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# Situating *Salsa* Through Tito Puente's Life and Music

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## Introduction

The word *salsa* bears a multiplicity of meanings. For most, Tito Puente included, it is a sauce for food. For many, it is also a music, which Celia Cruz referred to as a "working people's music"[1]. For some, it is more than a musical phenomenon. Willie Colón called it a concept, and Rubén Blades described it as "the folklore of the cities."[2] Professor Frances Aparicio even deemed it a form of cultural empowerment.[3] Yet from a musical perspective, the analysis of *salsa* must draw on factors outside of music, probing the intricate, historical web imbedded in the music. Even the culinary definition surrounds music as well, and its *sabor* (i.e. "taste" or "flavor") is a recurring theme. Fernandez describes this *sabor* as a flourishing mixture of new and old forms.[4]

For the purposes of this paper, *salsa* refers to a popular musical hybrid emerging in New York City during the late 20th century, whose overlapping rhythms reflect a similarly fluid, multi-layered evolution. Centuries earlier, its story began (more than anywhere else) in the Spanish colony of Cuba, where many African traditions collided under a massive slavery-driven economy. Regional music forms developed throughout the Caribbean islands under similar contexts, but Cubans produced *the* dominant style: *son*. Once transplanted to the States, Cuban music

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[1] Raul A. Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 14.
[2] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin* Jazz, 14.
[3] Frances R. Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 66. Aparicio also compares the improvisational sections to freedom and the chorus to a collective voice (p. 84).
[4] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin* Jazz, 57.

absorbed substantial jazz harmonic elements but retained a large portion of its complex rhythmic heritage.

Understanding this so-called *salsa* genre of music (for the term really includes many) also necessitates looking at its transcendent musicians, and analyzing its driving rhythms. Tito Puente, the undisputed king of this music was, fittingly, a percussionist, and he knew the importance of these rhythms, explaining,

> I have no doubt that the reason our music was so spontaneous a hit was our rhythm. … Not the songs or the melodies, but definitely our rhythm. They were not able to resist the insistent beat of our timbales, the clacking of our claves, the murmuring of our *marac*as, our pulsating *bongós* and *cong*a drums, the scraping of our *güiro*.[5]

His biography typifies *salsa*'s long, culturally interwoven history, and, most importantly, his prolific body of work includes wonderful examples of various styles and rhythms over a long period of time. Together, his life and music epitomize the broad meaning encompassed by the word *salsa*, and help bring that term into focus. The term itself was branded on Puente decades into his career, but since it did not cause any alterations to his music,[6] his early albums will be included as *salsa* even if the word only meant "sauce" at the time of their release.

Tito Puente was a highly capable multi-instrumentalist, band leader, arranger, and composer. Dubbed the "King of the Mambo"[7], he rose to the top of New York City's "Latin" music scene during the 1950s, and helped Caribbean-derived music explode throughout the United States. He played with countless musicians and

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[5] Josephine Powell, *Tito Puente: When the Drums are Dreaming* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2007), 41.
[6] That is, according to Puente. Others would disagree, but I have sided more with Puente on this issue.
[7] In Spanish "El Rey del Mambo".

recorded over a hundred albums including Cuban dance music, Latin jazz, and Afro-Cuban percussion music. Yet despite such a long, diverse musical resume, he continues to be defined by his timbale playing.[8] What's more, that use of stick percussion also helped redefine the music and the role of percussionists. For this reason, I have primarily limited my discussion to the use of stick percussion on his recordings, which, as a whole, is the best musical indicator of the long, complex history leading up to *salsa*.

In Chapter 1, I trace the history of genres and rhythms that preceded Puente and what was eventually called "salsa," by focusing on Cuban *son*. In Chapter 2, I introduce Tito Puente's own life (a child of Puerto Rican heritage learning Cuban rhythms in New York City), which provides a prime example of the transnational nature of his music, now (dubiously) labeled *salsa*. In Chapters 3, I use specific examples from Puente recordings to get inside components and concepts of *salsa*. In Chapter 4, I reveal some of the subtleties in Puente's playing and reflect on their greater implications for *salsa*. In other words, this paper analyzes *salsa* in specific terms, by providing a history of *son*, looking at the diverse cultural presences in Puente's life, and analyzing some of his music.

I highly recommend reading this paper in conjunction with recordings of the songs mentioned. A majority of tracks referenced can be found on *The Best Of* (the long RCA/Victor compilation of early songs, released in 1965) and *Dancemania*. See Appendix B for the complete list of songs and albums of relevance to this study.

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[8] Although this prominence as a performer was no doubt aided by his spotlighted status as a band leader

## Chapter 1: Tracing A Long History of Hybridization

Tito Puente's music might accurately be labeled *son*, mambo, cha cha chá, and Latin jazz, or just *salsa*. Marketers used the term *salsa* to artificially unify a vast assortment of music,[9] but (as expected) it is now a mixed blessing. On one hand, the formerly dizzying array became more accessible and commercially successful. On the other, it created a fictitious commonality between diverse traditions and rhythms. From an academic perspective, the word "salsa" has convenience through its generality. Yet, ultimately, such adaptability makes the word essentially meaningless without a follow-up in more specific terms.

This chapter provides background to *salsa* (and Tito Puente's music), by outlining its most dominant line of musical ancestry. Since the propensity of music to cross genres makes the process of categorization inevitably toe the line between oversimplification and tedium, this paper is not structured as a global discussion of Afro-Cuban related rhythms. Rather, it focuses on a few specific rhythms of relevance to both Puente and *salsa*.

### *Son*: A Focal Point

Although *salsa*'s musical contributors include Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (plus Venezuela, Colombia, and even Haiti to a lesser extent), few dispute Cuba's preeminence from a historical perspective. Influential bandleaders Johnny

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[9] The exact origins of the word are disputable. It might be traced to the Septeto Nacional song "Echale Salsita" and the popular Cal Tjader album *Soul Sauce*. Jim Payne, *Tito Puente: King of Latin Music* (Hudson Music, 2006), 36.

Pacheco (a Dominican) and Jimmy Bosch (a Nuyorican), describe Cuban music as being the "seeds of salsa" and the "main threads of salsa," respectively.[10] Scholars, however, made the Cuba-*salsa* connection even more specific by tracing through specific Cuban music forms including, most notably, *son*.

Gerard Sheller credits *danzón* and *son* as being "the direct forerunners of salsa".[11] Raul Fernández, similarly, defines *son* as "salsa's principal musical predecessor."[12] He goes on to describe *son* as "an instrumental music, a popular song, and a people's dance," and, in simplified terms, "a marriage between the Spanish guitar and African drum".[13] The word *son* (like *salsa*) bears a multiplicity of connotations. *Son* may simply refer to the *son* clave (a specific rhythm[14]) or to the genre of music. It also has an implicit connotation in Spanish meaning 'they are' and a similarity to the word "sonido" (meaning sound), but it is mainly the genre which concerns this study. During its evolution, *son* helped lay a foundation for a number of dance trends, including the 1930s rumba and the 1950s mambo.[15] *Son* is the Cuban pivot point between modern *salsa* and its African and European heritage.

**The Origins of *Son***

To call *son* a mixture of Spanish and African music oversimplifies two complex musical traditions. Spain's music includes influence of the Celts, Romans,

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[10] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 14.
[11] Charley Gerard and Marty Sheller, SALSA! The Rhythm of Latin Music (Crown Point, IN: White Cliffs Media Company, 1989), 72.
[12] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 20.
[13] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 25.
[14] For more on Claves see Chapter 3 under "Clave."
[15] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 22.

Germanic tribes, Arabs, Jews, and Gypsies all of whom at some point lived in the Iberian Peninsula. The music of Spain is also highly regional, so the term 'Spanish music' also encapsulates flamenco (of Andalusia), Celtic bagpipes (from Galicia and Asturias), zortzico airs (of Basque country), jota aragonesa (of Aragón), and the sardana (from Cataluña) all under one heading.[16] Perhaps Cuban musicians allude to this Spanish regionalism in their use of the term *gallego*, which refers both to musical blandness and to the northern part of Spain where Arab influence never reached.[17] Despite such musical variety, the Spanish population of Cuba through the majority of the 19th century was almost exclusively from Castilla (in Andalucía) or the Canary Islands (who were transplants from Andalucía).[18] So (unlike the African influx to Cuba) New World Spaniards' origins began with a large degree of with regional specificity. However, this regional specificity does not necessarily imply musical specificity.

Grouping together 'African music' shares the same problems. African slaves who were in Cuba came from quite diverse regions of Africa. Moreover, since Spain did not partake in the slave trade, colonies in Cuba bought slaves from the Portuguese, French, English, and Dutch. In the end, the Africans brought to Cuba came from the East and West coasts of Africa as well as the interior of the continent and were comprised of close to three dozen linguistic and ethnic groups.[19] The musical contributions of these groups were primarily drumming traditions, including

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[16] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 23.
[17] Ned Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 20.
[18] Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music*, 70.
[19] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 24.

batá drums of Yoruba, yuka drums from the Congo, and carabalí drums like bonkó and ekué. In addition to oversimplifying the two primary 'contributors' to *son*, there were also clear (though far more subtle) influences of Arawak (indigenous), French, and Chinese culture especially within musical life in the Oriente (Eastern Cuba).[20]

In Cuba, African musical traditions dominate those of other origins. Although the use of European instruments and harmony should not be overlooked, the defining features of Cuban music now revolve around African-derived rhythms. Sublette even refers to Cuban music as "African music's grown up child."[21]

**Africans in Cuba**

Cuba's musical "African-ness" compared with that of the newly-formed United States reflects some social distinctions between the Spanish and English colonies. Firstly, Cuba simply brought more African slaves. The ratio of slaves imported to Cuba compared to those brought to all of English North America was close to 2 to 1.[22] Yet, this may be deceptive, since it reflects only the influx of Africans. While the slave population of the English colonies was increasing naturally through births, the Cuban sugar plantations could only be sustained a continuous influx since slave mortality was so high. Unlike their Spanish counterparts, English colonial slave owners insistently denied Africans of their drums, language, and religion. Slavery in North America was designed to strip Africans of their racial heritage. There, Africans were bought and sold in smaller numbers than in Cuba, so

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[20] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 33.
[21] Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music*, 57.
[22] Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music*, 160.

groups of slaves didn't necessarily share a language.[23] By contrast, *cabildos* in Cuba were doing just opposite. These "mutual aid societies" encouraged and incubated the culture of specific African ethnic groups.

African presence in Cuba can be divided into four primary cultural groups, according to their regional African origins: Congo, Carabalí, Yoruba, and Dahomeyan. The first "group" comprises Africans from central and southwestern Africa (i.e. from Angola to the Republic of the Congo). Cubans refer to this origin as *congo*, but Bantu (referring to the common linguistic thread) is probably more apt. The second group, the Carabalí, came from Calabar (present day Nigeria and Cameroon), and, in Cuban musical terms, their significant contribution was the establishment of Abakuá. The transplanted people from the Oyó civilization form the third group: called Yorubas or Lucumí. Yoruba traditions profoundly influenced Cuban music through traditions of abakuá, batá drumming, which eventually entered the mix of *salsa* music. Once transplanted to Cuba, their religion became *santería*, whose batá rhythms continue to pervade Latin music, and are discussed below. The last so-called African group was from Dahomey (now Benin). They brought a religious culture to Cuba now called arará.

**Rhythms of Africa**

Mauleón, in her *Salsa Guidebook*, credits Afro-Cuban religious rhythms with the development of clave. She notices that batá drum patterns contain a similar pattern to rumba clave and more or less 6/8 versions of modern clave and cáscara.[24]

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[23] Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music,* 160-161.

This relationship highlights a fundamental characteristic of the clave that has existed from Africa to Cuba to Nuyorico. The clave has always been a two-measure phrase[25] beginning on the down-beat of one measure and on a syncopation of the other. Mauleón describes this relationship as one of "tension-relaxation."[26] (See Chapter 3 under the "Clave" for discussions of the specific rhythms).

Sublette perceived the presence of African musical history in *salsa* in more abstract terms. He points to the communicative nature of drumming (in his words, "making the drum talk"[27]) as being near universal in Africa. Then he traces the use of specific phrases santería call out to specific orishas (Yoruba deities) to the modern use of bongo drums, which still continue to "talk". Fernandez also notes that "the bongos were the first instrument with an undeniable African past to be accepted in Cuban 'society' circles."[28] Apparently, these little bongos have been expressing their African-ness since the beginning.

### *Son* Evolution in Cuba through the 20th Century

*Son* developed from the 17th to 19th centuries in the Oriente region of Cuba. During this time, a typical *son* ensemble relied heavily on clavijas (claves), bongos, a tres (a close relative to the guitar), and a marímbula (plucked metal strips, functioning as a bass) for rhythmic propulsion. Bongos typically played a steady rhythm similar to the present day martillo pattern. According to Ed Morales, "the signature of son

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[24] Rebeca Mauleón, *Salsa Guidebook For Piano and Ensemble* (Petaluma: Sher Music, 1993), 50.
[25] However, the notion of this music occurring in terms of measures is a modern one.
[26] Mauleón, *Salsa Guidebook*, 51.
[27] Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music*, 43.
[28] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 28.

belonged to the melodic guitar lines"[29] of the tres, which were eventually taken over by the piano. With maracas and shakers also in the rhythm section, a *sonero's* (i.e. a singer's) ability to loudly cut above everything and improvise was crucial.

The overall structure of *son* in the 18th and 19th century Oriente area was similar to its 20th century version. It began with a strophic verse-chorus type section and then moved to the more improvisatory *montuno* section. Although its spread began earlier, the most prominent movement of *son* began in the 1880s, especially through *trovadores*, traveling singers accompanying themselves on guitar. These singers were instrumental in bringing *son* (albeit in a rural form) to Havana at the beginning of the 20th century.[30] There, in Havana, the new style became wildly popular, and by the 1920s, it was offsetting the prominence of larger *danzón* bands.[31] There, in the cosmopolitan port city, *son*'s instrumentation morphed into the *sexteto*, a unit whose overlapping musical roles bear more similarity to its modern form.

In the 1920s *son* was primarily performed by *sextetos*, whose standard lineup included two singers (called soneros, one of whom played clave, and the other, maracas), a tres guitar, bongó, guiro, and bass. From the 1930s to the 1950s, *son*'s evolution was personified by Arsenio Rodríguez and his band. In the late 30s and 40s, Rodríguez (a blind Cuban, tres player) added and developed the use of conga, piano, and trumpets into his *son* ensemble. This new instrumentation eventually became known as the *conjunto* format. The many lineups of Puente's bands have not strayed too far from these *conjunto*s, which perhaps reflects his traditional roots as

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[29] Ed Morales, *The Latin Beat: The Rhythms and Roots of Latin Music from Bossa Nova to Salsa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 17.
[30] Isabelle Leymarie, *Cuban Fire: The Story of Salsa and Latin Jazz* (London: Continuum, 2002), 50.
[31] Morales, *The Latin Beat*, 17.

much as the modernity of the *conjuntos*. However, Puente's orchestras also included trombones, saxophones, and flutes in the horn section and timbales (of course!), vibraphone, and drum set in the percussion section.

Arsenio Rodríguez blended musical styles with *son* in his creation of afro-son, but he was not the first. Indeed, musical assimilation and hybridization are recurring themes in the history of Latin music. Since *son*'s pairing with dance was so crucial, many of the variations were born out of dance variations. The guajira-son, bolero-son, son-cha, danzonete, and mambo were all very much born on the dance floor as much as they were born on the music stage.

The 'mature' form of *son* from the 1950s on relies on its syncopated piano lines, tumbao bass line, and clave, yet it is also characterized by steady bongos and relentless shakers. The montunos on the tres were by no means obsolete by then, but widespread preference for piano was taking hold.

**Other Musical Forms from Cuba**

Cuban *son* was an important precursor to New York *salsa* and Tito Puente, but it was only one line in a thick web of traditions. Only through the combined existence of *son*, *rumba*, and *danzón* could the mambo, cha cha chá, and *salsa* exist as they do today. Although this study does not explore the histories of rumba and danzón, this section recognizes their importance.[32] Jim Payne's diagram entitled

[32] As quoted at the outset of this Chapter, Gerard and Sheller credit BOTH the *danzón* and *son* as being "the direct forerunners of salsa." Gerard and Sheller, *SALSA!*, 72.

"Historical Chart of the Styles of Popular Cuban Music"[33] categorizes the musical richness of Cuban music history, but it also illustrates the complexity of that history through its sheer density. *Son* may be at the center of Jim Payne's chart, but its prominence should not be overstated. Cuba is a large country, and diverse music developed within specific regions under differing circumstances. The interactions between these styles led to Cuba's constant musical reinvention.

Rebeca Mauleón's explanation of the development of modern clave highlights the importance of interactions between regional Cuban music (i.e. *son*, *rumba*, and *danzón*). To trace this history, she begins with the direct rhythmic lineage from African-derived batá drumming, but then goes on to note the Cuban danzón and rumba as important contributors.[34] Countless other styles evolved throughout Cuba and the rest of the Caribbean, and within the islands these styles also blended and interacted. Once Caribbean music arrived stateside it relied on its many international presences to fuel reinvention.

**Caribbean Music in the States**

Although Cuba was the geographic origin and incubator for popular Latin music styles (like the mambo and cha cha chá) that came to the U.S., it was primarily through non-Cubans in the States that international influences synergized. Tito Puente's career exemplifies the leading roles that non-Cubans, especially Puerto Ricans, took in the development of Cuban-derived music. After all, *salsa* and Puerto

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[33] Tito Puente and Jim Payne, *Tito Puente's Drumming With the Mambo King* (Hudson Music, 2000), 36.
[34] Mauleón, *Salsa Guidebook*, 51.

Rico are both American and Caribbean. Referring to a music dominated by Puerto Ricans as Cuban may be unfair, and A.G. Quintero-Rivera alludes to this in his reference to Cuban musical hegemony in the quote discussed below.

In his essay, *Music, Social Classes, and the National Question in Puerto Rico*, Quintero-Rivera explains that U.S. *salsa* ought not to be defined merely by its origins but also by its migration, which parallels that of its practitioners. The professor at the University of Puerto Rico goes on to praise the harmonious internationality of *salsa*, but not without some bitterness toward Cuban prominence.

> Salsa integrates not only different national musical traditions with their ultimately shared Caribbean roots but also performers of different national origins. This represents not a mere compilation of elements but a heterogeneous integration. Cuban ensembles and musical tradition held indisputable hegemony in Latin Caribbean music until the U.S. blockade which isolated Cuba after the 1959 Revolution.[35]

He acknowledges the seeming Cuban dominance within a multi-cultural phenomenon, and also the shared Caribbean roots among its musicians. Recognizing this shared sense of identity among Spanish-speaking migrants and immigrants in the U.S. is nothing new.[36] After all, once in the States, Venezuelans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans all spoke Spanish in an English-speaking country. Cristóbal Díaz Ayala points to *salsa* as a way to compensate for the inaccessibility of so-called "American" phenomena among Spanish-speakers. He states that "the popularity of

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[35] A.G. Quintero-Rivera, Music, Social Classes, and the National Question of Puerto Rico (Washington: Smithsonian, 1989), 5.

[36] Indeed Raúl Fernandez agrees, recognizes that "salsa provides a shared sense of identity for U.S. Latinos." Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 17.

*salsa* music helped stem the tide of U.S. rock and acted as a nationalist symbol within the Spanish-speaking Caribbean."[37]

The mambo craze in New York began in the 1950s through the music of Perez Prado (who wrote the big hit "Mambo No. 5") and Arsenio Rodríguez, but rose to stardom due to the bands of the "Big Three": Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, and Machito.[38] In Puente and Payne's collaborative book *Tito Puente's Drumming with the Mambo King,* Payne explains that although Prado and Rodríguez "probably introduced more Americans to Latin music, Puente's raw, high energy, New York-style mambo was more authentically Cuban, more infectiously swinging and irresistible to dancers."[39] The tremendous popularity of the dance was evidenced by the Palladium's 1952 all-mambo policy[40] and ensuing rivalries to crown a "King of the Mambo." Puente did not achieve this label without relentless hard work, but eventually his reign became unquestionable (for more on the rivalry and the Palladium see Chapter 2 under "As a Bandleader".

Diasporic Latino musicians in the States naturally heard and integrated the many sounds of American music, and, in this regard, Tito Puente is a great example. Among his early releases, Puente's incorporation of jazz, rock, blues, boogaloo, and early R&B was extremely overt. On Puente's *The Best Of* from 1965 one need only

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[37] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz,* 18. Fernandez describes Díaz Ayala's ideas from Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, *Música cubana: Del areíto a la nueva trova* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Cubanacán, 1981).
[38] Puente and Payne also give credit (rightly) to the other arrangers and leaders involved with the Big Three. They include Mario Bauzá, Chico O'Farrill, Ray Santos, Joe Cain, John Bartee, Edgar Sampson, and René Hernández. Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King,* 102.
[39] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King,* 22. (Puente and Payne also credit bassist Israel "Cachao" Lopez with helping introduce mambo to U.S. listeners.)
[40] Payne, *Tito Puente,* 26.

pick the songs with English titles to hear blatant American influences. Songs like "Hit the Bongo," "Fat Mama," "T.P. Treat," and "T.P.'s Shing-A-Ling" all have the simple straight rhythms and harmonies like early rhythm & blues (and rock and roll) of the 50s. Indeed, these songs pulse with more backbeat than clave. Payne calls this mixture of Latin and rhythm & blues "Bugalú" and attributes its creation to the close proximity of Puerto Ricans and blacks in New York City (particularly, between Harlem and the Bronx).[41]

**Timbales: A Parallel History**

Modern timbales are a pair of metal stick drums with only drum heads on top, played in a standing position.[42] The larger of the two is called the "hembra," meaning female, and the smaller one is called the "macho," meaning male. Two cowbells, a large "mambo" bell and a smaller "cha cha" bell attached to a metal rod in the middle, usually complete the setup, but a cymbal is often included as well.

The timbales evolved in Cuba, probably from timpani drums, but not without influences from Africa, Europe, and North America.[43] In keeping with the musical and cultural cross-pollination of Spain and Africa in Cuba, the timbales may have evolved not just from European-derived timpani but also from African derived hand drums. Organologist Fernando Ortiz points out that in order to transition from

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[41] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 64.
[42] Thanks to Tito Puente, see page 26.
[43] Jose Luis Quintana "Changuito" and Chuck Silverman, *CHANGUITO: A Master's Approach to Timbales* (Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp., 1998), 17. Quintana and Silverman draw on many more influences than just these, citing an onomatopoeic origin (i.e. tim-bal), a relationship to Arabic drums in Spain (called "tabl" or "atabal"), plus some ancestry going all the way to Sanskrit writing in India, the Crusades, the Moors, and the Turks. This whole lineage is on pages 14-17.

timpani to timbale, timpani drums shrank in size and became connected. All these traits could have been inspired by bongos (and similar African-derived hand drums). Few acknowledge African ancestry of the timbales, but his case is compelling.[44]

Before timbales reached their modern form, they were primarily played on the head, with varying degrees of muffling. A few rhythms still exclusively utilize the timbral possibilities of the drums' heads (like *danzón*, for example), but, for the most part, timbales now rely on other zones on which to "ride." Exhaustive exploration of dampening exists now only in the realm of solos, and when Puente put his elbow down on a drum while playing, he was exploring that history.[45]

Once the drums' shape changed to its present one, percussionists began relying more on the shells of the drums, called cáscara in Spanish, for propulsion. By the time Puente began playing them, cowbells began to come into use as another option, and early photos, cover art, and recordings show the bell as an important part of his timbale set-up.[46] The smaller cha cha bell was originally played in the 1940s on the timbale head itself,[47] but eventually moved up with its large counterpart. By the last quarter of the 19th century, timbales frequently borrowed elements from the drum set,[48] and (although the bass drum was sometimes added) a medium sized

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[44] Quintana and Silverman, *CHANGUITO*, 16.
[45] Puente's tour de force on "El Timbalón" (from *Un Poco Loco*) begins with some of these techniques.
[46] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 4, shows a photo of Puente circa 1951 with a cowbell attached (same photo is also in Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King, 20*), and the cover art for *Mambos* (1952, Tico records No. 101) includes a portrait of Puente playing timbales with a cowbell. Puente's first big hit "Abaniquito" uses the bell as well, and was recorded for Tico circa 1948-9. Payne, *Tito Puente, 23.*
[47] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 119.
[48] Drum set and timbales were often used for similar purposes. Tito began learning set before timbal, and early photos from the 40s show him with "Latin" bands playing a drum set. The relationship

cymbal became a mainstay. Puente's instrument also went through some phases over the decades including a somewhat excessive line up of drums (perhaps that not so excessive considering what other musicians were doing to their instruments in the 1970s…). Regardless, the origins of timbales generally mirror those of *salsa*. They contain elements from Spain and Africa, developed in Cuba, as well as some components of the American drum set.

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between the two instruments really solidified with the increasingly fluid marriage of so-called "Latin Jazz" through the years.

## Chapter 2: Tito Puente's Life

Tito Puente fits the cleverly-titled category of "Nuyoricans" (i.e. a Puerto Rican migrants in New York City), but, from a musical perspective, he may have been brought up more American and Cuban than Puerto Rican. He began learning piano at the New York School of Music, but with such a passion for jazz big band music he was soon also behind a drum set taking lessons from a "Mr. Williams."[49] There wasn't anything "Latin" about these drum lessons, though. When he began playing professionally with the Happy Boys, he began learning the timbales from Cuban-born timbalero José Montesino. Montesino taught the teenager Cuban rhythms, and he tightened them ever since. Cuban musicologist Dr. Olavo Alén Rodríguez was clearly in agreement on this subject:

> Everything I hear from Tito Puente is so Cuban. He can do it better than most of the Cubans. When a Puerto Rican musician decides to play Cuban music, he does it better than the Cubans! Tito Puente's way of playing pailas is so Cuban, so authentic.[50]

Rodríguez' sweeping territorial generalization is highly overstated and probably invalid, but his implications surrounding Puente are definitely on point. He was not the only one to recognize Puente's superlative Cuban sensibilities. In fact, in 1957, the Cuban government formally recognized Puente in a ceremony honoring the greatest Cuban musicians of the 20th century (thus far). For the Cuban government to invite the timbalero was remarkable since it represented a decision to circumvent

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[49] Puente did not remember his first name.
[50] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 14.

the superficial definitions of what is "Cuban." But, more importantly, Puente was conspicuously the *only* non-Cuban to be honored there.[51] This should come as no surprise. By 1957, Tito had helped propel the explosive popularity of transplanted Cuban dance trends, especially through his wildly popular years at the Palladium Ballroom. Puente grew up as a New Yorker, a Puerto Rican, a Nuyorican, an American, and (according to the Cuban government) a Cuban. It's no wonder a defining feature of his music is mixture.

**Spanish Harlem, and New York City**

Tito Puente, was born on April 20, 1923 at the Harlem Hospital in New York City. His parents, Ercilla and Ernest Puente, were Puerto Rican migrants living in the long segment of Manhattan referred to as "El Barrio" in Spanish (which translates to "the neighborhood" in English). El Barrio, the legendary birthplace of Afro-Cuban music in North America, was neither large nor glamorous. Residents had to be vigilant of crime and tolerant of less-than-ideal sanitation. The presence of Latin-American cultural influences was obvious due to its high percentage of Spanish-speaking residents, and the smell of rice and beans or fried plantains was apparently quite common.[52] This sliver, usually referred to as Spanish Harlem by English-speakers, was wedged between 125th street and 96th street. To the North of it was Harlem, a predominantly black neighborhood, and to the South stretched the Upper East Side, a wealthier, white neighborhood. Or as Puente says: "around the

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[51] Steven Loza, *Tito Puente and the Making of Latin Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 14.
[52] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 9.

neighborhood, one side we had the Italians, the other side we had the Blacks and the Puerto Ricans were smack in the middle!"[53]

It is true there was a large population of Puerto Ricans living in Spanish Harlem, but there were also plenty of Cubans as well. There was also a key political difference between the Puerto Ricans and Cubans living stateside. Puerto Ricans (as U.S. citizens) could travel to and from the mainland without a problem, but Cubans were limited to one month stays. In other words, the prevalence of Puerto Ricans in New York City is partially reflection of the relative simplicity of their political situation. And the term Nuyorico highlights the strong connection of the two regions.

The political differences between Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the United States sometimes translated to cultural hostilities, especially early on in El Barrio's history.[54] This friction seemed to soften with time, and the marriage of Machito (Cuban bandleader Frank Grillo) to Hilda Torres (a Puerto Rican) mirrors the gradual relaxation of intercultural tensions. Many bands were using both Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians, and it ought not to be surprising that musical hybridization (e.g. *salsa*, and Latin jazz) ended up occurring within this diverse environment.

The music of these immigrant populations residing in Spanish Harlem should not merely be viewed as an expression of Afro-Caribbean traditions or as mere entertainment. It was a culturally unifying force for a diasporic Spanish-speaking population. Max Salazar, a musician and writer who grew up in Spanish Harlem, explains that music also "was an indispensable crutch for Puerto Ricans and Cubans

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[53] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 13.
[54] Max Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom: Latin Music in New York* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2002), 5.

determined to survive in an alien environment."[55] In other words, music performance was a good way to supplement income; however its social role was by no means wholly positive. In the 1930s, English-language radio stations were refusing to air Spanish-language music. They claimed that there was little market for it, but at the same time, La Milagrosa Catholic Church was investing in it, through a program of music and dance called *Estrellas del Futuro* (in English, "future stars"). It was through this program that Tito Puente learned to dance. Later, he was apparently quite proud to be "one of the few band leaders who really [knew] how to dance."[56] He had begun this program before his teen years and was already proving to be quite the young star: young Tito was crowned "King of the Stars of the Future" four times, but that would not be his last reign in an artistic domain.

**Childhood and adolescence**

While the future Mambo King was being dubbed King of the Stars of the Future, he studied piano at the New York School of Music. Apparently, he was quite a nuisance to the neighbors due to his relentless use of found percussion. "I was a very percussive young man, always playing on things," Puente later explained. "M neighbors complained to my parents, 'Why don't you put that brat to *study* music? He's driving us crazy here."[57] He had begun piano lessons at age eight with Victoria Hernández, the sister of the famous Nuyorican pianist Rafael Hernández, but the clear switch from dance to music may have been out of necessity, after he twisted his ankle

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[55] Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom*, 4.
[56] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 12.
[57] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 12.

rather seriously.

Regardless, Tito Puente was attracted to the sounds of the big bands and swing music. He later recalled, "I would listen to the great dance bands of the day on the radio, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Chick Webb, and I'd go to theaters like the Paramount and the Strand to see them perform. My hero was Gene Krupa."[58] Puente also listened to Chick Webb, Jo Jones, Sonny Greer, Cozy Cole, and Sid Catlett, but his idolization of Krupa stands out. It was Krupa, the drummer with Benny Goodman, who inspired Tito Puente to begin learning his first percussion instrument: the trap drums. When Puente recollected his admiration for Krupa and Goodman, he got far more excited.

> I was going to Central Commercial High School on 114th Street. It was raining outside, and I ditched school that day. My friends didn't care. We raced into the Paramount to get right up front. We waited in line for hours. When we got inside, it was just crazy. My heart just pounded. It got up and danced in the aisles. I knew right there what I wanted. To be Gene Krupa. To play just like him.[59]

And he did! Puente remembers practicing Krupa's floor tom solo on "Sing, Sing, Sing" incessantly. When the Paramount announced a "Gene Krupa drum contest" judged by Krupa and Goodman, the fourteen-year-old already had that solo memorized note for note. At the contest, he sat in with Goodman's band, played "Sing, Sing, Sing," and won.

Many of Puente's musical characteristics later parallel Krupa and the solo from "Sing, Sing, Sing," whose rhythmic content and timbral quality bore many similarities to a timbale solo. Josephine Powell points to some other Puente-Krupa

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[58] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 13.
[59] Powell, *Tito Puente*, 46. Goodman's stint at the Paramount described here was in early April, 1938.

parallels, like the call and response duets the drummer played with trumpeter Harry James. Krupa also foreshadowed Puente in conceptual terms, by firing up musicians through "flash and verve which commanded the spotlight."[60] Krupa, an influential percussionist in his own right, was also the first drummer-bandleaders to reach a large audience.

Tito Puente had been getting drum set studies already with a teacher he remembers only as Mr. Williams. Mr. Williams imparted the essential rudiments as well as techniques in reading charts for big bands and shows, but apparently "he knew absolutely nothing about Latin music."[61] His interests were primarily in the swing sounds, like those of Benny Goodman. When Goodman played at the Paramount, his band usually alternated with Xavier Cugat's, which "played a kind of sweet Latin music that Tito abhorred."[62] Being the drummer for a jazz big band (like his hero, Gene Krupa) was evidently his first dream. Little did he know, he would later accomplish it via timbales, blazing a trail of Latin jazz in order to get there.

As a young teen (too young to get a union card), Tito, dubbed *El Nino Pródigo* ("the child prodigy"), began playing with the Happy Boys. That band's percussionist, José Montesino, taught Puente his first lessons on his now famous instrument: the timbales. At age sixteen, Tito landed a gig with the Noro Morales Orchestra and began playing with José Curbelo (the pianist for Xavier Cugat). This time was a transitional one for Puente, although he pinpoints 1937 as the beginning of his interest in Cuban music, when he heard an album by Casino de la Playa. Powell

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[60] Powell, *Tito Puente,* 48-49.
[61] Loza, *Tito Puente,* 3.
[62] Loza, *Tito Puente,* 48.

describes the day of transformation for the teen who apparently "balked at the thought of playing *bombas*, *plenas*, and *danzas*,"[63] which was the music of his Puerto Rican parents.

> He happened into a music store to listen to some new swing sounds. What he heard that day changed his entire perspective of what direction his music aspirations would take him. A new shipment of records from Havana had recently arrived. Among the batch of Victor recordings were fresh releases of Orquesta Casino de la Playa, Cuba's answer to popular American dance bands. The extraordinary group of nine young white Cuban musicians was nothing like Tito had ever heard in his life. Vocalist Miguelito Valdés … expressed unusual versatility in his vocal vocabulary, which included African Santería changes. He provided that extra-added touch to the group's otherwise standard jazz-influenced repertory.[64]

Puente credits Casino de la Playa with his excitement for Cuban music similarly to the way Krupa inspired him to play drums. Puente bluntly explains,

> "I wasn't really that interested in Latin music much before that. But [Casino de la Playa] was something else. I got all their records and learned the songs, one by one. I used to practice that number [Dolor Cobarde] note for note. Just like I did for the Gene Krupa drum contest."[65]

Regardless of how it began, he was apparently picking up the "Latin music" quickly. José Curbelo was impressed by the kid and recommended him for the drum chair for a three-month stint in the Telleria Society Orchestra in Miami.[66] At age 16, Puente found himself at a crossroads in his life, since taking the gig meant dropping out of school. He opted for the life of a professional musician, dropped out of school, and left for Miami. Considering Puente's career, this choice was no mistake.

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[63] Powell, *Tito Puente* 52.
[64] Powell, *Tito Puente* 52.
[65] Powell, *Tito Puente* 54.
[66] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 15.

**Early Career**

Tito's symbiotic relationship with José Curbelo was long and fruitful. Puente played in Curbelo's band, and Curbelo taught Puente about bandleading and music business. Later, Curbelo became the agent for Puente's band. By age nineteen, Tito Puente was already talented and experienced professional. It was in 1941, as Tito Puente straightforwardly explains, that he "sat in with [Machito's] band and Machito hired me."[67] Machito (who was Frank Grillo at birth) had been developing music that melded the sounds of Latin and jazz music. Thanks to the suggestions of trumpeter Mario Bauzá (his brother-in-law), Machito fired the musicians who couldn't read music and augmented horn sections using American big bands as models. According to Josephine Powell,

> The key was to employ non-Latino horn players, because their jazz inflected sound would come not just from jazz voicing in the arrangements but also from the details of the phrasing. At the same time, Bauzá preserved the thrust of the *son*-based Cuban structure in which the singer (Machito) improvised over the response of a two- or three-voice *coro*. The result was Machito and his Afro-Cubans. In reality, it was a Latin dance music with Afro-Cuban jazz.[68]

In essence, she credits Machito with the birth of "Latin Jazz."

As he playing with Machito, Curbelo, and Tito Rodríguez, Tito Puente was proving to be not just an able percussionist, but also an innovative one. Bobby Sanabria explains that Tito was "proving to be one of the first drummers in Latin music to use a combination of timbales, bass drum and cymbal to 'kick' big band

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[67] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 16.
[68] Powell, *Tito Puente*, 58.

figures, often without bongó or conga accompaniment."[69] Puente was also quick to point out, that he was the first to play timbales up front, standing up. This idea apparently came from a segment with Xavier Cugat in the movie *Go West, Young Man* (1936), but Puente insists that for Cugat "it was only in the movie. I am the first with timbale fronting the band. Machito put me there."[70] With Machito, Puente only moved up front for solo features, but once he had his own band, he was all the more noticed.

In 1942, still a nineteen-year-old, Tito Puente was drafted to fight in World War II. He was assigned to the U.S.S. *Santee* where he played alto saxophone (the drum chair was already taken) and developed his arranging skills (one of his arrangements, "El Bajo de Chapotín," got sent back on land to Machito's band). These years were by no means easy for Puente, beginning with his notification of his sister's death back home.[71] Towards the end of the war, the *Santee* almost went down during one of Japan's last gasp attack by kamikaze planes. Tito was ordered to sound the call to abandon ship at one point and later, wounded, had to play taps for his fallen shipmates.[72]

When it was all over, in 1945, Puente returned to New York with a presidential commendation. His spot in Machito's band had been filled, so Tito looked for work elsewhere.[73] During these transitional years, Tito worked with Frank

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[69] Loza, *Tito Puente,* 4.
[70] Powell, *Tito Puente,* 49.
[71] Loza, *Tito Puente,* 5. His sister died back on land from spinal meningitis.
[72] Powell, *Tito Puente,* 102-103.
[73] Returning serviceman were guaranteed by law to get back their prewar jobs, but Puente did not feel comfortable taking back the drum chair in Machito's band. He would have had to replace Uba Nieto, who desperately needed the spot to support a family. Loza 5.

Martí's Copacabana band, José Curbelo's Orchestra, and Fernando Alvarez' Brazilian band.[74] In 1947, Tito joined in with the Pupi Campo Orchestra, and at the same time was beginning his career as a bandleader. Federico Pagani, the "Father of Latin Dance Promotion,"[75] had begun booking Tito at the Palladium for sets under the name, the Picadilly Boys, which included lots of musician's from Campo's band.[76]

**As a Bandleader**

Tito Puente's official beginning as a bandleader began in 1949, when he took a core of the Picadilly Boys and formed his own band. The line-up included Jimmy Frisaura on lead trumpet (whom he had met through Pupi Campo), Chino González on second trumpet, Luis Varona on piano, Angel Rosa (vocals), Manuel Patot on bass, Manny Oquendo on bongos and Frankie Colón on congas.[77] A few months later his whole orchestra had grown to include three trombones, four trumpets (Mario Bauzá on lead), four saxes, a full rhythm section, and Vicentico Valdés singing lead.[78] However, on Tito's first hit ("Abaniquito") he didn't use the saxes or trombones.

At the turn of the decade, the mambo dance craze was taking New York City by force. Mambo, a child of the Cuban *son* and *danzón*, now incorporated rhythmic horn lines and syncopations of the piano's guajeo line. Cubans, above all Pérez Prado and Arsenio Rodríguez, had introduced the music to the American audience, but as

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[74] Loza, *Tito Puente*, 5.
[75] Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom* 81
[76] Loza, *Tito Puente*, 7.
[77] Loza, *Tito Puente*, 7.
[78] Loza, *Tito Puente*, 9.

Jim Payne puts it, "Tito's raw, high-energy, New York-style mambo was more authentically Cuban, more infectiously swinging and irresistible to dancers."[79] During the 50s, the hotspot for Latin dance (and plenty of other things, apparently) soon became the Palladium, thanks in large part to bands like Puente's.

The Palladium Ballroom, a dance hall located at 53rd and Broadway, opened its doors in 1947 and quickly transitioned to a popular nightspot. It closed its doors in 1966, but the Palladium's Era was the 1950s.[80] The ballroom's history runs parallel to that of Latin music through its success via integration. Just as *salsa* grew out of a synergy of interwoven Caribbean (albeit mostly Cuban) and American music, the Palladium's profits shot up only after it opened its doors to blacks.[81] This boom in the popularity of Latin music was no doubt also spurred by the post-war migration of Puerto Ricans looking for economic advantages in the mainland. Naturally, large numbers of these Puerto Ricans were attracted to New York City, as there was already an established community of compatriots. The Palladium boasted two bands, dance lessons, a floor show, and a dance contest, all for 25 cents.[82]

A rivalry began with old friend Tito Rodríguez's band over who would be advertised first on the Palladium's marquee, but, really, it was over who was 'King of the Mambo.' For the Palladium, the competitive aspect was just good business, but

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[79] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 26.
[80] Max Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom*, 87.
[81] The story goes that Tommy Morton (who Max Salazar explains as never showing up on official documents, although he clearly "called the shots and ran the Palladium") was looking for ways of attracting dancers. He began by looking for bands that could play all the popular dance trends (including swing, ballads, rumba, foxtrot, and tango), and he promptly hired Machito. Morton met with Machito and his trumpeter Mario Bauzá about ways of attracting business. Bauzá asked how Morton would feel about black people in his club and he responded that his interests lay only in the color green. Max Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom*, 88-89.
[82] Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom*, 87.

the bandleaders acted in self-defense of their music (and livelihood). The relationship between the two Titos eventually worsened to the point of not mentioning Rodríguez's name ('the other guy,' as Puente called him) and exposed a more aggressive side of Puente's personality.[83] In 1951, Rodríguez got his way, but Puente's band was relentless and obliterated its competition during all the following years. With a powerhouse of musicians and the freshness of his jazz influence, Puente's music was bold and exciting. In 1952, when the Palladium enforced an all-mambo policy it was becoming clear that Puente would reign supreme.

Puente's band rapidly evolved with personnel changes spurred by the Korean War in 1952. Mongo Santamaría replaced Colón on congas, and Charlie Palmieri and eventually took over Gil López's spot on piano (although he would return in 1957 total close to two decades in Puente's band).[84]

At the same time, Tito Puente's forays into Latin jazz (i.e. jazz songs based around Latin rhythms) were being dubbed Cubop. Puente was playing at the Birdland nearby, swapping sets with Coltrane, Blakey, Parker, and Davis, and establishing more classics including "Ran Kan Kan" (discussed in Chapter 3 under "Melodic Percussion") and "Barbarabatiri" (discussed in Chapter 4 under "Shells and Bells").[85]

Puente's diverse musical forays reflect the cultural diversity of his upbringing. Just as Puente grew up among the diasporic sphere of Spanish Harlem, New York City, the origins of his rhythms were Cuban (despite being Puerto Rican) and American (after all, Puente and jazz both grew up at the same time, in New York

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[83] Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom*, 129.
[84] Loza, *Tito Puente*, 9.
[85] Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom*, 130.

City). In 1955 and 1957 respectively, Puente recorded the pivotal albums *Puente in Percussion* and *Top Percussion*, which included percussionists Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo in an explosive tribute to Cuba, the rumba, and the African rhythms from which they evolved.

By the late 1950s Tito Puente was achieving huge commercial success. After all, he knew how to make people dance. The 1958 album *Dance Mania* was a commercial success (selling well over 500,000 copies), and in 2000 the *New York Times* picked it as one of the top 25 most significant albums of the 20th century.[86]

After the 50s, the Palladium closed and less successful artists struggled to keep working. But in the 70s, a new phenomenon had been poured onto the music: *salsa*. An umbrella marketing term, "salsa" took some getting used to among Latin musicians like Puente. But the new trend of salsa, freshened the music and spurred a rebound. Tito explains that "they gave that name to the music to give it heat, make it exciting. It's easy for everybody to say. In my concerts I always tell everybody, 'Now, we're gonna play for you - SALSA!' The audience goes, 'OHHH!' It's the same mambo I've been playing for forty years."[87] Commercial success was indeed an important factor for Puente. "Salsa" was attracting attention world-wide, and Puente surely didn't object when his income started skyrocketing. Puente's music was similarly reborn through Santana's Latin rock cover "Oye Como Va," which was originally a Puente cha cha chá.

Puente's five decade career was characterized by relentless hard work. He recorded over 100 albums and played with countless stars. His "Golden Latin Jazz

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[86] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 32.
[87] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 36.

All Stars" included the stars of a younger generation: Paquito d'Rivera, Giovanni Hidalgo, Dave Valentin, Claudio Rodin, Hilton Ruiz, and Ignacio Berroa on drum set. The vast diversity of his body of work is perhaps only equally by that of the term *salsa*.

## Chapter 3: Musical Structures in Puente's Music

*Salsa* can refer to many formats and genres, but Tito Puente's music typifies its general expectations. Firstly, his bands' instrumentations are an updated *conjunto* format. They rely on the piano rather than the tres or guitar, as well as multiple vocalists, a horn section (trumpets, trombones, and a baritone sax), a bass, and a dynamic percussion section including timbales, congas, bongos, shakers, and (not quite as often) drum set and vibraphone. This section takes specific examples from Puente's music to highlight some of the musical concepts relevant to Latin music in general, including song form and clave.

### Song Form

Puente's music most often adheres to a bipartite structure like that of *son*, especially when there are vocals. Songs begin with an introduction that establishes the rhythmic feel and introduces some of the melodic content. A strophic vocal section often including a chorus usually comprises the first "half" of the song, and a louder, more improvisational section follows. This second "half" usually accounts for a majority of the tune in terms of time. It often also includes a call-and-response section (called *Coro-Pregón* in Spanish) on a short, repeated vocal phrase and a pre-arranged, layered horn feature, referred to as the *mambo*[88] section. In Puente and Payne's book *Drumming with the Mambo King*, the call-and-response section is also

[88] In this case, the word *mambo* refers to the dance form and attests to the consideration of dancers. On one hand, the music developed with dancing in mind, but gradually showmanship increased (Tito is no slouch on that account!) and this section has also become a showcase for musicians.

labeled as both a *montuno* section and, more descriptively, as a vamp. They also include "interlude" as an alternate label for the *mambo* section.[89] This distinction between vamps and interludes underlines one important difference between these sections. The indefinite length of the vamp provides a springboard for improvisation, whereas the interludes are pre-arranged and include cues to the coda, or another vamp. If a vamp is opened to an instrumental soloist, horns often play background figures, called moñas.[90] The song form below outlines possible sections of a song, but is overly thorough, and few songs actually contain everything listed here.

Introduction

SECTION 1:
Verse (or two)
Chorus
Verse
Short Interlude
Chorus
Verse
Chorus

SECTION 2:
Call-and-response vamp with vocal ostinato
Interlude featuring horn section feature (*mambo*)
Solo over vamp with horn backgrounds
Coda

The instrumental interlude in the Section 1 usually foreshadows some material for the mambo section, but could also be a solo section as on "Cuando Te Vea" (from Dancemania) at 1:08. Its full form is outlined below.

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[89] Although a mambo can be labeled an interlude, not all interludes could necessarily be referred to as mambos. In the example that follows ("Cuando te vea") the interludes are too short to be considered mambo sections.
[90] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 80-81.

Introduction (0:00)

| | |
|---|---|
| SECTION 1 | |
| Verse | (0:22) |
| Verse | (0:44) |
| Trumpet Solo | (1:08) |
| Verse | (1:43) |
| | |
| SECTION 2 | |
| Interlude | (2:03) |
| Vamp (Vocal call and response) | (2:08) |
| Interlude | (2:30) |
| Vamp (Trumpet solo) | (2:39) |
| Interlude | (3:08) |
| Vamp (Vocal call and response) | (3:19) |
| Coda: Horn section and percussion cadenza | (3:42) |

These two-part song forms are divided, or at least reinforced, through rhythmic and dynamic change. Usually the "dividers" are breaks that lead into a new section, lead out of a solo, etc.. Rhythmic and dynamic indicators usually work in conjunction with each other to reinforce song forms. For example, quieter sections often necessitate a move from the cowbell to the timbales' shells, and in louder sections the bongo player might play a second bell part to overlap with the timbales.

The song forms of Tito's later forays into Latin jazz[91] assimilate some jazz tendencies, and often follow an embellished melody-solo-melody form. These forms, fittingly, utilize harmonic change to outline song form.

[91] *Sensación*, *Golden Latin Jazz All-stars*, *Un Poco Loco*, and *Mambo Diablo* would be a good starting point, but they constitute just the tip of that iceberg.

**Song Styles**

Puente's songs are primarily mambos[92] or cha cha chás, and he was obviously aware that *salsa* merely relabeled the same music. This should not have seemed too strange for Tito; he had already acknowledged the use of the word "rumba" as a synonym for "Latin" before *salsa* music existed.[93] Nevertheless, Puente (like most other musicians) was originally resentful of the word, stating that "there's no salsa music. They just put that word to the music that we were doing all the time. The mambo, the cha cha, they called it 'salsa.' You *eat* salsa. You don't listen to it, you don't dance to it." In the same interview, Puente also acknowledged a freshness and popularity spawned by the word, recognizing that "they gave that name to the music to give it heat, make it exciting. It's easy for everybody to say. In my concerts I always tell everybody, 'Now, we're gonna play for you–SALSA!' The audience goes, 'OHHH!'"[94] His interviewer, Jim Payne, goes on to note that this name *salsa* was boosting record sales and worldwide acclaim. One can only stay annoyed at a word for so long when it is boosting your career.[95]

Mambos and cha cha chá, both based on dance forms, follow similar stylistic principles but vary in tempo. The cha cha chá began with bassist "Cachao" Lopez's vamps in Nuevo Ritmo ("New Rhythm") at the end of *danzón* tunes.[96] Its popularity grew partly out of its accessibility (i.e. simplicity) preferred by non-Latin listeners. Typical cha cha chá piano part lays heavily on the downbeats, whereas a mambo's

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[92] For more on the mambo, refer back to Chapter 1 under "Caribbean Music in the States" and Chapter 2 "As a bandleader."
[93] Powell, *Tito Puente*, 62.
[94] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 36.
[95] Payne, *Tito Puente*, 36-37.
[96] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 119.

piano part usually rides primarily on off beats. Bell rhythms also have contrasting degrees of syncopation; cha cha bell rhythms are usually squarer than those of the mambo (shown below).

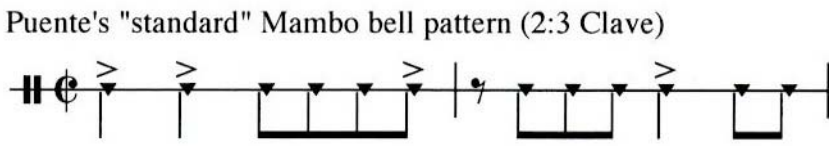


Figure 3.1[97]

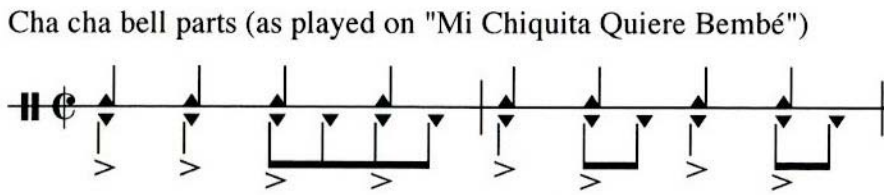


Figure 3.2[98]

There are many other patterns that could illustrate this contrast. The mambo pattern (Figure 3.1) includes syncopations and an anticipatory accent, whereas the cha cha's accents (Figure 3.2) are all on down beats. Combined with the difference in tempo

[97] This pattern comes not from a particular recording, but instead from Puente's method book (Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 67). In actuality this pattern becomes more mutable within the music, and its transformations are explored in Chapter 4 in the second half of the section entitled "Shells and Bells."

[98] This rhythm is not static on the recording, it changes, often looking more like the second measure of the figure. For more on the fluidity and fluctuation of bell rhythms see Chapter 4 under "Shells and Bells."

(cha chas are slower), the cha cha chá was more accessible to dancers, because the beat was so explicit.

Many other song types recur in Puente's albums, including the bolero (slow ballad) and Afro-Cuban 6/8 (a compound-meter feel with some similarity to the mambo). And although the two-measure clave cycle is continuous within a song, styles often change. Cha cha's frequently open into double-time mambos, and mambos sometimes swing into 6/8. The song from which Figure 3.2 comes ("Mi Chiquita Quiere Bembé" from *Dancemancia*) begins as cha cha chá and transitions to 6/8 for a drum solo (2:45-3:41).

These variations between styles are more or less superficial. Distinctly Afro-Caribbean idiomatic concepts unify *salsa* music. In his book *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, Raul Fernandez enumerates these defining features:

> Arrangement and improvisation in much Afro-Cuban music and, by extension, in salsa are built around a two-bar rhythmic pattern called the clave. Playing en clave is essential for the music to "sound right" and for the dancers to stay in step with it... Second, the "melody" instruments (brass, strings, piano, and bass) are utilized so as to maximize their rhythmic potential. Third, the "rhythmic" instruments (all percussion) are played so as to exhaust their melodic capacity. Combined, these factors can create an intelligibility problem for many U.S. listeners.[99]

Fernandez organizes these three features in order of importance, and Puente's music, again, provides excellent examples.

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[99] Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, 15-16.

**Clave**

The “intelligibility problem” for comprehending *clave* arises from a misplaced importance on the rhythm itself, and the linguistic disconnect only adds to the confusion. The Spanish meanings of *clave* reveal only a hazy outline of its musical significance. It means “key,” but, much like with English, this can signify a “code,” a “solution,” or a musical key. It can also be an adjective meaning “essential” and (in architecture) refer to the keystone of an arch. Within Latin music, the clave is the rhythm that outlines a two-measure repeating cycle in simple, bold terms. The most prevalent version is the *son* clave shown in figure 3.3a below, and its name refers to the *son* origins discussed in Chapter 1.

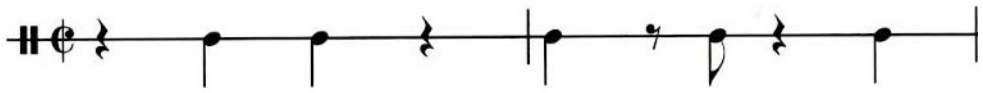

Figure 3.3a: 2-3 Son clave

The specific rhythm of the clave is not as important as its implications for how other parts should overlap and interact. In other words, it acts as a musical guide for the idiomatic rhythms (for all instruments) that will “sound right.” Playing “en clave” involves choosing cohesive rhythms within the set cyclical framework. Idiomatic two-measure repeating rhythms (as opposed to the shorter cycles of the guiro and non cyclical melodic lines) outline this framework and must always orient to each other in the same way. In other words, each two-measure pattern by itself could start on either measure. However, once one begins, all others must consent to that

orientation.

The clave and bell patterns already mentioned are only two of these idiomatic reference points, but the clave now also exists as shorthand for playing the correct rhythmic "direction." This is an important distinction. That is to say, when something "outlines the clave," it expresses the difference between alternating measures. Any of the repeating two-measure phrases, whether they be piano, congas, etc., are reference points for the others and need not get there indirectly via the clave. Again, rhythms "in clave" are merely rhythms that idiomatically fit the cyclical framework.

Using the clave as shorthand must have emerged out of convenience, since it exposes the cycle with unmatched simplicity (and, looking back over time, consistency as well). For example, expressing its direction is merely a matter of stating the balance of notes. The clave shown above in figure 3.3a, is called a 2-3 clave since its first half contains two notes and the second half contains three. When musical structures begin on the second measure it becomes flipped (as shown in Figure 3.3b). The resultant rhythm is a *3-2* clave, since the measure with three notes occurs up front, followed by the one with just two.

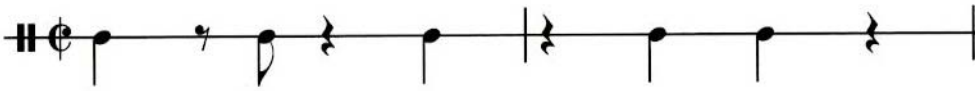

Figure 3.3b: 3-2 Son clave

The simplicity of describing the clave's orientation can be highlighted by comparison; describing the orientation of the bell and shell rhythms is exceedingly difficult and inconvenient.

2-3 clave is the most common form. For example, every song on Dancemania starts in 2-3, though it doesn't necessarily stay that way. When songs group measures into odd numbers the second measure of the clave cycle becomes the beginning, since the first measure was part of the previous section.[100] For example, the song "Complicación" (Track 2 on *Dancemania*) changes back and forth from 2-3 to 3-2. Its 11-measure introduction (10 measures with a one bar break) begins in 2-3, but the last measure is only half of the clave (the "two" side). The clave continues from where it left off for the following section, and hence starts on the "three" side. Odd hypermetrical groupings like this are a common tool for sectional changes of feel.

The shorthand of using the clave becomes the stepping stone for beginners but often implies an overstated centrality of such a specific rhythm. On one hand, "anything that matches the Clave is more comfortable."[101] But the musical reality is that rhythms "en clave" do not always need to trace the clave; they can also be complementary, ambiguous, or even contrary (though these occasions are rare). One example of the counterintuitive nature of clave is the use of beat "1" as an anchoring point. In the clave, this downbeat occurs on the three side; however, most bell patterns *avoid* beat "1" on the "three" side. Puente confirmed this notion in

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[100] Or put another way, when a song begins in 2-3 clave, all phrases beginning on odd numbered measures are also in 2-3 clave, and all phrases beginning on even numbered measures are in 3-2 clave. When a song begins in 3-2 clave, all phrases beginning on odd numbered measures are also in 3-2 clave, and all phrases beginning on even numbered measures are in 2-3 clave.
[101] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 56.

exaggerated terms, stating that "any time you hit the downbeat, that establishes the 2:3 feeling."[102] Most piano montunos have a complementary relationship to the clave, and only two of the five clave notes actually fall in line with the most typical piano lines. Constantly cycling rhythms of one measure or less do not change to show where the clave is, and hence are versatile. Yet most non-cyclical patterns (like horn section hits) either imply a certain clave direction, or are inappropriate for either. Occasionally, rhythms fit both. In his book, Puente explains that "some figurations are flexible. They can go with either Clave."[103] The most common conga rhythm for a guaguanco actually seems to run against the "correct" clave orientation (see figure 3.4), but it is an exception rather than a rule.

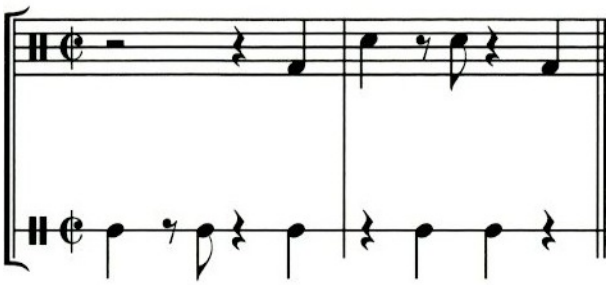

Figure 3.4: Conga guaguanco rhythm over 3-2 clave

This relationship is quite contrary, even canon-like; the conga's rhythm on the "2" side of the clave (first measure, top part) is the same as the rhythm of the "3" side of the clave (first measure, bottom part). As this example should show, defining when

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[102] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 56. They give his song "Para Los Rumberos" from *Cuban Carnival* as an example of this concept.

[103] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 56. In this section he refers to a fight between Machito and Mario Bauzá over the corresponding clave of a specific figure, but doesn't give the actual rhythm.

music is “en clave” lacks empirical rules, and its implications come only from immersion in its language. That said, the clave mirrors a recurring conceptual distinction between the two measures of the cycle. The “two” side of the cycle emphasizes the second beat more than the “three” side does, which usually leans away from emphasis there. The mambo bell example (Figure 3.1) is not the only instance of this trend. Other examples occurring in this study include the cáscara pattern (explained shortly, Figure 4.1), the trumpet part (below, Figure 3.5), and the bell excerpt from “Babarabatiri” (Figure 4.2).

**Percussive Melodies**

Fernandez’ quote regarding percussive melody instruments **(page 36)** probably refers firstly to piano montunos, whose repetitive cycles were compared with the percussion’s earlier. Percussive horn orchestrations also pervade *salsa*, and a majority of Puente’s tracks provide instructive examples in this regard. The mambo section from “Algo Nuevo” (:43-1:24, on *The Best Of*) illustrates Fernandez’ idea about *maximizing* rhythmic potential. The poignant feature of this instrumental interlude lies in the trumpet part, which pierces the texture with a highly articulate rhythm on only one pitch (shown below).

Trumpet part (in concert C) from "Algo Nuevo" (0:43-1:24)

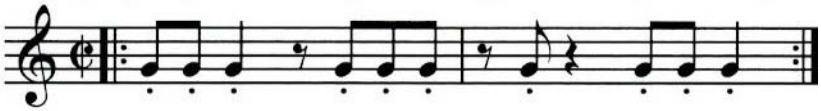


Figure 3.5

During this section other horn parts gradually overlap in chaotic cacophony, yet this trumpet part repeats 22 times, and its total of 220 notes over 40 seconds are all G. The cycling two-measure loop functions more like a percussion pattern than a horn one. The last three eighth notes in the first measure are placed similarly to most mambo bell patterns.[104]

Vocal lines (especially improvised ones) are often more rhythmic then melodic, and often ride on only a couple notes. Short interjections can also cue sections and/or function like a timbale or conga fill might. In the call-and-response section of "Algo Nuevo" (following the trumpet part just discussed, 1:24-1:38), the lead vocalist calls out with mostly one to three syllable interjections without definite pitch. Some vocals even use onomatopoeic spoken rhythms, like on "Bambaram Bam Bam." On "T.P.'s Treat," Puente even imitates a timbale solo with his *voice*.

**Melodic Percussion**

The utilization of pitch in percussion parts reflects the melodic consciousness of those "rhythm" instruments. As a very general example, the guaguanco conga rhythm discussed earlier relies on two pitches, and the lowest of these must start and end its phrase. What's more, the phrase is far from a percussive stream; it acts more like a bass line. Similarly, different pitches of cowbell lend themselves to certain rhythms. The highest pitch bell (usually with a slightly curved mouth) tends towards a cha cha rhythm and is rarely utilized for anything else.

The quotes and imitations of obvious melodies played on percussion highlight

[104] One of which was shown earlier in Figure 3.2. Chapter 4 looks with more of an eye for detail under "Shells and Bells."

the degree to which percussionists think melodically and exemplify the attempt to "exhaust their melodic capacity"[105]. For example, on the live version of "Ran Kan Kan" on *El Rey* Puente plays a vibraphone line on timbales. The original version of "Ran Kan Kan" opens with a tutti horn phrase which leads to a break for vibes at measure 5 (Figure 3.6a).

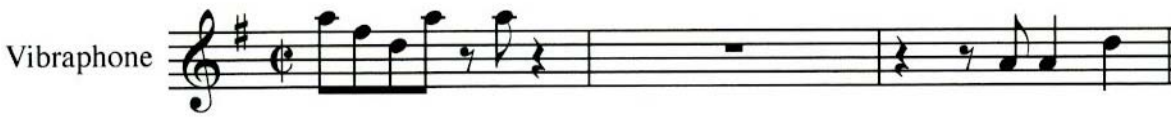



Fig. 3.6a Vibraphone on "Ran Kan Kan" (mm. 5-7) from The *Best Of* (1965)

Decades later, when Puente revisited "Ran Kan Kan" for the album *El Rey*, his arrangement re-orchestrated the vibraphone phrase to the timbales while maintaining its melodic essence.

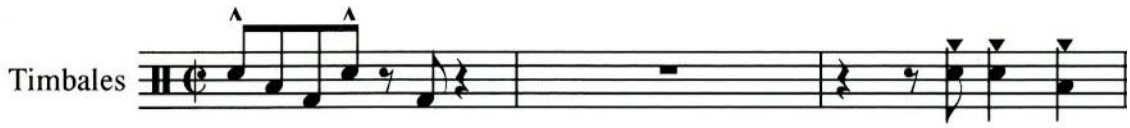



Fig. 3.6b: Timbales on "Ran Kan Kan" (mm. 5-7) from *El Rey* (1984)

In this instance, a transcription cannot do justice to Puente's melodic sensibilities, since he tuned his timbales to mimic the original vibraphone part. Puente's solo on "Rey del Timbal" (also form *El Rey*) executes melodies with even more startling

[105] Fernandez, From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz, 15-16.

precision by quoting military trumpet calls. Chapter 4 specifically discusses that solo under the "Solo Analysis" section.

With this often ignored perspective towards percussion (i.e. that it has melody), Puente's percussion albums, *Top Percussion* and *Puente in Percussion*, may not be lack anything. The drums are playing the melodies!

# Chapter 4: Reflections on Puente's Playing

## Shells and Bells: Cáscaras and Coros

On almost any Puente song there is a constant, flowing pattern of stick on shell, bell, or cymbal for a majority of the time. These patterns are usually played by the timbale-player, but sometimes a bell pattern is supplied by another player. Regardless, these patterns support, propel, and excite the music. The quiet undercurrent of stick on shell subtly reveals the clave and locks the band together through its unwavering precision. When Tito's moves to the cowbell or cymbal, dynamics explode through a newfound resonance, and patterns become less strict.

Cáscara (meaning "shell" in Spanish) refers to a specific rhythm played on the shell of the timbales. It lacks the volume, resonance, and warmth of the cowbell, and usually is utilized for the sections with quieter dynamics. The option of switching between shell and bell was a development during Puente's career, albeit very early on. Unlike the wide variety of cowbell rhythms (discussed shortly), this rhythm is almost always the same, as shown below with a 2-3 clave.

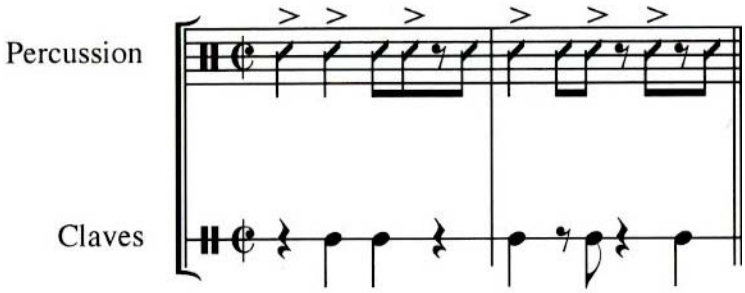



Figure 4.1: Cáscara (with 2-3 Clave)

Note that it has a “2” side and a “3” side and must be oriented correctly. Any Puente song in which the timbales are struck on the shell probably utilizes this rhythm. Variation often occurs in degrees of accentuation (and the degree to which unaccented notes are “ghosted”), or by filling in all gaps with a second hand. These accents are critical to the correct feel of the cáscara, and Puente highlights their value by quoting Gilberto Moreaux, who exclaimed: “the accents, the accents! Don’t forget the accents. They are very important in this music.”[106]

In his method book, Puente explains the mambo cowbell pattern in simplistic terms, but his recordings reveal far more fluidity and variation. For example, in “Babarabatiri” (available on *The Best Of*) the second half of the bell patterns change more or less according to section (Figure 4.2).

[106] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 67.

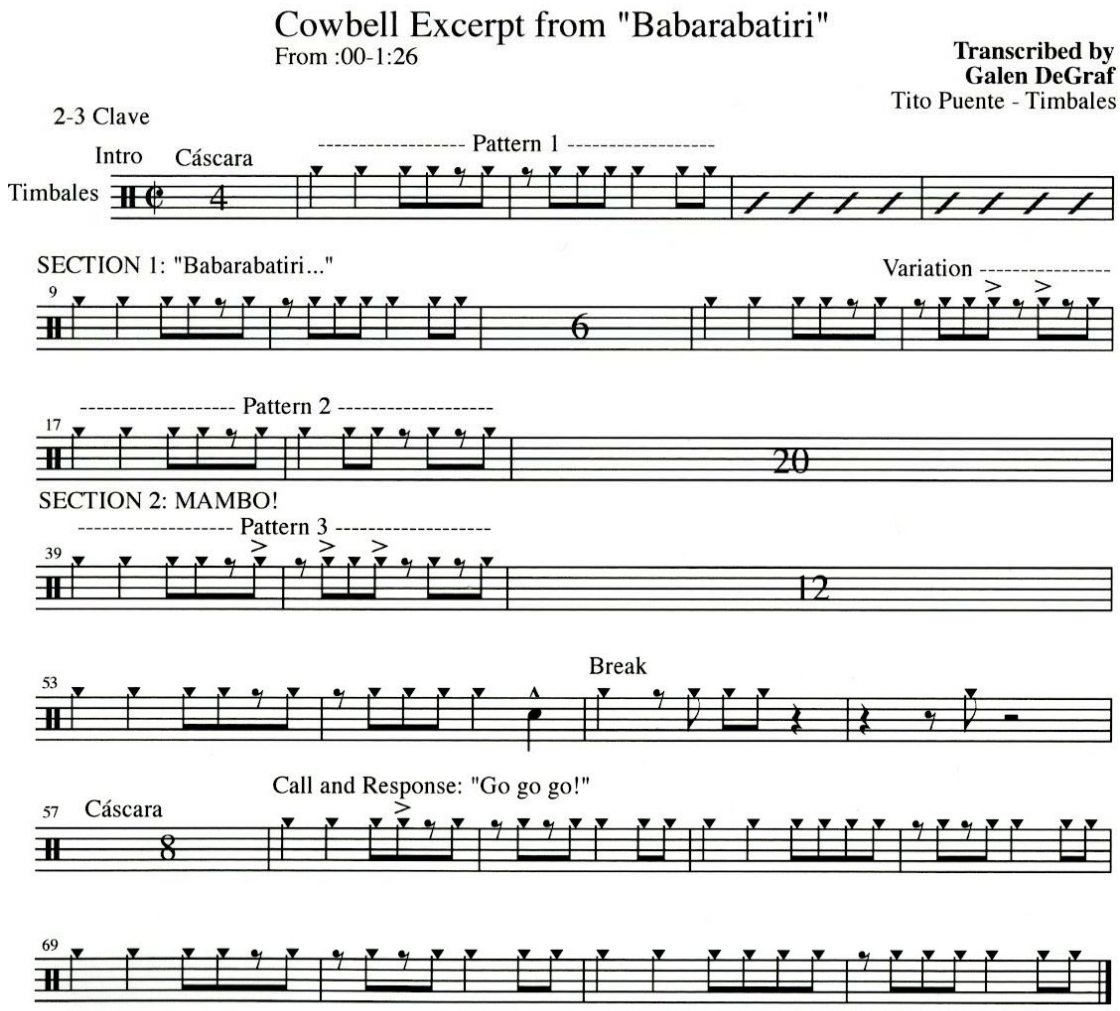



Figure 4.2

Throughout the song, as shown in the transcribed excerpt, Puente begins two-measure patterns consistently; odd numbered measures usually consist of two quarter notes followed by a syncopation like that of the cáscara. The second measure of the pattern changes over the course of the song, but its transformation is both smooth and purposeful. Puente begins on the bell with a pattern (Pattern 1, Figure 4.2a) much

like the “standard” one from his method book[107] in mm. 1-16, and changes to another idiomatic rhythm, the cáscara (played on the bell), at m. 17 (Pattern 2, Figure 4.2b). This change may not have been conscious; the cáscara’s rhythm is one of a few that ought to be drilled into the muscle memory of an experienced timbalero’s wrist. It should be able on to run “on autopilot,” and might have taken hold unconsciously. Conscious or not, Puente smoothly transitions between the two patterns with a syncopation (Variation, Figure 4.2 m. 16) which foreshadows the second one.

Figure 4.2a: Pattern 1

Figure 4.2b: Pattern 2

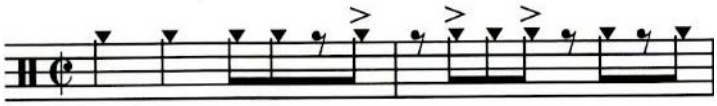


Figure 4.2c: Pattern 3

Pattern 3 (Figure 4.2c), from mm. 39-52, is not a “standard” pattern, but it may have occurred with the same degree of unconsciousness as Pattern 2. This rhythm’s naturalness probably stems from its similarity to patterns 1 and 2. In fact, it

[107] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King*, 67 (see Figure 3.1 or Appendix A).

is a musical hybrid of both! The first measure stays consistent among all 3 patterns, but the second measure of Pattern 3 is the mixture of the other two (i.e. the first half comes from Pattern 1, and the second half from Pattern 2). The eloquence of this musical transformation probably never entered Puente's mind. The rhythm itself mirrors the horn line that emerges in the same place. Tito, the bandleader, probably sang parts of all instruments to himself, and, in this instance, they crept into his playing. Percussionists too often see "Latin" rhythms as static from song to song, or (perhaps) they revere a purity of repetition. But here, in "Babarabatiri," Puente smashes both notions. Pattern 3 (by mimicking the horn line) is a testament to his consciousness of all the interacting parts, which trumps typical patterns. During the call-and-response section (beginning at m. 65), he does not even maintain a consistent two-measure pattern, highlighting the general spontaneity and freedom that characterize this section.

**Solo Analysis: "El Rey del Timbal"**

On the album *El Rey*, "El Rey Del Timbal," (which means "The King of the Timbales" in English), is a timbale feature, with barely a melody to detract from the King's unyielding improvisations. The track itself lasts over the three minutes, but its melody is only 5 seconds (occurring first at 0:10, and again at 2:45). Other horn figures function to rev up dynamics, while others are staccato one-note exclamation points appended to Puente's statements. Besides the 10 seconds of melody, the entire arrangement glorifies the timbalero through tension and release. Dynamics build to energize his solo, and parts drop out to spotlight him again.

The timbale solo throughout “El Rey Del Timbal” is relentless. Puente explores the complexity of simple sub-units, and his brutally explicit approach reflects the accessibility of his music. One poignant moment in the song occurs around 1:51, when Puente’s whole band drops out from behind him for the first time (Figure 4.3a). The timbale feature begins with 10 measures of consistent rhythms, but then abruptly shifts into melodic consciousness without steady tempo.

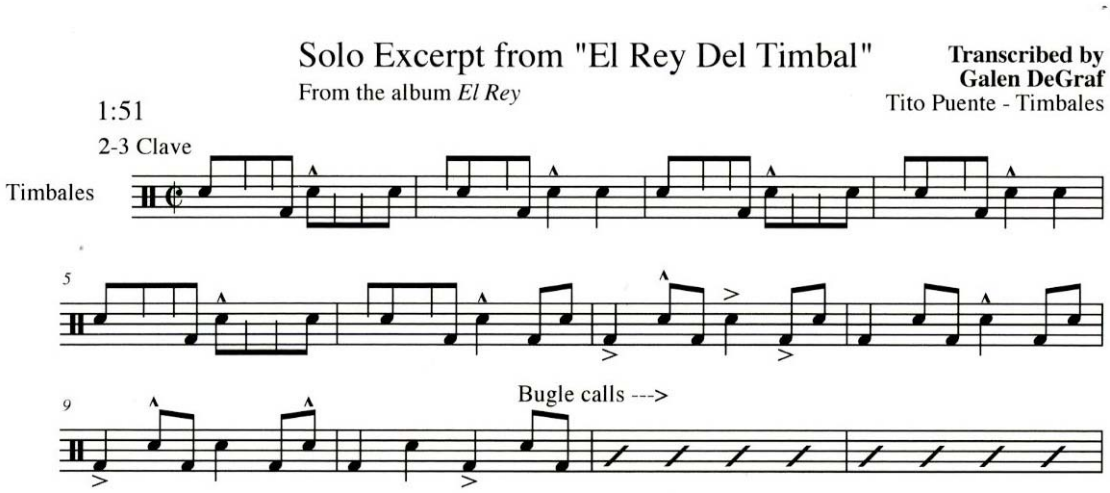
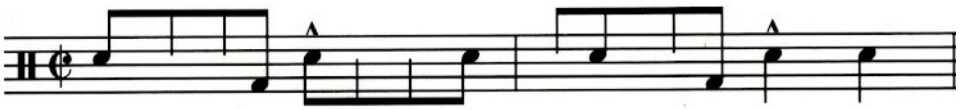



Figure 4.3a[108]

The first 10 measures consist of only two rhythms. Especially considering the recorded depth of Puente’s low timbale, the first pattern (Figure 4.3b) seems remarkably similar to the bass and snare patterns found in rock music.



[108] In this excerpt, ghosted (i.e. very quiet notes), are shown without note heads. In this way, the transcription may be read more easily, since it becomes more of a rhythmic reduction (i.e. only the most important notes).

Figure 4.3b: Phrase 1, mm. 1-6 from the Solo Excerpt

The second pattern (Figure 4.3c) is remarkably simple, but is brought to life through its syncopated accents (only notated in Figure 4.3a).

Figure 4.3c: Phrase 2, mm. 7-10 from the Solo Excerpt

Both of these patterns maintain a steady tempo through a straightforward reliance on eighth and quarter notes, contrasting to the solo material beginning around 1:30, which employs triplet-derived polyrhythms. At 1:51, the band's (and especially the piano's) sudden absence[109] is a moment of relative tension, offset by Tito through a return to straightforward groove-like material. Soon after, Tito jarringly breaks down the consistency of the pulse (Figure 4.3a, measure 11) to play some melodies, but at least his intentions are obvious. The musicality of this choice is debatable. On one hand the paused clave and lack of dance-ability are inexcusable. At the same time, however, Puente's performance highlights the often overlooked power of the drums. Here, *he* exercises the power to halt the dancing (by waiting do so until after the band had dropped out), and *he* cues the band back in. Indeed, his sovereignty is unquestionable, and perhaps the bugle calls are self-referential announcements of his own presence as King of the Timbales.

[109] In fact, it begins the *only* section for solo timbales, if the hand claps at the beginning can be considered accompaniment.

At a social level, Puente's choice of melody reveals dubious accessibility. The melody he chooses is widely known and recognizable, but at the same time simplistic, goofy, and shallow. This instance exposes the significance of showmanship for Tito, as his awareness of an audience outweighs attempts at artistic purity. It also reflects the long transition from music exclusively for dance to music for an audience.[110] At a conceptual level, this track reveals the versatility and absolute power of drums over the music. Puente became such a transcendent figure in Latin music due to his ingenuity. The melodic quotation here exemplifies Puente's proficiency at speaking to an audience through his drums. That communicative explicitness in drumming dates back to the Afro-Cuban calls for orishas, yet Puente's specific approach and context are far more modern.

**Coda**

Puente's multi-faceted relevance to *salsa* music includes his own stature as a *salsero* as well as his ingenuity in developing and energizing the music. His life and music contain many cultural parallels, since the hybridization of music often emerges through similar social circumstances. As Steven Loza puts it, "Tito's musical world encompassed diversity, the diversity of multicultural New York City and of the bicultural, bilingual environment of El Barrio."[111] And yet, Tito probably realized that New York City's musical sphere alone was not the whole picture. He traveled to

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[110] This transition is highlighted by going back to Puente's *Cuban Carnival* (1955), which includes a popular track dedicated to the dancers, called "Pa' Los Rumberos" (in English "For the Dancers").
[111] Loza, *Tito Puente*, 2.

Africa (specifically Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania)[112] and clearly felt an abstract connection to it. In an interview with Jim Payne, he explained, in simplistic terms, his take on rhythmic genealogy: "Africa is the mother country and they gave us the basic rhythms, but there's more syncopation in the Caribbean area – Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti."[113] Song titles such as "China" and "Africano" reflect his interest in diverse musical roots. His albums *Cuban Carnival* and *Top Percussion* explicitly pay tribute to his Afro-Cuban roots. Perhaps the arrangement of "Confusion" even had some commentaries on the overwhelming influences present in the Latin music idiom. The song begins with highly atypical introduction, including a snare drum back beat and funky guitar comping. What's more, the remainder of the song is an inconsistent bolero, with lilting bossa nova sections, a fake ending, and even some loud, discordant horn interjections.

Before Puente, the abanico (a short roll-like rudiment), was one of few moments of prominence for the timbales. The idea of the timbal solo was Puente's;[114] he brought the drums up front, both literally and figuratively. His music could only be so "infectiously swinging and irresistible to dancers"[115] because he a developed an Afro-Cuban stick language to which few others can ever come close.

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[112] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King,* 143.
[113] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King,* 144.
[114] Jay Hoggard, personal interview (Middletown, CT: 8 April 2009).
[115] Puente and Payne, *Drumming with the Mambo King,* 22.

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Appendix A: Figures and Transcriptions

Preface to the Transcriptions

Good transcriptions must toe the line between readability and attention to detail. The goal of a transcription is not to be able to reproduce a groove, phrase, or solo from the written notation alone. Instead, transcriptions provide a visual map of what occurs when, and a lens through which the music becomes clearer. Their goal is achieved in two primary ways. First, they isolate the specific instrument(s) being dealt with. Second, the passage may be read and studied at the pace suits the reader (as opposed to the recorded material, which always occurs in real time.)

With this in mind, one may approach the transcriptions and recordings in tandem, so as to note stylistic choices and details not evident in transcriptions. For example, notes falling just behind the beat, ahead of the beat, or swung must be simplified to maintain the tool-like function of the written music. These instances and other more abstract features including timbre (tuning, instrument choice, and acoustics) and dynamics (beyond the highly simplified code of accented, staccato, crescendo, and such terms) are best highlighted through the recordings rather than by an incomplete attempt on the staff itself (which would also greatly reduce the readability of the notation.)

In the end, they are merely analytical tools. Puente apparently reflected on some transcriptions of his solos by stating “Don’t worry, I couldn’t read them myself, even if I had to. When I’m soloing I’m just playing of the top of my head. I’m not really thinking about it.” (Puente and Payne, *Tito Puente’s Drumming With the Mambo King*, 157.)

All musical transcriptions, diagrams, and figures are in order of appearance and by Galen DeGraf except for Figure 3.1 which comes from page 67 of Puente and Payne’s *Tito Puente’s Drumming with the Mambo King*.

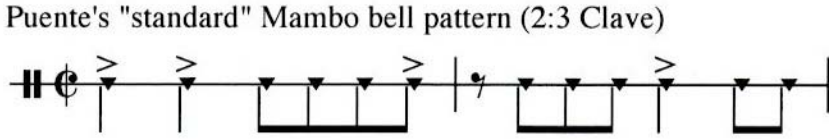


Figure 3.1 (from page 36)

Cha cha bell parts (as played on "Mi Chiquita Quiere Bembé")

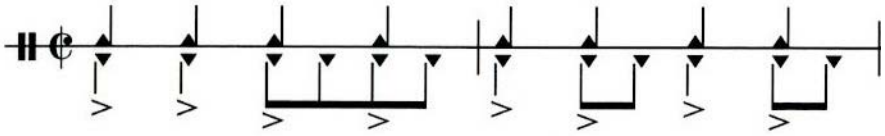

Figure 3.2 (from page 36)

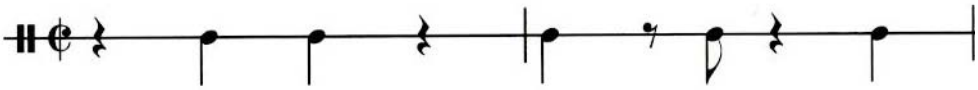

Figure 3.3a: 2-3 *Son* Clave (from page 38)

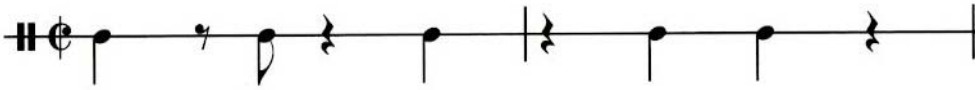

Figure 3.3b: 3-2 *Son* Clave (from page 39)

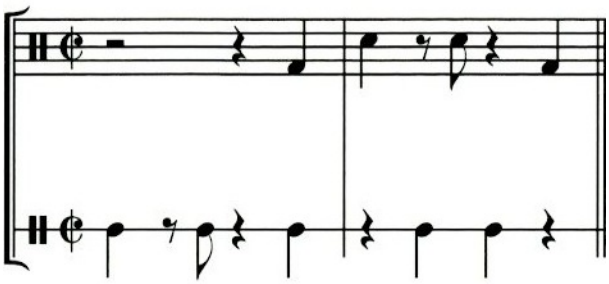

Figure 3.4: Conga guaguanco with 3-2 clave (from page 41)

Trumpet part (in concert C) from "Algo Nuevo" (0:43-1:24)

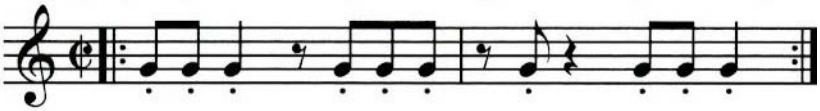

Figure 3.5 (from page 42)

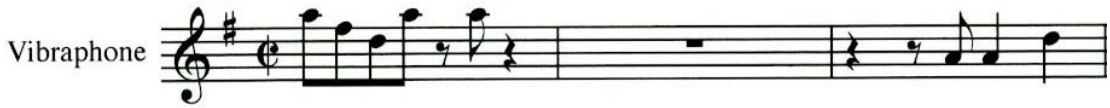


Figure 3.6a: mm. 5-7 from “Ran Kan Kan,” original version (from page 44)

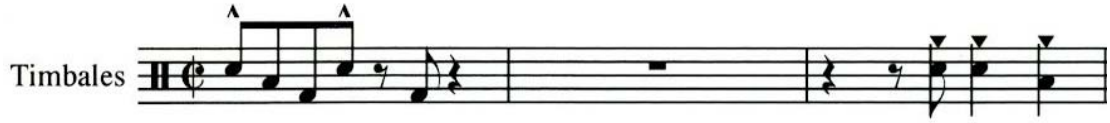


Figure 3.6b: mm. 5-7 from “Ran Kan Kan,” *El Rey* version (from page 44)

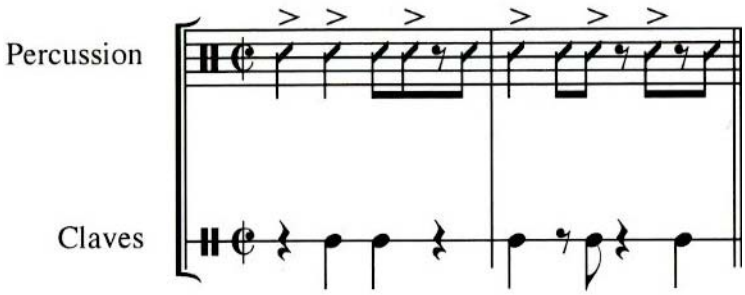


Figure 4.1: Cáscara with clave (from page 46)

Cowbell Excerpt from "Babarabatiri"
From :00-1:26

**Transcribed by**
**Galen DeGraf**
Tito Puente - Timbales

2-3 Clave

Intro Cáscara ---------- Pattern 1 ----------

Timbales 4

SECTION 1: "Babarabatiri..." Variation ----------

9 6

---------- Pattern 2 ----------

17 20

SECTION 2: MAMBO!

---------- Pattern 3 ----------

39 12

Break

53

Call and Response: "Go go go!"

57 Cáscara 8

69

Figure 4.2 (from page 48)

Figure 4.2a: Pattern 1 (from page 49)

Figure 4.2b: Pattern 2 (from page 49)

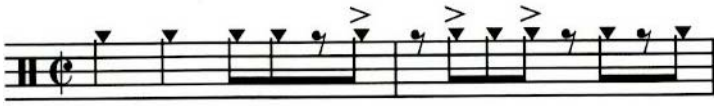

Figure 4.2c: Pattern 3 (from page 49)

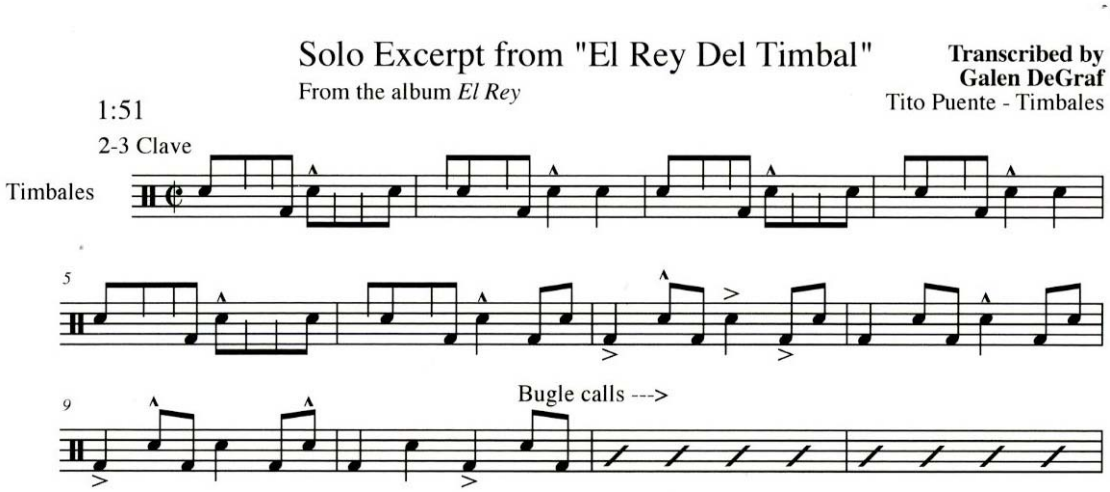


Figure 4.3a (from page 51)

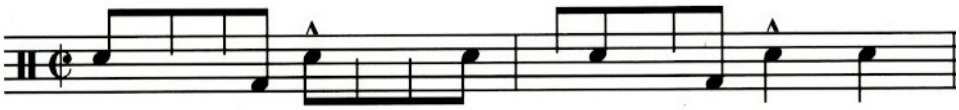

Figure 4.3b: Phrase 1 (from page 51)

Figure 4.3c: Phrase 2 (from page 52)

Appendix B:

All songs and albums are by Tito Puente unless noted.

Specific songs referenced, organized alphabetically by song

"Abaniquito" (written by José Curbelo) – *El Timbral*, re-released on *Mambo Macoco*

"Algo Nuevo" – *The Best Of*

"Babarabatiri" – *The Best Of*

"Bambaram Bam Bam" – *The Best Of*

"Complicación" – *Dancemania*

"Confusion" – *The Best Of*

"Cuando Te Vea" – *Dancemania*

"El Rey del Timbal" – *El Rey*

"Fat mama" – *The Best Of*

"Hit the Bongo" – *The Best Of*

"Mi Chiquita Quiere Bembé" – *Dancemania*

"Para Los Rumberos (For the Dancers)" – *Cuban Carnival*

"Ran Kan Kan" – *The Best Of*

"Ran Kan Kan" – *El Rey*

"T.P. Treat" – *The Best Of*

"T.P.'s Shing-a-ling" – *The Best Of*

"Timbalón" – *Un Poco Loco*

Album referenced, organized chronologically. All dates refer to release date except where noted.

*Mambo Macoco (1949-1951)* – Tumbao. Released 1995, recorded 1949-1951. [Compilation]

*Cuban Carnival* – BMG. 1955.

*Puente in Percussion* – Tico. 1956.

*Dance Mania* – RCA International. Released 1958, recorded 1957.

*The Best Of* – RCA/Victor. 1965. [Compilation]

*Top Percussion* – BMG. 1957.

*El Rey* – Concord Picante. 1984.

*Un Poco Loco* – Concord Picante. 1987.

The author highly recommends reading this paper in conjunction with the recordings. A majority of tracks referenced can be found on *Dancemania* and *The Best Of*.