

Chapter 3: Genre Issues in Cuban Son

In talking with musicians about son, *música tradicional*, and *septetos*, I discovered a great deal of discrepancy regarding the definitions of these terms. In particular, for some, “son” as a generic category seems to be synonymous with the instrumentation of the classic 1930s septet, while for others, it is a much broader category, a set of musical formulas that inform most of Cuban dance music. Some musicians use the term to describe a way of life, similar to the ways in which blues artists in the U.S. use the term “the blues” (Lapidus 2002: 23).

In this chapter, I present an overview of research on Cuban categories of musical genres, focusing on the “son complex” (Alén Rodríguez 1998; Orozco 1992) as it is commonly understood. I adopt an approach to son and related genres that reflects common usage by musicians and *empresas*.

Generic categories have practical application as the basis for concert planning, employment of musical groups, and other aspects within the local *empresas*. As noted in Chapter 1, *empresas* constitute a crucial “internal public” for which musicians must present a “credible and convincing” performance of traditional son.

The second half of this chapter examines more closely some issues raised in Chapter 2. As noted there, the increased international success of son has brought issues of class and racial identity associated with son and other

contemporary dance music to the forefront, particularly with regard to the polarization of supporters of traditional son and performers of timba. I clarify here the distinction between son, salsa, and timba, and address issues of class and race.

Dominant Theories of Cuban Music

Most analyses of Cuban music are concerned with the identification and separation of genres and subgenres. Taking their cues from Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz (1952, 1965), who described Cuban music as an *ajiaco* (stew) combining European and African elements, most scholars have defined genres on the basis of instrumentation and ethnic derivation (i.e. figuring out what is European and what is African). Carpentier (1946), Linares (1982), León (1984, 1991), and Díaz Ayala (1998, 2003), among others, make these criteria central to their research.

The presupposition that the Cuban *ajiaco* consists of two finite poles, the European and the African, has indirectly supported linear, evolutionist theories of Cuban music. The aforementioned scholars, joined by Pérez Sanjurjo (1986), Évora (1997), and Betancur Álvarez (1999), in attempts to pick apart Cuban musical “ingredients,” place Cuban music along a timeline of changing instrumentation. A typical narrative of the development of son, for example, notes the arrival of small, string-based quartets in Havana shortly after the turn of the century, soon followed by the addition of claves and bongó. By the mid 1920s, a trumpet was added to the typical ensemble, making the *septeto* (lit.: septet) the most popular band in Havana until the

early 1940s, when Arsenio Rodríguez and Conjunto Casino expanded to a larger format with two more trumpets, a piano, and *tumbadoras* (conga drums).¹

This evolutionist approach, while perhaps accurately tracing some of the developments of dance music styles, inadvertently equates group formats with “traditional” or “modern” performance styles. Readers must assume that after 1927, for example, no son group performed without a trumpet; the older sextet sound was replaced by the more modern septeto. As Sublette (2004: 365) points out, however, only the most successful bands could afford the added expense of a trumpet player.

David García (2003: 257-61) criticizes this type of evolutionist thinking in the dominant theories of the development of mambo in Cuba and New York, pointing out that the tendency to trace musical developments linearly through changes in instrumentation and a few key performers can place excessive emphasis on a “‘traditional-modern’ dichotomy” and obscure the co-existence of differing styles at the same time and place.

However, a linear account of musical development is often supported by Cuban musicians themselves. The oral history of son among changüí musicians in Guantánamo, for example, traces the development of son out of changüí, which itself was preceded by older forms such as *nengón* and *kiribá*.

¹ Although both *conga* and *tumbadora* are used to describe the same instrument commonly known as a “conga drum,” conga is also a genre of music performed during Carnival in Cuba. To avoid confusion, I will use *tumbadora* to describe the instrument.

Each successive change (i.e.: the use of the tres or the incorporation of certain characteristic rhythms) is attributed to specific players (Lapidus 2002: 15-18).

The theories of Alén Rodríguez (1992; 1998) and Orozco (1992), while still closely linked to the aforementioned historical studies, focus on Cuban music in contemporary practice in an attempt to codify Cuban music into distinct genre complexes.

Orozco (1992: 168) divides Cuban music into four discrete genre complexes: *rumba*, *son*, *danzón*, and *canción* (which includes, but is not limited to, bolero.) In brief recognition of the potentially porous nature of these categories, Orozco suggests a possible fifth category of “the inter-generic complex of popular dances (in a hybrid and unstable state).”²

Alén Rodríguez (1998: 56) identifies five complexes: *rumba*, *son*, *danzón*, *canción*, and *punto guajiro*. Beyond some stylistic unity within each complex, he asserts that “one can detect a certain homogeneity in the musical attitudes and behavior” of its performers.

These approaches have been criticized for their oversimplification. As Jorge Duany notes,

[Alén Rodríguez] straightforwardly attempts to trace the origins and transformation of musical styles in different times and places to assess their present configuration. However, stressing separate traditions produces a fragmented view of Cuban music, and one is sometimes

² “...el complejo intergénero de bailes populares (estado híbrido inestable).”

left wondering if such a thing actually exists. In a sense, the whole is lost in its parts (Duany 1995: 94).

French musicologist Maya Roy (2002: 113) accurately observes the fluidity of genres in the Cuban context, pointing out that even in the case of Miguel Matamoros, whose compositions form a major part of classic son repertoire, “the lines between *trova*, bolero, and *son* fluctuate,” somewhat contradicting Orozco and Alén Rodríguez, who would place boleros and sones in two distinct genre complexes.

Also, placement of genres within one complex or the other is often open to interpretation. Alén Rodríguez (1998: 132) includes cha-cha-chá in the danzón complex on the basis that it was performed by charanga groups that had until the 1940s performed mostly danzones. On the other hand, Urfé (in Orovio 2004: 204) includes the cha-cha-chá as one of many different types of sones, along with other styles popularized by charangas, such as the mambo.

Such ambiguity often causes scholars to err on the side of inclusivity in discussions of son-derived dance music. Peter Manuel (1985: 249, 254) uses the terms “Afro-Cuban popular music,” “*salsa*,” and “modern *son*” interchangeably to discuss music recorded in Cuba and New York.³

³ In 1997, Manuel (1998: 127) adopts the term “Latin American dance music” for a discussion of a similar cross-section of music. Although avoiding the controversy surrounding the use of the term *salsa* (discussed later in this chapter), this term presents problems of its own, since music from elsewhere in Latin America is not discussed.

Acosta (n.d.: 5) echoes the sentiments of Duany, above, arguing that the concept of a “genre complex” arbitrarily organizes different genres and variants into separate “musical ghettos.” Acosta holds that each of the genres typically called “complexes” (son, danzón, rumba, canción) are intrinsically related on fundamental formal and rhythmic levels.⁴ Genre complexes also conflate diachronic elements with synchronic elements. While son variants appear to have existed at the same time in different places, the change from contradanza to danzón and on to cha-cha-chá is a fairly well documented linear progression. I follow Acosta’s general suggestion, then, to avoid referring to son and its variants as part of a “complex.” However, he instead suggests the use of terms like “protogenre,” “paragenre,” and “inter-genre.”⁵ I find that these terms are too awkward for the discussion at hand, and will rely on terminology used by musicians themselves in reference to instrumentation, form, repertoire, and performance practice.

James Robbins presents a sophisticated analysis of these factors, supporting a more general application of the term son:

Son as a generic label has an extremely broad range of meaning, from the designation of a particular complex of specific musical elements to

⁴ For example, Acosta notes the similarities between rhythmic timelines in danzón, rumba, and son, all three of which consist of two-part patterns with one “syncopated” part and one “straight” part.

⁵ These terms are actually some of many proposed by Orozco in more recent work, endorsed by Acosta.

a cluster of related genres linked by commonalities of form to the identification of the essence of Cuban music, that is, the thing that makes it Cuban (Robbins 1990b: 182).

Robbins (ibid: 188) asserts that any piece can be performed as a son provided that it incorporates a sufficient number of “identifiers,” such as a characteristic *tumbao* pattern in the piano or tres, an anticipation in the bass or guitar, or typical percussion accompaniment parts. Robbins (ibid.) uses the term “*matriz*” to describe the overall feel of a characteristic pattern in any instrument, similar to the way North American pop musicians use the term “beat” to discuss different instrumental patterns (i.e. “It’s got a really good beat.”).

Formal structures and instrumentation can also serve as identifiers:

When enough of the musical practices associated with son are present--the *matriz*, or a prominent tres and bongos [sic], or, most commonly, a montuno--a piece becomes part of the son complex (Robbins 1990: 190).

So, according to Robbins’ definition, a great deal of Cuban popular music can be described as son. Vincenzo Perna (2001: 98) uses the term *música bailable* (lit.: “danceable music” – music for dancing) to refer to contemporary son-derived styles, most often called timba or salsa.⁶ Despite differences in

⁶ See later in this chapter for more in-depth discussion of the controversy surrounding the term “salsa” in local and international markets. Although this term is used in official contexts

typical instrumentation, and a much wider range of stylistic influences, *música bailable* has enough identifiers, or *matrices*, to be recognized as son, or at least a close relative. As Perna points out:

At times, tactical reasons suggested the use of [terms] in retroactive fashion, as when [Juan] Formell declared that timba is *all* music made in Cuba after 1959...Conversely, the recent international boom of 'traditional' *son* persuaded other dance bands to dub their own music as *son*, thus choosing to underline continuity, rather than rupture, with the music of the past (Perna 2001: 100)

The Importance of Genre in Practice: Institutional Music Structures in Cuba

Robbins (1989) underlines the relationship of official generic categories with actual musical practices. Since all public performances are organized according to genre through local branches of national cultural programs, such as the Casas de Cultura or Casas de Música, musicians who wish to participate must be able to describe their music in clear generic terms. For example, the director of a local performance event might wish to plan the

to mean, literally, any music that can be danced to (including Cuban music outside of the son complex, such as *danzón*, as well as foreign dance music such as the tango or the merengue), Perna has observed that it often is used to distinguish between contemporary and older styles (e.g. *música tradicional* [traditional music, often referring to son] vs. *música bailable*).

spacing of the concert, avoiding too many slow songs in a row, or making sure to have a couple of high energy numbers at the end. Rather than asking participants to perform specific songs, he or she would request a list of genres – i.e. *bolero-son-danzón* – to ensure that the event would go according to plan (Robbins 1989: 386).⁷

There is a great deal of feedback from musicians in the formation of official generic categories. The Ministry of Culture and the Instituto Cubano de la Música (Cuban Music Institute) serve as official advisories for the formation of policies regarding music. Also, music administrators are hired from the ranks of professional musicians, and most continue to be active themselves in the musical community. Ideas about musical genre are not merely imposed from-above, but rather formed by musicians for musicians (Robbins 1989: 380; Moore p.c. 2005).

With this in mind, it becomes clear that the subject of musical genre is not just of academic interest. Generic identification is a part of a musician's daily life. For practical reasons, musicians must be fluent in generic terms.

In general, musical groups are organized by subgenre. Under the general umbrella of son based music, terms like *conjunto* or *orquesta típica* designate a specific instrumentation, playing style, and repertoire. Numeric

⁷ Robbins (1989: 386) provides an anecdote of one musician in Santiago who was chastised for performing a piece in a style other than the one he had planned. Thus the decision to perform a son as a bolero, or vice-versa, can, in the eyes of the concert director, upset the flow of the event.

terms, like *trio* or *sexteto* are also used somewhat less specifically, although in some cases they are also associated with a specific style or repertoire (Robbins 1989: 381). In my experience, for example, a septeto was any group performing *son tradicional* (traditional son), especially those who incorporated classic repertoire (sones from the 1920s and 1930s) or playing styles that recalled older incarnations of groups such as Septeto Nacional or Septeto Habanero. These groups would almost surely have a tres and bongó, and were expected to have at least some classic son numbers in their repertoire. Most septetos were actually seven musicians, but some were anywhere from 6 to 9 players.⁸

Genre and Subgenre

In the institutional music system, musical groups are categorized according to “subgenre” (*subgénero*), or group formats associated with particular styles. Here, Robbins’ (1990b: 188) concept of “identifiers” often functions more specifically: certain characteristic trumpet lines, accompaniment parts, and other *matrices* might allow musicians to imply

⁸ As a further example of the use of *septeto* as a more specific designation akin to *conjunto*, I attended the 2004 Encuentro Nacional de Septetos in Havana, at which groups performed exclusively son and guaracha, with the occasional bolero. All groups had a tres player, but not all groups were septets.

“charanga” or “mambo” style, even if they are not using the appropriate instruments.⁹

The term “son” is often combined with other qualifiers to suggest a different form, style, or attitude in a given tune. Hyphenated terms like “bolero-son,” first started to appear in the 1920s (Robbins 1990: 187). This can refer to a more or less literal hybrid, as in the case of Miguel Matamoros’ “Lágrimas Negras,” which is typically performed as a bolero-style verse with a son-style montuno at the end. However, it can also indicate a less obvious stylistic union, such as a son that is in a more relaxed tempo, or one that has a verse that is considered “bolero-like” by the performers. Although the list of hybrid terms coined by artists over the years is seemingly endless, some have been more clearly defined.

David García (2003) uses the term “son montuno” to refer specifically to the conjunto style of Arsenio Rodríguez, beginning in the 1940s. Although “son montuno” is often used interchangeably with other terms, García argues for its use in specific reference to Rodríguez’ sound on the basis of its profound impact on other dance bands during the 1940s and ‘50s. García points out that, although by the mid-1940s many bands had copied Rodríguez’ instrumentation (i.e. the conjunto, with added trumpets, piano,

⁹ In Chapter 4, I provide a number of examples of how septetos employ characteristic melodic and rhythmic material from different subgenres, especially *son tradicional*, *guaracha*, and types of contemporary *música bailable*.

and tumbadora), few bands had the same arranging scheme in terms of the way these instruments were used.

Thus the term “son montuno” implies not only a certain instrumentation, but also a specific formal structure and reorganization of the rhythm section. Rodríguez added to the standard septeto formal structure (i.e. intro – verse – montuno) by expanding the montuno, adding a break section (called a *cierre*) at the end of the montuno, and a truncated version of the montuno which often incorporated interwoven horn lines along with coro singing.

The term *guaracha* first referred to lively, bawdy songs found in nineteenth century Cuban *teatro bufo* (burlesque theater). Orovio (2004: 102) indicates that it was often performed either in 6/8 or 2/4 time, and, like son and rumba, incorporated call-and-response passages between a lead vocalist and chorus. Sublette (2004: 346) suggests that son groups began to use popular guarachas to “liven up the repertoire,” performing them as essentially faster sones.

Conjuntos who played in faster tempos during the 1940s were called “conjuntos guaracheros.” García (2003: 235) suggests an oppositional, racialized relationship between the son montuno and the guaracha. In addition to differences in tempo, guarachas performed during this period by La Sonora Matancera and Conjunto Casino were far less syncopated than son montunos recorded by Arsenio Rodríguez. Audiences and musicians at the time equated slower tempos, denser structures, and off-beat emphasis with a

“black sound,” while faster tempos, and less complex rhythms were thought of as “white.”

It appears, however, that this opposition does not exist in contemporary usage. Robbins (1990b: 190-91) notes that older musicians tend to distinguish between *guarachas* and *sones* in their repertoire, while younger musicians consider the terms to be interchangeable. Alén Rodríguez suggests that the *guaracha* has been “absorbed” by *son*:

In many interviews with musicians in which we have inquired about the relationship existing between the *guaracha* and the *son*, we have come to the conclusion that at present the *guaracha* is nothing more than a *son* with spicy or funny lyrics, and played at a faster tempo (Alén Rodríguez 1998: 78)¹⁰

The main competition for *son* sextets in the 1920s were the *charangas*, or *charangas francesas*, groups that performed *danzón* in middle-class dancehalls. To compete with *son*, *charanga* bands started adding *montunos* and sung choruses to their *danzones*. These “*danzonetes*” adapted the

¹⁰ *Guaracha* remains hard to define. Moore (p.c. 2005) suggests that *guarachas* typically had shorter harmonic cycles, tending to start with the *coro* instead of with a longer verse. The lead vocal line would then sing a comical or picaresque quatrain before the *coro* entered again, thus using a somewhat less symmetrical “call-and-response” pattern.

charanga's instrumentation (flutes, violins, piano, double bass, *paila* [timbal], and *guiro*) to the son (Orovio 2004: 51, 66).

In the 1940s, Bandleader Antonio Arcaño, along with Israel and Orestes López, eventually popularized an instrumental style of son-influenced *danzón*, adding a montuno section that they called a "mambo," similar to Arsenio Rodríguez' "diablo" section, which created heightened intensity for dancers. Arcaño's *danzón de nuevo ritmo* (*danzón* to/with a new rhythm) contributed to both the mambo and the cha-cha-chá (García 2003: 201; Sublette 2004: 307; Orovio 2004: 50).

By the late 1940s, most charangas had adopted a final montuno section incorporating what came to be called the "mambo rhythm" (example 1, below) (García 2003: 169-73). While the origins of the dance music style known as mambo are the subject of much controversy, the style that gained the most international recognition was that promoted by Damásio Pérez Prado, "The King of Mambo." Pérez Prado's version is thought of as the "crystallization" of mambo by scholars such as Acosta (1993) and Betancur Álvarez (1999). It was his adaptation of son-derived rhythms (such as typical *tres guajeos*) to Stan Kenton-style big-band arrangement techniques that characterized the sound made famous in the mambo craze of the 1950s (García 2003: 286-87).¹¹

¹¹ García argues that Pérez Prado's mambo style was not highly innovative, since it uses simpler harmonic structure and less rhythmic variety than the arrangements of Arcaño and Rodríguez (2003: 287). However, it can be argued that Pérez Prado did use the U.S. big-band

which can be varied depending on the practical and artistic needs of the group.

Blackness in Son: Issues of Class and Race

Moore (1997: 87-113) shows how son, initially repressed as an “inferior” Afro-Cuban form, was eventually accepted, appropriated, and adapted to fit into mainstream culture, helping to form conceptions of Cuban national identity in the 1930s. In Moore’s (1997: 88) words, “*Son*...[mediates] stylistically and ideologically between the cultural practices of working-class Afro-Cubans and the white and black middle classes.”

Contemporary attitudes toward son reflect this mediation. Although son is recognized officially as Cuba’s national music, its cultural value is often argued (whether aggrandized or disparaged) on the basis of perceived racial or class identity.

Robbins (1990b: 194) notes that son is still associated by some Cubans with *la gente más baja de la clase baja* (the lowest of the low). One of his informants suggests that soneros are uneducated and prone to drunkenness and fighting. At least through the late 1980s, even some musicians who played son did not describe themselves as soneros because of the negative connotations of the term (*ibid.*).

The perception of soneros as uneducated persists among musicians in the 1990s. In a series of interviews, José Luis “El Tosco” Cortés (leader of timba band NG La Banda) called Juan de Marcos González (band leader and

arranger of Sierra Maestra and the BVSC recordings) “musically illiterate” (Perna 2001: 266).

Several musicians that I spoke with in 2004 explained that these sentiments still exist today, although many conservatory graduates are also playing in septetos in order to earn tourist dollars. At the same time, some musicians performing in septetos pride themselves on their humble origins. As I noted in Chapter 1, a *sonero de monte* (of the hills) is often thought of as more naturally talented and authentic.

The racial identity of *son* remains highly contested. Godfried (2000) laments the fact that in the 1970s, many Cubans turned up their noses at *son*, calling it *chea*, which he defines as “ugly; to be despised.” Robbins notes the same term in association with *son* in the 1980s, but adds that “‘*Cheos*’ or ‘*guapos*’ are ‘*negros*’; they are considered violent and like *son* and *salsa*” (1990b: 195).¹³ Muguercia (1985: 105) also identifies a negative attitude towards *son* on the basis of racial prejudice, saying that many still think of it as “‘rhythm of slave quarters, music of blacks.’” This connection between musical sound and racial stereotypes parallels the *cocolo* versus *rockero* discourse surrounding Puerto Rican salsa in the 1980s, as well as racial stereotypes associated with U.S. hip hop culture.¹⁴

¹³ *Pepillos*, on the other hand, are white, wear fashionable clothing, and listen to U.S. rock (Robbins 1990b: 105).

¹⁴ The racial dynamics surrounding Puerto Rican salsa are in fact quite similar: *cocolos* (which loosely translates as “coconut heads,”) are lower-class blacks who listen to salsa and are

Juan de Marcos González has spoken on numerous occasions about the importance of son in establishing Cuban national identity as primarily African in nature. In his words,

it's very important that the [U.S.] African American community understands the reality of Cuba: the fact that we're a black country. [Cubans] are much more African than the [U.S.] African-American community because we have capitalized the African roots (De Marcos González 2000).

Eugène Godfried, an outspoken supporter of son as Cuba's most important national music, also emphasizes its African roots. He argues that bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez

ensured a permanent African presence of the Congolese Bantu and Calabar Abakuá components inside the manifestation of the Son, through the lyrics and the introduction in the musical group formations of the percussion such as the "tumba" and the "bongos" (Godfried 2000)

Godfried denounces contemporary timba bands as elitist and capitalistic, claiming that the only true African popular music is the son. He claims that any African influence in timba groups has either been "lost or suppressed" (ibid.).

considered to be uneducated, out-of-style, and prone to violence. *Rockeros* (rockers) are whites who wear expensive, "preppy" clothing and listen to U.S. rock groups.

[The manager of a Miramar club] strictly preferred “new” bands that played the so-called “Cuban salsa” or “timba,” which he defined to be “Afro-Cuban” music. I told him that having a group of youngsters of African descent playing in a band does not mean that they are playing either African or Cuban music (ibid.).

Godfried views the attempt by dance bands to officially adopt the term “timba” over “salsa” as a deliberate attempt to co-opt African identity, “grasp[ing] the African Cuban legacy known as rumba”(ibid.). He views timba’s overtly cosmopolitan attitudes and references to international consumer culture as negations of traditional Afro-Cuban culture; while it may not be “white people’s music,” Godfried holds that timba is decidedly “non-black.”

On the other hand, Perna (2001) and Hernández-Reguant (2004) argue that timba is the most clear musical expression of contemporary Cuban blackness. Hernández-Reguant calls timba “black people’s music” (2004), showing how it “glorified Afro-Cuban heritage as central to Cuban identity”(ibid.). Perna (2001: 261), like Godfried, views timba and traditional son as polar opposites, but observes the opposite racial characteristics. He argues that while son has traditionally been an Afro-Cuban genre, revivalist projects like the BVSC have effectively backgrounded its African elements. He contradicts Pacini Hernández (1998), saying that the Cuban son has emerged on the World Music market as a white version of Afro-Cuban music, not thanks to its African character:

while [BVSC], with its patronizing portrait of lively oldies, comfortably falls into laid back, joyous clichés of third world ‘traditional’ music, contemporary Cuban dance music has proved [sic] far too complex, topical, angry, and Afro-Cuban, to break into the world music circuit (Perna 2001: 273).

My own view falls somewhere in between those of Perna and Godfried. In light of the overwhelming popularity of timba among Afro-Cubans and its affirmation of Afro-Cuban religious practices and musical traditions, as well as its relatively open criticisms of the economic plight of working class Cubans, timba has potential as a powerful voice for the Afro-Cuban community. It is also appealingly “hip,” fluidly incorporating a wide range of Cuban and U.S. styles in creative and exciting ways. However, the accusations that timba artists promote crass commercialism and elitist, anti-Cuban sentiments are not altogether unfounded. While many timba lyrics address the concerns of Cubans in the midst of a severe economic crisis, the handful of successful timba performers have gotten rich singing them. Seen from this perspective, Perna and Godfried’s views are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

However, these kinds of polemic attitudes underline the contested nature of racial identity in connection with musical sound. As Moore (1997: 1), Robbins (1990b: 195), and others have noted, racial issues in Cuba are often more nuanced and complex than in the U.S. due to the presence of a strong mulatto identity. The controversy as to the racial character of son

demonstrates the way in which music can provide insight into larger trends of racial conflict (Moore 1997: 10).

Biased attitudes about music are part of an ongoing social dialogue on race and must be understood as a component of the larger phenomenon manifesting itself as racial segregation, discrimination, and overt physical repression (Moore 1997: 10).

In 2004, I saw no overt examples of racial discrimination or prejudice on the part of musicians. What I encountered were subtle clues as to the hidden complexity surrounding race in Cuba. For example, a friend jokingly commented to me that I liked to dance with lots of intertwining arms, *como los negros* (like the blacks). The leader of Perlas del Son, an all-female septeto in Santiago that performs son repertoire with often overt references to Afro-Cuban religious music, takes care to introduce both the petite straight-haired guitar player and the only dark-skinned member of the group (the bongocera) as “Las Chinas” (the China girls). While neither of these examples are particularly malicious, they indicate that there are certainly some stereotypes that have survived the official elimination of racial discrimination during the revolution.

While racial issues surrounding timba are hotly debated, it may be that the perception of son as old time music by the younger generation has in some way neutralized former racial connotations, similar to the way rock

music has become a neutral category for younger audiences in the U.S.¹⁵ Clearly, what is written here only scratches the surface of class and race issues as expressed through music, a subject which is beyond the scope of this volume.

A Word About Salsa

Because musicians and audience members often refer to *música* available of different types as “salsa,” a term which has been problematized by musicians and scholars for the past several years (see Duany 1984; Manuel 1991; Padura Fuentes 2003), I will provide a brief overview of the history of its use in the U.S. and Cuba. I will show how, despite its problematic nature, it still serves as a useful descriptive term for musicians in Cuba, which will in turn aid my discussion of septeto performance styles.

The social dynamics surrounding salsa parallel those of son in many ways. Like son, salsa has been historically associated with racial stereotypes (as in Puerto Rico; see above), and its origins are frequently debated and contested by musicians for different ideological reasons. Also, salsa is often recognized by listeners according to discrete musical identifiers in much the same way as son. These identifiers have much in common sonically with son, making the lines between son and salsa highly subjective. This fact underlines the close relationship of the two genres, and shows that debates about salsa’s

¹⁵ Thanks to Robin Moore for suggesting this analogy.

origins, similar to debates surrounding timba and son in Cuba, are staged on ideological rather than musical grounds.

Peter Manuel (1991: 159) defines salsa as “Cuban-style dance music as produced by Latinos in New York City and elsewhere.” Although the precise origins of the music known internationally as salsa are contested, the general consensus among scholars and musicians is that salsa is at least “very significantly based in Cuban dance music” (Berríos-Miranda 2002: 27). Cuban son styles popularized throughout the Caribbean in the 1940s and ‘50s were brought to New York by a primarily Puerto Rican immigrant community after World War II (Manuel 1991: 160; Waxer 2002: 4). Although salsa has multiple “sites of articulation” (Waxer 2002: 5), its commercial center has always been New York City (Duany 1984: 186-87).

A common narrative is that Puerto Rican bandleaders such as Tito Rodríguez, Eddie Palmieri, and Ismael Rivera “updated” the sound of Cuban conjunto and charanga bands, adding instruments as well as Afro-Puerto Rican rhythms to the typical sound (Berríos-Miranda 2002: 27). Although there is considerable disagreement as to whether these updates represent a truly separate musical genre, rather than another style of Cuban son, musicologists agree that salsa represents a fusion of a variety of music from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the United States (especially jazz, rock, and soul), and other Latin American countries, especially Colombia and Venezuela (Duany 1984: 186; Manuel 1991: 160; Orozco 1992: 176-77; Waxer 2002: 4-5).

The precise origins of the term “salsa” are unknown. Venezuelan disc jockey Phidias Danilo Escalona, New York publisher Izzy Sanabria, and Fania Records producer Jerry Masucci have all been credited with coining the term (Rondón 1980: 33; Roberts 1979: 187; Manuel 1991: 160). In any case, it gained currency as a marketing term for dance music records produced in New York during the 1960s and '70s, the majority of which were on Jerry Masucci's Fania label (Manuel 1991: 160; Moore 2002: 58; Waxer 2002: 4).

Although Lise Waxer (2002: 5) suggests that salsa was a standard term for Latino dance music by the late 1970s, other sources indicate that the term was not universally accepted, even by musicians who were considered “salseros” by audiences:

Now, you have to go with what people are saying, so I adapted the word salsa, but it really doesn't mean anything to me (José Manguál, Jr., in Blum 1978: 144)

This is not a musical terminology at all. The music that I am playing today, which I have been playing for the last 20 years or more, if they want to call it Salsa or matzo ball soup, the name doesn't make any difference to me. But I would imagine that the younger generation has to have a title for this music so it can be used commercially as the New York sound (Tito Puente, in Blum, *ibid.*)

Meanwhile, the term salsa was not familiar to Cuban audiences until the late 1980s (Moore 2002: 58, 63). Due to the break in U.S./Cuba relations in

1960, Cuban musicians were cut off from a market that they had once dominated; since the “rumba craze” of the 1920s, Cuban music had had a profound influence on American jazz and popular music (Blum 1978: 145; Manuel 1991: 159; Pacini Hernández 1998: 110; Moore 2002: 58). Manuel (1991) and Moore (2002) both note that the U.S. embargo on Cuba, combined with changes in recording industry structures (the decline of the major record labels such as RCA Victor, Columbia, and BMI after World War II) and negative reactions to the Cuban Revolution, allowed smaller independent record labels like Fania Records to enter the Latin music market.

It could be argued that the Cuban Revolution, and the subsequent political fallout during the years 1959-61, are at the center of the controversy around salsa. With the public image of Cuba suddenly transformed from island paradise to communist stronghold, record producers were hesitant to try to market Cuban music (Manuel 1991: 161). The label “salsa” effectively wiped the slate clean, providing a music without such problematic connotations. While some musicians, like Tito Puente and José Mangual, were ambivalent about the term, others, especially Cubans, viewed its adoption as an outright attack “designed to marginalize and disenfranchise Cuban artists under socialism” (Moore 2002: 62). While this view is perhaps extreme, the truth remains that a large amount of Cuban repertoire was recorded and

marketed to Latino audiences in the U.S. as salsa without any recognition of its origins, much less royalties paid to composers (*ibid.*).¹⁶

However, salsa has nonetheless become a term of great cultural significance throughout much of Latin America. Jorge Duany (1984) emphasizes the strong Puerto Rican roots of the music, tracing its origins back to the European and African influences on Puerto Rican music during the colonial period. Berríos-Miranda (2002) details the ways in which salsa differs from Cuban son. Others, while conceding salsa's debt to Cuban music in terms of form and structure, join Duany and Berríos-Miranda in asserting that salsa has social and political importance as a source of Puerto Rican and pan-Latino identity (Padilla 1990; Waxer 1994: 140, 2002: 5; also Moore 2002: 59; Manuel 1991: 162-63).

What is Cuban salsa?

For my purposes here, it is important to understand how Cubans have used the term salsa. As noted earlier, Cubans were almost completely cut-off from the salsa market until the 1980s, thanks to the U.S. embargo as well as

¹⁶ In a recent roundtable on the impact of the BVSC project, María Teresa Linares recalled that Jerry Masucci and other representatives from Fania Records had actually come to Cuba in 1981 to record "fragments" of playing by popular Cuban musicians, presumably with the intention of teaching Cuban style playing to New York musicians (Fornet 2001:168). Whether true or not, this anecdote demonstrates the extent to which some Cuban musicians feel victimized by the commercial success of salsa.

ensorship by the Cuban government.¹⁷ During the first 20 years of the Cuban Revolution, salsa was “informally suppress[ed]” (Moore 2002: 63). Although there was no official policy with regard to salsa, it was never heard on the radio, deejays were prohibited the use of the term itself, and even playing a bootleg tape or black market LP of Gloria Estefan could result in various forms of political harassment (ibid.).

The 1970s saw a shift toward acceptance of salsa by government policy makers. Moore speculates that this may have been due in part to the relaxed political relations with the U.S. under Jimmy Carter, and in part to the growing international popularity of salsa. The latter statement is supported by the fact that EGREM began producing records to compete with New York salsa, most notably the ensemble known as “Estrellas de Areíto” [Areíto Stars]. The formation of “Estrellas,” a group made up of the best dance band musicians of the moment, was a direct challenge to Jerry Masucci’s “Fania All-Stars” (Moore 2002: 63-64).

Since the onset of the Special Period in the early 1990s, dance music has been promoted more than ever as a valuable source of revenue. Godfried (2000) and Perna (2001: 98) note that contemporary dance music was commonly called *música bailable*, Cuban salsa, or simply salsa until 1998, when popular bands including La Charanga Habanera and Los Van Van

¹⁷ Some salsa, as well as American rock and jazz, was available to those able to pick up radio reception from neighboring countries. Adalberto Álvarez claims to have been influenced by New York salsa broadcasts from Venezuela (Roy 2002: 164).

officially adopted the term timba. While Godfried insists that this term is an attempt to superficially incorporate traditional rumba into an otherwise elite, non-African dance music, Perna holds that the term “timba” emerged as a defensive move against critics (like Godfried) who viewed timba as excessively cosmopolitan, indulgent, and capitalistic:

Música bailable musicians found themselves caught between increasing institutional attacks on dance music and the international success of the Buena Vista Social Club...In 1998, through a series of public concerts, interviews and articles on the press [sic], they publicly launched the word “timba” (Perna 2001: 99).

Today, Cubans still use “salsa,” “salsa cubana,” or “salsa dura” interchangeably with “timba” (Perna 2001: 98). In common parlance, the term salsa might be used in reference to timba or New York salsa. In either case, it refers to a style of playing derived from son, but with more aggressive arrangements, faster tempos, and a wider variety of influences, such as American R&B and jazz. While musicians might argue that salsa is just another version of son (Palacios, interview), they still use the term for its own descriptive merits. Some soneros even use it as a derogatory term to undermine the authenticity of other musicians: “All that stuff that they play –

you know, it's very fast, it doesn't have that 'swing' that son has! ...It's nothing more than salsa, played in a son format" (Cañambú, interview).¹⁸

Conclusion

Generic categories have direct application in actual musical practice in Cuba. Musicians are employed and concerts are organized according to genre, and, as Robbins (1989) suggests, official *empresa* categories are often developed with the help of musicians and musicologists. Since all performers must be officially represented by a local *empresa*, a band must be clearly identifiable as belonging to one category or the other; septetos cannot sound too much like jazz combos or timba bands if they want to find work easily.

At the same time, the Cuban definition of son seems wider than that implied by the BVSC. As noted above, son can be defined simply as a way of playing something, and thus can incorporate a wide range of musical ideas while still retaining its essential "son" quality. Although many traditionalists such as Godfried (2000) and Juan de Marcos González (2000, 2001) see contemporary dance music as a direct opposition to son, others point out the many similarities between the two.

The tourist boom and the international success of traditional son has had the direct effect of attracting a wider range of musicians to septetos, which has indirectly affected performance styles and the definition of what

¹⁸ "Todo lo que tocan ellos – usted sabe, es muy rápido, no tiene ese swing que tiene el son! ...Es nada más que salsa, tocado en formato de son."

can be called a “traditional” music group. Septeto musicians stylistically negotiate local definitions of “traditional son,” as well as regional identity, which, as noted in Chapter 1, has become an important issue for musicians due to the centralization of tourism around Havana.

Chapter 4 uses the information discussed here as a starting point for a closer analysis of these kinds of stylistic choices. Each group studied has developed a different approach for balancing tourists’ and empresarios’ expectations while striving to create a distinct *sello* (stamp, or signature sound) that might catch the ears of wealthy tourists or the next Ry Cooder.