

Worksong of the Caribbean

The lyrics are rarely deep and often bawdy: at least half the songs are about sex. But they have the richness of colour, rhythm and dialect that marks out the best of Caribbean poetry.

—Gregory Salter, “The Loudest Island in the World”

The question of whether there is an underlying unity to the Caribbean region has been a conundrum for many scholars. The people of the Caribbean basin—all the Antilles and some of the continental coastal areas that shape its perimeter—are usually characterized by their diversity: their languages, history, natural environment, cultural expression, political boundaries, and so on. Students of Caribbean literature bow to language differences by neatly separating Caribbean expression into the Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone areas. Important historical records of the region are dispersed in repositories in Spain, France, England, and Holland, making it difficult for researchers to determine historical commonalities.¹ Access to the music of the region, however, is not quite so difficult. We can cautiously argue that while borders may separate people, music nevertheless tends to unite them.

The quotation at the beginning of this introduction—a description of a Caribbean popular music genre—could apply to any number of forms. It might refer to calypso, salsa, *son*, meringue, or *mento*. It points to the common aspects of the popular musics of the basin, which share many rhythmic patterns, instrumental formats, and styles.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk long ago recognized the unifying themes of Caribbean music. Born in New Orleans in 1830, this gifted American composer and pianist came from a family that became split by the revolution in Haiti. Some members remained in Haiti and served in the new independent republic; his maternal grandfather and his mother—an infant at the time—moved first to Jamaica and later relocated to New Orleans. As a child he was exposed to the melodies and rhythms of Haiti,

sung to him by his nanny, a black slave woman who had been brought along by his family from Saint-Domingue. As we shall see, this woman whose name we do not know was perhaps one of the most influential individuals in the history of the development and diffusion of Caribbean music.²

Gottschalk's virtuosity at the piano took him to France at an early age and later to Spain. Beginning in 1854, he took a series of trips to several islands in the Caribbean. Over the next ten years, he visited Trinidad, Haiti, Martinique, and Puerto Rico and lived for extensive periods in Guadeloupe and Cuba. During his travels, Gottschalk encountered the same sounds he had first learned as a child in New Orleans. He absorbed this music with passion and wrote numerous themes based on the music of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Guadeloupe. Far from being a "culture cannibal," Gottschalk promoted and helped local musicians wherever he went and became a close friend and collaborator of the leading musicians of the area. Gottschalk organized orchestras and concerts in city after city in the "repeating islands" of this Mediterranean Sea. On one occasion, he organized a concert in Havana with hundreds of musicians, including a team of more than forty percussionists from Santiago who were paid to travel six hundred miles to the west. At this megaconcert, the orchestra performed his *Night in the Tropics* symphony, composed some time earlier during a one-year retreat in Guadeloupe. The Bard of the Tropics, as he came to be called, wrote numerous *contradanzas*, and his works are peppered with the sounds of the tango and the *cinquillo*.³ Through his work, the common sounds of the Caribbean were further diffused throughout the area, even to islands that he never visited. Gottschalk's compositions, it has been reported, were among the best-selling music in the major music store in Curaçao in the late nineteenth century.⁴

What explains Gottschalk's wide-ranging musical repertoire and popularity? Was he unique? And what might he tell us about national and transnational cultural patterns in the Caribbean region?

I would say that the development and diffusion of Caribbean musical modes owes also to the economic conditions of life throughout the

region: the interregional migration of labor and, especially, the work of slaves or wage laborers in sugarcane fields and on coffee farms. The corpus of Caribbean genres—*son*, *mento*, calypso, meringue, *bomba*, and so forth—can be seen as the distinct, national worksongs of the entire region, created by the same people whose muscle, nerve, and sweat supported the fabric of these different yet similar societies.

The legendary settlement of the Palenque de San Basilio, near the city of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, illustrates how music and the people that make it and share it can transcend geographical distance and political boundaries. The entire Atlantic littoral of Colombia, from Barranquilla to the Gulf of Urabá, witnessed numerous and extensive rebellions by African slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which led to the formation of independent communities, or *palenques*. The present community of San Basilio dates its inception to a successful slave insurrection that took place in the first years of the seventeenth century. The *palenqueros* successfully fought off attacks by the Spaniards, who agreed to grant them autonomy in 1603. Further attempts by colonial authorities to regain control failed until, in the early 1700s, the Spaniards were forced finally to ratify local autonomy.⁵ San Basilio remained fairly autonomous until increased economic relations with the outside world began to encroach upon the settlement in the early twentieth century.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the music of the Cuban *son* spread by way of recordings and films throughout Latin America. The *son* took root in numerous areas of the Atlantic coast of Colombia, aided by the migration of Cubans connected to the production of sugarcane to the area. Local *sextetos* and *septetos de son* soon developed. In Palenque de San Basilio, a *sexteto* was formed in the 1930s that remains active to this day. The repertory of these groups is essentially the *son* and the *bolero-son*. The instruments in these *sextetos* match those common to Cuban groups: claves, maracas, guitar, bongos, and so forth.⁶

A number of factors help explain how and why the Cuban *son* was so readily adopted on the Colombian coast. The rhythm of the music was carried—like much African-derived musics—on skin drums played by

hand. Popular commercial films showed the Cuban musicians to be largely blacks and mulattoes, like much of the population of the Atlantic littoral and unlike the people from the Colombian highlands. The lyrics were sung in a Caribbean Spanish closer to the local dialect than the sound of highland Colombian Spanish. The songs spoke of work in the cane fields and of eating poor people's staple foods such as cassava and plantains. In short, the music contained musical and cultural elements for which coastal people could feel a strong affinity.

We can surmise that in spite of, or rather because of, its Cuban origin, this music—together with its characteristic instruments and repertory—came to be adopted as a local traditional form on the Colombian coast. *Son* and *bolero-son* are included as such in Colombian anthologies of regional folklore. Common historical and musical roots and affinity also explain why in recent years the Atlantic coast of Colombia has also contributed greatly to the developing sound of salsa—a hybrid of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other musics from the Spanish Caribbean. Thus, in the Colombian Caribbean coast, we witness the peaceful coexistence of national and transnational musical identities, simultaneously Colombian and Cuban.

Caribbean music has traversed not only political borders but linguistic boundaries as well. In the late 1700s, the greatest of all *palestino* rebellions took place in the French colony of Saint-Domingue. This movement culminated in the creation of the first independent republic of Latin America and led, as is often the case during revolutionary times, to an exodus that involved every stratum of the population. Sugar and coffee planters and slaves, as well as free peasant and working-class blacks and mulattoes, scattered, and the musical and cultural ripples connected to this event are still being felt, sometimes in surprising ways, throughout the sea of the Antilles and beyond.

Some of the French-speaking planters fleeing the Haitian independence movement went to Spanish Puerto Rico, where they set up plantations to continue the cultivation of sugarcane and coffee. Today on the island of Puerto Rico there exists a musical form, a drum, and a

Example 1. *Cinquillo*Example 2. *Bomba* composite rhythm (two or three supporting drums)

dance all known as the *bomba*, which, in the last fifty years, came to be regarded as one of the most characteristic expressions of the national folklore. The structure of the traditional or folkloric *bomba* is held together by a rhythmic pattern—known as *cinquillo*—played by sticks on a wood block, although this is not always done in modern orchestrations of this rhythm (exx. 1 and 2). Researchers who have investigated the historical roots of the *bomba* drums and dances have all agreed the rhythms played on these drums were performed by slaves and free black workers who were brought, or who came on their own, to work on the Puerto Rican island following Haitian independence.⁷

Bomba established a Puerto Rican national tradition as well as contributed to the development of transnational salsa. The *bomba* became part of mass popular music in Puerto Rico due largely to the work of bandleader Rafael Cortijo in the 1950s. It worked its way into salsa especially in compositions by Nuyorican bandleader Willie Colón. In 1994, two hundred years after the beginning of the Haitian revolution, a Grammy Award was given in the United States to the Cuban American singer Gloria Estefan for her CD *Mi tierra*. The *bomba* rhythm—so closely associated with Puerto Rican folklore—may be heard behind the title song, with its lyrics that speak repeatedly of Cuban themes, Cuban traditions, and the general nostalgia of Cuban Americans for their island homeland.

The historic-musical record can help unravel this interwoven cultural fabric. More or less simultaneous with the Haiti–Puerto Rico migration, another inter-Antillean migration occurred. A broad group of fleeing Saint-Domingue planters, along with their slaves, free black peasants, and employees, resettled in the old province of Oriente in eastern Cuba. There the transplanted planters began coffee production, especially around the cities of Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo. There, too, a musical tradition developed in communities of slaves, free black peasants, and workers based upon the drums, rhythms, and traditions brought over from Haiti. The music played at these *sociedades*, some of which are still active in Santiago and Guantánamo, is known as *tumba francesa*.

The *tumba francesa* contains rhythmic figures and a “feel” that became part of Cuba’s musical heritage (ex. 3). Its drums, drumbeats, and percussive figures on accompanying sticks are similar to those of the Puerto Rican *bomba*. In the orchestral arrangements, the bass lines of the *bomba* and the Cuban *montuno* follow the same pattern. These musical clues, based on historical events, can help decipher the conundrum of why, as in the case of Gloria Estefan’s interpretation of “Mi tierra,” a tune based on a “Puerto Rican” rhythm of “Haitian” ancestry could resonate so strongly among Cubans. It constitutes another example of the multifaceted Caribbean sensibility. The tune could be identified—depending on the audience—as either Cuban or as belonging to a pan-Latino genre that includes Spanish-speaking peoples from all regions of the Caribbean.⁸

Direct memories of the politico-economic exodus from Haiti have long receded. Yet, as the above examples suggest, a collective musical memory remains. This cultural inheritance originating in the music of some of those who migrated from the French colony continues to influence the popular music of the entire Spanish-speaking Caribbean to this day.

The irony is that people who fled the movement for national independence in Haiti helped preserve, albeit unwittingly, musical forms

Example 3. *Tumba francesa*

that would evolve to symbolize notions of independence and national identity among other Antilleans. The development of the genre known as the *danzón* constitutes a particularly telling example of this irony and exemplifies the continuing cultural impact of the Haitian revolution and the migration that followed in its wake.⁹

A year after Gloria Estefan's *Mi tierra* received a Grammy, the first Grammy awarded under the category of Latin jazz went to a CD entitled *Danzón (Dance On)*. A few years before, a Mexican film also called *Danzón* had won a number of international awards.¹⁰ The genealogy of the *danzón* and its characteristic rhythmic patterns provide a road map of the ways in which music in the Caribbean evolved as working musicians traveled through language and political barriers.

In the 1700s, "society" dance in the Antillean colonies was dominated by the European *contredanse*. The origins of this form are somewhat obscure, but most authors trace it to the English "country dance" of the seventeenth century. The form provided inspiration to a number of European art music composers, notably Mozart. In the eighteenth century, *contredanse* became the favored dance in European courts and salons, thereby making it obligatory for the elite planter society in the colonies to follow suit. The *contredanse* in Saint-Domingue and Cuba, the two major European colonies in the Caribbean in the eighteenth century, was modified in its interpretation by working musicians—mostly black and mulatto—whose reinvention creolized the form.¹¹

The settlement of wealthy planters from Saint-Domingue in eastern Cuba in the early 1800s provided an impetus for musical activities in that area. All over Cuba, French was the prestige language of the salons, and things French commanded respect and adulation in elite circles. The creolized version of the *contredanse* imported from Haiti would fuse

Example 4. Habanera (ancestor of tango)



with and reinforce the local *criollo* version over the next several decades.¹² Rhythmic cells such as the tango, habanera, and *cinquillo* became dominant patterns in the newly emerging styles (ex. 4).

This evolution led to the development of the Cuban *contradanza*, a form that “exuded sensuousness,”¹³ and later, in 1879, the *danzón*, a couples dance regarded as the first truly “national” Cuban dance genre. Thus, one hundred years after the anti-independence planter elite brought the *contradance* out of Saint-Domingue, its descendant, the *danzón*, had become identified with the Cuban independence movement against Spain.

These musical genres did get around. The *contradanza*—in particular the rhythmic figure known as the tango or habanera beat—was an important component of early jazz. Composer and pianist Jelly Roll Morton pointed to this rhythm when he declared that in the early jazz of New Orleans (a Caribbean city), there was always a certain “Spanish tinge.” W. C. Handy used the tango beat in his “Saint Louis Blues.” The heir to the *contradanza*, the *danzón*, spread quickly. In 1881, two years after it was first composed in Matanzas, Cuba, *danzón* sheet music was for sale in music stores in New Orleans. *Danzón* took root in Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century, where it became part of the local heritage in another Caribbean city, Veracruz. It became the “society” dance of choice throughout the Spanish Caribbean in the first half of the century.¹⁴

We must note that rhythmic cells characteristic of the *contradanza* and the *danzón* are also present in other Caribbean dance genres, namely the merengue in the Dominican Republic and the calypso in Trinidad. These various styles arose probably as a combination of inter-Caribbean diffusion resulting from multiple inter-island labor migra-

tions and independent developments from common roots.¹⁵ They became differentiated over time as local musicians infused basically similar rhythms with a different feel, varying cadences, tempos, and local melodies.

Diffusion of already similar instruments, styles, formats, and rhythms has continued in the twentieth century. Musicologist Kenneth Bilby tells us, for example, that “in its original form, played in the eastern part of Cuba, the *son* sounds rather similar to *mento* as played by a Jamaican string band.”¹⁶ Bilby also finds “Cuban influence . . . suggested by the frequent use of what is called a ‘rumba box’ in Jamaica.”¹⁷ Conversely, other scholars have pointed to the presence of Jamaican-style drums and terminology in popular music and instrumentation in eastern Cuba. A prominent *comparsa* of Santiago’s carnival features a *toque de Obía*, strongly suggesting an allusion to Jamaica’s *obeah*.¹⁸

These cultural links should not come as a surprise. Maroon communities, independent contraband commerce, and the development of creolized centers fairly removed from colonial control were centered in areas of Haiti, the north coast of Jamaica, and eastern Cuba for centuries, allowing for extensive contact and interaction among the peoples of the region.¹⁹ In the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Jamaican workers were, legally and illegally, imported to work in eastern Cuba in the cane fields and as domestic servants in cities such as Santiago and Guantánamo. For several decades, this labor force traveled back and forth between the two islands, with unavoidable cultural exchange by-products.

In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, a much larger migration of workers went from Haiti to Cuba to labor in cane fields and coffee farms in old Oriente province. Haitian celebrations, such as the Easter *rara* parades, instruments, and religious practices took root in rural areas of eastern Cuba.²⁰ The Cuban *son* became popular in Haiti via return migration and radio broadcasts.

By the 1950s, important exponents of Cuban popular dance music were traveling to Haiti for long performance engagements: singer

Celia Cruz, trumpeter Chocolate Armenteros, percussionists Rolando LaSerie and Cándido Requena, pianists Peruchín Jústiz and Bebo Valdés, and many others. The foremost rhythmic pattern in Cuban music, the clave, found its way into the Haitian meringue, which, like the old Jamaican *mento*, sometimes became nearly indistinguishable from its cousin across the Windward Passage. In the last twenty years, diffusion of music across language barriers has become institutionalized by way of various festivals that feature Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone popular musics.²¹

Popular music has allowed some Caribbean people both to enjoy a national identity in their respective countries and to share a common identification with musics from nearby and distant regions within the basin. An interwoven social history and the development of national popular music styles inform one another: the social history of migration helps explain cultural patterns and shared sensibilities, while musical history and forms illuminate cultural agents of change and identity formation. The history and evolution of popular music provides a running commentary to centuries of slavery and wage work, in cane fields or in coffee farms, in rural areas and in the cities. Caribbean popular music can be interpreted as an overarching musical riff, a repetitive worksong that helps tie us together and interrelate a set of revolutions, economic changes, and labor migrations spanning five centuries.