not the first art form to have to confront the dual and often incompatible functions of being both educational and escapist entertainment. Some people may always prefer fantasy to social realism, and man Latinos who dress up to go dancing in plush salsa clubs don't want to hear song about barrio murders--that's what they're trying to get away from. For its part since the mid-1970s the music industry has tended to direct salsa away from its barrio orientation,

to make it into a more bland, depoliticized pop--ketchup rather than salsa. Since that period, most of what has been promoted on radio and records is the slick, sentimental salsa romantica of crooners like Mark Anthony, rather than the more aggressive, proletarian, Afro-Caribbean salsa caliente. The change is also reflected in the fact that most of today's band leaders are not trained musicians and seasoned club performers like Willie Colon, but cuddly, exclusively white singers distinguished by their pretty-boy looks and supposed sex appeal. Most of them, like Jerry Rivera, are studio-bred creations of the commercial music industry; in their occasional live performances, they cling timidly to the recorded versions of their songs, hoping to compensate for their musical limitations by extravagant smoke, lighting, and stage effects. Unfortunately, as this type of salsa grows ever more trivial, it continues to lose the interest of barrio youth--precisely the people whose creative input could revitalize it.

While the music industry and artistic creation have their own internal logic, salsa's course seems to reflect broader developments in the sociopolitical order at large. Salsa was born in the sixties and early seventies--a period of protes and mobilization linked to rising expectations and the generalized feeling that fundamental social change was possible. Domestically, the economy was growing, blacks and Latinos were discovering the exhilaration of mass mobilization, and the Right was on the defensive. In the Caribbean, newly independent West Indian countries were optimistically confronting imperialism, and the Cuban Revolution was flourishing. Salsa embodied the moment's affirmative and sanguine spirit in its unabashedly proletarian flavor and hymns to Latino solidarity.

But those days are decades past, and we are now in the older, wiser, and more cynical 1990s. Internationally, the Latin American Left is decimated - the Cuban Revolution is on the defensive, and throughout the hemisphere, the American fla flies unchallenged. Domestically, the progressive gains of the sixties and seventies have been largely unmade by a triumphant Reaganism, and scarcely dented by a nominally Democratic president. In the New World Order, to sing songs of revolution would be like spitting in the wind, and popular music throughout the hemisphere seems to have retreated into sensuality, sentimentality, and lumpen nihilism. Accordingly, roots reggae's messianic fervor has given way to dance-hall's glib crudity, the nueva cancion movement has fizzled, nihilistic gangster rap rules the ghettos, and mainstream salsa has withdrawn into a commercially safe formula of soap-opera lyrics and diluted rhythms. It remains to be seen whether a resurgent pan-Latin American culture can again presume to challenge Pax-Americana in song and action.

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