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César Miguel Rondón

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The Book of Salsa: A Chronicle of Urban Music from the Caribbean to New York City.

By César Miguel Rondón

Trans. Frances Aparicio with Jackie White

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

340 [pages]; \$20.00 [paper].

REVIEWER: MARISOL NEGRÓN, University of Massachusetts—Boston

The welcome translation of César Miguel Rondón's *The Book of Salsa* provides English-speaking audiences access to one of the most referenced texts in Latin music. First published in 1980, *The Book of Salsa* provides a timeline of the music's development from its emergence in the 1960s through the rise and decline of the 1970s "boom." Rondón, a Venezuelan journalist, author, and radio and television producer, wrote the book while on assignment in New York for various Venezuelan newspapers. In this chronicle of salsa's development, he details the proliferation of bands; the personal and professional lives of musicians; the live performances, concerts, and films produced to promote the music; the arrangements, instrumentation, phrasings, and lyrics that fueled salsa; and the role of Fania Records, the dominant Latin music label of the 1970s that created an infrastructure for the development of salsa as a cultural product. Citing the convergence of rhythms that took place in New York's predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhoods, Rondón argues that salsa's unifying attribute was that "the barrio was its only defining mark" (p. 25), a characteristic that would connect salsa to other Latin American and Caribbean urban centers in countries like Venezuela, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.

The Book of Salsa provides a social history of a musical form that would come to represent a sonic soundscape that privileged New York as its site of enunciation, the city's predominantly Puerto Rican communities, and their collective experiences as racialized subjects and cultural agents. Rondón begins his journey through the New York Latin music scene with the success and spectacle of big bands in the 1950s, the development of Latin jazz prior to that, and the general influence of Cuban music in New York since the early 20th century. With the U.S. embargo of Cuba situated as a turning point with regards to the access of musicians to Cuban music, the author proceeds to describe the opportunities that developed for musicians and the emergence of salsa in the 1960s. Rondón highlights the innovative lyrics and musical structures of musicians such as Eddie Palmieri, Willie Colón, Ray Barretto, Larry Harlow, and Mon Rivera, finding in their music the "still-nascent but urgent sound" (p. 16) characterized by (1) the use of *son* as the main basis for its development (especially in the long and aggressive *montunos*); (2) arrangements that were modest in terms of harmonies and innovations but markedly bitter and violent; and (3) the imprint of the marginalized barrio (p. 16).

For Rondón, the late 1960s emerge as the period of greatest innovative achievement within New York salsa, while the four-year period between 1970 and 1974 would witness the music's artistic apex and the first stage of the salsa boom. Rondón takes great care to contrast the "authentic" salsa from the 1960s and 1970s, "conceived exclusively from an urban perspective" (p. 123), from the *matancera* style that looked not toward New York's urban working class Latino communities, but to Cuban musical forms of the previous two decades. This trend, epitomized by

the recordings of Celia Cruz and Johnny Pacheco, produced a “commercial” music that repackaged already established musical practices of 1950s Cuban music most identified with that of La Sonora Matancera. Rondón critiques not the music itself, but its release as new and innovative while lacking original elements that revealed the music’s contemporary circumstances and identity as “music of the barrio” (p. 39). In setting apart the matancera style, Rondón illustrates how various musical forms circulated within Latin New York during the boom under the umbrella of “salsa.”

While the author refers to an unevenness in the quality of salsa as a result of the informal training of many artists and the collective nature of the music, he underscores the extra-musical practices, musical approaches, distinctive lyrics, and timbre that articulated the collective identity of El Barrio. In so doing, Rondón stresses the “motivation” and “guts” of artists like Willie Colón and Héctor LaVoe in moving beyond the parameters of orthodox aesthetic formulas to produce a music that captured the wholeness of El Barrio through “strokes of genius and blows of failure” (p. 177). Rondón thereby shows how artists exceeded the boundaries of traditional aesthetic categories that critics utilized to evaluate the music’s “quality” and created music that reflected, articulated, and reinforced what Juan Flores has elsewhere referred to as a “New American identity” (1993: 213). Rooted in the lived experiences of New York’s predominantly Puerto Rican communities, salsa became “a culturally valid music because it was one they could identify with, one that authentically represented them” (p. 39).

The portrayal of Puerto Ricans within *The Book of Salsa* as an imprisoned, isolated, and culturally deficient community distances them from exterior influences. Within this context, code-switching, or “Spanglish,” within Latin music functions as a way to identify with a foreign culture that engulfed Puerto Rican communities. As a result, the advent of boogaloo, a short-lived musical form that fused Latin rhythms with African American styles and dance and party music of the broader U.S. music scene (Flores 2000: 89), represents a cultural aberration. Rondón rejects boogaloo as music of Latino youth in the 1960s who “abandoned Spanish in order to babble in an English that no one understood...[and] surrendered their cultural identities in an attempt to crossover into mainstream music markets” (p. 13). This perception of boogaloo fails, however, to consider alternative expressions of Latinidad by framing the music solely within the context of U.S. economic and cultural imperialism. This perspective also fails to consider the agency of Puerto Ricans in creating multiple and varied musical and social relationships with other ethnoracial groups, particularly African Americans, since World War I.¹

It is important to stress that Rondón’s critique of U.S. economic and cultural practices does not undermine his analysis of salsa as a popular musical form that articulated the lived experiences of New York Puerto Rican communities. Moreover, Rondón’s anti-imperialist stance does not extend to sustaining an opposition between salsa as a commodity and cultural sign. In fact, he argues against an opposition between “*pure*, spontaneous, and *truly popular* art” (p. 56—original emphasis) and “that other art created by the industry with the express purpose of becoming an international and millions-making enterprise” (pp. 56–7). Maintaining that “music that really matters is never limited or subordinated by the accolades of the market,” (p. 69) Rondón cites the artistic and commercial success of the film *Our Latin Thing (Nuestra cosa)* (1972), a musical documentary of the now legendary 1971 performance of the Fania All-Stars at the Cheetah lounge in New York. In addition to the extended excerpts from the concert that highlight the innovation

and improvisational talent of the artists, the film contains a series of scenes filmed throughout Latin New York, including East Harlem's El Barrio. An instant classic when released, the film emphasized the relationships of musicians to the spaces, discourses, and cultural and musical practices of "Latin" New York, reinforcing the identifications and recognitions between musicians and fans within New York's predominantly Puerto Rican communities while allowing Fania Records to capitalize on salsa's role as a cultural sign.²

While recognizing that the boom allowed "for an extraordinary diffusion of the music" (p. 27), Rondón also reserves his most strident critique for Fania Records. Arguing that the very boom the label facilitated "would be both its [Fania's] achievement and undoing" (p. 40), Rondón points to the label's increasing creative control over artists' endeavors and the desire to make the music more palatable to mainstream audiences. The author refers specifically to a series of three albums recorded with Columbia Records in the mid-1970s that, despite all efforts, failed to broaden salsa's audience. Rondón also cites Fania's "managerial chaos" (p. 285) and secretive business practices as partial causes for the decline of the salsa boom, particularly as the label's stable of artists began to leave.

Highlighting the artistic achievements that continued in New York with songs like "El Cantante" by *sonero* [improvisational vocalist] Héctor LaVoe and the music of avant-garde bands like Conjunto Libre (which later became Manny Oquendo and Libre) and Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino, Rondón illustrates the continued saliency of salsa as a cultural sign even as the boom went into decline. However, Rondón argues that in the latter part of the 1970s the most creative and vital salsa emerged not from New York but from parallel sites like Puerto Rico, citing the popularization of salsa there and the innovation of groups like the Puerto Rican All-Stars. Rondón also points to the increasing significance of Venezuela by the end of the 1970s, not only as a site of consumption, but also the production of salsa with the emergence of groups like Dimensión Latina and Sonero Clásico del Caribe that reflected a Venezuelan context. Contrary to this success in both Puerto Rico and Venezuela, Rondón refers to the schism that developed between salsa and *merengue* in the Dominican Republic. As Pacini-Hernández has since documented, the establishment in the mid-1970s of a Fania Records office in the Dominican Republic and the music's considerable financial backing created a direct competition with the island's *merengue*—a competition that moved beyond control of the marketplace to a struggle over the meanings of music and national identity (Pacini Hernández 1995: 107–108). The different trajectories of salsa in each country speaks not only to the proliferation of multiple "salsas," a term used by Rondón, but to the ways the music could also be employed to reproduce U.S. neo-imperialist economic practices.

Rondón follows the routes of salsa in New York, Latin America, and the Caribbean in his final chapter, added for a 2004 Spanish-language edition of the book. Conceding the impossibility of summarizing the period since the book's initial publication, he brings attention to the varied trajectories of salsa since the boom, citing some of the most important trends and moments in "Latin" music since *The Book of Salsa* was first released in 1980. While Rondón mentions the influence of salsa on various genres, he does not address these musical and cultural markets, including *rock en español*, *reggaeton*, pop music, or the innovations of a group like Dark Latin Groove, which combined salsa with reggae, rap, and rhythm and blues. Focusing on the principal trends in salsa itself, Rondón dismisses the salsa "*erótica*" [erotic] that emerged in the 1980s with its emphasis on romantic ballads and sexual innuendo. Rather, he calls

attention to the artistic and commercial contributions of various artists and their music, including Ruben Blades' politicized lyrics, Juan Luis Guerra's significance to merengue and *bachata*, and Gilberto Santa Rosa's adherence to an aggressive salsa reminiscent of the 1970s. Rondón also highlights the artistic achievements of various bands, including Grupo Niche's success in internationalizing Colombian salsa and credits Venezuelan Oscar D'León for taking salsa "to all the corners of the world" (p. 290).

By detailing "a story now disappointing, now inspiring" (p. 250) that traces salsa's creative and commercial achievements, Rondón challenges nostalgic recuperations of the music that seek to somehow distance artistic development from commercial successes. As Rondón demonstrates, salsa originally developed as a cultural marker for urban, working-class Puerto Ricans in New York during the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, with each recurring Latin boom in the U.S. cultural and music markets, the separation of the music from its temporal and spatial context increasingly ignores how salsa informed and was informed by the material circumstances of these communities. *The Book of Salsa*, with its emphasis on mapping the music's development in New York, privileges salsa's initial role as a cultural sign for Puerto Rican communities without neglecting the music's transnational context. His emphasis on New York also recognizes the ways in which the city became not only a site for the representation of Caribbean music, but for the articulation of diasporic Caribbean identities, particularly for New York's primarily Puerto Rican communities.

The full index to *The Book of Salsa* is a welcome addition to the book, as is the decision to not translate words related to music genres, instruments, and concepts that do not have sociolinguistic and cultural equivalents in English. Instead, the translators provide explanations of each of these terms. Most of the song lyrics, however, are provided only in English, a loss to Spanish language readers and those interested in the original text. Also lacking are the extensive photos and cover art from the original publication. Neither of these two issues, however, detract from the translators' ability to convey to the reader the context and meaning of *The Book of Salsa* or the translation's significance for Latin music fans and scholars alike.

As one of the first chronicles to document a transnational social history of salsa, Rondón's *The Book of Salsa* lays the foundation for tracing the music's cultural history in Latin America and the Caribbean (e.g., Manuel, Bilby, and Largey 1995; Santos Febres 1997; Quintero Rivera 1998; e.g., Otero Garabís 2000; Waxer 2002, 2002; Quintero Herencia 2005) and for moving beyond this nexus to explore salsa's moves through Japan, Montreal, and London (Hosokawa 2002; Román-Velázquez 2002; Pietrobruno 2006). Likewise, Rondón's shift away from the emphasis on Cuban music toward the cultural agency of local communities in transforming and resignifying musical and cultural practices has facilitated explorations of the social and diasporic meanings of salsa for Puerto Ricans (e.g., Valentín 2002; Flores 2004, 2008) as well as other Latinos (e.g., Padilla 1990; Berríos-Miranda 2000; Washburne 2008). In addition, *The Book of Salsa* provides a central reference point for the music's history as scholars move beyond the contours of salsa's masculinist discourses by incorporating gender as a central category of analysis (Aparicio 1998, 1999, 2002; Waxer 2002; Aparicio and Valentín 2004).

Rondón's *The Book of Salsa* remains an invaluable resource for fans of Latin music, as well as journalists, ethnomusicologists, and cultural critics, and is often cited as a reference in music encyclopedias and similar texts, including the Garland handbooks of African and Latin American music as well as the Encyclopedia of Latino Popular Culture and *Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture, and Society in the United States*. Fans of

Latin music whose first encounter with *The Book of Salsa* occurs through this translation will find that this “chronicle of urban music” helps the reader recuperate a watershed period through an understanding of salsa as “the first full systematic expression that urban Latinos identified with and claimed as their own” (p. 39) in New York.

NOTES

¹ On the shared musical relationships between African Americans and Puerto Ricans since World War I, see Glasser (1995).

² On this relationship between music and its audiences, see the chapter on “Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity” in Gilroy (1993).

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Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music

By David F. Garcia
 Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006
 274 pages: \$25.95 [paper]

REVIEWER: HALBERT BARTON, Long Island University

As a young boy in Cuba, Arsenio Rodríguez, was kicked in the head and blinded by a donkey. Later, he was dubbed The Marvelous Blind Man (El Ciego Maravilloso), and became known for his aggressive musical style. David F. Garcia claims that this theme shaped Arsenio's approach to music: "dale cocimiento" (p. 135), he would say to his musicians, meaning "let's kick some ass" (p. 50).

Despite his visual impairment it was not uncommon for Arsenio to get into fistfights. His brother Kiki once saved him from a potentially fatal beating and spent several years in jail for stabbing to death his assailant. The perennially pugnacious Arsenio continued to fight back through his music, especially against the whitewashing

The Book of Salsa : A Chronicle of Urban Music from the Caribbean to New York City. 4.15 (54 ratings by Goodreads). Paperback. Latin America in Translation/En Traducción/Em Tradução. English. This lively translation provides for English-reading and music-loving fans the chance to enjoy Cesar Miguel Rondon's celebrated *El libro de la salsa*. Rondon tells the engaging story of salsa's roots in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela, and of its emergence and development in the 1960s as a distinct musical movement in New York. Rondon presents salsa as a truly pan-Caribbean phenomenon, emerging in the migrations and interactions, the celebrations and conflicts that marked the region. Venezuelan TV producer Rondon documented salsa music from the 1950s to the 1970s in this survey, first published in Spanish in 1980, but not available in English until now. With an added update to the present, the comprehensive chronicle traces salsa's evolution, beginning with the 1940s merger of jazz and Cuban rhythms by Machito and his Afro-Cubans. Crossing continents, from New York City and Puerto Rico to Venezuela, Rondon examines salsa's working-class origins . . . and relates the difficulties of marginalized barrio life to the music's international appeal. About the Author. Cesar Miguel Rondon is a journalist, author, and radio and television producer with Corporacion Televen in Caracas, Venezuela. Rondon follows the routes of salsa in New York, Latin America, and the Caribbean in his final chapter, added for a 2004 Spanish-language edition of the book. Conceding the impossibility of summarizing the period since the book's initial publication, he brings attention to the varied trajectories of salsa since the boom, citing some of the most important trends and moments in "Latin" music since *The Book of Salsa* was first released in 1980. While Rondon mentions the influence of salsa on various genres, he does not address these musical and cultural markets, including rock en español, reggaeton. Cesar Miguel Rondon's excellent book on salsa, appropriately entitled *The Book of Salsa*, has finally been translated into | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. In *The Book of Salsa* Rondon identifies the precursors of the salsa genre, pointing to classic Cuban popular music and the "Latin" music that was popular in the United States in the 1940s and 1960s. But Rondon shows the ways in which salsa itself was a new creation that, rather than providing amusement and spectacle, reflected the spirit of the marginal, urban Latino barrios of the United States, in particular New York City. At the same time he is able to provide examples of the continuities between these two stages in the development of a Latino music scene in the United States.