

Latin Rhythm From Mambo to Hip Hop

Introductory Essay

Professor Juan Flores, Latino Studies, Department of Social and Cultural Analysis,
New York University

In the latter half of the 20th century, with immigration from South America and the Caribbean increasing every decade, Latin sounds influenced American popular music: jazz, rock, rhythm and blues, and even country music. In the 1930s and 40s, dance halls often had a Latin orchestra alternate with a big band. Latin music had Americans dancing -- the samba, paso doble, and rumba -- and, in three distinct waves of immense popularity, the mambo, cha-cha and salsa. The “Spanish tinge” made its way also into the popular music of the 50s and beyond, as artists from The Diamonds (“Little Darling”) to the Beatles (“And I Love Her”) used a distinctive Latin beat in their hit songs.

The growing appeal of Latin music was evident in the late 1940s and 50s, when mambo was all the rage, attracting dance audiences of all backgrounds throughout the United States, and giving Latinos unprecedented cultural visibility. Mambo, an elaboration on traditional Cuban dance forms like el danzón, la charanga and el son, took strongest root in New York City, where it reached the peak of its artistic expression in the performances and recordings of bandleader Machito (Frank Grillo) and his big-band orchestra, Machito and His Afro-Cubans.

Machito’s band is often considered the greatest in the history of Latin music. Along with rival bandleaders Tito Rodríguez and Tito Puente, Machito was part of what came to be called the Big Three. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, they offered up memorable mambo performances at the legendary Palladium Ballroom in mid-town Manhattan and other upscale venues. While New York became the hub of Latin music in the U.S, another famous Cuban bandleader, Dámaso Pérez Prado, based in Mexico City and Los Angeles, brought mambo international visibility.

Mambo’s popularity was furthered by its frequent use in movie soundtracks and with the emergence of television as household entertainment. The “I Love Lucy Show” brought a Latino into American living rooms for the first time, introducing Cuban American musician Desi Arnaz. While Arnaz’s most characteristic musical form was la conga, he has been identified with the mambo era, especially after Cuban-American author Oscar Hijuelos structured his Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* around an imaginary episode of the “I Love Lucy Show.”

The mambo was but one genre in a string of dance and music crazes that characterized the fascination of American culture with things “Latin” throughout the 20th century. In the early decades of the century, the tango swept through Paris and New York. Originating in the underworld of turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires, the tango was based on the ubiquitous “habanero” rhythm from 19th-century Havana, transported through port

cities such as Veracruz, San Juan and New Orleans. The rhythmic features of this music were the basis for early jazz, especially ragtime. When Jelly Roll Morton famously spoke of the “Spanish tinge” as a necessary ingredient of jazz composition, he was primarily referring to “la habanera.”

The tango craze was followed in the 1930s and 40s by the “rhumba craze.” In fact, the misspelled “rhumba” was not the authentic Afro-Cuban ‘rumba’, but a simplified version of the Cuban son made seductive for use in American middle-class lounges and ballrooms. The rhumba craze in the United States began with the immense popularity of the standard “El Manisero,” also called “The Peanut Vendor,” first performed in 1930 on Broadway by the visiting Cuban orchestra of Don Azpiazu. That tune, an early best-selling recording, became familiar to a broad audience through many interpretations;

most notably, Louis Armstrong and Stan Kenton’s variation set the tone for what has remained the exotic-erotic romance of American mass culture with the stereotyped image of the care-free, sexualized Latino.

The early 1940s saw Americans doing the conga, the carnival line-dance form accompanied by the conical drum touted by Desi Arnaz/Ricky Ricardo as “Mr. Babalu.” In the 1950s and early 60s came the cha cha cha, whose simplicity of steps allowed for even greater public participation and enjoyment. The 1970s brought salsa, the commercial rubric and musical-cultural modality that became the most widely recognized marker of Latino identity at a nation-wide and international level. Perhaps reggaeton, with its Spanish-language inflected version of hip hop and dancehall, signals the latest Latin soundtrack, co-existing with the new-watered-down version of “salsa” and rap of recent decades.

The glitter and hype of these waves of popularized commercial entertainment provide a version of Latino culture often at odds with the reality of Latino social experience. From the 1940s on, the Puerto Rican community more than Cuban New Yorkers constituted the primary social base of Latin music in New York. After Puerto Ricans were declared U.S. citizens in 1917, working-class families from the Island began filing into New York City. The mass migration starting after 1945 brought the city’s Puerto Rican population to nearly a million, altering the nature of New York’s Latino neighborhoods.

This overwhelmingly poor and working-class community had been reared musically less on mambo or Cubop and more typically on traditional Puerto Rican country music (*música jíbara*) and on bolero-singing guitar trios. Rather than the Palladium and other mid-town venues, its’ music-making and dancing favored house parties and more humble local nightclubs “uptown” in East Harlem and the Bronx. The uptown-downtown distinction was fluid, however, with overlap between them, and the foremost musicians

of the day were equally at home delighting audiences in both worlds. And while the downtown version tends towards commercialization of Cuban-based genres, and the uptown version is a more grass roots, “authentic” expression of ethnic musical traditions, the difference can not be reduced to one of artistic quality. For sheer musicality, no one could beat the great orchestras of the “Big Three” (Machito and the Titos) and other headliners at the Palladium and mainstream venues.

The idea of two divergent currents in New York Latin music is useful in understanding the many dimensions of the history of Latin music in America. Both had different relations to the music industry, with the more mainstream styles finding readier access to big commercial labels, and the more grassroots styles being released on small but important independent labels like Tico, the Spanish Music Company (SMC), and later Alegre. Fania, the founding home of salsa in the late 1960s, began as a homegrown label and devolved into a would-be major by the mid-70s. Interestingly, while record sales of even the premier musical groups remained modest at best, the crossover genres of boogaloo and Latin soul had huge-selling hits like Mongo Santamaría's "Watermelon Man," Ray Barretto's "El Watusi" and Joe Cuba's "Bang Bang," among the first Latin tunes to make it onto the Billboard charts.

By the time post-mambo styles evolved in the mid-to-late 1960s, issues of generational change, race and class, and political-cultural affirmation overshadowed those of geographic distinction or artistic virtuosity. The music of second-generation New York Latinos, the "Nuyorican" children of the mass migration growing up on the "mean streets" of the inner city, were bound to create new musical forms expressive of altered social and cultural conditions.

Despite the oft-held notion of how distinct the Latin American and African American communities and cultures are, the story of music in the South Bronx in the late 20th century illuminates the intersections between them. Starting with the pachanga craze of the 1960s and proceeding through that decade until all of the music was labeled "salsa" around 1971, the music of New York Latinos became ever more deeply intertwined with African American and Caribbean styles. The largely untutored "young Turks" whose sudden stardom drew the ire of established masters like Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri, embraced and emulated African American culture by playing songs in English and resting more on the backbeat than on the usual clave-based trappings of typical Latin bands.

In the emergence of hip hop, Latin music's ties with inner-city African American expression are even more pronounced. The historical relationship between the rebelliousness of the late 60s and that of the 80s is expressed in the statement that while the earlier era turned to revolution, the latter, for lack of access to political influence, created the elements of hip hop. The differences are obvious, musically and politically, but the similarities are found in the common social base of the styles' original musicians and audiences. Both alternative musical forms in the 1960s and 80s were vulnerable to the ravenous appetite of the mainstream music industry. The avid sacking of the music's commercial opportunities and the attendant dilution and trivialization of the music are evident in both narratives. So quickly was early hip hop dislodged from its founding social and ethno-racial context that little acknowledgment has gone to the influence of Puerto Rican artists in that dynamic and consequential cultural movement called Hip-Hop. That its origins are even "Latin" at all is placed in continual question, including among many Latinos themselves.

The historic arc from mambo to hip hop describes a diaspora cultural dynamic that shows remarkable resilience in the face of multiple pressures to abandon native and historical traditions and go American mainstream. At the same time, the intricate and vastly creative interaction between Cuban, Puerto Rican and other "Latin" traditions with African American music in its many stylistic expressions, a fusion that shows no sign of abating in the new millennium, has graced contemporary listeners with decade after

decade of inspired musical invention. The film *From Mambo to Hip Hop*, is subtitled “a Bronx Tale” so as to locate its subject geographically and socially, but the impact of the musical forms it explores radiates confidently outward, resounding in multiple incarnations everywhere in the world.

Humanities Themes

Popular Music and Identity. Popular music is pertinent in understanding the circulation of social ideas about race, gender, social class, geographical location, and historical moment. Ethnicity and notions of how to identify oneself as ‘white’ or ‘black’ or ‘Latino’ are also powerfully represented in popular music. For music like the mambo, and later for the evolution of hip hop, we can examine what these identities meant to generations coming of age in the 20th century.

Popular Music and Social Stereotyping. The combination of aural and visual stimuli presented in popular music creates the perfect storm for communicating and circulating important ideas about society. It can be an arena where social stereotypes are forged, from the image of country singer as ‘redneck’ to that of young African American men as gangsters to caricatures of Asian and Latin people in novelty songs from the 1920’s - 60’s. But stereotypes can be broken in popular music as well, when musicians defy or comment on such categories. Popular music allows the examination of a wider cultural process about how ideas about social groups are created, formed, reformed and negotiated.

Migration and Immigration. The immigration, migration, and urbanization of various minority groups in America throughout the twentieth-century have provided an environment that fostered numerous styles of pop cultural forms that have had a global impact. With popular music, we can examine how traditions and innovations created within one community are shared and interact with those of another to create new cultural styles, and new art forms.

Discussion Points

1. 1950s New York City began to publish articles on an emerging "mambo revolution" in music and dance. Recording companies began to use mambo to label their records and local newspapers advertised mambo dance lessons. The mambo dominated the music scene for 20 years through the mid-1960s. What was it about mambo that appealed to so many and across cultures? Why was there a mania? How did the mambo compare to other popular cultural forms of the 1950’s and 60’s?
2. From *I Love Lucy* to *West Side Story*, how did American films and television portray Latin music and musicians? Has that portrayal changed in contemporary television and film? Give examples.

3. The popularity of Latin music in America has been closely connected with dance trends. Why do you think this is true? What characteristics are shared by all the Latin music and dance crazes that swept America, from mambo to the rumba to the conga to the cha cha and salsa?
4. Why are the mainstream music industry and many in the hip hop community slow to acknowledge the Latin influence in hip hop's history? Is that changing? Who were the significant Latino musicians and DJs who were playing hip hop at its beginnings in the Bronx?
5. It has been said that hip hop arose out of the most desperate days of the South Bronx. How was the music a reflection and expression of the times? How did it answer the needs of the generation coming of age in the 1970's and 80's in urban America? How were these musicians influenced by the 'mambo' and salsa generations of musicians before them?
6. In exploring the impact of Latin Music in American culture, filmmakers, musicians and cultural commentators note that cities like New York set the stage for cross-cultural pollination as well as competition in many musical forms. What are some of the social and political issues revealed by the evolution of Latin music in the American scene?