

Abstract

The story of Latin American music and dance is one of cross-pollination where the dances, rhythms, instrumentation and social rituals of distinctive cultures coalesced into new forms of expression. Along the continuum of styles was Latin Jazz, the result of the mutual fascination that Afro-Cuban and jazz musicians shared for each other's artistry. Most types of Latin music have their own dance forms, which evolved simultaneously with the music, often graduating from the streets to the dance clubs and sometimes to stages. Latin Jazz music took its own path, originating on the bandstand without the parallel emergence of a dance form one would officially call "Latin Jazz dance." In my research, I set out to expand my understanding of the evolution of Latin Jazz music and dance and attempt to answer the question: How can I define Latin Jazz Dance and trace its evolution into what it is today? Armed with that knowledge, in the future I intend to teach dancers and choreographers about the music and dance and to stage works for concert performance in the genre.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

THE EVOLUTION OF LATIN JAZZ MUSIC AND DANCE – UNDER THE SKIN

by

Teresa Perez Ceccon

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

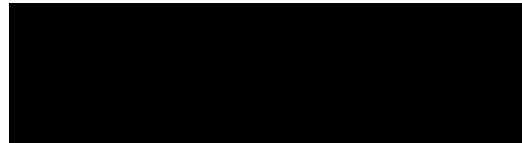
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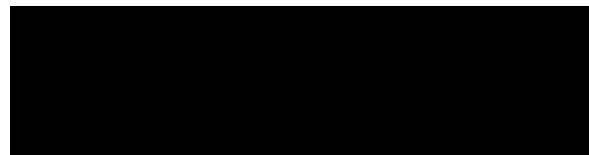
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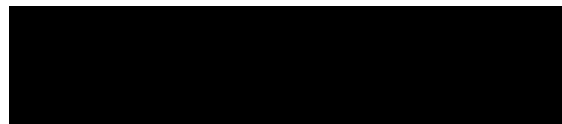
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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Acknowledgements	5
List of Figures	9
Introduction	10
Rationale	11
Research	13
The Latin Music and Dance Continuum – Historical Review	14
The Taínos	14
The African Slaves	15
Cuba’s First Dance - Danzón	15
Rumba	16
Son Montuno	16
The Mambo Craze	17
Cha Cha	18
Enter Latin Jazz	19
Mario Bauzá and Machito	19
Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo	19
Cross-Pollination in El Barrio	20
Latin Genres of the 1960s	21
Salsa – The Musical Revolution	22
Salsa Dance	23
Latin Jazz Music Today	24
Conclusions about Latin Jazz Dance	24
Additional Thesis Research	25
Lessons	25
Costume Design	26
Interviews	27

Methodology	28
Under the Skin: A Thesis Performance	28
Folkloric Dance: Taíno and Bomba y Plena	29
Social Dancing: Partner Dances - Rumba, Mambo & Salsa	29
Latin Jazz Dance Performance	29
Feedback from the Thesis Video Showing	30
Results and Implications for the Future	32
Works Cited	34
Appendix	35

List of Figures

Figure 1: Photo of folkloric costume	27
Figure 2: Program for thesis concert that was canceled	35

Introduction

By 1950, both my parents had arrived in New York from Puerto Rico seeking better opportunities. I was born in 1970 and grew up like most Latino children back then – balancing my identity with Puerto Rican heritage and as an American kid in New York City. At family gatherings, I loved to dance to *Salsa* and *Merengue*, though I spoke little Spanish and did not appreciate the meaning of the songs. With my friends, rock n’ roll and disco were our obsession.

Years later, I became a dance educator specializing in the Simonson Technique, a somatically based movement practice that promotes longevity for dancers. The technique applies to many dance styles, including Jazz, Contemporary, Modern and Latin Jazz. I am a protégé of its creator Lynn Simonson. In her early dance career, she was in a Cuban-inspired show that traveled around the U.S., Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. During this time, Lynn acquired a passion for dancing to Latin Jazz music (sometimes referred to as Afro-Cuban Jazz) that she carried into her technique classes by way of choreographing movement to beautifully textured jazz songs with intricate rhythms. As her student, I also became attracted to the possibilities of integrating elements of Latin Jazz Dance and, when I started teaching Simonson classes, I often created choreography in the style.

I have been teaching at NYC dance studios, universities and international workshops for over 30 years and realized that Latin Jazz Dance remains an underexplored technique and physical practice in academia and at public and private dance studios.

There are several reasons:

- Dancers are unaware of Latin Jazz Dance because they are simply not exposed to it in dance schools.
- Latin Jazz Dance was never given the “ballroom dance treatment.”

- Unlike *Rumba, Salsa, Merengue, Cha Cha* and others, there are no formalized dance steps that can be learned and repeated.
- The music likewise is not restricted in form like other ballroom styles. Musicians who improvise want to push boundaries and be inventive. Latin Jazz cannot be hemmed into steady, predictable patterns that dancers can easily follow.
- Some dancers, particularly those who have not grown up with Latin rhythms, have difficulty finding the “groove” in their bodies. I observe this regularly with otherwise gifted movers in my classes; for example, isolating body parts can be awkward and challenging.

I believe these impediments can be overcome with more education and by engaging choreographers and dancers who wish to expand the breadth of their work. Latin Jazz movement can deeply enrich both a dancer’s repertoire and their world view.

Rationale

In pursuit of my Master of Fine Arts in Dance, I endeavored to expand my knowledge of the origins of Latin music and get to the bottom of a simple question: How did Latin Jazz Dance evolve into what it is today? Early in my project, I had a brief discussion between sets at a jazz club with Bobby Sanabria, the preeminent Latin music historian and world famous percussionist. When I told him about my endeavor to research Latin Jazz Dance, he exasperatedly shook his head saying something to the effect of, “No one has been able to define it.” That was a disappointing yet pivotal moment. I have since confirmed my original supposition: Though complex, Latin Jazz (the musical marriage of Jazz and Afro-Cuban music) is fairly well documented in recordings, books and film, however information about Latin Jazz Dance and those who practiced it is scarce. Nevertheless, I persevered with my research.

In popular culture, Latin music and dance have their moments of popularity on TV and Broadway. Television competitions like *Dancing with the Stars* frequently showcase *Salsa*, *Merengue*, *Mambo* and the *Cha Cha*, which are Latin dance forms, but not Latin Jazz dance forms. For many American viewers, this is where their understanding of Latin dance begins and ends. At best, Latin Jazz Dance has been treated as an offshoot of Jazz dance and loosely grouped with popular ballroom styles. There is common ground between ballroom dances and Latin Jazz Dance, but the latter allows for a more expansive vocabulary of movement because it is not necessarily bound by conventions like partnering and prescribed steps.

In my research, I looked to bring clarity to the art form with an eye towards the following short-term and long-term objectives:

- Better define “Latin Jazz Dance,” which has eluded formal definition.
- Give it the recognition it deserves as an important art form.
- Promote it so choreographers and dancers can experience its significant artistic value.
- Examine how college-level dance programs can incorporate Latin Jazz Dance into their curriculum.
- Develop new courses and workshops for college students and well as amateur and professional dancers.
- Enhance my ability to teach Latin Jazz movement through my specialty, the Simonson Jazz Technique, and
- Establish myself as a subject matter expert in this field of dance.

Regardless of whether there is consensus on what constitutes “Latin Jazz Dance,” the creative possibilities of setting dance to the music are endlessly enriching. As a teacher and choreographer, I have found that the polyrhythms of Latin music challenge a person to dance and

move in unique ways that have roots in African and Latin culture. Through my thesis project, I sought to gain the knowledge to more articulately explain to dancers the cultural, musical and dance developments that led to Latin Jazz, a rich avenue for musical and dance expression. Ultimately, I want to be instrumental in getting more Latin Jazz dance performances to concert stages.

Research

My research into this topic began with building a historical picture of the evolution of Latin dance and music. I also pursued an intellectual, hands-on understanding of Latin rhythms and how they inform movement through several private lessons with professionals in the field. That was supplemented with wide-ranging interviews with dancers and musicians.

One particular musicologist by the name of John Storm Roberts wrote two authoritative books, *Latin Tinge* and *Latin Jazz*, that were critical resources for my project. A third influential book, *Cuban Fire: The Story of Salsa and Latin Jazz* by Isabelle Leymarie, provided a helpful framework for the evolution of African and Latin music. I watched innumerable videos on the history of dance, music and various social topics relevant to my thesis. Among them was a four-part documentary series produced for the BBC called *Historia de la Musica Latina en los Estados Unidos*.

Researching these sources revealed the complexity of the evolution behind Latin music and dance. Cultural and artistic developments intertwined over centuries, and the stories told by historians do not always corroborate. I found far less documentation about Latin dance than about the music. Still, I was able to piece together the most salient facts into the following historical summary, which I plan to use in my future teaching.

The Latin Music and Dance Continuum – Historical Review

The story of Latin music and dance can be told through the evolution of its rhythms, along with changes in the composition of ensembles, instrumentation and, most importantly, musical tastes. With few exceptions, Latin music is meant for dancing. The musicians – whether in conjuntos (small bands) or orquestas (big bands) – exist to play for the dancing public. Generally, the musical genres are synonymous with their dances (e.g., Salsa musicians play Salsa music for Salsa dancers).

The term “Latin Jazz” first gained notoriety in the 1940s and has since left an indelible imprint on music around the world. In the big picture, however, Latin Jazz is just one of the many styles that exist on the continuum of Latin music. Moreover, it derived from a fusion of its predecessors. Therefore, appreciating Latin Jazz requires an examination of history and the key pioneers whose contributions had lasting impact.

What follows is only a cursory review. For the sake of brevity, important genres and geographies (Samba from Brazil and Tango from Argentina, for example) were omitted because their relevance to Latin Jazz in its nascent years was less pronounced.

The Taínos

Before Columbus arrived, native Taíno tribes inhabited Cuba, Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands. The Spaniards treated them harshly and attempted to enslave them. Refusing Spanish subjugation, the Taínos rebelled. Through disease and violent mistreatment, the tribes were virtually wiped out within the span of just a few decades.

However, the contributions of the Taínos endure in the culture and DNA of Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Taíno words (Huracán), inventions (hammocks) and even superstitions still

survive to this day. Musically, the Taínos gave us instruments that are mainstays in Latin music, including the maracas and the guiro.

The African Slaves

Looking for new sources of labor, the Spaniards began slave trade early in the 16th century. The African slaves brought their music, dances, religion and languages to the Caribbean and the Americas. These contributions left an indelible mark on the New World, especially on Cuban culture. Rhythms derived from sacred rituals were transported from distinct regions in Africa. For example, the Yorubas worshipped African deities called orishas, each invoked with its own percussive and dance patterns. The Abawka's rhythms could only be heard and danced to in secret societies.

In Puerto Rico, the folk dance Bomba y Plena was accompanied by three drummers playing West-Central African patterns in an improvised “dialogue” with the dancer(s). In Plena, singers related the stories of the day. These traditions continue today on the island.

Common to most Latin rhythms is the clave, “a two-bar pattern of African origin, [that] became the foundation of popular Cuban music, giving it a smooth, round and propulsive feel,” as explained by musicologist Isabelle Leymarie in her book on Afro-Cuban music (10).

Cuba's First Dance - Danzón

Danzón was among the earliest dance forms to forge a place in Afro-Cuban culture. It combined Cuban rhythms with the French contradanse – an elegant ballroom dance form for couples, initially those of upper class status. Bobby Sanabria, renowned Latin music historian, points out that “timbales were, in fact, invented by Cubans to mimic the timpani used in the original orchestration of contradanse in Europe” (Sanabria, Danzón). Timbales are two high-pitched metal-shelled drums combined with a cowbell or cymbal to produce a wide range of

percussive sounds. In the early 20th century, Cuban bandleader Antonio Maria Romeu developed a new type of ensemble, the charanga, an orchestra featuring flute and strings played over a basic timbale rhythm called baqueteo. These groups played Danzón and other forms of music at dance halls.

Rumba

Rumba was danced in the back alleys of Cuba over West African rhythms that were recreated on makeshift instruments found on plantations, such as wooden boxes (cajons) and basic tools, such as garden hoes and shovels. “The authentic Rumba was a complex and gripping ritual including drumming, singing, declamation and dancing” (Leymarie 24). Rumba originated from African fertility dances that were considered by whites as too profane. The pelvic movements were therefore “moderated, replaced by the suggestive swaying of hips, a symbolic handkerchief, a foot or hand gesture laden with meaning” (Leymarie 27).

Rumba was in its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s. The sophistication of Rumba grew and reached New York, popularized with the 1930 Broadway staging of *The Peanut Vendor* by Don Azpiazu. The successful show featured rhythms heard on Cuban streets, introducing enthusiastic American audiences to new exotic sounds. According to author John Storm Roberts, “Azpiazu’s authenticity, coming at a time when El Barrio [New York’s Latin community], was beginning to develop as an alternate Latin center, ensured that Cuban styles, and not just Cuban melodies and rhythms, would become part of American music” (Roberts, *Latin Tinge* 79).

Son Montuno

In the 1930s, a rhythmic motif called Son Montuno was being formulated by Cuban bandleader and composer Arsenio Rodriguez, a blind percussionist and player of the tres (a Cuban version of a mandolin). It started with Son, a Cuban folk song structure that migrated

from Eastern Cuba to Havana during the Spanish-American War. Rodriguez added a conga drum (the first time it was introduced into a dance band), substituted piano for the guitar and incorporated multiple trumpets. Additionally, he drew inspiration from African rhythms, stepping up the complexity of percussive patterns in the music. According to the Havana Music School, “The legacy of this Cuban rhythm [Son Montuno] is present in Latin genres such as Salsa, Mambo, Latin Jazz, Timba and the Cha” (Padron). “When you talk about Son Montuno, ground zero is Arsenio Rodriguez... the most important person in the history of Cuban dance music” (Sanabria, “Son Montuno”). The Son Montuno musical pattern and instrumentation has become ubiquitous as a core musical ingredient in Latin music to the present day. There was an accompanying dance by the same name, but it was superseded by other dances and now has faded into obscurity.

The Mambo Craze

By the late-1940s into the 1950s, the Latin scene was dominated by Mambo, a style of Cuban music and dance whose name comes from the Congolese word meaning a chant in praise of deities. The style was brought into Cuban conjuntos by Arsenio Rodriguez and bassist Cachao Lopez. “In New York, it came together with the burgeoning big-band Latin sound to become perhaps the first Latin idiom largely developed in the United States” (Roberts, *Latin Tinge* 127). Big band leader Jose Curbelo’s band boasted the inclusion of two future leaders of Mambo, the New York-born Puerto Rican timbale player, Tito Puente, and bandleader Tito Rodriguez. Widely considered the “King of the Mambo,” Puente infused his Mambo with an intense quality that was characteristically New York in nature. (Puente would also go on to have an illustrious career in myriad musical styles, including Salsa and Latin Jazz.)

By 1952, the Palladium Dance Hall in New York City restricted its acts to only Mambo bands playing the NY style, including bands led by Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez and Machito. Though Mambo music was originally Cuban, New York Latinos arguably “built a dance out of the neat, flowing yet bustling basic patterns and a thousand lindy-based variations” (Leymarie 158). The Palladium was also culturally significant because its dancefloor symbolized the beginning of true integration with Latinos, Blacks, Jews, Italians and more sharing the floor.

This was a golden age for celebrity dancers. Foremost among them were Pedro “Cuban Pete” Aguilar (who was actually Puerto Rican) and Millie Donay. The two were fixtures at the Palladium, and *Life Magazine* named Aguilar the greatest Mambo dancer ever. The couple elevated Latin Dance to the concert stages of Carnegie Hall, the Apollo, Waldorf Astoria and Madison Square Garden.

Augie Rodriguez and Margo Bartolome also contributed to Mambo dancing. At first, they were aficionados, not trained dancers. However, they sought formal dance training and applied their techniques into their Mambo, thereby inventing new moves and expanding the vocabulary of Latin dance with turns, slides and other tricks like their signature finale spins.

Cha Cha

While Mambo accommodated complexity in rhythms, arrangements, jazz-inflected instrumental solos and fast tempos, another increasingly popular style emerged in the 1950s that represented a simplified dilution. The Cha Cha (or Cha-Cha-Chá) was more accessible to American dancers, setting off a new dance craze that became a standard in ballroom dance.

Enter Latin Jazz

As Mambo dominated the New York dance scene, another variation of Latin music was developing in New York, building on the foundation of Mambo while adding more elements of American Jazz.

Mario Bauzá and Machito

In the early 1930s, Latin musicians, who mostly lived in East Harlem in what is called El Barrio (the neighborhood) frequently worked with musicians from Harlem in big bands playing Jazz. One was Mario Bauzá, a clarinetist-turned-trumpeter from Cuba who “spent the 1930s playing the Savoy Ballroom with the Chick Webb band, and later wove what he had learned into the New York Latin sound of Machito” (Leymarie 55). Bauzá soon came to be known as the most prominent forefather of “Latin Jazz.” He and his brother-in-law, “Machito” (Francisco Grillo), formed a new type of big band. The hallmark of Machito & His Afro-Cubans was a new balance of jazz improvisation over intense Afro-Cuban grooves and a tidal wave of horns.

They held court at La Conga for three years and became a sensation with dancers and musicians alike, notably with white audiences. Despite criticism about the “Afro” in their band name, Bauzá proudly stated “I’m of African descent and the rhythm we play is African” (History of Latin Music in the USA).

Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo

Jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, who made a name for himself as one of the originators of Bebop Jazz, was smitten with Machito’s exciting blend of Afro-Cuban rhythms with jazz. Looking for new avenues of expression, Dizzy asked Bauzá to suggest a *conguero* for an upcoming Carnegie Hall concert. Chano Pozo arrived in New York from a rough neighborhood in Cuba speaking no English. He astonished the American audience with a tune Gillespie wrote

to feature Pozo's playing, "Cubana Be Cubana Bop." The 1947 concert was a sensation and a milestone in the development of Latin Jazz. The two went on to collaborate in writing "Manteca," a groundbreaking song that identified what Afro-Cuban Jazz was to be about. Unfortunately, Pozo was killed the next year in a fight, but his legacy was imprinted on the new musical form he helped advance.

Cross-Pollination in El Barrio

In 1917, the Jones-Shafroth Act granted American citizenship to Puerto Ricans. Seeking better opportunities, Puerto Ricans gradually left their agricultural jobs and came to New York, with the largest concentrations settling in East New York, Washington Heights and East Harlem. The latter, which was formerly populated by Jewish and then Italian immigrants, came to be known as "El Barrio" (the neighborhood). Over time, waves of Puerto Ricans were driven there by hurricanes and the prospects for a better life. Many worked in harsh conditions for minimum wages. They struggled to preserve their language and culture while assimilating into the American way of life. Their native music was an important connection to their homeland.

El Barrio's proximity to Black Harlem, a hotbed for jazz, also exposed Latino musicians to jazz idioms, and they joined big bands to earn a living. "In the history of Latin jazz, it was generally Latin musicians who first adapted to jazz, rather than the reverse" (Leymarie 84). As Cuban and Puerto Rican populations in NYC swelled, El Barrio became the hub of Latin music. Numerous dance clubs hosted Latin big bands.

While Cuban bands dominated through the 1950s, the rising Puerto Rican population in NYC ensured that its musicians also had the opportunity to forge unique musical statements. Leymarie explains that "a new and energetic generation of Puerto Rican bandleaders came to the fore in the Big Apple, producing music that bore their own stamp" (Leymarie 220). At the Park

Plaza, Puerto Rican and Afro-Cuban bands would challenge each other to friendly battles of the bands.

Latin Genres of the 1960s

One particularly influential figure was pianist Eddie Palmieri, who grew up in East Harlem, and had equal admiration for Cuban music and jazz. He punched up the common charanga ensemble by replacing the flute and trumpets with a trombone section, helping define a distinctively New York sound. Another was Ray Barretto, a congo player and bandleader, whose compositions incorporated descargas. These were competitive musical exchanges between horns influenced more by jazz soloing than by the tightly arranged horn parts typical in Latin orquestras at the time. The influence of Palmieri and Barretto would be absorbed into new offshoots of Latin music.

In the 1960s, three Latin musical genres emerged. The Pachanga mixed Son Montuno and Mambo into its own styles with an energetic, fast dance. Famous flautist Johnny Pacheco performed with Charlie Palmieri's big band (brother of Eddie Palmieri), actively working the New York club circuit, playing Pachangas. "Around 1965 the charangas vanished almost as suddenly as they had come, perhaps because they were simply too opposed to the general sonic drift of 1960s music or because the Pachanga was too energetic a dance" (Roberts, *Latin Tinge* 166).

Musical tastes in New York became decidedly more "funky." Boogaloo (Bugalú) mixed Son Montuno and Mambo rhythms with those of the African-American rhythm & blues music of the time, expanding Latin music's appeal to Black audiences. Ray Barretto was one of the originators of this fusion. Unlike traditional Latin dances where couples paired, Bugalú was freestyle, and dancers mixed dance steps from other dances, such as Cha Cha or Mambo. Bugalú

was derided by Cuban traditionalists, and the fad was history by 1969 as people grew tired of its repeated piano figures.

Another hybrid style related to Bugalú was Latin Soul, which combined Mambo, R&B and Latin Jazz. Popular for a short period among East Harlem and Bronx teenagers, Bugalú was sung in both Spanish and English.

Salsa – The Musical Revolution

Salsa music and dance arguably has eclipsed most of its precursors in Latin music and dance in terms of popularity and longevity. A product of New York City, the rise of Salsa was fueled by a confluence of musical styles present in the mid-1960s through the 1970s. If its backbone was Cuban, its first audience was Puerto Ricans from El Barrio. Salsa gave them a sense of pride and cultural identity against the backdrop of discrimination of Latinos in American society.

A seminal work that inspired legions of soon-to-be Salsa musicians was the third album of Eddie Palmieri's band, La Perfecta, entitled *Lo Que Traigo Es Sabroso*. A jazz aficionado inspired by jazz artists McCoy Tyner and Chick Corea, Palmieri continually experimented with new arrangements and instrumentation, such as a trombone conjunto.

In 1964, Fania Records was founded in New York City by Jerry Massucci, a lawyer who loved Latin music, and composer/bandleader Johnny Pacheco. The label quickly came to assemble the A-list of Salsa artists and its Fania All-Stars concerts became legendary. Among this list were trombonist/bandleader Willie Colón, conguero/bandleader Ray Barretto, singing sensation Celia Cruz (dubbed the Queen of Salsa) and Tito Puente. "Fania was known as 'the Latin Motown,' with one huge hit after another becoming popular all over Latin America," according to the website SalsaGente ("History of Salsa").

The new style they were collectively producing came to be called “Salsa” or sauce, a term coined by Izzy Sanabria allegedly referring to the pep or swing in the music. Salsa is truly a multi-layered sauce combining American and Latin Jazz, Son Montuno, Cha Cha, Mambo, Bomba and Plena, ingredients that each were influenced by their predecessors. By association, its roots are Cuban, but it was New York-based musicians, mostly Puerto Rican, who assembled them in the blender.

Salsa Dance

Salsa developed regional variations, including New York Salsa, Los Angeles Salsa, Cuban Salsa, Cumbia and Rueda de Casino. “Many dance aficionados really claim, as the dance and the term were coined in the Big Apple, that New York-style salsa is the first kind of salsa” (“History of Salsa”). “With the Salsa boom, many non-Latinos rushed to take Salsa dance classes. As a result, the Salsa routines became progressively codified, in great part under the influence of Puerto Rican [New York-based] dancer Eddie Torres, who promoted an elegant ballroom salsa, with stylized moves, some borrowed from Mambo (windmill, Suzy Q, cucaracha, head duck, surprise dip, whiplash, hook and hook, etc.)” (Leymarie 289). In the New York style, dancers step on the second beat, whereas other styles emphasize the first beat.

Other Latin clubs, such as Chico East and the Nuyorican Village, sprung up to take advantage of the Salsa dance craze. A 1975 documentary, *Salsa* captured live performances in New York, helping spread the word about the exciting new phenomenon beyond El Barrio. Fania Records’ Johnny Pacheco was instrumental in promoting the style, arranging successful tours in Africa and Japan, where Salsa has been enduringly popular ever since. Salsa also was adopted throughout the Spanish-speaking world, with particular fervor in Colombia, the Caribbean and Central America.

By the late-1970s, the “Hard Salsa” style promoted by Fania was losing ground to new genres becoming popular with young Hispanics: fusion, disco, rap, house, techno and jungle. In the 1980s, the music became watered down into a softer Salsa Romantica that used synthesizers in lieu of larger orquestas. Today, Latino dancers have turned to new genres such as Bachata (which originated in the Dominican Republic in the mid-20th century) and Raggaton (a mix of hip hop and Latin music that started in Puerto Rico).

Latin Jazz Music Today

A historical examination of the roots of Afro-Cuban music that led to the Latin Jazz fusion greatly illuminates what is inside this exquisite music. Today, any well-rounded jazz player knows how to compose and improvise over Latin rhythms. The best have gained not only technical mastery of their instruments but also an appreciation for the complex rhythms and the musical and cultural influences that lend this music its rich quality. Salsa music likewise calls for rhythmic, harmonic and improvisational skill, and in this regard shares a generous overlap with Latin Jazz music.

Musical fads have come and gone, but the best withstand the test of time. I would place Latin Jazz in that category. The list of non-Latino musical heavyweights influenced by Latin Jazz is vast and impressive: Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Cal Tjader, Stan Getz, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Sarah Vaughan, Sheila E and more.

Music is inevitably the product of cross-pollination of existing art forms and cultural factors, and each successive generation of musicians must expand its knowledge of these idioms.

Conclusions about Latin Jazz Dance

Has the musical cross-pollination translated to the dance world when it comes specifically to Latin Jazz Dance? Only in limited circles. For reasons outlined in the introduction,

Latin Jazz as a dance form is not well understood among most dancers and not formally taught in university level dance programs or at public schools or private studios.

I originally posed the thesis question: “How did Latin Jazz Dance evolve into what it is today?” Bobby Sanabria’s reaction hung over my query, “No one has been able to define it.” In my search, I have not found a singular choreographer, school or dancer that has ever universally formalized something called Latin Jazz Dance. The closest my research got to identifying the origins of Latin Jazz Dance was Mambo dancing back at its height of popularity in the 1950s. The sophisticated New York bands were playing complicated jazz-infused compositions while professional dancers – Cuban Pete and Millie Donay and Augie Rodriguez and Margo Bartolome – were improvising and pushing the frontiers of Latin dance. They performed at highly respected concert venues. Unfortunately, the Latin dance crazes ended by the late 1950s with the Cuban Revolution and the rising popularity of rock n’ roll music. Had it not been for these changes, perhaps Latin dance may have continued to evolve with the growing interest in Latin Jazz music.

Additional Thesis Research

Lessons

My topic is not purely academic; a visceral appreciation for Latin Jazz music and dancing was paramount to my learning process. I took *Salsa* dance lessons with well-known dance instructor Frankie Martinez in New York. His classes begin with fascinating historical context on how Latin social dance evolved.

I traveled to Miami for a private class to learn folkloric Afro-Cuban dances with Marisol Blanco, Master Teacher and graduate of Cuba’s prestigious Superior Institute of Arts. The instruction brought me closer to the gestures and meaning of African dances that formed the

backbone of Latin movement, and I intended to incorporate this into a folkloric dance I planned for my thesis concert.

I took private Latin rhythms classes with Max Pollak, dancer, musician and creator of RumbaTap, a unique style that blends tap dance with Afro-Cuban rhythms. He taught me about the intricacies of the clave rhythmic patterns, giving me more advanced ways to translate those patterns into my body coordination.

I also learned to play the congas with Montclair State Cali School of Music graduate Anthony Freda. Our lessons continue to this day and I have moved on to the standard drum kit. My goal is to physically reproduce the rhythms embedded in Latin music so I can internalize them more intimately and express them through dance.

Costume Design

The costume pictured here mimics the type of dress worn in Latin folkloric dance, and I intended to wear it at my thesis performance. For a collaboration project in my MFA studies, I worked with NY-based costume designer Aya Shibahara to design and construct the costume. It has a white three-tiered skirt, orange gingham material for the layer underneath and moo moo on top with an elastic ruffled neckline and three-line waistband with a halter tube top made from the gingham fabric. I shopped for and cut the fabric, used a sewing machine and finished stitching by hand. I believe that a choreographer who touches every aspect of putting on a dance performance gains a holistic appreciation of what it takes to make art.



Figure 1

Interviews

To add perspective to my research, I interviewed several people including my mentor Lynn Simonson, who studied and worked with a range of luminaries in the Jazz dance world including Claude Thompson, Luigi and Jaime Rogers, the Puerto Rican-born dancer who would go on to be the lead dancer in *Golden Boy* on Broadway with Sammy Davis Jr. Her personal dance experiences with Afro-Cuban Jazz gave me an understanding of how Latin dance was packaged for non-Latino audiences as musical revues for entertainment purposes. Lynn Simonson talked about how her “Latin Jazz Wednesdays” classes where she observed that some dancers found Latin rhythms complicated to hear in the music, forcing her to spend time discussing movement related to instrumentation and rhythmic patterns in detail (Simonson). (Being exposed to her in-depth body coordinations enabled me to better communicate these concepts with my students.)

In addition to my rhythm classes with Max Pollak, we had extensive conversations about the history of Latin American dance, particularly about the intermingling of Afro-Cuban music and American Jazz that spawned Latin Jazz. He discussed his point of view that Latin dances have been chronically under-appreciated and under-represented by most dance institutions, including academia. To him, the most popular Latin dances have been watered down from their original, authentic versions (Pollak).

I interviewed Cuban-American director and choreographer Maija Garcia, known for her inventive production of *West Side Story* in Minneapolis. She discussed her perspectives on the richness of Latin Jazz music and its effect on how we create choreography. She also agreed that Latin Jazz Dance has not achieved enough recognition in academia and was enthusiastic about my thesis project (Garcia).

Finally, for some social context, I interviewed my parents about their recollection of the burgeoning Latin dance scene in the 1950s when they would go to the clubs in New York City. The most popular dance in those days was the Mambo, and my parents recounted how the dance floor temporarily seemed to erase the prejudice that divided people along ethnic and racial lines. In fact, it was a point of pride for them as Puerto Rican New Yorkers that their music and dance was appreciated by people outside of their culture, especially with the discrimination against Hispanics at the time (Perez).

Methodology

Before the COVID-19 crisis shutdown, I was preparing for my Latin Jazz Dance thesis concert called “Under the Skin - The Evolution of Latin Jazz Music & Dance” to be held at Gibney Studios in NYC in April 2020. The performance never took place due to the closure of the studio and the quarantine. What follows is a description of the event as I had planned it. Additionally, I created a thesis video to document the process in lieu of the live concert. (See Appendix for the concert program.)

Under the Skin: A Thesis Performance

The event was scheduled at Gibney Dance 280, Studio C performance space under its Performance Opportunity Project (POP) series. Audience members were to be welcomed with a Latin culture immersion, including food to be donated by a local Cuban restaurant and music from a NY-based Latin Jazz combo called La Banda Ramirez.

The evening was to open with welcome remarks from me describing the intent of the show. I planned to wear the folkloric costume mentioned earlier.

The performance was divided into three major chronological eras: Folkloric, Social Dance and Latin Jazz Dance. Through my research, I identified key developments in the

evolution of Latin Jazz music and dance. I produced a documentary-style video that spanned the story of Latin music and dance, starting in the Caribbean before Columbus' arrival and leading up through present day. Segments of the video were to be shown before each of the live dance performances to provide historical context for their respective eras.

Folkloric Dance: Taíno and Bomba y Plena

The show's first dance featured a demonstration of Taíno dance from Marie Poncé, a member of the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers, which preserves Native American culture. She was to be accompanied by two traditional drummers. Next was Bomba y Plena, part of traditional Afro-Puerto Rican folkloric dance, performed with her drum company by the founder of Bombazo Dance company, Milteri Tucker Concepción. I was to join the dance and play the conga in this piece. For the thesis video, I demonstrated Bomba as a solo in my folkloric costume.

Social Dancing: Partner Dances - Rumba, Mambo & Salsa

Latin dancer Rodolfo Santamarina and I were to choreograph a couple's dance illustrating the evolution of Latin social dances from Rumba to Mambo to Salsa. The intent was to dance to live music by La Banda Ramirez. I was also in communication with Latin dance instructor Frankie Martinez regarding working privately with us to advise on our choreography. In my thesis video, Latin dancer Moises Santos and I demonstrated what I envisioned for the social dance portion of the performance.

Latin Jazz Dance Performance

The main showpiece of the concert was a Latin Jazz Dance that I choreographed to a composition from Machito, who is considered the father of Latin Jazz. The instrumental piece,

called *Congo Mulence*, embodies the key elements of Latin Jazz music with an infectious conga pattern and exciting horn melodies – combining Latin rhythms and Jazz improvisations.

My process started by drawing inspiration from the music. For me, Latin music’s polyrhythms inspire movement, not as an afterthought but as an inextricable element of my choreographic approach. I listened for the rhythmic patterns and the accents in the instrumentation and created the dance on my body — exploring isolation of the hips, ribs and shoulders, opposition and coordination to bring out these musical motifs. For this concert piece, I preconceived the movement before rehearsals began.

The ensemble included three women, including myself, and two men. In rehearsals, I first guided the dancers through a crash course in Latin music and dance history to give them context for the work. Together we had six two-to-four hour rehearsals before the pandemic stopped our progress. For the thesis video, I had footage of two group rehearsals along with post-pandemic outdoor solos from three of the dancers.

Feedback from the Thesis Video Showing

My thesis video was presented via a Zoom session to my professors and some of my fellow graduate students, and I gathered feedback and answered questions. Below are noteworthy discussion points.

Several viewers were struck by the irony and sadness of my “social” dance with Moises Santos in a time of social distancing; we had to wear masks. It was observed that the dance achieved a unique intimacy and was a relevant art piece on its own during the COVID-19 crisis. Throughout the evolution of Latin dance, social dancing has always been core to the Latin community, which makes the pandemic restrictions particularly tragic. While the intention of dancing with masks was precautionary and not designed to make a statement about the crisis, the

viewer's observations reinforced for me the poignancy of the juxtaposition of dancing and distancing.

When asked whether Latin Jazz dance can exist on its own without Latin Jazz music, I pointed out that this genre of dance comes inextricably from the music because, in my opinion, the choreography draws inspiration directly from its rhythm, instrumentation and the improvisational exchanges between the musicians. This is one of the reasons I argue that understanding the music is integral to making dance in this genre.

There was an inquiry about the relationship between the Simonson technique and Latin Jazz dance. I reinforced that Simonson is one of many avenues into Latin Jazz, including theatre dance, African and Eurocentric Latin ballroom. Fundamentally, the Simonson technique develops the body based on principles of anatomy and kinesiology, preparing dancers' bodies to move regardless of the style of dance they perform. However, the Simonson technique is rooted primarily in Jazz dance, and Lynn Simonson has long incorporated Latin Jazz dance into her Jazz classes. Her passion for the music and its expressive qualities are hallmarks of her class choreographies. The technique emphasizes a deep connection to instilling musicality into one's movement, which requires attentive listening to the layers of sound in music and using the body to express them. I explore the rich polyrhythmic content in Latin Jazz music through a variety of simultaneous body coordinations, isolations and rhythmic movement that accentuates what I hear in the music - a repeating *montuno* piano part, a blaring trombone solo, a *clave* or *tumbao* conga pattern, etc. The connection between Simonson technique and Latin Jazz dance is seen in my teaching. Because of the precise instruction in Simonson on the mechanics of movement, dancers acquire a clearer understanding of Latin Jazz movement vocabulary as they focus on how to shift

weight on the feet while using the pelvis in opposition to the rib cage, shoulders and arms, and the coordination of different body parts moving to the rhythm of the music.

My thesis research has enhanced my ability to offer students more context as it relates to Latin Jazz choreography used in my classes. In particular, I can now articulate more about the history and musical concepts to expand the dancers' grasp of who and how the music and dance evolved. When it comes to Latin Jazz choreography, I believe the best place to start is by listening intently to the music – understanding its history and context, and picking out rhythmic figures that can inspire phrases and gestural motifs. The sophisticated rhythmic and harmonic attributes of Latin Jazz allow for powerful artistic expression.

Results and Implications for the Future

The intent of my thesis was not to codify a technique or dance style as an official Latin Jazz Dance. Instead I set out to learn about Latin Jazz music so I could more deeply understand its roots and artistic importance and how they relate to the fundamentals of the dancing that accompanies it. What I found (actually what I have known for years but in less detail) is an incredibly sophisticated, expressive music form that can inspire equally expressive dance — and a fascinating history filled with the blending of cultures and socioeconomic realities. In my teaching of Latin Jazz Dance over the last two years, I have been incorporating my research to relate this history as a background for dancers and choreographers. Now that my understanding is greater, my description of it to students has become more nuanced and detailed.

The objective of my research was to gain a proficient understanding of the origins of Latin Jazz music and dance to prepare me for two major initiatives: to educate and to create dance works. Armed with this knowledge, I foresee creating a college-level, single semester course called “Latin Jazz Dance” open to all levels of dance students. The curriculum will

combine lectures on the origins of Latin music and dance and the fusion with Jazz music and other jazz dance styles to accompany my Latin Jazz technique classes.

Outside of academia, I will run Latin Jazz dance workshops for dancers of all levels, giving classes in the style and creating choreography. As a guest artist contracted by the Jazz Choreography Enterprises, I teach young girls at a studio called Groove With Me in East Harlem. With my research, I can further enrich their appreciation and understanding of Latin Jazz dance. I plan to continually seek out other guest teaching jobs where I can impart my knowledge.

Once live performances are possible, I intend to present my thesis concert in some form. In addition, I will continue to explore prospects to choreograph and present Latin Jazz dance works for the stage.

Latin Jazz dance has yet to evolve into a well-defined art form. No choreographer, school or dancer has emerged as the definitive voice setting the standard for Latin Jazz dance. Instead, we can conclude that the style is open to interpretation. Just as Latin Jazz music is a wide-ranging fusion of Afro-Caribbean rhythms and Jazz, Latin Jazz dance can accommodate a fusion of many dance styles -- ballroom, Broadway Jazz, African dance, street dance, etc. Its lack of definition may be its artistic strength, leaving choreographers free from any boundaries that might limit or codify its movement vocabulary.

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Appendix

Figure 2: Program for thesis concert that was canceled

UNDER THE SKIN

The Evolution of Latin Jazz Music & Dance

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION – Teresa Perez Ceccon

CARIBBEAN BEGINNINGS THROUGH RUMBA

Historical video

FOLKLORIC DANCES

Taíno Dance

Music: Taíno Drummers

Dancer: Marie Ponce

Costume: Marie Ponce

Bomba y Plena

Music: Bomba y Plena Drummers including Teresa Perez Ceccon

Dancers: Milteri Tucker Concepción & Teresa Perez Ceccon

Costumes: Milteri Tucker Concepción., Teresa Perez Ceccon & Aya Shibahara

ARRIVAL IN AMERICA THROUGH SALSA REVOLUCIÓN

Historical video

SOCIAL DANCING

Partner Dances: Rumba, Mambo & Salsa

Music: La Banda Ramirez

Dancers: Teresa Perez Ceccon & Rodolfo Santamarina

Choreography: Teresa Perez Ceccon & Rodolfo Santamarina

Costumes: Aya Shibahara

LATIN JAZZ TODAY

Historical video

LATIN JAZZ DANCE

Latin Jazz Dance Ensemble

Music: Congo Mulence by Machito performed by La Banda Ramirez

Dancers: Teresa Perez Ceccon, Juli Greenberg, Stephanie Lau, Jose Manuel Mitaynes, Rodolfo Santamarina

Choreography: Teresa Perez Ceccon

Costumes: Aya Shibahara

SPECIAL GUEST PERFORMANCE

Afro-Cuban Percussive Dance (5:00)

Dancer: Max Pollak

Choreography: Max Pollak

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