DEPAUL UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Diálogo

Volume 8 | Number 1 Article 11

2004

African American and Hispanic American Dialogue Through Music

Caleb Dube

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo

Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation

Dube, Caleb (2004) "African American and Hispanic American Dialogue Through Music," *Diálogo*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol8/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

African American and Hispanic American Dialogue Through Music

Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol8/iss1/11

Maracas, art by Elizabeth Erazo Baez. www.BaezFineArt.com

African American and Hispanic American Dialogue Through Music

Caleb Dube DePaul University

My nephew is part Puerto Rican and part African American. To me, he symbolizes the dialogue between Hispanic Americans and African Americans. This reality was the source of inspiration behind this paper. The surface impression one gets is that there is always tension between these two groups. However, there is some good dialogue going on, as I propose, through popular culture, especially music. In both groups music plays an important cultural role; music is considered a powerful spiritual form. Some articles in the previous issue testified to this observation, especially for the Latino communities. Music is used to join two people in marriage, to welcome new babies to the world, and to put to rest those that have passed on to the next world of the living dead. Music is also used to party. However, this dialogue is not new. Musicians from either group have borrowed ideas ranging from music styles to musical instruments.

1880s

In Cuba African slaves fused African music with Latin rhythms. African slaves were introduced into Cuba from Spain at the beginning of the 16th century. Between 1835 and 1864 about 400,000 African slaves were brought to Cuba. African slaves made up over 40% of the total population. As a result Cuban culture has a high density of African cultural elements, especially in music. Mexico also had an African population since the colonial period. As a result there are African contents in Mexico's cultural, social, and political developments from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. After the Spanish-American War of 1898, African American soldiers brought some Cuban beats to the U.S., especially to jazz. Some of the musical styles brought from Cuba were the *habanera*, *the son*, *rhumba*, *mambo*, and *chachacha*. From the Dominican Republic came *meringue*, while salsa came from Puerto Rico (Lippman 1996). The Mexican influence on African American jazz came as a result of the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition of 1885 in New Orleans. Mexico sent a band to the fair "that was the hit of the fair, with New Orleans publishers releasing sheet music for their numbers that sold thousands." (Ibid.) Some members of the Mexican band decided to stay and live in New Orleans, and they played in early jazz bands. One of the noted performers was clarinetist Lorenzo Tio and Alcide "Yellow" Nunez. Tio was educated at the Mexican Conservatory. So, he added a Spanish touch to jazz. The cultural dialogue through music had started. Between 1892 and 1913 Nunez led The Reliance Brass Band, while Lorenzo Tio, Sr. fronted the Excelsior Brass band between 1880 and 1928.

1900s

W. C. Handy who is erroneously referred to as the "father of the blues" continued the dialogue when in 1900 he visited Cuba where he heard the son, after which he experimented with several Latin musical styles such as the *rhumba*. He used the *rhumba* and the *habanera* when he formulated his version of the blues. "St. Louis Blues" carries these borrowings (Ibid.). Midway in the song represented by the lyrics below, the beat changes from a slow blues to a Latin rhythm:

St. Louis woman
With all her diamonds and rings
She stole that man of mine
With her apron string
If it hadn't been for powder or store bought hair
She wouldn't have taken that man of mine
He wouldn't have gone nowhere, nowhere

1940s - 1980s

Later, in addition to New Orleans and New Mexico, Latin American musical influence came through New York. It is therefore not surprising that jazz has the

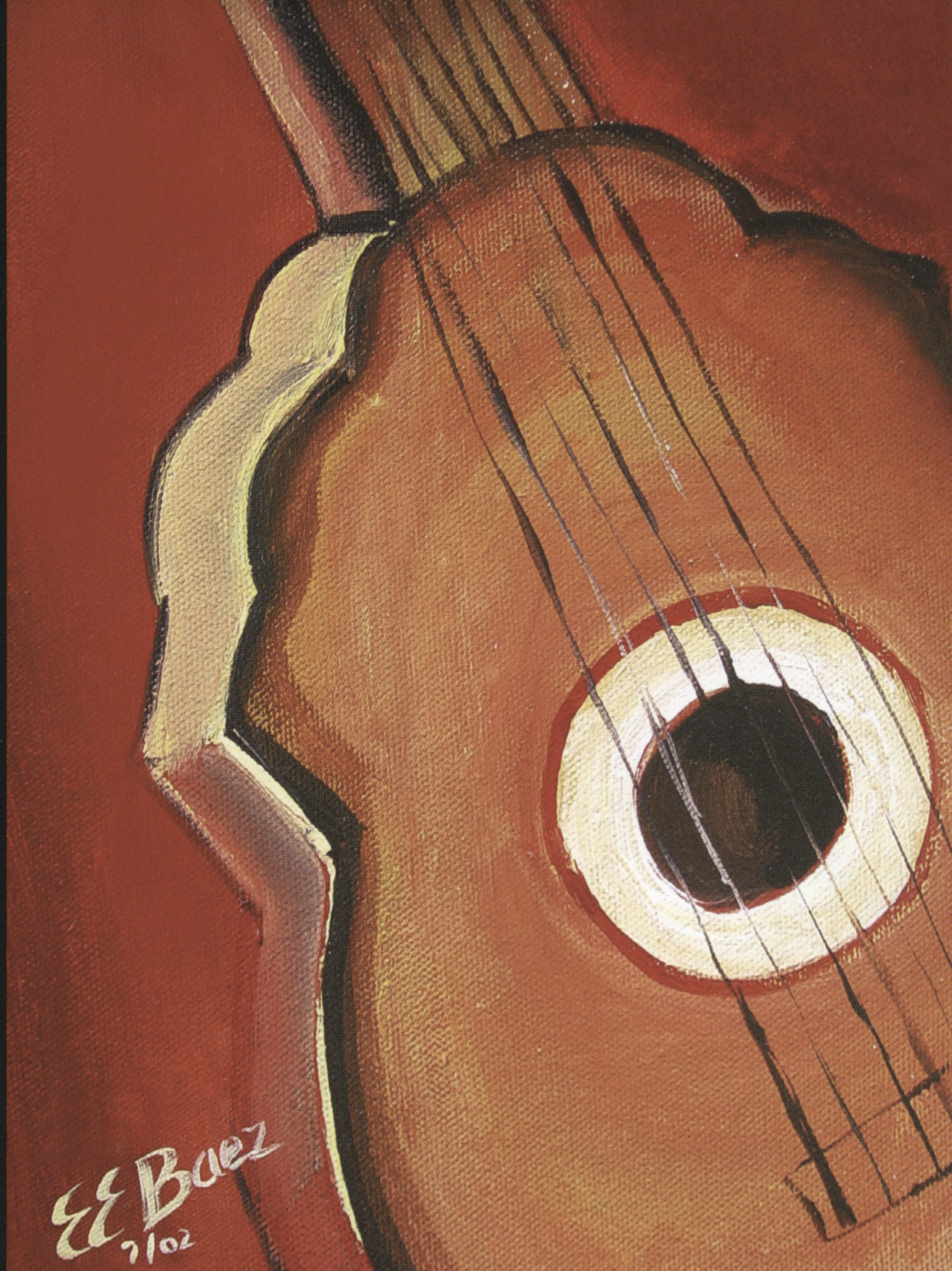
"Spanish tinge," to borrow Jelly Roll Morton's words. The next historical period that saw another surge of the Latin influence or borrowings were the 1940s through Dizzy Gillespie and Luciano "Chano" Pozo Gonzalez a percussionist from Cuba. It was another Cuban musician, Mario Bauza, who introduced them to each other. Both Gillespie and Pozo were key founders of Afro-Cuban or Latin jazz, a mixture of bebop and Cuban folk music. Pozo who came from Cuba in 1947 introduced congas and complex polyrhythms to jazz. It was because of Dizzy's interest in Latin rhythms that Pozo joined the band. Dizzy showed his embracement of Latin music by occasionally playing Latin percussion for the fun of it. Previously, Pozo had played with Charlie Parker. The collaboration between Dizzy and Pozo resulted in such songs as "Tin Tin Deo", and "Manteca". In 1956 Gillespie formed a band that toured overseas under the auspices of the State Department. In the late 1980s Gillespie used the same concept to put together some young performers including Latino musicians such as Panamanian pianist Danilo Perez, who worked in Gillespie's United Nations Orchestra for four years. In 1990 Perez composed most of the musical score for a European film *The Winter in Lisbon* featuring Gillespie, while in 1995 he composed the music for one of the episodes of the series "Break Through: People of Color in America Scene."

Another African American musician who embraced Latin rhythms was bluesman Professor Longhair. The borrowing is evident in his Latin tinged rhumba-rocking piano style and croaking and yodeling vocals. Today, one of the New Orleans musicians who uses a similar Latin-tinged vocal style is Aaron Neville of the Neville Brothers. Take a listen to "Tell It Like It Is," especially the chorus.

Following the new immigrant populations of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in the 1950s, another era of musical dialogue set in. It was the future generations of these migrants that contributed to hip hop culture in the 1980s. As pop culture critic Nelson George has observed, in hip hop culture the Hispanic American-African American dialogue in the twentieth century can be seen in break dancing culture:

> ...breaking was just a way to dance at the time, not a lifestyle expression. Within the African American community it came and went. Perhaps breaking would have been forgotten altogether if it hadn't been for the almost religious zeal of Puerto Rican teenagers.... Hispanics made break dancing competitive. Breaking crews, in the long tradition of urban gang culture, challenged other dancers to meet them at a specific playground, street corner, or subway platform. Armed with large pieces of cardboard or linoleum, not guns or knives, they formed a circle where, two at a time, breakers dueled each other, move watching move, until one of the crews was acknowledged victorious.... The durable contribution of breaking, however, is how primarily Hispanic dancers made an impact on hip hop's musical development.

Even today, the Latino input into hip hop music is significant, and the dialogue between Latino musicians and African American musicians is sometimes transacted through the mass media such as television and radio, notably Black Entertainment Television, local Chicago radio stations such as WGCI and Power 92 where Latino radio personalities host shows. In the past WGCI had Irene Mojica, Power 92's week day afternoon is hosted by "the freaking Puerto Rican,"



Cuartro, art by Elizabeth Erazo Baez. www.BaezFineArt.com

MUSIC IS USED TO JOIN TWO PEOPLE IN MARRIAGE, TO WELCOME NEW BABIES TO THE WORLD, AND TO PUT TO REST THOSE THAT HAVE PASSED ON TO THE NEXT WORLD OF THE LIVING DEAD.

Musica Criolla, art by Elizabeth Erazo Baez. www.BaezFineArt.com

Donnie Devoe. Puerto Rican timbales virtuoso and salsa exponent Tito Puente made cameo appearances on the Cosby Show in the 1980s. They also both performed on a Coca-Cola commercial together. He has also appeared as a guest on the recordings of African jazz artists such as Phil Woods, George Shearing, James Moody, and Terry Gibbs.

1990s

It seems natural that the cultural dialogue between Latinos and African Americans first took place in the coastal areas or the borderlands of Louisiana (New Orleans) and New York (the east coast). These locations provided the environment for the interaction – Mexicans from the south and Puerto Ricans from their land. However, there were some inland locations that became fertile ground for the interaction. Chicago is one such location, especially for the blues and hip hop. The Chicago blues scene that saw a revival in the 1980s, provided the ground for collaboration between Latin and African American performers. African American vocalist Katherine Davis worked with guitarist Tino Gonzalez, while drummer Tino Cortez received his apprenticeship in the blues from Jimmy Walker, Aaron Burton, Homesick James, Lovie Lee and others that are too numerous to mention. Cortez says that he was embraced as and nurtured as the future "carrier of the blues tradition. They said it was a tradition and it was my responsibility to carry it. I was embraced as a new member of the community. I knew that I was different. Within a year I was embraced. They treated me like their child." His acceptance represents the on-going dialogue and interaction that was transacted through music. Cortez tours overseas regularly with African American blues artists such as Byther Smith and Aaron Burton, and locally he performs every week in Katherine Davis's blues band. While musicians are eclectic given the economic reality of little work available, Cortez prefers to play the blues instead of Latin music or rock'n'roll where the money is better.

One famous collaboration featuring the blues was John Lee Hooker's album *Chill Out*, featuring Carlos Santana on guitar on the title song "Chill Out (Things Gonna Change)." One cannot miss the Latin-tinged stinging Santana guitar sound. In fact, the only apparently audible blues feature in the song is John Lee Hooker's voice. The percussion (congas and timbales) is Latin-tinged as well. The two also collaborated in writing the song. I affectionately refer to this album as "John Lee Hooker Goes Latin," because of its heavy use of Latin rhythms. In his own recordings Santana mixes Latin rhythms with blues and rock. In the past, Santana has enjoyed some success with African American audiences, especially with his album *Abraxas* and the song "Oye Como Va." Another Latin artist who blends various rhythms is Danilo Perez. Earlier in the paper we mentioned the work he did with Gillespie. In 1995 he became the first Latin artist to perform in Wynton Marsalis's band when he toured Poland in 1995. His mission of blending cultures through musical dialogue has enabled him to produce some highly acclaimed recordings, *PanaMonk*, a title that suggests that this work was Perez's interpretation of Thelonious Monk's music while his next recording was *Central Avenue*, a recording that fused Panamanian roots music, and the blues. He has performed with African American musicians such as George Benson, Clark terry, Bradford Marsalis and Jack DeJohnette, among others. Today, there are young Latino performers who have carved names for themselves on the hip hop and R&B scene. These include Fat Joe, the late Big Punisher, Angie Martinez and Jennifer Lopez.

These are few and brief accounts of how popular music provides the platform for Latinos and African Americans to engage in some cultural dialogue leading to better relations.

-Department of Sociology, DePaul University, Autumn 2003

Caleb Dube is part-time faculty in the Department of Sociology at DePaul University. Contact him at cdube@depaul.edu

SOURCES

Tino Cortez, Interview, Evanston, IL, September 3, 2003

Leonard Feather, 1976 *The Book of Jazz: From Then Till Now*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., New York

Nelson George, 1998 *Hip Hop America*, New York: Penguin Books.

Ira Gitler, 1996 *Jazz Masters of the Forties*, Collier Books, New York.

John Lee Hooker, *Chill Out*, 1995, Point Blank Records

Dave Lippman, 1996 *Bleaching Our Roots: Race and Culture In American Popular Music*, Manuscript

Robert Walser, 1998, *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, Oxford University Press

Internet