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A History of Salsa

Part 8: Who Owns Salsa?

There are fewer topics that cause more impassioned debate than the origin of salsa. Everyone claims that their version is accurate because salsa is a part of them. That they own it. So why do we think that way?

Cultural identity

Intercourse between Europeans, Africans and Native Indians naturally created a significant presence of Creoles in the Caribbean. At first these people existed in a cultural limbo: unaccepted by the white ruling elite for having impure blood; and distancing themselves from the black slaves due to the abject conditions the Africans suffered.

But as the colonies diverged from Spain through creolisation, the person of mixed blood came to represent the cultural ideotype. Evidence of this exists:

“[Manuel A., 1849] Alonso's male gaze imagines and discursively constructs a Puerto Rican woman - Creole or mulatta - who possesses both a European-associated languor and an African-derived sensuality...”

- Frances R. Aparicio

but should be examined in the context of its time; a feminisation of literature and music that had occurred due to the male domination of the arts. Aparicio explores further the association of the white woman with the danza, and the mulata with the plena. The culture of the colonies therefore came to be symbolised, at least in part, by the Creole female and the music she was associated with. The common use of the word “mulata” as an expression in salsa belies the music's role in Latin cultural identity. It reinforces male dominance by continued feminisation, and maintains the Creole ideal.

Salsa also symbolises the dream of Latin American unity: the optimism in Simon Bolivar's vision of a *Gran Colombia* - a single nation of a united people; the reality of a Latin America suffering from fragmentation, persistent lawlessness, economic hardship, political instability; the frustration of a potential unrealised. Ruben Blades alludes to this dream in a brief comment on his live album with Son del Solar. Salsa is an indicator of the great things Latin Americans are capable of. It is the musical identity of Gran Colombia.

The European Spanish are willing to claim ownership of salsa in the face of non-Latins through the tenuous link of sharing a similar language. But the Latin Americans would consider the Spanish as having no such right, given their past differences. Here, cultural identity begins to blur with national identity.

National identity

The use of salsa as a symbol of national identity can be attributed to two main factors: a loss of national sovereignty due to U.S. intervention, and the relative ineptitude of U.S. troops in dance.

Whereas the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 sought to limit European influence in the Americas, the Roosevelt Corollary to the doctrine (1904) sought to justify U.S. intervention throughout the Western Hemisphere. This led to a number of U.S. military invasions throughout the Caribbean basin to protect its political and economic interests. Latin Americans adopted their music and dance as a form of cultural resistance.

For example, the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916-24) generated much resentment, causing the Dominicans to adopt the *Cibaeño* variant of the merengue as part of their defence. However:

“Dominican creativity not only spawned 'lithe and delicate merengue rhythms' that the clumsy U.S. occupiers could not contend with, but generated a new expressive form from the marines' incompetence”

- Paul Austerlitz

Merengue is perhaps the most extreme example of music and dance as national identity, because of the extent to which it was employed. Six years later, the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo based his entire presidential campaign on the merengue, and promoted it ceaselessly throughout his time in power.

Political identity

“Save Havana for mañana [tomorrow]” is the slogan of the Miami Cuban who can't or won't go back to Castro's revolutionary Cuba. They are fiercely aggressive in the protection of “their” music, which they perceive as predating the revolution, and symbolic of the good things before Castro. To them, revolutionary Cuba has no right of ownership, and they maintain an anti-collaborative stance to deny any hint of legitimacy.

In contrast, salsa - like the potent image of Che Guevarra, has been adopted by socialist movements abroad. Socialist Cuba possesses a variety of properties that make it a marketing dream: strong records in health, education, and culture; oppression by a foreign “imperialist” government; and subversion by militant right-wing groups. Salsa's origin as music of the underclasses, and its rise to dominance implied through the removal of class structure, make it the ideal tool in promoting socialist ideology.

But nowhere is the issue of ownership more polarised than between Cubans and Nuyoricans. For the Nuyorican, salsa is a term made by them; a music kept alive by them when Cuba lost momentum. It was through their efforts: the music labels of Fania and RMM; the radio stations and clubs; and the live performances that kept salsa going.

For the Cuban, salsa is a word created to disguise the music's true Cuban origin, to deny their right of ownership. American record labels were once in the habit of recording songs by Cuban composers without properly attributing them, using the initials D.R. (Derechos Reservados [Rights Reserved]) instead. Says Charley Gerrard (1998):

“The idea was that, due to the break in relations between the United States and Cuba, the composers would receive the moneys due them whenever relations between the two countries improved. As a result, the general public was not made aware of the tremendous amount of material by Cuban composers recorded by Fania artists.”

The collapse of RMM over unpaid royalties casts doubt on this argument, and hints at corruption similar to that experienced during Batista's regime.

Perspective: Ownership and Possession

There are two interesting definitions of ownership: 1) exclusive right of possession, 2) possession with the right to transfer possession to others. Both concern possession and the right to it.

If there ever was a word that describes salsa's genesis, it has got to be creolisation. Not hybridisation because it's too sterile a term; devoid of the racial, colourful, cultural connotations that “Creole” has.

Given the diversity of salsa's lineage, how can we consider that the Creole belongs to any particular group? If inclusion has been its heritage, what possible benefit to salsa could exclusive possession provide?

The transnationalisation, and local adaptation within each country compounds the issue further. If not now, then soon, salsa will no longer be perceived as “owned” by the Latin Americans. Salsa already means different things in different places - even though it remains the same word. There is a compelling case for saying that no one owns salsa, but at least we can all possess it - every single one of us.

At it's most fundamental level, if salsa is defined by the individual, how could we be sure that your definition of salsa was the same as mine? Instead of telling you what you should believe in, we would both have to try to understand all salsa could be. And if we chose to commit a good portion of our lives to that purpose, then perhaps some time into that pursuit, we would realise that salsa had come to own us instead.

To paraphrase an aboriginal saying: “How arrogant is the man who thinks that he can own that mountain, for it will still be there when he and his children are gone”.