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Tracing the Origins of Salsa Music

by Luis Alba

The Latin music we hear today has its origins in Cuba where the blending of African drum rhythms and Spanish guitar evolved into a variety of Latin American music: *Son*, *Danzón*, the rhythms of Carnival, *Cha cha cha*, *Mambo*, *Salsa*.....even *Tango* came out of Cuba.

During the war in Cuba in 1898 US Soldiers got a taste for Cuban music. Later, during Prohibition in the USA, Americans went to Cuba where drinking alcohol was legal and they became infected with the Latin rhythms.

As early as 1909 radio recordings came out of Cuba. In 1932 American Radio came to Cuba to record Orquesta Anacoana. This amazing all-female orquesta consisted of 10 sisters. They were the first females in Cuba to openly play percussion, horns and other instruments. Locked in the house for days at a time during the war, they had nothing to do but practice. This group evolved into one of Cuba's leading orchestras and one of the first to get top billing in New York. One sister, Graciela, went on to become the lead singer for Machito's orchestra.

It wasn't long before musicians in the USA began incorporating Latin rhythms into their own music. In 1900, W.C. Handy visited Cuba and began our legacy of Latin jazz here in the USA. Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie "Bird" Parker, Stan Getz and Cal Tjader have all followed the tradition by blending and evolving Latin jazz. Gillespie added a Cuban drummer named Chano Pozo to his band in 1938 and they began to compose together.

Even the less esoteric forms of music in the USA have sampled Latin rhythms and incorporated them with great success. Sam Cooke, The Diamonds, Johnny Otis, Elvis Presley, Bo Diddley and Nat King Cole all helped popularize Latin music with hits containing elements from Cuban music. Gloria Estefan is one of the most well-known contemporary popularizers of Latin music in the USA. She has very successfully blended English lyrics and and rock and roll style with her Cuban musical heritage.

To find the roots of Cuban music we look to West Africa where the slave trade thrived. The Yoruba, Congo and other West African people created rhythms in ancient times to call forth various gods. Sadly, these wonderful rhythms were brought over to the New World under dire circumstances. One drummer named Ijibwa was taken captive and placed on a slave ship for America. He was forced to play on deck to keep up the spirits of the prisoners so that the "merchandise" would arrive alive.

The slaves used the drum rhythms in Christian worship too. Slaves were forced to adopt Christianity upon arrival in the new World, but often called their own gods by Christian names so as to avoid punishment. A similar practice was the progenitor of the "Yo Mama is so..." jokes in existence today among African-Americans. "Mama" was actually a code word for "Master". Hardly anyone telling these jokes today remembers what "Mama" actually stood for in slave times. In Latin music most of the listeners are not even aware that the drum rhythms we dance to are actually religious in meaning, dedicated to various African gods. *Cabillolos* (secret societies) still exist in Cuba and keep alive over 200 different rhythms for different African gods.

Troubadours from Spain brought Flamenco guitar music to Cuba. Out of this came *Son*. Rural Cubans brought the folk guitar to Havana after the war in 1898. Isaac Oviedo was one of the originators of *son*. He taught himself the guitar by watching other musicians and started the group *Santiga Casana*, a charuquita group; kettle drum (timbál), ceramic jog, accordion and guitar. In 1926 Oviedo brought the Matanza Sextet to Havana. Later on Emilio Orfe created the *danzón* style with violin, cello, flute and African drums. He started his first orchestra at age eleven!

Oreste Lopez helped create Mambo by combining *danzón* with African rhythms from the street. The dancing itself came out of rehearsals where couples would come over and improvise. Lope put together Arcanos Orchestra in 1938.

Xavier Cugat was another important figure in popularizing Mambo. Born in Spain and raised in Cuba, Cugat was initially trained in classical violin beginning at age 8. His music was a unique blend of Afro-Cuban and Flamenco influences. Cugat spent time in New York and Berlin before giving up music to become a cartoonist for the LA Times (!), but in the 1940's Charlie Chaplin dragged him out of his

musical retirement to compose a score for the Chaplin film *City Lights*. Cugat formed a group, "Cugat and the Gigolos" and found that he could make a living in Hollywood doing tropical music for films. He created a smooth Latin blend of music that was very popular with Busby Berkeley and Fred Astaire.

Don Aspiazu started the *Rumba* craze in 1930 with his Rumba dance team and full orchestra. Anglo-Americans were in a frenzy over the "fiery tempo and barbaric melody" and thought of Latin music as daring and fascinating. The film industry continued to popularize Latin music with Desi Arnaz and his orchestra singing such songs as "Babalu" and "Cumbanchero". In 1940 he popularized the conga line dance.

Tito Puentes' contribution to Mambo is well-known, as are the contributions of Willy Colon and Celia Cruz. Cruz was recorded on Cuban radio at age 7 and made her first record in 1951. One lesser-known figure is Arsenio Rodriguez, one of the true fathers of Salsa. A blind drummer in Cuba, he began to evolve the *Salsa* sound from *Mambo* in the early 1960's.

People continually argue about the difference between *Mambo* and *Salsa*. Some say they are the same thing. Some say *Salsa* is something you eat! Some think *Salsa* is a generic label for all different types of Latin music. But if you listen to the early *Mambo* of Tito Puente, Machito, Beny More, Tito Rodriguez and the many greats who started playing before 1960, and then listen to some of the newer folks on the block, you'll find a distinction there easily enough. As to whether to move the body or feet on the first or second beat, that is a whole subject all on its own.

For more information on Latin music, Descarga has an extensive line of recordings, videos and written works on the subject. "The Roots of Rhythm, narrated by Harry Belafonte, was the main source of information for this article. To order it from Descarga, call toll-free 1-800-377-2647.

Rueda de Casino

(from an article in Hoofers Anonymous)

During the late 1950's in Cuba, there was a popular dance -- some might call it a "dance craze!" -- that was done in the streets and in the clubs, and in people's homes. It was called *Casino Rueda*, or *Rueda de Casino*, or simply *Rueda*. *Rueda* means "wheel". *Casino* refers to the kinds of turns and breaks you might normally see in ordinary partner *Salsa* dancing.

"Swing Your Partner Round and Round..." If the first few words of this notorious dance command ring a bell, then open your ears, as you may start to hear phrases like "*dame una*" (give me one), "*dame dos con vuelta*" (give me two with a turn), and "*exhibela*" (show her off)... the list is endless. *Rueda de Casino* is Country and Western square dancing SALSA STYLE! If you like dancing *Salsa*, then imagine the sensation of doing so not with one person but with an entire group. Picture this... you step out to your favorite Latin nightclub. Later in the evening, the floor opens as couples gather in a circle. You know the moves, the names, the signals. You grab a partner and you're about to enter into the most incredible *Salsa* experience. *Rueda de Casino* was originally danced in the 1950's to the *Cha cha* beat in members-only clubs in Cuba known as *casinos deportivos*. These casinos sponsored dances with live orchestras where dancers would get together and create new styles. It was in these casinos that "*la rueda*" was born. Unfortunately, the Castro regime stifled a lot of popular cultural activities, forcing them underground. *Rueda de Casino* eventually resurfaced in people's living rooms, on the street, at clubs and parties. It was first introduced to Miami in the early 90's and is rapidly making its way across the United States.

Rueda de Casino, in its truest form, is an art of communication that requires dancers be alert and quick. A leader calls out or signals the dancers to a short combination of intricate steps followed by commands such as "*adios*", "*enchufa*", or "*dame...*" which are patterns that lead dancers to a change of partners. There are reportedly more than 150 moves, each with a name that often has a double entendre or some cross-cultural humor buried in it. Each pattern also comes with a hand signal or gesture which are well needed in large circles and/or loud night clubs. It's incredible to watch but certainly much more so to participate. Everyone in the wheel, including followers, keep their eyes peeled to the caller. When the dancers are on in "*la rueda*" it is intoxicating and addictive

The form of the *Rueda* -- passing partners in a wheel -- hints at its early, colonial origins, which were probably a "*mezcla*", a blend of French Court Dances (brought to Cuba by Haitians) and the indigenous Afro-Cuban dance movements. With Cuban emigration to the US -- with an especially large influx into Miami -- the Cuban culture, music and dance blossomed here, and, along with *Mambo*, *Cha cha*, and *Salsa*, *Rueda* has reemerged. Recently, *Rueda* has sprung up in Los Angeles and here in San Francisco (a dance group from L.A., led by Tomas Montero, performed *Rueda* at last year's SF Carnival Parade!)

Cha-cha

Cha cha is the newcomer of the Latin American Dances. This dance was first seen in the dance-halls of America, in the early fifties, following closely *Mambo*, from which it was developed. The music is slower than *Mambo*.

Chonque was the grandfather of *Rumba* and *Cha cha* with African rhythms and Spanish guitar, but Enrique Joren came up with the first full-fledged *Cha cha* in 1951. He wanted it to be a medium rhythm, very recognizable and not too frenetic. His creation came from the idea that there should be a music created specifically for dance and participation, not only for listening, or for a select elite.

The name *Cha cha* is an imitation of the "rhythm" from dancing Cuban side steps. From the less inhibited night clubs and dance halls the *Mambo* underwent subtle changes. It was triple *Mambo*, and then peculiar scraping and shuffling sounds during the "tripling" produced the imitative sound of *Cha cha*. This then became a dance in itself. *Mambo* or triple *Mambo* or *cha cha* as it is now called, is but an advanced stage in interpretive social dancing born of the fusion of progressive American and Latin music.

After the World War II the *Mambo* was pushed aside by the *Cha cha* which became popular around 1956. According to its roots the *Cha cha* should be played passionately without any seriousness and with staccato allowing the dancers to project an atmosphere of 'naughtiness' to the audience.

Merengue

The *Merengue* is the national dance of the Dominican Republic, and also to some extent, of Haiti, the neighbor sharing the island. There are two popular versions of the of the origin of the *Merengue*.

One story alleges the dance originated with slaves who were chained together and, of necessity, were forced to drag one leg as they cut sugar to the beat of drums. The second story alleges that a great hero was wounded in the leg during one of the many revolutions in the Dominican Republic. A party of villagers welcomed him home with a victory celebration and, out of sympathy, everyone dancing felt obliged to limp and drag one foot. *Merengue* has existed since the early years of the Dominican Republic (in Haiti, a similar dance is called the Meringue).

It is possible the dance took its name from the confection made of sugar and egg whites because of the light and frothy character of the dance or because of its short, precise rhythms. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the *Merengue* was very popular in the Dominican Republic. Not only is it used on every dancing occasion in the Republic, but it is very popular throughout the Caribbean and South American, and is one of the standard Latin-American dances.

There is a lot of variety in *Merengue* music. Tempos vary a great deal and the Dominicans enjoy a sharp quickening in pace towards the latter part of the dance. The most favored routine at the clubs and restaurants that run a dance floor is a slow *Bolero*, breaking into a *Merengue*, which becomes akin to a bright, fast Jive in its closing stages. Ballroom *Merengue* is slower and has a modified hip action. *Merengue* was introduced in the United States in the New York area. However, it did not become well known until several years later. Ideally suited to small, crowded dance floors, it is a dance that is easy to learn and essentially a "fun" dance.