Introduction

Buscando Ambiente

> People and their cultures perish in isolation, but they are born or reborn in contact with other men and women, with men and women of another culture, another creed, another race. If we do not recognize our humanity in others, we shall not recognize it in ourselves.
>
> *Carlos Fuentes*

On July 14, 1930, the *New York Times* reported that the country's rate of unemployment was at least 20 percent and rising fast. On this day, eight and a half months after the stock market crash, the newspaper also showed that over the past year Prohibition had cost the U.S. government $960 million in enforcement proceedings and loss of alcohol tax revenues.

Just as Americans continued to drink during Prohibition, those who could afford it continued to seek amusement during the Great Depression. Singer and bandleader Cab Calloway remembered that

> there were breadlines everywhere and near riots in New York. Everybody was angry with poor old Herbert Hoover. Everybody except people in the entertainment world, I guess. It's a funny thing, when things get really bad, when the bottom falls out of the economy, that's when people really need entertainment. . . . Jazz was swinging, the theaters on Broadway were cleaning up, and in Harlem the nightclubs, speakeasies and jazz spots were packed every night.[1]

Calloway was in a good position to know. Newly installed in Harlem's Cotton Club, he was earning about fifty thousand dollars a year. *Variety* reported that the club itself was the most profitable in New York

City, having netted a clear four hundred thousand dollars in the previous season.

That summer the entertainment emanating from New York City seemed boundless. Three Rudy Vallee orchestras were playing on each Cunard cruise ship, while the famous crooner himself had just acquired the first sponsored network radio show. Composer Cole Porter's "Love for Sale" had been banned from the airwaves for its overt references to prostitution, but many of his other songs were skyrocketing to popularity on Broadway. Vaudevillian Molly Picon was the headliner at the Palace theater. And with a flip of the dial, highbrow New Yorkers could hear some of the first live broadcasts of full-scale operas.

On July 14, 1930, still another musical event was taking place in a Manhattan recording studio. While this event would never be noticed by most of the U. S. population, it would prove momentous to speakers of Spanish in New York and Latin America. On that day a Puerto Rican group led by Manuel "Canario" Jiménez recorded Rafael Hernández's "Lamento Borincano." Canario, his two guitarists, and his *maracas* and *clave* players received about twelve dollars apiece for their efforts.

The modest fee notwithstanding, this song had a value that extended far beyond its monetary value. Just as Gorney and Harburg's "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" (1932) became a virtual theme song for the Depression, such was "Lamento Borincano" for Puerto Ricans and other Spanish speakers. More than any other song, this inexpensively made, apparently simple *bolero* would embody the essence of this era and the hard times it brought for many Latin Americans in both the United States and their homelands. Though it was composed and recorded in New York, "Lamento Borincano" also became a lasting, hugely popular anthem for Puerto Rico, an island with an ambiguous national status.

It is these hidden, quietly heroic, and often ironic cultural moments that I chronicle in this book. Amazingly, Puerto Rican musical production remains nearly as invisible to North American audiences today as it did in the 1930s. Just as Puerto Rico exists in the minds of North Americans, when they think of the island at all, as a kind of netherworld, not quite Latin America but not quite part of the United States, people in the English-speaking world have generally given little thought to the immense cultural wealth produced by Puerto Ricans. Indeed, they have had little opportunity, for while innumerable books and articles in English dissect social problems among Puerto Ricans, few describe their history or artistic expressions.[2] Puerto Ricans in general, and Puerto Ri-

can migrants in particular, are found more often in the pages of crisis-oriented contemporary studies than in those of historical works. In fact, scholars casting backward for an explanation for the persistently low socioeconomic status of many Puerto Ricans have often blamed this problem on an ostensible cultural deficit within the group itself. Glazer and Moynihan's 1963 contention that the Puerto Rican heritage is "weak in folk arts, unsure in its cultural traditions, [and] without a powerful faith" still finds its adherents thirty years later.[3] Indeed, as problems multiply in North American inner cities, there has been a recent academic and popular revival of this blaming-the-victim approach.[4]

Ironically, works by ethnomusicologists and music critics on Latin popular music often reinforce this impression. They take Puerto Rican music out of its historical context, a context that properly includes an explanation of what happens to cultural expression within a colonial society. Unwittingly, such writers make Puerto Rican music the loser in an ahistorical Darwinian scheme that closely parallels social science condemnations of Puerto Ricans as a failed ethnic group. To them, Cuban music survived and flourished because it was the fittest. It is as if there were no political or cultural hierarchies between colonies and neocolonies organized first by Spain, later by the United States. It is as if there were no shared history to explain the similar development of musical forms in different parts of Latin America, or the dominance of one set of sounds over another.

With both colonial and migration history unexamined, it has become a truism that popular Latin music in New York equals Cuban music, even though Puerto Ricans have for many years been among the field's most prolific performers and composers. Many popular and scholarly assessments suggest that Puerto Rican musicians have left their own ostensibly meager musical resources behind and "merely" adopted Cuban sounds. Puerto Rican musicians in New York City during the 1930s "imported" Cuban music and were "strong in the hybridizing wing." Their own music becomes more or less a footnote to the history of the *rumba* and to subsequently popular Cuban genres. A description of the collection of contemporary Latin sounds known as *salsa,* for example, asserts that "stylistically its backbone consists of Cuban dance music."[5]

When it comes to Puerto Rican sounds, then, I know of no in-depth histories of such popular music and its practitioners and audiences for any period. And yet the music and history of composers such as Rafael Hernández and groups such as Canario's are fascinating in their own right, as is the interwar period, when such artists wrote and played many

songs of lasting beauty—within the context of the massive displacement and migration of their compatriots.

This book is intended to fill these narrative and conceptual gaps within the history and culture of the Puerto Rican migration experience. It is also meant to encourage the reader to reevaluate the structure of ethnic history in general and the place of ethnic cultural expression within it. For contemporary writings about Puerto Ricans and other ethnic North Americans, whether negative or positive, often reflect or rebel against the paradigms set up by earlier thinkers. Thus, they do not get outside of previous models to consider other possibilities.

Scholars such as Oscar Handlin, for example, writing before the 1960s, portrayed American ethnic communities as disorganized and unhealthy settlements reflecting the abrupt uprooting of Old World, rural peoples. Their problems, he felt, were solved within a few generations through assimilation and the dissolution of the ethnic enclave. In contrast, the subsequent work of historians such as Sánchez-Korrol, Yans-McLaughlin, Vecoli, Bodnar, and others has argued that these ethnic communities were highly organized environments in which family and community life reflected a coherent set of values, though not necessarily the stereotypical American ones of individualism and economic success through upward mobility.[6] Portraits in recent ethnic monographs show music taking place in intimate gatherings within a strictly ethnically based community setting. Their depictions of closely knit settlements utilizing cultural activities for both ethnic and economic sustenance constitute a reaction against their predecessors' work.

Such recent contributions have been crucial to a more three-dimensional portrait of ethnic life, especially for Puerto Ricans and other groups that have been ranked low on what Micaela di Leonardo calls "the ethnic report card system."[7] However, while such approaches bring us important new information and insights, they are also problematic. Just as Handlin praised the pastoral paradises the immigrants had ostensibly left behind, modern historians romantically recreate such utopias in urban areas in the United States. Contemporary monographs that apparently argue against Handlin frequently follow him in presuming that "healthy" ethnic communities preserve an unspoiled and uniform Old World folk culture, exist within bounded geographical territories, and have little interaction with members of other groups. Moreover, they suggest that consensus means stability and that disagreements, divisions, and change within a group of ethnic Americans indicate a community in crisis.

Evidence from both the Old World and the New World, however, suggests that such assumptions lead to serious distortions of the ethnic experience, with implications not only for the past but for contemporary societies as well. In recent years, for example, scholars have rejected simplistic rural-to-urban migration paradigms, acknowledging the variety of regional and class backgrounds of ethnic Americans. Historians such as Rudolph Vecoli tell us that Italians, for example, thought of themselves as Genoese or Calabrian back in the Old Country and only merged under one national umbrella in the United States. Such an observation would seem to be a promising beginning for a study of the subjectivity and plasticity of ethnic identity and its cultural components. Unfortunately, while ethnic historians have begun to recognize the fragmented and constantly changing nature of the ethnic experience in economic, political, and social terms, they frequently draw the same tired conclusions in the cultural realm. John Bodnar's *The Transplanted,* for example, an otherwise fine synthesis of much of the recent monographic work on immigrant communities, presents an unreflective interpretation of ethnic cultural life:

> Almost no dimension of the traditional life immigrants knew remained unaffected by the new order which confronted them. At the same time most newcomers did not hesitate to exploit or draw upon past belief and practice if it in some way would facilitate and render intelligible their new life and condition. . . . Consider their use of the rich repository of song, dance, and folktales which nearly all groups brought to the American city. . . . While these traditions had already begun to recede in the premigration lands in the face of modern explanations of an individual's plight which were tied to science, industry and technology . . . folk culture could serve to reinforce group identity in the face of meeting new groups, inform outsiders about immigrants and who they were, and even provide explanations of their lowly status which all newcomers could understand.[8]

Historians now acknowledge the multifaceted and ever-evolving economic, social, and political reasons for immigrant and migrant movements but persist in viewing music of the ethnics' homelands as an unmediated and uncontroversial folk sound shared by the entire community, faithfully reproduced in the United States. They do not try to find out whether the variety of regional, class, political, religious, and other backgrounds of ethnics from the same national entity might affect their perceptions of national identity or their construction and use of forms of cultural expression such as music. Historians are generally content to take both ethnicity and ethnic cultural expression as givens, as

the by-products of a common national identity, the automatic offshoots of the economic and social spheres presumably underlying them. Uncritically adopting the nostalgia of their informants, for example, chroniclers of Latino music in New York City often evoke a mythically cohesive community that preserves and produces authentic music. Within such a framework, constant infusions of "genuine" music made by "real" ethnics in their own neighborhoods are ultimately diluted and commercialized by musicians catering to non-Latino audiences in the "Anglo" sections of the city. As in many other portraits of ethnic cultural life, Latinos within this framework had two choices: to remain "ethnic" (i.e., "Latin," in itself a dubious category) or to become "Americanized."[9]

Such unquestioned assumptions not only rewrite the ethnic experience within history but impose value-laden models on contemporary ethnic life as well. People in the United States, and indeed all over the world, are constantly being told that to avoid internal or external conflicts and to be economically and socially successful they must ally themselves with one racial or ethnic category. They must choose between assimilation and cultural preservation. As the Yugoslav writer Bogdan Denitch recently pointed out, however, the culprits in interethnic strife are not multiculturalism or overlapping identities themselves but strategies of "ethnic cleansing," which are "forcing the creation of new identities that 'are so much narrower, more parochial, and less flexible.'"[10] Moreover, it is apparent that economic difficulties often provoke conflicts between peoples who previously coexisted peacefully.

Anthropologists Fredrik Barth and Micaela di Leonardo, historian David Whisnant, ethnomusicologist Adelaida Reyes-Schramm, and sociologist Felix Padilla suggest, however, that rather than indicating the deterioration of a community and its cultural practices, the constant evolutions of ethnic identity and spheres such as music are normal historical processes. Within any living society ongoing intra- and interethnic negotiation and reshaping of cultural forms in dialogue with material conditions are the stuff of which national and ethnic identities are made and remade.[11]

Puerto Ricans on the island and the mainland did not adopt Cuban music wholesale to the detriment of their own traditions but incorporated it into an ever-evolving repertoire of available cultural materials. Indeed, I concur with Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's contention that tradition itself often amounts to a set of conventions from a variety of sources, agreed upon by a self-defined group of people, that are fre-

quently redefined in moments of rapid social transformation.[12] In New York, where Puerto Ricans lived among a constellation of constantly changing ethnic groups within a protean social environment, this process accelerated and perhaps became more acutely meaningful. The diverse collection of Puerto Rican migrants who found themselves living in New York City, sometimes together and sometimes apart, did not unite behind a common ethnic identity represented by agreed-upon institutions and cultural symbols. Instead, they formed a range of organizations and debated over appropriate cultural programs and representative repertoires. They exchanged forms of entertainment and ideas about its purpose among themselves as well as with members of other ethnic groups. Puerto Rican communities in New York were neither ethnically inviolable nor disintegrating, and their cultural choices were far broader than an "ethnic" or an "American" identity.

Indeed, I attempt to demonstrate that musical subcultures can exist side by side or within a dominant culture with varying degrees of exchange and mutual influence. Examples of the complex dynamics inherent in such diffuse expression quickly emerge when one scrutinizes musical production. Mark Slobin and Richard Spottswood, for example, analyze the eclectic career of an early-twentieth-century Jewish musician, noting his not untypical "inter-ethnic popular culture contact" and "fluency in two parallel, related, yet complementary ethnic styles."[13] As Charles Keil concurs with his study of polkas among Polish and Mexican-Americans in Milwaukee, different ethnic groups can play and dance to very similar musical forms without even knowing it, while maintaining a socially antagonistic relationship to one another.[14] Indeed, all sorts of combinations are possible, depending upon the conditions in which cultural forms and social, political, and economic relations have developed. North Americans between the world wars were usually totally oblivious to the rich Spanish-language musical production going on right under their noses, unless it was danceable. Most Puerto Ricans, however, were conversant in the popular mainstream styles and artists of the period and even used them as a point of reference for their own. A 1930 ad in New York's major Spanish newspaper, *La Prensa,* for example, billed the popular Cuban singer Antonio Machín as "El Rudy Vallee cubano," that is, the Cuban Rudy Vallee.[15] Clearly, imbalanced power relations between groups and countries can have subtle cultural correlatives, though musical expression is not just reducible to this interpretation.

In fact, music is simultaneously a material and a symbolic phenome-

non. As Raymond Williams and William Roseberry suggest, cultural objects are embedded in a process of creation and reception such that "cultural creation is itself a form of material production, [so] that the abstract distinction between material base and ideal superstructure dissolves in the face of a material social process through which both 'material' and 'ideal' are constantly created and recreated."[16] Songs such as "Lamento Borincano" or, for that matter, "Love for Sale" are, concretely speaking, the mediated products of the entertainment industry. Musicians are workers producing tangible products, and music itself often follows trade routes and is made up of concrete mixes that we can trace. A musical analysis of "Lamento Borincano," for example, would show the influences of Italian opera, Puerto Rican mountain music, and Cuban popular sounds.

And yet music is not reducible to its commercial and genealogical dimensions. By musicological standards, there was nothing particularly Puerto Rican or folkloric about "Lamento Borincano." Nevertheless, many Puerto Ricans immortalized it as a profound expression of national consciousness. Thus, a major aim of this work is to reexamine the causal relationship between music and the social, political, and economic conditions intersecting with it. Though musical production is dependent upon the conditions of what I hesitatingly call this larger setting, it also possesses its own internal dynamics. The lives of musicians are simultaneously based in economics and aesthetics, and their production is both symbolic and concrete. They span both sides of this traditional causal divide and thus provide a significant case study with which we can reevaluate our preconceptions of what produces what. I take pains to show the ways in which musical forms actually serve to articulate and even define social distinctions, a point nicely illustrated in Manuel Peña's study of music among Mexican-Americans in Texas.[17] At the same time, I demonstrate the unpredictability of music, which can often transcend social, economic, and political conditions and class, racial, ethnic, and geographic barriers that its audiences cannot.

There are many ways in which Puerto Rican music, or indeed any ethnic music, both relates to other spheres and yet creates its own. For example, while tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans settled in New York prior to World War II, this migration in no way equaled the one following the war. And yet it was precisely this period between the world wars that produced the most fervently patriotic Puerto Rican music by the most beloved Puerto Rican popular composers of this century.

There were ironies in this music's relationship to other ethnic sounds,

which seemed mainstream by comparison. During economically desperate times, as we have seen, Cab Calloway was earning a thousand dollars a week. But Calloway's theory regarding the direct relationship between hard times and entertainment is foiled when one remembers that Canario and many other artists were probably earning thirty dollars or less in the same week that Calloway pocketed his thousand. In any given time, as well as over time, ethnic musical production is multilayered and subject to a range of influences. The songs created by Rafael Hernández, for example, were as embedded as those of Cole Porter in the record and publishing industries' organization of production and distribution, and yet they were marketed to vastly different audiences and yielded very disparate rewards to their composers.

The way Puerto Ricans made meaning of their music and musicians and how they decided what was an authentic or traditional expression varied between social groups as well as between individuals, always in a dialectic with the concrete conditions under which the music was produced. Music in Puerto Rico was subject to foreign and commercial influences as well as to differences in race, class, and regional development, and in New York it continued to be protean, shaped according to situation and evolving through time. Rather than serving as a unifying force in a dividing or dissolving American ethnic community, music itself was an ongoing source of diverse definitions for Puerto Rican ethnic identity and an arena of contention. Just as the music they created and were exposed to was complex and mediated, so were the responses to it of people with varying and ever-evolving ideas about their cultural identity and Puerto Rican or Latin music's relation to it. On the island blacks and whites, upper and lower classes, danced to the same mixes of Spanish, Cuban, Puerto Rican, European, and North American ballroom music—in separate clubs. Both there and in New York they argued about whether the *plena,* of black "lowlife" origins, was a fitting national music. Some celebrated their Latino identity and the wealth of musical forms it embraced, whereas others, as Puerto Ricans, members of the working or elite classes, blacks or whites, or some combination of the above, bemoaned the lack of a music representing their particular perceived condition.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s there were disputes and disagreements among ethnic musicians, audiences, and industry personnel over what was authentic Puerto Rican music and what ought to be recorded and played at live events. In this work I try to demonstrate the often highly subjective nature of the ethnic cultural experience, an experience

within which ethnic peoples individually mold their collective identities, drawing from a broad repertoire of cultural forms.[18] This experience draws upon the ongoing contact between the old country and the new, a phenomenon that historians often overlook. It is particularly vital, of course, in the case of Puerto Ricans, for political, economic, and geographical reasons.

Throughout this book, I present these arguments through individual portraits within a general consideration of the diversity of Puerto Rican music and the people who helped to bring it into concrete form: composers, performers, audiences, local merchants and club owners, record company executives, and that most elusive of all figures, the ethnic intermediary, who will be explored in his or her various guises throughout this work. In general, I try to capture the complex collaborative though not necessarily cooperative process involved in the creation and reception of musical expression. As Howard S. Becker and other sociologists of cultural production would put it, art is a social activity, and "whether we speak of the collective acts of a few people . . . or those of a much larger number . . . we always need to ask who is acting together to create what events."[19]

The narrative concerns I deal with in the following chapters are of course inseparable from the analytical ones, which are intentionally embedded in the very format of the work, with its thematic rather than chronological chapters and its treatment of issues of causality. For example, in my organization of the narrative I try to reorient the reader's sense of cause and effect, base and superstructure. Instead of providing background chapters on Puerto Rican and New York political, economic, and social history before going on to the music, which would imply that such information is the hidden layer underlying cultural activities, I let the introduction of the lives of musicians and other musical personnel, audiences, and the songs motivate the exploration of other issues. Thus, for example, the examination in chapter 1 of Puerto Rican music's multiple influences and the myriad experiences of musicians leads to a discussion of regional, multinational, and colonial capitalism issues. A look in chapter 2 at the difficult residential and vocational choices facing black Puerto Rican musicians reveals struggles over racial and ethnic identity among Puerto Rican and other Latino settlers in New York. Chapter 4 suggests that songs such as Hernández's "Lamento Borincano" were simultaneously the concrete production of a commercial recording industry, articulators of ethnic identity, and a form of sublimated political protest during a trying period.

In a deeper thematic way, I grapple throughout these chapters with the causal relations between the production and consumption of Puerto Rican music and the social, economic, and political conditions of a particular time and place. I show that Puerto Rican music, like any living cultural form, was always subject to a mix of influences on the island as well as in New York City. North American and Puerto Rican musicians, for example, have for a long time been aware of the existence of each others' music, and neither they nor their audiences have been as reluctant to accept its hybridization as ethnic histories generally lead us to believe. At the same time, many of the forces producing such new and diverse combinations of music, including economic pressures upon musicians and a North American near monopoly of the production of commercial entertainment, have been anything but benign or in the hands of Puerto Ricans. Throughout this book I demonstrate that Puerto Ricans worked within a music business they did not control. At the same time, musicians and audiences made choices that reflected their own intertwined economic and aesthetic motives and musical and social relationships. Puerto Rican composers and performers crafted their own words to these "foreign" musical genres and prided themselves on their ability to please a wide variety of dancers and listeners. Likewise, audiences were proud of their musical *compatriotas* who were successful in their careers. Rather than feeling a sense of anger and ethnic betrayal when Puerto Rican musicians began to play with the Catalan Xavier Cugat or the North American Paul Whiteman, their compatriots, who generally lived in the same neighborhoods and worked in the same daytime jobs, felt that they were bringing credit to the group as a whole, along with money and new sounds into the community. Canario's musicians did not despise him because he adopted the style and songs of others and was not as talented as they were. They were glad his hustling abilities brought them work.

Musical production had its own nuances in the more technical spheres. Influenced by economic downturns or international conditions that cut off supplies of materials and artists, record production was also tremendously affected by changes within the medium itself. Ethnic recording had its own particularities. During the Depression, for example, when other types of record sales plummeted, sales of Spanish-language and other discs stayed steady and even flourished. Never a source of dramatic sales for companies even in the best of times, ethnic records continued to do what they had always done: they provided a means for manufacturers to sell phonographs to homesick U.S. migrants and immi-

grants. The rise of radio, which drastically affected mainstream record sales from the mid-1920s, had little effect on those ethnic groups toward whom few programs were geared at that time.

The history of Puerto Rican music in New York City is thus a history of infinite crossovers and variations on a theme. It is a history that reflects the conditions surrounding it and yet escapes them. Puerto Ricans have defied scholars' longstanding categories by popularizing folk music and folklorizing popular music. To chart some of these fascinating variations and examine their significance is the purpose of this book.