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Review/Reseña

Fernandez, Raul A. *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

In Praise of Older Drummers: The Cuban Creators of Latin Jazz

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Despite more than forty years of political vitriol between Cuba and the United States, the two countries have actually been locked in a musical embrace for over a century. Initially linked to each other and the rest of the circum-Caribbean world by waterways and port cities and later by media, musicians in the two countries have continuously influenced each other, from the brass band and piano music of the nineteenth century to the earliest sounds of the recording era to the late-twentieth-century genres of hip-hop and rap. Seemingly every decade during the twentieth century produced a Latin music dance craze in the United States, with Cuban

genres, such as the *conga*, *rumba*, *mambo*, or *cha-cha-cha*, becoming mainstays in urban American ballrooms, nightclubs, and living rooms. This interchange, of course, was hardly unidirectional. While connections between Cuban music and early jazz have been documented (Roberts 1999a, 1999b; Stewart), American ragtime, blues, jazz, and popular music also influenced musicians in Cuba and beyond. These transnational musical influences, realized by the aesthetic decisions of individual musicians and consumers, underscore the long-term musical relationship between the United States and Cuba.

The interchange between Cuban music and American jazz has probably existed since the creation of jazz in the early twentieth century. Still, there was a clear move on the part of Cuban and American musicians in the United States toward a particular synthesis of the two genres in the late-1940s and 1950s. Known first as Afro-Cuban jazz or *cubop* (coined from the combination of “Cuba” and “bebop”), and later as Latin jazz, this fusion of Cuban rhythms and instruments with American jazz aesthetics took several guises, and for this reason defining Latin jazz can be a vexing endeavor. Some of the early Afro-Cuban jazz works essentially took Cuban popular music dance ensembles and rhythms and added jazz harmonies and a jazz emphasis on extended soloing. For their part, American jazz musicians approached the fusion primarily by adding Cuban rhythms and percussion to what remained a jazz approach to playing a musical composition. Even today, Latin jazz describes a broad spectrum of music ranging from vocalist-dominated, danceable *salsa* music (with “jazz” harmonies and perhaps the inclusion of an occasional instrumental solo) to virtuosic, instrumental concert music informed by sacred Afro-Cuban rhythms and daring improvisations and avant-garde jazz techniques. What all these Latin jazz expressions have in common are their roots: a foundation in Afro-Cuban and jazz music aesthetics, Cuban percussion, and a repertoire of genres, compositions, and improvisatory conventions established by the work of a crucial generation of Latin jazz artists. It is this generation of widely emulated musicians that author Raul Fernandez focuses upon in his latest work.

Raul Fernandez is Professor of Social Sciences at the University of California, Irvine. While trained in political economy, the Cuban-born Fernandez is extremely well positioned to study Latin jazz through his lifelong interaction with Cuban music, first as a fan, then as a musician, and finally as a scholar. Significantly, in addition to his decades of interaction with the subject matter, Fernandez's expertise led to his recruitment by the Smithsonian Institution to conduct oral histories for its Jazz and Latino Music Oral History Programs. Fernandez interviewed over a dozen Latin jazz, Cuban, and salsa musicians on behalf of the Smithsonian, providing him invaluable access to major artists in these fields. His work resulted in Fernandez's appointment as curator of an excellent traveling Smithsonian exhibit *Latin jazz: La combinación perfecta* (2002–2006). He also produced an outstanding companion compact disc and authored a bilingual exhibit book (2002), a dazzling work that includes over 150 photographs.

While his Smithsonian book sketched an overview of Latin jazz history, in *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz* Fernandez seeks to flesh out the stories of the key Latin jazz musicians whose artistry made Latin jazz artistically and commercially successful. Specifically, Fernandez focuses upon a generation of master musicians (all born in the 1910s and 1920s) that achieved the highest levels of performance in Cuba before eventually relocating to the United States in the late 1940s to early 1960s: bassist Israel "Cachao" López; trumpeter Alfredo "Chocolate" Armenteros; percussionists Ramón "Mongo" Santamaría, Francisco Aguabella, Armando Peraza, Carlos "Patato" Valdés, and Candido Camero; and vocalist Celia Cruz. While his study parameters exclude many of the earliest foundational figures of Afro-Cuban jazz (e.g., Arsenio Rodríguez, Mario Bauzá, Chano Pozo, Machito) or important *Nuyorican* musicians (e.g., Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri), it is difficult to quarrel with Fernandez's selections, all of whom represent influential master artists.¹

Fernandez establishes several goals for his work. Characterizing his offering as an introductory study, the author aims to provide "a historical, biographical, and theoretical platform on Cuban music that may serve

¹ For scholarly work on Arsenio Rodríguez and Tito Puente, see García (2006) and Loza (1999), respectively. For an excellent essay on Machito and Mario Bauzá, see Austerlitz (2005).

others who wish to establish richer comparisons between different national forms and eventually develop a more encompassing regional aesthetics" (xii). Acknowledging works that approach the comparative study of Afro-Atlantic music in a general sense, Fernandez identifies his book as addressing an "absence of more detailed histories, empirics, and the aesthetic theorizing of *particular* national genres" (ibid; emphasis in the original). The author casts his book as artist-centered rather than genre-centered, and thus artist profiles form the bulk and heart of the book. To this end, Fernandez also seeks to elevate the discourse and appreciation of both Latin jazz and the artists he presents, musicians who, for the most part, worked for decades in relative obscurity.

The book is divided into two parts. In part 1, "Popular Music," Fernandez provides a social and historical overview of the Cuban music that served as a foundation for Latin jazz expressions, as well as identifies key musical elements essential to the Afro-Cuban style. Most of the ideas in part 1 synthesize earlier scholarship, though Fernandez does make useful points and use novel approaches in presenting his information. For example, in the introduction to part 1, Fernandez relates Antonio Benítez Rojo's concept of "repeating islands" (1992) to the similarities of socio-economic conditions and vernacular music forms on the various Caribbean islands: their colonial nature, plantation economies, and reliance on imported slave or wage labor. He extends this idea to music, noting that Caribbean communities inherited European language, musical instruments, genres, and song forms, but repeatedly created similar yet locally unique musical expressions by adding varying elements of African musical practices and musical instruments. They also began singing songs in local rather than continental dialects, often about topical subjects that reflected the Caribbean experience. It is an interesting use of Benítez Rojo's ideas, one that I would have liked to see extended to religious ritual, particularly the processional and carnival-based activities that were sites of both African musical retentions and *criollo* creations in Cuba and throughout the Caribbean.

Chapter 1, "The Salsa Concept," begins with a brief discussion of the term "salsa" before launching into a historical overview of Afro-Latin dance

music forms in the United States. Here, Fernandez rightly critiques the absence of Afro-Latin music from many versions of the American music canon, a glaring omission in light of recurring Latin dance music crazes. Acknowledging that the Spanish language served as one barrier for many audiences, Fernandez also claims that musical characteristics (primarily aspects of rhythm and drumming) could create reception problems on the part of audiences unfamiliar with Afro-Latin aesthetics, which he explains in general terms. Fernandez also critiques the overly simple distinction between “authentic” traditional music and ostensibly inauthentic or compromised popular music. Indeed, he notes that “much of what is regarded today as ‘classic’ Afro-Cuban music, the ‘truly authentic,’ developed in the ambiance of nightclubs and casinos patronized by U.S. tourists in Havana,” hardly a setting uncompromised by commercial concerns (19). He also notes that while many lamented the passing of the poetic and socially engaged *salsa consciente* of the 1970s in favor of the commercial romanticism of *salsa sensual* of the 1980s, *salsa consciente* was itself commercial music, built upon even earlier popular forms.

In chapters 2 and 3, “The Ontology of the *Son*” and “The Aesthetics of *Sabor*,” Fernandez discusses the traditional Cuban *son*, a music genre that served as the foundation for much Afro-Cuban dance music, salsa, and Latin jazz. The *son* has been described as the quintessential Cuban music because of its perfect synthesis of African and Spanish aesthetics, instruments, and musical forms. Fernandez observes that many of the musical instruments that characterize Cuban popular music or represent musical Cubanness are “New World” island creations based on “Old World” models (European and African). Even instruments of strictly European origin that appeared in *son* sextets and other Cuban ensembles, such as the guitar, string bass, and trumpet, became associated with a new rhythmic style of playing. This rhythmic style, along with the instruments of African origin, came to be viewed as representatives of Afro-Cuban influence within the *son* and others genres, a condition initially reviled as a social pollutant and later celebrated as the musical embodiment of *afrocubanismo* (see Moore 1997). In addition to new instruments and new ways of playing, Fernandez notes how new words were coined to describe new instruments

(*bongó, tumbadora, marímbula*), musical parts (*montuno, tumbao, guajeo*), and other musical concepts.

Refreshingly, Fernandez also wants the reader to consider the role that dancers played in the commercial success of Cuban dance music through their creation of new dance moves to accompany and even influence the development of new Cuban music genres, “a process of back-and-forth interaction between musicians and dancers/audience” (49). While poetics and musical influences from a variety of sources played a role in its creation, the *son*, states Fernandez, is an enrapturing music “born not at a concert but at a dance” (35), a music “that people listen to with their feet” (26). The Cuban “flavor” of its musical expressions, Fernandez argues, a thriving mix of old forms and new creations, contributed both to the growth of Cuban music and its spread beyond Cuba’s shores.

In part 2 of the book, “On the Road to Latin Jazz,” the author examines select music artists crucial to the success of Latin jazz in the second half of the twentieth century. In a brief introduction, Fernandez builds on the histories and ontologies in part 1 to introduce arguments and justify the artist profiles that dominate the remainder of the book. Fernandez seeks to undermine the myth that Latin jazz was created more or less in a singular meeting between jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and Cuban percussionist Chano Pozo in the late 1940s (a myth belonging more to jazz than to Cuban music history). Arguing that a variety of specific interactions between Cuban and American musicians were also occurring, Fernandez casts the Gillespie/Pozo collaboration as an important part of a broader movement. In the immediate wake of Gillespie and Pozo’s short-lived *cubop* project came a wave of Afro-Cuban jazz ranging from large dance bands to small *cool jazz* combos. Fernandez’s focus for the remainder of the book is a series of biographical profiles of Cuban artists crucial to these various Latin jazz incarnations.

The author acknowledges that the roster is an uneven one. Because the typical instrumentation of American jazz combos could be transformed into Latin jazz ensembles simply by adding a percussionist or two, percussionists make up a majority of the book’s profiles (five of eight), with the remaining work focusing on a bassist, a trumpeter, and a vocalist.

Fernandez's subjects have impeccable, decades-long résumés beginning in the streets, nightclubs, radio studios, and concert halls of Cuba and ending in the United States, where they experienced periods of success and difficulty. Fernandez's contribution here is the creation of compact and detailed histories of important Afro-Cuban musicians, synthesizing commonly known information, little known anecdotes, and additional information gleaned from his research. For those interested in Latin jazz, this section of the book alone is, as they say, worth the price of admission.

Four of the chapters are dedicated to single artists. Chapter 4, "Magic Mixture," profiles the legendary bassist Israel López, better known as Cachao. Born in 1918 in Havana, Cachao is typical of the subjects Fernandez presents: a musician's musician, known primarily to other musicians and aficionados, an innovator, virtuosic, an influential talent and bold performer. Cachao's contributions to Cuban music include the co-creation of the *mambo* in the late 1930s and recording influential *descargas* (jam sessions) in the late 1950s, all with tasteful bass lines that were widely emulated. Relocated to the United States in 1963, Cachao played with every major Latin artist in New York before receding into obscurity. Amazingly, Cachao triumphantly reemerged in the 1990s, largely due to the exposure he garnered from a documentary film (Garcia 1993) and Grammy-winning recording project (López 1994), both produced and sponsored by a benefactor, the Cuban-American actor Andy Garcia.

The chapter "Drumming in Cuban" profiles percussionist Ramón "Mongo" Santamaría (1917–2003), while chapter 6, "Lords of the *Tambor*," provides biographies of varying length of the legendary percussionists Armando Peraza (b. 1924?), Carlos "Patato" Valdés (b. 1926), Francisco Aguabella (b. 1925?), and Cándido Camero (b. 1921). If part 2 is the heart of Fernandez's book, these chapters are its soul. All the men listed here achieved success in their long careers, and in their innovative collaborations with American musicians and each other, and as composers and bandleaders in their own right, they were crucial to the artistic success of Latin jazz in the United States. Fernandez also credits their efforts for the ubiquitous presence of Cuban conga drums in a variety of music ensembles around the world. Their diverse performance credits are too

lengthy to summarize but range from giants of Cuban music to Carlos Santana, Duke Ellington, and Frank Sinatra. Mongo Santamaría had the most success as a composer, bandleader, and crossover artist, while Aguabella's reputation as a master of Afro-Cuban religious drumming garnered him a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a documentary film in his honor (Blank 1995). Of all the artists, Camero's four-page profile is the most underdeveloped and feels somewhat tacked on to the others, his impressive career notwithstanding.

Chapter 7 provides a biography of Alfredo "Chocolate" Armenteros (b.1928), a trumpeter with an unparalleled résumé stretching from the legendary Arsenio Rodríguez through a stint as musical director for the great Beny Moré and eventually continuing in New York, where he played with the legendary Machito and numerous other artists. The last artist profiled, Celia Cruz (1920?–2003), is a clear exception to the other subjects: a female, a vocalist rather than instrumentalist, well-known rather than journeyman. Though not a composer or bandleader, Fernandez argues that Cruz's shrewd aesthetic judgment played a significant role in her success and, consequently, the success of the pan-Latin salsa music wave she rode from the 1970s until her death. Unlike the instrumentalists in this book, information on Cruz is easily obtainable. Her popularity resulted in several posthumous book-length biographies (and an autobiography) in English and Spanish. While Fernandez contributes material from his oral history interviews, this chapter, while efficient and detailed, strikes me as the least revelatory in light of recently published works. A two-page afterword concludes the book.

Written in a clear, approachable style, Fernandez provides a concise overview of Cuban music, and the Cuban *son* in particular, as a foundation for his Latin jazz study. Though purposeful, there is a subtle cleverness to some of Fernandez's writing, such as his examination of what he calls the "gustatory imperative," the ubiquitous metaphors of culinary taste (e.g., *sabor*) commonly deployed in discussion of Cuban music (52). Some of his titles are playfully referential as well (hence the title of this review), while others allude to his larger goal of taking very seriously music too often

dismissed as “merely” popular or dance-oriented (such as his chapter titles that combine the words “ontology” and “*son*,” “aesthetics” and “*sabor*”). To this end, when describing the music of the *son* as “requiring a miniature orchestra” whose performance “has been likened to the core of a symphony” (25), Fernandez deploys a common technique for attacking the highbrow/lowbrow divide that dismisses music that is popular, rhythmically exciting, or danceable: the use of prestigious terms (orchestra, symphony) associated with prestigious music (European concert/classical music) to reframe and elevate the artistic appreciation of the non-classical music at hand.

Despite the book’s title, the musical procedures by which the Afro-Cuban rhythms summarized in part 1 become Latin jazz are not discussed, which could have given the work additional depth. Instead, Fernandez chooses to focus upon the musical personages that created and realized some of Latin jazz’s musical procedures. Thus, though Fernandez includes six brief music notation examples in part 1 of the book, the book is very accessible to non-musicians.

As an artist-centered work, the book is quite successful and will provide an excellent reference source for scholars and Latin jazz fans alike. His informative biographies are a concise synthesis of original ethnographic work and existing materials scattered throughout a variety of international publications. Fernandez also effectively uses ethnographic data to attack some of the misconceptions regarding Cuban musicians (indeed, all musicians) who have labored under a variety of stereotypical assumptions: what they do is fun and therefore not work, what they do is play and therefore not art (55). While environment, artistry, and luck play a formative part in the success of the artists Fernandez profiles, what also emerges from his portraits of musicians is a no-nonsense strength, one requiring dedication, hard work, perseverance, versatility, and creativity. Even in the brief sketches Fernandez provides the reader, we find artists emerging from a variety of social circumstances and hardships, and toiling in a variety of blue-collar or service professions (pushcart vendor, longshoreman, mailman, delivery driver, cleaner) at different points of their careers. Fernandez clearly loves this subject matter, and I appreciate

his restraint; despite his admiration for these artists and his advocacy to increase appreciation of them, the author never collapses into hagiographic prose.

One aspect of the book I find surprising, however, is that the voice we primarily hear is Fernandez's. Oddly, it is in the slimmer companion book to Fernandez's Latin jazz exhibit that, while containing far less material about individual artists, actually presents paragraph-long quotes from the individual artists, giving the reader a sense of their personalities. Whether a stylistic choice or an obligation to existing publications, to find so few first-person quotes in a volume bolstered by the unusual access to oral histories is disappointing.

While Fernandez does cover issues of ethnic identity and racial prejudice, I found myself wanting more substantive engagement with this topic in both a historical and performative sense. In his early chapters, Fernandez surveys Afro-Latin genres and the far reach of Cuban influences. To expand on his "repeating island" motif, it is worth noting that one thing "repeated" in the histories of national music genres in the Americas (Cuban *son*, Brazilian *samba*, Argentinean tango, Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena*, American jazz) was a period of initial condemnation by the ruling classes, largely because of the music's African influences and lower class origins. Though nearly every artist presented by Fernandez is of unquestionable African ancestry, the author does not explore this issue beyond one or two biographical occurrences. What was it like to live and tour in the United States in the 1950s and beyond, initially doubly marginalized by African descent and by language? Did the percussionists ever feel like exotic props, or were they respected as equals? These types of questions have been raised about more highly visible cross-cultural collaborations, such as with Paul Simon on his *Graceland* album and Ry Cooder on the *Buena Vista Social Club* projects. Similarly, Fernandez mentions the Cuban Revolution very briefly, primarily in Celia Cruz's chapter, but it would have been interesting to learn how the rest of the musicians felt about their changed homeland (and its changed music) while they continued their work in the United States. A notoriously touchy subject, it may have been too problematic for inclusion or peripheral to the Smithsonian interview projects.

Organizationally, the book's bifurcated form leads to a few problems, as some terms introduced in part 1 (e.g., *tumbao*, *descargas*) are not defined until later, sometimes much later. Other Afro-Cuban terms (e.g., *aché*) are never defined, and a few mentions of personages or anecdotes make redundant appearances. While some readers will nod knowingly in recognition of terms not immediately defined, the introductory nature of the text would benefit from a more timely definitional approach.

Fernandez's sparse use of musical notation examples is also sometimes problematic. He defines *clave*—a repetitive timeline pattern and the thick wooden sticks that play the pattern—as “a two-bar rhythmic pattern” and “two-measure phrase,” but for some reason he chooses to notate it as a one-measure pattern (15, 27). Moreover, his chosen notational representation of *clave*, while correct rhythmically, utilizes unconventional beaming and ties on the notes, giving it an awkward appearance. He also leaves, in its initial appearance, the concept of “3-2 *son clave*” unexplained, later providing a general explanation of the “3-2” component, but not the *son clave* component (*son clave* and *rumba clave* are both timeline patterns, differentiated by the placement of a single note and so named for the genres most associated with their origins). Given the importance he justifiably gives to *clave* as organizing musical force, more specificity and attention to explanatory detail is warranted.

A final criticism is more a question of citation style. Fernandez advises the reader that much of his biographical material comes from oral history interviews, so it is understandable that many interesting biographical details are not sourced. However, in the earlier chapters of the book, scholarly readers might desire a more conservative citation approach. So, for example, when reading that Cuban *danzón* sheet music was available in New Orleans in 1881 (10), or Rubén Blades describing *salsa* as “the folklore of the cities” (14), or that Mexico's Emperor Maximilian requested a *habanera* tune before his execution (73), readers seeking more information will be disappointed. Such details may be well known to the author and select scholars and aficionados, but many readers would benefit from the extra assistance.

These criticisms aside, Fernandez successfully achieves his goal of providing an artist-centered, introductory work on Latin jazz. He effectively presents the nature of Cuba's "musical hegemony within the Caribbean basin," (vii) while resisting the hagiographic impulses so often found in writing on Latin American popular music. His choice to focus on a generation of extraordinary artists is ultimately fruitful, resulting in excellent summaries of these artists' careers and a welcome addition to Latin jazz studies.

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