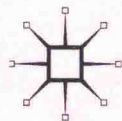


# CUBAN WOMEN AND SALSA

*To the Beat of Their Own Drum*



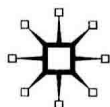
DELIA POEY



**CUBAN WOMEN AND SALSA**  
**TO THE BEAT OF THEIR OWN DRUM**

Delia Poey

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# CUBAN WOMEN AND SALSA

In memory of my mother, Delia Alcazar de Poey,  
whose voice I hear in every Cuban song

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is the result of a personal connection to music that eventually led to an academic interest in the topic. I am not a musicologist or music historian, much less a musician. I do, like most folks, feel a deep and intimate connection to certain types of music—a connection that is experienced on and through the body. Music's power to transport us to another place and time while we simultaneously experience the here and now is incomparable. We are carried away, yet the physicality of the experience takes hold of us and its immediacy compels a corporeal response. This response can be subtle, as in tapping our feet, closing our eyes, or perhaps swaying softly, or it can be an outburst of energy, a frenzy of movement. My first connection to salsa was far removed from intellectual or scholarly interest. It was, and continues to be, physical and emotional.

One of my earliest memories of salsa is dancing to a Celia Cruz LP in my living room in Mexico City. It wasn't a party, or even a family gathering. It was just me, a five- or six-year-old girl holding my mother's hands as she let me improvise my own movements to the music. That scene was unconsciously repeated more than 20 years later as I danced with my daughter in a similar living room in Tallahassee, Florida—the music and Celia Cruz's voice collapsing geographic and temporal distance. Perhaps it is my personal connection to the music that first drove me to think of salsa in matrilineal terms, as it was female voices that brought out the strongest response. These voices articulated joy, pain, exuberance, and human connection in ways that I could understand on an intuitive, physical level. As a testament to this music's transnational moves, my memories of listening to and moving to the rhythms of salsa span over 40 years and include locations as disparate as Los Angeles and Miami in the United States; Cali, Colombia; Guatemala City; and Mainz, Germany. In each location, consumers, as both listeners and participants, bring their own interpretation to the music—a testament to the fact that salsa is not only a transnational phenomenon but a translocal one as well.<sup>1</sup> In dance, for example, I have, like many others, noted strong regional differences.

I am not a great dancer, or even a good one, but I am a competent partner in paying close attention to my partner's lead. In dancing I have noted that Puerto Ricans come in on the opposite foot from Cubans, Colombians (*caleños* in particular) add a slight jump to mark a step, Dominicans tend to speed up the steps, and Los Angeles dance style is theatrical and decidedly more acrobatic. I mention differences in dance because salsa music, and Caribbean music in general, privileges bodily movement.<sup>2</sup> Salsa is made for dancing as much as, or arguably more than, for listening. For this reason, my ensuing analysis of female performers also relies heavily on the corporeal.

### DEFINING SALSA

The term "salsa" itself bears explanation, along with the history behind this musical expression. Even the origins of the term are a subject of debate. Some would trace it to 1933, to the appearance and popularity of Ignacio Piñeiro's song "*Echale salsa*" (Put some sauce on it), recorded with his Cuban group Septeto Nacional. But its contemporary use to designate a type of dance music began with radio DJ Phidias Danilo Escalona in Venezuela in the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The term gained broader usage once the recording label Fania promoted it as a marketing term in the latter part of the decade.<sup>4</sup> Of course, not everyone embraced the term "salsa." Cubans on the island, as well as many in New York, insisted the form was basically Cuban music from the 1940s onward. Even Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri, two artists strongly associated with the development and dissemination of the music, resisted the term. Puente insisted "salsa" was an imposed and artificial term, while Palmieri found it disrespectful.<sup>5</sup> Adding to the controversial use of the term is the debate about its classification as a "genre," "style," or something else. Various artists have described it in broader terms, such as Willie Colón's assertion that "salsa is a concept" and Celia Cruz's description of salsa as "working people's music." Perhaps classifying it simply as "a way of making music," as Ángel Quintero-Rivera has proposed, comes closest as a descriptive term. This book uses the term "genre," therefore, with the understanding that salsa resists easy classification.

Additionally, there are ongoing discussions among scholars as well as performers regarding salsa's influences and roots. The one point of consensus is that New York City is its birthplace. The city provided a space where various groups and communities came together in close proximity, promoting vigorous exchange between musicians from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other locations in the Caribbean and

Latin America, as well as those rooted in African American forms such as jazz. After World War I (WWI), migration from Latin America and the Caribbean to New York intensified but

had not yet split into countries of origin. Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, and other “Latinos” lived in the same neighborhoods and attended the same social clubs... Musical groups had members from diverse national backgrounds and those mixtures eventually gave way to the notions of “Latin” and “Latino” as broad-spectrum terms.<sup>6</sup>

The Puerto Rican community, which began to establish itself in the city after WWI, grew to large numbers due to migration from the island following WWII. A US-formulated project to industrialize the island, Operation Bootstrap, led to the displacement of rural populations to urban centers, creating economic pressures for further migration from the island to New York City. This massive flow of people is but one link in a chain of migrations and displacements that mark the history of the Caribbean. In the years following WWII, this history led to a confluence of multiple flows and migrations into New York City as the Puerto Rican migration, although the largest in numbers, was joined by others from different points in the Caribbean and Latin America. In terms of music, the city served as a space for cultural contact not only between musicians from various points in the Caribbean but between consumers as well. These factors meant that to attract diverse audiences and to keep them coming back for more, bands played a mixture of rhythms, even if “throughout the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, Cuban styles (*son*, rumba, conga, *guaracha*, mambo, and cha-cha) dominated.”<sup>7</sup> The dominance of Cuban rhythms, particularly *son*, can also be attributed to these Caribbean currents, as *son* had already traveled throughout the region and had been adopted, changed, and rearticulated prior to arriving in New York.

But salsa is much more than relocated *son*, and the rise of salsa in the 1960s has to be understood in historical context.<sup>8</sup> It was in the early part of that decade that several social, economic, historical, and political forces converged, propelling the development of this particular music. Three factors linked to the rise of salsa are (1) the breaking of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba in 1962 and the ensuing embargo, (2) the dominance of rock and roll, and (3) the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on Latin@ communities.<sup>9</sup> Although these factors appear here enumerated, none of these alone would have had the same effect, nor does any one of these take precedence over the others in the formation of salsa.

Aparicio notes that indirectly "salsa music is one of those unacknowledged results of the Cuban revolution."<sup>10</sup> As Eddie Palmieri explains regarding the impact of the revolution and the ensuing embargo: "There was mambo, and after that there was the cha-cha-cha. And after that there was pachanga. And after that there was nothing."<sup>11</sup> The vacuum created by the absence of music coming from Cuba precipitated innovations and fusions on the part of New York-based bands and individual musicians. Another consequence of the embargo worked in the opposite direction, toward older recordings and compositions from Cuba. Due to the country's political and economic isolation, copyrights were disregarded. Fania, for example, substituted D.R. (*derechos reservados*) or "rights reserved" for the names of Cuban composers, which made royalties difficult to trace. As Wasburne points out, it also had the effect of making the Cuban contribution "obscured, distanced, and denied," which further facilitated Fania's marketing of the music as pan-Latino.<sup>12</sup> A third consequence of the Cuban Revolution was the migration of musicians from the island to New York. For example, two of the female performers highlighted in this study, Celia Cruz and La Lupe, had to reinvent themselves outside Cuba; but they, and others, also brought their own styles to the city and the emerging salsa industry.

The innovations that marked the emergence of salsa were both musical and lyrical, and both were connected to a new consciousness influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. In terms of instrumentation, the larger role played by trumpets and trombone, for example, produced a brash, more aggressive sound that better expressed the realities of barrio life.<sup>13</sup> Rhythmically, influences were broadened to include not only various points in the Caribbean, including of course Puerto Rico, but also other locations such as Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela. These musical innovations were particularly marked in *salsa dura*, or hard salsa. For some artists, it led to even further experimentation, spawning a branch of the music that can be classified as avant-garde. For some, musical arrangements remained closer to Cuban rhythms, although still incorporating other elements and influences. Rondón classifies this as traditional or *matancera* style, named after Sonora Matancera, the Cuban group established in 1924 and popular throughout the ensuing decades in both Cuba and abroad.<sup>14</sup> Thus, from its inception, salsa was able to promote innovation as well as making use of traditional styles, not just from Cuba but from Puerto Rico and other points in the Caribbean as well.

Although its musical innovations can neither be denied nor diminished, salsa from the late 1960s to the early 1980s differentiated

itself from earlier "Latin" music, and Cuban *son* more specifically, through lyrical innovation, with greater emphasis placed on the words themselves.<sup>15</sup> "Salsa lyrics were cultural—educational, even. They spoke of dancing, drums, history, community, ethnic and national consciousness, food and street situations which the soneros (improvising singers) then commented on in improvisations, all while issuing a call to party."<sup>16</sup> The political dimensions of salsa addressed social and economic inequality through lyrics that expressed a lived reality. These were not protest songs, in the traditional sense, but rather, "protest embedded in everyday life: songs heard over the radio or record-player, and music danced to at parties and in nightclubs or discos."<sup>17</sup>

The musical and lyrical innovations that marked the emergence of salsa were also tied to market forces. To counteract the lure of rock and roll, particularly for Latin@ youth, salsa provided an alternative. Rather than incorporating the sound and rebellion of rock and roll, salsa adopted a stance of resistance to it on several levels. The most obvious of these is linguistic, as salsa lyrics moved further away from English or even bilingualism after the retreat of the short-lived bugalu, also referred to as Latin boogaloo. In terms of instrumentation and overall sound, salsa favored the trombone over the saxophone, the acoustic piano over the electronic keyboard, and the "ancestral skins of their bongos and drums" over electric guitar and drum set.<sup>18</sup> Quintero-Rivera and Márquez explain the appeal of salsa in the late 1960s as "largely a response of (im)migrant youth of Latino-Caribbean culture to rock and roll, to the hedonistic presentism of its origins and the homogenization that its 'globalization' appeared to imply."<sup>19</sup> Salsa's rebellion stood in contrast to that of rock and roll, as it was not one directed toward their parents' generation but rather a rebellion against US hegemony more generally.

Although the rise of salsa in New York City is intricately tied to a historical moment that is specific in place and time, it also reverberated outward toward locations in Latin America and the Caribbean. As Rondón explains, the reality of the *barrio*, expressed musically and lyrically, also spoke to the reality of marginalized urban spaces in multiple locations in distant places such as Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama. Youth in these locations became not just consumers of the music but creators and innovators as well. As Rondón asserts, "from 1975 on, the Caribbean refused to stay in second place," as Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic produced and developed their own original salsa.<sup>20</sup> Colombia and Venezuela too went on to develop their own salsa variants, which incorporated local musical

influences and spoke to national as well as hemispheric projects of decolonization.

By the 1980s salsa's dominance was waning, particularly in the United States. The decade began with the demise of Fania, but that was a symptom rather than a cause of salsa's shrinking sales and prominence. Younger audiences were turning away from the music as its lyrical thematics, centered on class identification, clashed with the dominant ideology of the Reagan years. Salsa's raw and brash sound was also out of step with younger audiences inundated with the slick, highly technological recordings produced in the genres of pop and rock and roll. The industry's response led to the rise of *salsa romántica* or "romantic salsa," which promoted a seamless studio sound with a standardized and softened backbeat while the lyrics centered on individualistic, heteronormative romantic relationships all packaged through lead vocalists that presented more style than substance. Of course there were exceptions, such as Rubén Blades, who continued to put out politically conscious music, or *salsa consciente*, that spoke directly to the political unrest and tensions in Latin America. Yet Blades's music was far more successful in those markets than in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Musicians who had established themselves in the 1970s, such as Willie Colón and Eddie Palmieri, also continued to put out records, even if these were commercially less successful and garnered limited radio airplay.

By the 1990s salsa also saw a geographic decentering as Miami's recording industry rose to prominence. The shift went beyond geography as the "Miami Sound" promoted largely depoliticized lyrics together with more technological recordings that contained softer and more easily followed rhythms. The emergence of Miami as a Latin music industry center also marked a different engagement with class issues, as its overall sound appealed to middle-class Latin@ audiences. Thus, by the 1990s, salsa music had changed in several ways. Yet even as musicians and fans of earlier "salsa dura" decry these changes, salsa's roots in balancing tradition and innovation and favoring hybridity over purity, and inclusion over exclusion, dictate that the genre will continue to change.

### THE CUBAN ROOTS OF SALSA

The degree to which Cuban musicians and Cuban musical traditions shaped the development of salsa is a point of ongoing debate. This project will focus on Cuban roots, with the understanding that those roots are not the dominant, let alone sole, contributors to salsa.

Yet, within the polemics regarding musical influences, there is broad consensus that Cuban music, particularly but not exclusively *son*, is a major contributor. Although *son* originated in eastern Cuba, away from urban centers, it took root in Havana in the 1920s, where it incorporated pronounced Afrocuban features from rumba, “notably the *clave* pattern and the extended montuno section...in which vocal call-and-response patterns were sung over simple harmonic ostinato.”<sup>22</sup> While the genre would later be elevated as representative of *cubanía* or the nation itself, it was initially rejected by elite society, as it was perceived to be displacing “the *danzón* and the fox trot, which were seen as music more appropriate for whites.”<sup>23</sup> The “typical instrumentation of an early-twentieth-century son band in Havana consisted of the tres, guitar, bongo, marimbula, maracas, and claves” with the marimbula, claves, and the bongo coming directly out of African-derived musical traditions.<sup>24</sup> By the time *son* was recorded in Havana in the 1920s, “it had changed in tempo and feel after mixing with western Cuba’s rumba. In the next thirty years, it would influence and merge with other powerful Cuban styles such as *danzón* and the bolero.”<sup>25</sup> As Fernández summarizes,

like its African and Spanish ancestors, the son is several things at once: an instrumental music, a popular song, and a people’s dance...As a popular song, son thematizes images of the moment, sometimes as a counternarrative to official history; at its best, the songs evoke pictures of work and leisure, of love and sex.<sup>26</sup>

While *son* is closely associated with its Cuban origins, its reach outward throughout the region meant that as early as the 1930s, it “was already considered legitimately Caribbean and not exclusively Cuban.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the spread of *son* through maritime commerce routes between Cartagena and Yucatán as well as the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico was facilitated by the region’s shared history and cultural elements, particularly in terms of music.<sup>28</sup> As Acosta summarizes:

What actually underlies our rhythms and our genres (or proto-genres, subgenres, etc.) is what we could call an Afro-Cuban or, better yet, Afro-Caribbean polyrhythmic framework or foundation...This polyrhythmic framework, common to the entire Caribbean area—and to a large extent Brazil and other regions of the Americas—in all probability can be traced back to historical developments in the earliest stages of European colonization of the Americas.<sup>29</sup>



This shared musical heritage facilitates the adoption and transmutation of rhythms from one location to another while also making nationalist claims porous.

Son's grassroots origins and growth, however, are not entirely divorced from the role that market forces and global flows of capital played in its development. US corporate interests, to say nothing of the interests of white elites on the island, aided in its dissemination throughout Cuba as well as abroad. Several factors contributed to the connections between US and Cuban music "including Cuba's economic dominance in the Caribbean, its proximity to the United States, and a vibrant sheet music industry."<sup>30</sup> In addition, coinciding with the rise of *son*, "in 1930, RCA Victor began an aggressive campaign to monopolize the recording industry in Cuba and internationalize its popular appeal."<sup>31</sup> As Díaz Ayala documents, in the earliest parts of the twentieth century, US labels engaged in the practice of traveling throughout several regions in the Caribbean with portable recording equipment. Although the practice was discontinued in most countries, it continued in Cuba into the 1930s. The labels' strategy also included bringing music personalities to record in the United States.<sup>32</sup> It bears noting that the earliest song cited to include the word salsa, "Echale salsita" (Put Some Sauce On It), is, according to one popular and perhaps apocryphal story, said to be based on Ignacio Piñero and his band's experience with bland American food as they traveled to New York to record and tour. A lasting effect of early US corporate involvement in Cuban music is that by the time Cuba had an established recording industry in the 1940s, it was heavily dependent on labels such as Decca, Victor, and Colombia.<sup>33</sup>

US participation in Cuba's tourism industry likewise exerted influence on its music.<sup>34</sup> On one level, it promoted the dissemination of Cuban music as international audiences flocked to Havana's nightclubs. Of course, catering to this audience also had an influence on popular music as forms such as *son*, guaracha, and rumba became stylized to appeal to these demographics' tastes. The open flow between Europe, the United States, Latin America (particularly Mexico), and Cuba, meant popular music traveled back and forth in cycles of appropriation, relocation, rearticulation, and reappropriation, beginning with the "Rumba Craze" of the 1920s and 1930s and continuing on to the "Golden Age" of Cuban dance music in the 1940s and 1950s. By the time Cuba and the United States broke diplomatic relations in 1962 following the revolution of 1959, Cuban music had established a strong presence in the United States as well as in the Caribbean, and salsa was poised to emerge as the dominant sound of latinidad.



## GENDER AND SALSA

Scholarship on salsa has grown in the past 15 years, yet the role that female performers have played, and continue to play, in the development of the genre has been largely ignored.<sup>35</sup> The lack of representation of female performers in the scholarship is no doubt rooted in the overall underrepresentation of women in the salsa recording industry. Their marginalization or outright exclusion can be at least partially attributed not only to the fact that salsa has been traditionally male-dominated, but also masculinist. Puleo asserts that “the sexist, misogynist, and machista ways of thinking and behaving have been reflected and glorified in the patriarchy of salsa music.”<sup>36</sup> Aparicio likewise notes that particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, “salsa music was characterized by quite disturbing articulations of violence against women and of (hetero)sexual conflict consistently framed as metaphors of war and physical struggle.” Yet, she also rightly takes great pains in pointing out that in this regard, salsa is sadly not exceptional, and exposing salsa’s “misogynistic violence and gender conflict . . . must be part of an examination of larger structures of patriarchy and of phallogocentric discourse that cross national and cultural lines.”<sup>37</sup>

Beyond outright misogyny in salsa, there is the construction of the salsa performer on purely masculine and even hyper-masculine terms. Visual and aural examples of this can be found in the music and public persona of Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe. As evidenced in both the music and early album jackets for *El Malo*, *The Hustler*, *Cosa Nostra*, and *The Big Break/La gran fuga*, Colón and his sometime “partner in crime” Lavoe, present themselves as “the Latin superfly, the borderline criminal street thug.”<sup>38</sup> That “the tradition of *guapería*, and crime became principal characteristics that distinguished salsa from its Latin predecessors” is without a doubt tied to salsa’s open identification with the barrio.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, having a male musician project the persona of the *guapo* is part of a long tradition throughout the Caribbean. In Cuba, for example, it was not uncommon for *rumberos* and *soneros* to display their toughness both lyrically and through gestures.<sup>40</sup> New York salseros like Colón and Lavoe, however, took this tradition further, with overt references to the crime and violence that permeated barrio life. Manuel suggests that the lyrics of these songs “suggest at least a hint of fascination with the ghetto’s lawlessness and with the figure of the guapo, the macho hoodlum who has achieved power in the marginalized and oppressed world of the barrio.”<sup>41</sup> Washburne interprets the lyrics as well as the visual imagery