



“QUEEN OF SALSA”: CELIA CRUZ

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The career of Celia Cruz and her influence on Latin American musical culture.

Celia Cruz (1924–2003), the great Cuban salsa singer, was one of the most popular Latin American musical figures of the twentieth century. An examination of her career reveals six elements of her extraordinary influence.

CRUZ’S UNDERSTANDING OF POPULAR TASTE

Celia Cruz had an exceptional knack for recognizing popular trends in dance music. This talent allowed her to make major contributions to the musical heritage of Cuba and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

One challenge in the world of popular music is ascertaining whether one tune or another will receive mass approval and become a hit. Ever-changing musical tastes and their unpredictability go with the popular music territory. A few exceptional musicians have possessed the ability to capture riffs, phrases, and melodies that grabbed the immediate attention of listeners and dancers. In the realm of Cuban popular dance music, Celia Cruz was such a musician.

Cruz was not merely a vocalist with a great voice who just happened to record a large number of hits, including “Burundanga,” “Sopa en botella,” “Caramelo,” “Quimbara,” and “Yerberero Moderno.” She personally selected each of the tunes that became a hit, often against the advice of composers and promoters who wanted her to record something else. She studied the lyrics and music of the songs brought to her attention, sang them to herself, and made her own decisions about which to record. One such song was composed in *bembé*, or 6/8 rhythm, by Oscar Bouffartique,

a violinist, pianist, and music teacher well-known to professional musicians but neither a successful composer nor a household name with the public. Although using *bembé* in popular songs was deemed risky—the rhythm was considered too slow and, perhaps worse, was identified with near-hermetic sacred Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies—Cruz insisted on recording Bouffartique’s “Burundanga,” which immediately became one of the emblematic recordings of 1950s Havana.

Cruz’s carefully selected *sones* and *guarachas* (popular Cuban song genres) became so popular throughout the Caribbean basin that they eventually became part of the cultural heritage, not just in Cuba but in major Caribbean cities known for their musical tradition—Ponce, Puerto Rico; Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic; Veracruz, Mexico; Cartagena and Barranquilla, Colombia; and Puerto Limón, Costa Rica.

CRUZ AND CUBAN BROADCASTING

Cruz’s contribution to Cuban music dates back to the beginning of her career in the 1940s when she sang for Havana radio station Mil Diez. In the mid-1940s the newly legalized Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) launched a radio station that came to be known, because of its location in the radio bandwave (1010 AM), as Mil Diez. Historians of Cuban popular music generally acknowledge that Mil Diez programming signified a major change in the music available on the radio. The station featured music styles, orchestras, and artists that had not previously had access to the airwaves. It had no commercial interruptions and projected a populist style, which appeal to the Cuban public. It was on Mil Diez that the composers associated with the *movimiento del “feeling”* (“feeling” movement) first performed their songs; jazz also became a regular part of the daily programming, which emphasized the latest innovations in dance music popular among working-class listeners. Antonio Arcaño’s *danzón de nuevo ritmo*, Arsenio Rodríguez’s *son montuno*, and the popular Afro-sones. Arcaño y sus Maravillas, Arsenio Rodríguez, and the Trío Matamoros with Benny Moré were among the prominent artists whose music was often broadcast

■ See also

Cuban Singers in the United States

Diasporas: Afro-Cubans in the Diaspora

Miami

Music: Afro-Cuban Religious Influence on Cuban Popular Music



Celia Cruz (1924–2003). The Cuban-born queen of salsa, Celia Cruz, came to embody the essence of Afro-Cuban popular music and “tropical” dance music throughout Latin America. CHRISTIAN AUGUSTIN/ACTION PRESS/ ZUMA PRESS/NEWSCOM

by Mil Diez. Moreover, all the music on Mil Diez was live; no recorded music was broadcast.

Cruz was part of Mil Diez’s select roster of artists. She sang accompanied by the station’s band, directed by notable Cuban conductor and violinist Enrique González Manti, and featuring the young *bongosero* Ramón “Mongo” Santamaría. Through Mil Diez the Cuban public listened for the first time to Cruz’s deep contralto voice. Some of her live performances have survived, mostly in the form of Afro-sones such as “El cabildo de la Mercé,” “Pa’ congrí,” “Tuñaré,” and “Mi Iyale.” The popularity of Cruz and the rest of the Mil Diez performers led other major radio stations to develop similar programming, often hiring musicians away from Mil Diez. By the end of the 1940s, Cuba’s musical panorama had changed substantially, thanks in part to Cruz and the other artists who made their start at Mil Diez.

INTRODUCTION OF AFRO-CUBAN MUSIC TO A WHITE AUDIENCE

In the 1950s, Celia Cruz helped transform the sound of the Sonora Matancera, an ensemble that acted as a musical bridge, bringing an Afro-son light to white dancing audiences.

One of the oldest of the Cuban *son conjuntos* (“Cuban sound” bands), the Sonora Matancera played music with a slow-to-medium tempo. It was a simple sound that allowed the ensemble to accompany various singers over the years. The Sonora sound, always played on the beat, did not have the syncopated accents and off-beats that characterized Arsenio Rodríguez’s conjunto. In the argot of Cuban musicians, while both Arsenio and the Sonora were high-quality ensembles, Rodríguez’s group was compact and energetic, a *conjunto macho*. La Sonora, by contrast, was a *conjunto hembra* (“feminine” band), and a conservative one at that, perhaps the last conjunto to add conga drums in the late 1940s. Other musicians referred to the Sonora Matancera as *música fácil* (easy listening), *música para*

blancos (music for whites), or even more negatively *música de caballitos* (merry-go-round music). Music connoisseurs of the 1940s and 1950s claimed that black Cubans never danced to the Sonora Matancera. And it was indeed the case that the Sonora Matancera, an all-black ensemble, played largely for audiences at white Spanish society events, including the Sociedad Artística Gallega (Galician Artistic Society) and other society functions.

After joining La Sonora, Cruz chose catchy *guaracha* tunes played at a fast pace, adding her rhythmic vocal improvisations and restrained *sabrosura* (flavor). As the composer and musician Ned Sublette has noted, Cruz made the Sonora sound blacker (p. 575); at the same time, she was not one of the local *locas* like Juana Bacallao who wore a platinum wig fifty years before Cruz dared do the same. Cruz did not drink or smoke and did not engage in the daring theatrics of other female performers of the time such as Bacallao and, later, La Lupe. These qualities made her nonthreatening to white Havana society. Thus, for the first time, a black female singer from a working-class Havana neighborhood became a leading entertainer at sedate Spanish dance locations in Havana.

CREATION OF A TRANSNATIONAL POPULAR MUSICAL CULTURE

Through her voice, music, and songs, Celia Cruz transnationalized Latin American folklore and music to create a greater sense of Pan-American unity. Cruz was a fan of all Latin American popular music, especially Venezuelan and Colombian folkloric compositions, and the songs of Colombia’s Lucho Bermúdez. She recorded songs from all over Latin America, including the Brazilian tune “Usted Abusó,” the *ranchera* “Tú y las nubes,” and the Peruvian “Toro Mata.” She added her passion for Latin American folklore and traditions to the Cuban-Caribbean core of her music. Her most successful recordings with Johnny Pacheco, Willie Colón, and Papo Lucca were mixtures of Cuban guarachas, Dominican *merengues*, Puerto Rican *bombas*, and songs from Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and elsewhere. These mixtures became the essence of the new concept of salsa, which served to build bridges among various Latino communities, especially in the United States. Salsa also became a form of cultural defense against the dominant and diluting influences of the easy pop and rock music originating in the United States.

Cruz transformed the Peruvian classic “Fina Estampa” into a Latin American hit, and she made “A papá” into much more than just another bomba by Mon Rivera. Through her direct artistic intervention, she contributed to the development of a Latin American feeling of unity centering on salsa and Cuban music. In the last three decades of her career, Cruz used her performances and recordings to become an ambassador for Latin American music as audiences around the world learned to identify her shout of *Azúcar!* as emblematic of the sound of salsa.

CIRCUMSPECTION ABOUT GENDER ISSUES

Though Cruz was a musical innovator, her contributions to the emerging debate over issues of feminism and gender representation were largely symbolic and limited by her perception of what the market could bear. Throughout her life, Cruz maintained a polished conservative appearance and carefully managed her public image. Thus, in matters pertaining to the public representation of black women's sexuality or issues related to race relations, she was circumspect and market-savvy.

Curiously, at the beginning and at the end of her career, she was involved in performances that touched on the subject of beautiful black female bodies—in both cases, through a traditional male gaze. After her work at Mil Diez, Cruz appeared at Havana's Teatro Fausto in *Sinfonía en blanco y negro* (Symphony in White and Black), a show choreographed by the famed Roderico Neyra, with music by Bobby Collazo. Other performers included vocalists Elena Burke and Xiomara Alfaro. The show featured a group of attractive young *mulatas* (mulattas, or mixed-race women) dancing to popular hits sung by Cruz. The show was a great success, running for two years, during which time it was renamed *Mulatas de Fuego*. An idiomatic translation might be "Hot Chocolates," the original Spanish conveying a "hot" sexuality that is both gendered and racialized as not white and not black. The show's title was another expression of that persistently fetishized Cuban icon, the mulata. According to those who saw it, the beautiful mulatas performed nicely choreographed, highly sexualized, provocative dances. Cruz's accompaniment of the show's stellar attractions cast her almost in the role of observer, allowing her to keep her distance physically and figuratively, while singing with her usual and proper *sandunga* (grace and elegance).

More than fifty years later, while Cruz was struggling with the last stages of terminal cancer, she released a CD and DVD featuring "La Negra tiene tumbao." Much had changed in half a century: nudity, sexual tension, and erotic fantasies characterized the song's video. However, Cruz's performance recalled in many ways her earlier supporting role for the dancing *mulatas*. In "La negra tiene tumbao," she also maintains her distance; she is not a participant in the video itself. Her role is that of an observer whose singing provides commentary on the body of the model-like black woman featured in the short segment, praising the way she moves and walks. In spite of these obvious parallels, Cruz's participation this time was subtly but significantly different. Her fame and advanced age—she was over eighty years old when the video was produced—graced her with a grandmotherly aura and the calm authority for commenting directly and effusively on the beauty of the model she affectionately calls *negrita*.

For some in the Cuban-American community, Cruz went too far by participating in this steamy

video. But she and her advisers understood that the video was a way to reach and sell to a younger generation that had grown up in the worlds of hip hop and MTV. In the same vein, the strongly sexualized portrayal of the young woman in the video may have offended those holding on to a more progressive representation of gender. Yet, as Monika Gosin has suggested, Cruz's "La Negra tiene tumbao" saluted, albeit in a limited way, the spice, sexiness, and positive self-image of black women (p. 162). In any case, it may have been unrealistic to expect her, after a sixty-year career and in the twilight of her life, to suddenly abandon her tried-and-true sense of the market in favor of the critical perspective of the academy.

The same dictates applied in connection with issues of black pride: Insofar as Cruz addressed this theme, it had more to do with market conditions than with political consciousness. Cruz was interpreted differently by different audiences, and she carefully managed these differences. Thus, she was careful not to publicize among her white Cuban American fans in Miami her 1970s performance with the Fania All-Stars in Zaire on the occasion of the Ali-Foreman heavyweight championship "Rumble in the Jungle." But she also had a powerful audience base among Latin Americans of color in New York, Los Angeles, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Panama, Ecuador, and elsewhere. Those audiences went into a frenzy when they interpreted her "Bemba Colorá," as a sardonic recognition of the shared blackness of all African-descended peoples of the Americas.

Decades earlier, Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén's political poem "Negro Bembón" had lovingly reproached black people for their self-consciousness about their physical features. It may well be that Cruz, in a less politically conscious way, struck a similar note with "Bemba Colorá," while reaching a much broader audience. Because of the powerful market response to the song, she made "Bemba Colorá" one of her signature performance pieces.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF LATIN JAZZ

Cruz professed not to care for jazz. In the late 1970s, she expressed her disappointment when the Cuban band Irakere received a Latin music Grammy award for which she had also been nominated. While she had no standing in the world of Latin jazz, the growth of the genre in South America was made easier after Cuban dance music had taken root there, allowing local musicians in many countries to absorb its rhythmic elements. While the styles of Machito and Arsenio Rodríguez found a home in the United States, the laid-back, less syncopated sound of Cruz and her backup band, the Sonora Matancera, were popular in Mexico and South America. Cruz thus played an important, although perhaps unwitting, role in connecting Afro-Cuban rhythms to Latin jazz. She helped

lay the foundation that allowed generations of younger musicians to experiment and develop new avenues for this music of the Americas.

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This entry includes the following articles:



RACE: INTRODUCTION

As in much of the Americas, notions of race are historically linked to the institution of slavery. Cuba is no exception. One of the last countries in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery (1886), Cuba has struggled with this legacy even as it has embraced its African heritage as being central to Cuban culture.

RACE: SLAVERY IN CUBA

Cuba, paradoxically, has been called the whitest and blackest island in the Caribbean: whitest because a large segment (from 50 to 70 percent) is of European descent, especially compared to the French- and English-speaking Caribbean where whites are less than 5 percent of the population; blackest because in certain manifestations of its culture (religion, music, folklore, language) it shows profound African influences. Cuba also had a significant population of free people of color even during times of slavery.

RACE: FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR IN CUBA

RACE: RACIAL ISSUES DURING THE TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE

Upon its independence, Cuba sought to define itself. People of African descent and a small, but significant, Chinese community became more important in delineating Cuba's cultural and national identity. Black writers, scholars, and artists began to have an increasing voice in the national dialogue, even if, as a group, black, Chinese, and mestizo populations often felt the brunt of discrimination and poverty.

RACE: AFRO-CUBANÍA IN THE REPUBLIC, 1907–1959

RACE: RACE RELATIONS AFTER THE REVOLUTION

The Revolution of 1959 made large strides for black and mixed-race Cubans by eliminating many public barriers to discrimination: in the workplace, education, health, and public spaces (beaches, parks, clubs, etc.). However, subtler forms of discrimination persisted, aggravated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent economic crises.

RACE: THE CHINESE IN CUBA

RACE: INTRODUCTION

Alan West-Durán

An overview of how race is viewed in Cuba, especially from the perspective of Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation and later views that challenge it.

Like all societies that were once slave states, Cuba was divided along class, gender, and especially racial lines. Notions of citizenship were racialized

in colonial times, when Spanish *casta* paintings and racial classificatory regimes detailed an obsessively minute taxonomy based on the amounts of European, African, Chinese, and indigenous ancestry that a person had. When Cuba became independent, the racial classifications were simplified to black, white, and mixed race (mulatto, mestizo). Yet, like other societies in the region, Cuban society is affected by *shadeism*, and it has a plethora of terms to capture even slight variations in skin tones and features.

For much of the twentieth century Cuba, like Brazil, was depicted as a racial democracy—a view later