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M U S I C

Salsa: Music on the Move

BY POLITA GORDON

Literally translated from the Spanish as sauce or something adding spice, salsa stepped out of the cookbook and the kitchen and into the musical vocabulary during the 1960s. Since then, the term has come to represent both a style of Latin music and a feel for how the music is played. Salsa is a special blend of African rhythms and Latin melodic styles with American swing and jazz. It is a music that is both ancient and contemporary, telling the story of the migration of a culture from Africa through the islands to the New World.

While all the Caribbean countries are deeply involved in the creation of salsa, Cuba is acknowledged as the heartland and main source of its inspiration. Born in the sugarcane fields as a hybrid of African and European sounds, salsa grew up in Havana and reached maturity in New York City. Unlike the music of Latin and Central America, the sound of Cuba was primarily a product of foreign influence. Eradication of Cuba's Taino and Siboney tribes by Spanish invaders in the 16th century eliminated not only the traditional reed-and-stick drum sound, prevalent in the music of other area cultures, but created a void of cheap labor to service the sugar industry. Turning to the African coast of southern Nigeria for their new workforce, the Spanish began importation of the Yoruba tribe, who at one time dominated a powerful and complex social structure in the Dahomey region of Africa. With the Yoruba came mythology, tribal religion and drums.

The melodies and rhythms of Yoruba culture were powerful and compelling, forceful enough to threaten the 17th and 18th century Spanish and to survive as the foundation of 20th century salsa. Perceived as potentially dangerous practices which might stimulate rebellion, the drumming, spiritual rites and ceremonies of Yoruba were outlawed by Catholic Spaniards. Preserving the most sacred practices through secret "Abakwa" societies, the Africans also publicly practiced Yoruba by establishing cover identities for their deities in the form of Catholic saints. This mix of the two religions is still widely practiced today in the form of Santería.

At the end of the 19th century, the popular dance of high society in Cuba was quasi-European *danzon*, in which couples light-stepped their way across the floor to the music of *charangas francesas* ("French orchestras"), groups dominated by flutes and violins. Out in the streets and

in the dance-halls, however, parties, carnivals and parades moved to brass horns and strong, African-inspired percussive drums. In the 1930s, a new type of sound based on this black street music and instrumentation gained widespread acceptance through *conjuntos*, brassy trumpet-and-conga-drum bands that slid in through the back doors of Havana's finest hotels and clubs.

By the time the Americans began to frequent the island in large numbers at the end of World War II, *charanga* orchestration had given way to *conjuntos* and dance-hall mambo was no longer a dirty word. While Roosevelt broadcast fireside chats and Carmen Miranda pranced across U.S. movie screens sporting a headful of bananas, Americans traveled in record numbers on any of Pan American's 28 daily flights from Miami to rumba the night away in the premiere winter playground of post-war vacationers.

Recognizing the *tourista* taste for that which is familiar, hotel and club managers booked swing bands from New York along with local groups. Cuban musicians had an opportunity to work—or play as the case may be—unlike anywhere in the Caribbean. Between sets of tropical dance music, they checked out their American counterparts and the imported sounds of swing, bop and jazz bought down from the north. In turn, American musicians began to experiment with intriguing Afro-Cuban rhythms by incorporating them into American popular music. Inspired by the mambo, rumba and clave beat, jazz greats Dizzie Gillespie, Stan Kenton and Nat "King" Cole wrote and recorded Latin-style arrangements, while incorporating Latin players into their bands.

While a road bridge from Key West to Cuba died a planner's dream, a musical bridge out of Havana did materialize—express to New York. Responding to the jazz siren, Cuban musicians began to head for New York as early as the 1920's. Moving in and around the jazz milieu, and between uptown and downtown clubs in the late '40s and early '50s, Cuban players made their mark with groups like Machito's Afro-Cubans and the "Cubop" sound. On one night in 1946, 5,000 people turned out for a Latin dance at the Manhattan Center, with many others turned away. Regular "Latin nights" were staged at the Palladium dance hall, the mambo was hot and jazz greats like Charlie Parker were recording the Latin musicians.

In 1959, the Cuban revolution altered the course of Cuban-American relations forever. With commercial flights no longer available, American tourism took its



Johnny Pacheco and Celia Cruz, photographed in concert by Howard Moss

business elsewhere and in what was once considered the "Las Vegas of the Caribbean," Cuban musicians played to empty rooms. Fidel Castro did more than change the political history of Cuba; he altered the course of Afro-Cuban music and catalyzed the creation of salsa. The cultural curtain fell after 1960 and not another note was heard out of Havana.

While the growing 1950s Puerto Rican migration to New York might have been expected to create a new force of Latin musicians and an expanded audience for Latin music, the majority of first generation Puerto Rican American youth turned their backs on their parent's culture, opting for the "American way." Looking for quick assimilation into American society, they abandoned Latin music for rock'n roll.

Awakening a spirit of ethnic identity, the politico-cultural revolution of the 1960's helped lead young Latinos back to their roots and musical heritage, however. They were looking for a sound which reflected both the land and spirit left behind, and the new life which they had embraced in New York. They found their sound and called it "salsa." The term served to identify an irresistible New York Latin dance music which fused ancient, hot Afro-Cuban rhythms with the cooler, modern American jazz. Salsa became the music of contemporary Latin-American street life set against the history of Africans and Spaniards in Cuba. It was the sound of the Yoruba with the feel of the ghetto. While the initial composition of the music was

closely related to Latin swing and cubop, the hipper and tougher style made salsa in particular the special sound of young New York Latinos.

If salsa was the sound, Fania Records was the label that created its new stars. Founded by Johnny Pacheco, a Dominican flutist popular for his *charanga* sound, Fania is credited with formalizing the popularity of this hybrid form of New York Latin dance music—a music that was traditional, but through the '60s still unfamiliar to the rock-oriented youth of New York.

While sometimes accused of merchandising old sauce in a new bottle, taking the Latin jazz sound of the '30s and '40s and calling it an innovation, Fania marketed the music in a way that created a new identity and image for New York Latinos. The artists, a product of contemporary New York living, caught the imagination and identification of their audience. Signing musicians such as Larry Harlowe (co-author of the salsa opera "Hommy," a version of The Who's "Tommy"), Ray Barretto (conga player and cross-over artist who scored with "El Watusi"), and Eddie Palmieri (innovator of the salsa jazz piano and improvisational style), Fania reinvested profits in the creation of name, face and song recognition for its artists.

Eventually, Fania signed Willie Colon, a fifteen-year-old streetwise trombone player from the Bronx who shook the salsa world. Colon, whose distinctive music incorporated the street beat of New York with Cuban rhythms and traditional Latin instruments, pushed to the musical

vanguard with his "Asalto Navideno" LP in the mid-1970s. Resisting Pacheco's insistence that his artists play only a "tipico" Cuban sound, Colon synthesized musical elements that reached far beyond the Afro-Cuban tradition. His innovations rendered salsa a universal Latin music, laying to rest any arguments that the music was merely a modernized version of the Havana big band sound.

The 1970s established the foundation for salsa's permanent stronghold in the musical arena. Heating up audiences from Paris to San Juan, Americans, Europeans and even Japanese were dancing to the salsa beat. Older artists, like blind Afro-Cuban percussionist Arsenio Rodriguez, timbalist Tito Puente and singer Celia Cruz, benefitted from the spread of salsa fever. Interest in these Latin masters was revived as they teamed up with Fania stars, and younger audiences no longer dismissed them as old hat.

It was in the '70s that salsa became an important presence on the Miami musical scene—finally. As had New York's Latinos, Miami Cubans spent their first decade here immersed in American pop music. Once having achieved a degree of cultural security, they began to explore their native idiom. Today, the Miami salsa base is well established, through the music of transplanted groups such as Cesar Nicholas y Su Orchestra (previously of New York, which is now over-saturated with salsa groups) and home-grown talent on the order of Miami Sound Machine. "In this setting, you should be able to turn on your radio 24 hours a day and hear salsa if you want it," says local promoter Reyes "Popi" Burgos, whose Salsa Hotline service (756-7903) provides information about clubs, dances, radio stations and special events in the area. "It's music made for the tropics."

These days the international salsa hot-spot is Puerto Rico. Supporting eighty salsa radio stations, and attracting crowds of 50,000 to salsa beach concerts, San Juan has overtaken New York as the pulse point of the salsa beat. This shift in locale supports the fact that salsa is still on the move. It is, perhaps, more refined, sophisticated and intellectual than it was earlier on, but salsa remains music with a history as long as its Afro-Cuban roots and as varied as its American influences. Eduardo Aguirre, Music Director of the Miami based Charanga Tipico Tropical group, says it this way: "If you have the music inside—no matter where you are—if you want to play that kind of music and you know how to play it, it will come out."