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## *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music*

By David F. Garcia  
 Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006  
 274 pages: \$25.95 [paper]

**REVIEWER:** HALBERT BARTON, Long Island University

As a young boy in Cuba, Arsenio Rodríguez, was kicked in the head and blinded by a donkey. Later, he was dubbed The Marvelous Blind Man (El Ciego Maravilloso), and became known for his aggressive musical style. David F. Garcia claims that this theme shaped Arsenio's approach to music: "dale cocimiento" (p. 135), he would say to his musicians, meaning "let's kick some ass" (p. 50).

Despite his visual impairment it was not uncommon for Arsenio to get into fistfights. His brother Kiki once saved him from a potentially fatal beating and spent several years in jail for stabbing to death his assailant. The perennially pugnacious Arsenio continued to fight back through his music, especially against the whitewashing

of Afro-Cuban musical heritage. He also fought against the profound disrespect he encountered daily as a working-class Black man in a musical industry dominated by *mundeles* (“white men” in Congolese) and their anointed mambo kings (i.e. pretenders to the throne).

“Abre kuto guiri mambo” (p. 50) he would say in his Congo-Spanish creole: open your ears and listen to what I’m going to tell you. “No Spanish...African! African!” (p.22). Creator of the modern *conjunto* ensemble, founder of mambo, virtuoso *tres* player, brilliant composer and arranger, Rodríguez had an enormous impact on 20th-century popular music. By the same token, he was stubborn as a mule, refusing to take a few simple steps that would have given him wider appeal. Bucking the emerging 1960s trend towards accelerated tempos, as in the hands of Eddie Palmieri’s *La Perfecta*, he forcefully stayed put in a laid-back sound that gave free rein to inspired improvisations from musicians as well as dancers. While he always had a core of devoted fans, especially among Afro-Cuban dancers and other Afro-Latin *cognoscenti* in New York who fully appreciated his genius, including Larry “El Judio Maravilloso” Harlow, he never achieved the fame of his musical progeny. Sadly, he died in relative poverty and obscurity, far from home in California, an archetype of neglect. His central role in the musical innovations of mambo had been largely passed over, and his stylistic developments in Cuban *son* music percolated into Buena Vista Social Club fame (over 7 million discs sold) twenty-five years after his death. However, the music that he pioneered had become a world favorite without him getting his full due. Garcia provides the evidence with which to interrogate this neglect and finally give him the respect he so richly deserves. While Arsenio is mentioned frequently in histories of Latin pop, his contributions have never been studied in depth. Garcia shows how the story of Arsenio underlies the foundation of not only salsa, but also the early 21st-century rage for traditional Cuban *son*. In doing so, Garcia gives the man the book-length treatment he deserves.

In the Introduction, Garcia states that his main purpose is to address “the conflict in his volatile professional career and his music’s long-term significance to Cuban and Latin popular music history” (p.3).

Chapter 1, “I Was Born of Africa”, situates Arsenio’s music within an African diasporic framework, explicitly Congolese. The lyrics to his musical compositions were full of references to his Congolese heritage, including his spiritual connections to Palo Monte, a Congo-based religion founded by enslaved Africans in 19th century Cuba. Arsenio’s outspokenness was especially mordant in that he consistently affirmed both his Cuban and African identities, often at the same time.

Chapter 2, “Negro y Macho,” looks closely at how Arsenio’s music embodied a critique of the whitened and emasculated sound of the so-called mambo kings. By contrast, Arsenio, the founder of the basic core of mambo and *son montuno*, had a sound that was considered by his fans to be more black and more masculine. Garcia argues that he achieves this sound from the use of *contratiempo*, playing against the beat. The chapter describes the masterful tones that run through all his compositions and performances. The chapter also unravels the expectations of performer and audience, where the musical sense of “home” is Black African, working-class, and Cuban.

Chapter 3, “Who’s Who in Mambo?” looks at Arsenio’s career in relation to the mambo kings of the pop culture imagination: Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez, Pérez Prado, and Machito. Garcia shows how mambo, Latin jazz, and salsa are all inconceivable without Arsenio. Others have laid claim to the authorship of mambo

(Cachao, et al.), but Garcia finds that Arsenio had developed the core elements.

Chapter 4, “Remembering the Past...,” goes deeper into the details of Arsenio’s life history as recorded in interviews. Garcia pays special attention to the last ten years of his life, tracing his journeys from New York, Chicago, Curazao, and Puerto Rico to his final stop in Los Angeles. Garcia shows how Arsenio’s core audience during the 1960s was a more mature audience, more motivated by longing, as opposed to the youthful excitement that accompanied the emerging restless and rowdy sounds of *pachanga*, boogaloo, and salsa. Arsenio’s music represented a sort of comfort food for an audience steeped in the bittersweet experience of migration.

Chapter 5, “Salsa...,” looks at Arsenio’s music in relation to the development of salsa in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution and the chill of the Cold War. Garcia looks closely at many reasons why Arsenio was unable to fully cash in on his innovations. Racial discrimination by producers appears to have been a factor, even as younger salsa musicians recorded his music. The new music sometimes paid tribute to Arsenio even as the new arrangements selectively poached from his repertoire.

The Conclusion is particularly valuable to those who want to understand the connections between Arsenio and the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon. The role of the Netherlands Antilles, particularly Curazao, is shown to have an especially critical role. In Curazao, the love for Arsenio’s music never completely retreated into nostalgia, having been sustained by migrant workers traveling back from Cuba. The influential Cuban group Sierra Maestra, who led the global rediscovery of son in the 1990s, had incorporated the flavor of Arsenio music and achieved great fame in Curazao, which became a testing ground for receiving approval from hard-core fans.

Garcia’s tightly organized and concise book is based on over a hundred interviews, and makes use of over a dozen interview transcriptions from other sources. His most valuable source appears to have been Arsenio’s brother, Raúl Travieso, to whom Garcia dedicates the book. Travieso’s eyewitness accounts give Garcia’s commentaries depth and breadth to his analyses.

One of the strengths of Garcia’s book is that he provides a window not just into the life of Arsenio, but also into the contexts in which he lived. How is it possible that his life could have ended so unceremoniously? Many musicians may see him as one of the giants of twentieth-century music, and he has received a few posthumous tributes in this spirit, but his musical innovations did not translate directly into success as a performer. Yet the commercial boom of the Buena Vista Social Club albums, which have Arsenio written all over them (and not just in the compositions), shows the enduring appeal of his characteristic style and tone... earthy, vibrant, achingly rich, and transcendent.

Garcia approaches the life of this individual in the context of racial and ethnic dynamics in Cuba and the United States. Neither strictly biographical (where cultural context recedes) nor macro-sociological (where individuals are muted), the book succeeds in a “history of the person” approach whereby individuals, whether ordinary or extraordinary, are agents and witnesses of large scale sociopolitical events and circumstances such as the Cuban Revolution, the Cold War, Latin American migration to the United States, and the U.S. civil rights movement.

Garcia argues persuasively against the tendency to pigeonhole music according to national, or even regional, classification. Nor is he merely celebrating Arsenio’s music as part of a universal language. By detailing the scope and trajectory of Arsenio’s life, he shows how rhizomes (horizontal, synchronic connections) can matter as much as taproots (vertical, diachronic connections). What his transnational perspective brings to

the study of Arsenio's life and work is a heightened attention to the interaction between different local groups and institutions across and within national borders. New York City, in particular, is a favored site for transnational (not to mention translocal, transethnic, etc.) analysis, full of localities that may be temporary, performative, in transit. The exigencies of life as a musician dictate, to a great extent, how one must travel. Arsenio had to "ramble," just like his musical kin to the north and west.

Garcia also emphasizes things that tend to get left out of biographies of famous musicians—the integral roles of dance, spirituality (Palo Monte in this case), and the transnational flows of culture that sustain particular musical traditions (e.g., the Cuba/Curacao connection). Many will find that the book provokes further interest in the role of Palo Monte in Cuban music. The material is tantalizing, as not much has been written about this topic in English.

Whereas dance is traditionally thought as optional or external to the music, in Arsenio's mambo the musicians are locked into the dancer's footwork by the emphasis on *contratiempo*. Generally, it is not obvious how important dance is to *son montuno*, but Garcia makes a strong argument about a subtle phenomenon that would escape the untrained eye and ear. His analysis of how the dance steps interlock with the off-beat phrasing of the music is especially noteworthy.

Overall, *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music* is a terrific biography that painstakingly traces Arsenio's profound contributions to the growth of Latin popular music. The book was awarded a 2007 Certificate of Merit for Best Research in Recorded Folk, Ethnic, or World Music from the Association for Recorded Sound. Published in the Temple University series "Studies in Latin American and Caribbean Music," it combines strong ethnomusicology, musical analysis and notation, and great contextualization of people, places, and sounds. While the writing is a bit too dry to attract many readers beyond his core audience, the book is deeply informative and most appropriate for serious researchers. Some of the most interesting material (for general readers) appears tacked on at the end of the book and in the endnotes, but this also rewards those who follow through to the end.

While many salsa lovers have at least heard of Arsenio Rodríguez, they will learn a lot from this book. I would expect many readers with strong interests in Latin/Caribbean music, the African/Congolese diaspora, Cuban studies, and U.S. Latino studies to find this book a good and rewarding read.

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### ***Straight Outta Puerto Rico: Reggaeton's Rough Road to Glory***

Directed by James Chankin and Leigh Savidge

Produced by James Chankin

Santa Monica, CA: Xenon Pictures, 2008

71 minutes; 19.98 [dvd]

**REVIEWER:** MARISOL LEBRÓN, New York University

*Straight Outta Puerto Rico: Reggaeton's Rough Road to Glory* is the first feature-length documentary to trace the genre's evolution from its "*underground*" years in Puerto Rico to its current international success. The film is in many ways an unapologetic rags-to-riches story that attempts to explain how reggaeton overcame incredible

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