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Perceptions of authenticity in the performance of Cuban popular music in the United Kingdom: ‘Globalized incuriosity’ in the promotion and reception of UK-based Charanga del Norte’s music since 1998

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Abstract

Drawing on my own experiences both as a performer and researcher of Cuban music, this article challenges the essentialism inherent in much promotion of ‘Latin’ music in the United Kingdom today, illustrating how issues of ethnicity and gender affect perceptions of authenticity by means of a case study of Charanga del Norte, a UK-grown Cuban music dance band, over the last fifteen years. Since its inception, my band has featured musicians from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, Charanga del Norte features more female musicians than most UK Latin bands. As I show, most promoters marketing the group have tended towards exoticization, using essentialized images of Latin culture, with an emphasis on not just the Cuban but all the Latin American members of the band. This meant the group was originally promoted as a northern UK-based salsa band, although audiences and promoters gradually became more aware of other forms of traditional Cuban music as a result of the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon. Promotion of us at World Music events has taken a slightly different stance and focussed more on publicizing the African roots of our ‘Afro-Cuban’ music.

Keywords

authenticity

cultural identity

transnational popular music

transcultural processes

gender

ethnicity

Introduction

Once upon a time, and a very bad time it was, there roamed a gang of men called Orientalists. Western dilettantes for the most part, they took it upon themselves to discuss and disseminate arts and books and ideas from the east, bringing to bear the prejudices and assumed superiority of Empire. The Indian subcontinent, China, the Middle East: these places and their peoples were exoticised, romanticised and patronised. So much for the bad old days. Except it is not clear that what has succeeded orientalism is so much better. In place of imperial condescension, we now have a kind of globalised incuriosity. Where once the British would pounce on differences with other cultures and blow them up, now they are more inclined not to deal with them at all. (Chakraborty 2011: 5)

In the United Kingdom, popular music as well as other arts are dominated by Anglo-American forms. Even foreign films no longer maintain their original title. A general lack

of curiosity about European and other foreign cultures persists. In an age of instant knowledge there is perhaps an attention deficit for anything that requires a different language in the anglophone world. As Aditya Chakraborty's article on modern 'globalized incuriosity' points out, at least the orientalist were curious. So now that we have such a wide range of music from around the world available to us in the United Kingdom via live performances, recordings and the Internet are we really more curious about other cultures? Was the interest in salsa in the 1980s and in the Buena Vista Social Club during the late 1990s a superficial one that was no better than the interest of those experiencing the *rumba* craze of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States and tourist Havana?¹ Are we seeing the same essentialist views of the past in new twenty-first century clothing? My experiences as a performer of Latin music in the United Kingdom would suggest that we are not as far ahead of the 1930s as we might think.²

Charanga is the name for a line-up of flute, violins, piano, bass, *timbales*, *güiro*, congas and vocals that developed in Cuba at the turn of the twentieth century, and its associated sound. Comprising male mixed race musicians, these *orquestas* (bands) perform *danzón*, *mambo*, *chachachá* and *pachanga* alongside other popular Cuban styles such as *son*, *guajira* and *bolero*.³ Whilst they reached the height of their popularity in the 1950s, there are still charanga bands performing today, particularly in Cuba, the United States and Latin America. In 1998, I set up my own charanga band inspired by the flute playing of Richard Egües from Orquesta Aragón, with whom I later studied in 2000 and 2001 in Havana.

My own motivation for wanting to play Cuban music stemmed from the fact that, as a flautist, I wanted to improvise within a dance music idiom, a role seldom given to my instrument. As Rolando Lozano (second flute player with Orquesta Aragón) remarked to his son Danilo, ‘the charanga is a flute player’s heaven. Dance music with a flute is very rare. Usually, it’s a lot of heavy brass and percussion’ (1990: 142). In addition to being inspired by Richard Egües’s solos, I wanted to play Cuban charanga as I liked the sound of this type of line-up and the way all the players had to work together cooperatively to make its distinctive sound. I also attended live performances by well-known charanga bands from Havana and New York who were touring extensively in the late 1990s and early 2000s in venues such as Casa Latina in Leeds, Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, and Queen Elizabeth Hall and The Barbican in London. Given that it felt to me as though this music was very much part of the UK scene, it did not seem strange to want to perform it myself; I had no revivalist agenda and no inclination to be ‘exotic’. As a musician I was obsessed with the solos of Richard Egües and José Fajardo and my overriding motivation was to get a charanga band together so I could improvise in this style in live performance.

As both a musician and linguist, I have always looked at learning music and languages as an immersion process. Learning Cuban charanga music was no different to learning Hindi or French for me, so I set about learning the music and the culture simultaneously (I had yet to hear of the term ‘ethnomusicology’ at this point in my career). In the United Kingdom, I studied the music by listening to recordings of Cuban music, transcribing all the instrumental lines to learn how to arrange the music, and copying solos by ear to learn the stylistic vocabulary needed to improvise in style. Additionally, in Havana, I studied

with Richard Egües and listened to the advice of other famous charanga musicians, such as Polo Tamayo of Ritmo Oriental. Interestingly, these teachers took an anti-essentialist approach to my wish to learn: rather than emphasizing the fact that I was a white English girl without a hope of being able to play with Cuban *sabor*/flavour, all encouraged me to immerse myself in the recordings and to ‘copy and invent’. That is, to play in style whilst developing my own *sello*/stamp. These players felt that it was important to play charanga music well and, whilst insisting on learning characteristic phrases, they also demonstrated how to be creative with that charanga vocabulary and syntax.⁴ Thus, while charanga music is rooted in Cuban culture and while it has been a delight to discover its musical history through practical engagement in charanga *típica* style, I have been able to develop my own personal voice (*sello*): I am from the United Kingdom after all and I do have my own flute sound. Indeed Polo Tamayo talked to me about how Cuban musicians could play jazz and still maintain their Cuban identity. Similarly he was accepting of my own cultural background and recommended I insert English melodies into my solos due to the fact that Cuban improvisers also love quoting well-known melodies in their improvisations.⁵ As this style is a mix of the ‘composed’ with the ‘spontaneous’ I feel that there is always scope for adding something new without making it unstylistic.⁶ Creativity within the parameters of charanga is therefore my motivation and not what might be meant by authenticity. Nevertheless, the ‘globalized incuriosity’ of many promoters and audiences vis-à-vis the matter of authenticity, as I show below, continues to affect our music’s distribution and consumption.

Domains of authenticity

In discussions of the authenticity of musical performance, it is useful to distinguish between musical and cultural elements.⁷ On the one hand, authenticity refers to the execution of the music (from whichever style or era one chooses) and, on the other, to the ethnicity and gender of the performers. These two aspects of authenticity (the musical and the cultural) are not mutually exclusive but they do need to be teased out in order to fully understand the misunderstandings surrounding the use of this term. As regards the former, I would argue it is (and therefore should be) possible to play a musical style whose origins are not from your own country of birth. Associating music solely with the culture within which it emerged also needs to be avoided. Since the turn of the twentieth century, radio, television, recordings, films and the World Wide Web have disseminated music across the globe, as has the physical migration of peoples. We must therefore embrace the fact that, as music travels, it undergoes modification wherever it settles due to the creativity and curiosity of human beings. Should we automatically bemoan, for example, that Stephane Grappelli is a more famous jazz violinist now than African American Stuff Smith? For this very reason, I personally do not use the term ‘authenticity’, preferring instead to refer to the style I play as *charanga típica*, as exemplified by Cuban bands of the 1950s,⁸ blended with elements of my own culture (as detailed in S. M. Miller 2010: 143–280). For these reasons – my wish not to negate the Cuban origins of this music nor to deny the band’s genesis in Yorkshire – I chose the epithet ‘del norte’ (from the north).

Whilst not striving for straight imitation, Charanga del Norte has been praised for its musical authenticity by Latin music DJs. According to Dave Hucker of *The Beat* magazine, we are ‘authentic charanga’:

Led by flautist Sue Miller, they are 100 percent authentic charanga with a raft of top-notch players, both English and *extraneros* [*sic*]. Their latest release is called *Our Mam in Havana* (CDN). The cover features a picture of somebody’s mother sitting at a Cuban kitchen table in very fetching pastel colored hair curlers. The music is beautifully crisp and well constructed, original compositions and classic charanga songs. Liberally infused with a dash of humor, *Our Mam in Havana* is a worthy contribution to the charanga tradition and helps keep this seminal style of Cuban music on the tips of our toes. (2008)

Yet we have sometimes been criticized for inauthenticity by audiences expecting salsa.⁹ For example, at a Charanga del Norte performance at Colchester Arts Centre in 2008, an angry salsa dancer from Ipswich told me in the interval that I was not playing the music right and that he should know because he has a Colombian [*sic*] friend, adding ‘look sunshine you can’t get away with this chacha thing!’ To be fair to this disgruntled salsa dancer, the concert was a last minute engagement and the band had not been well publicized: it was billed as a salsa night hence the audience was made up solely of members of one local salsa dance class. I came to suspect that, had I not announced some of the numbers as being in *chachachá* style, they would all have been happy to dance to them.¹⁰ I was able to test this theory out at later performances in salsa-oriented venues by

not naming the style: as most dancers are mainly familiar with the Tito Puente/Santana 'Oye como va' variety of *chachachá* they do not tend to recognize its Cuban variants, which are often more *son*-based, and so happily dance their salsa steps to these numbers. I have found that where I have had the power to ensure my own publicity materials are printed in venue publicity, this situation does not arise as audiences are then prepared for something a little different, and are no longer outraged at the lack of a brass section.

Therefore, Charanga del Norte can be seen as musically authentic in that it performs mid-century charanga *típica* styles with the traditional *orquesta* line-up of flute, violins, *timbales*, *güiro*, congas, vocals, piano and bass. We are, however, culturally inauthentic in that most of our musicians did not grow up with this Cuban charanga music. Yet this brings its own issues. The statements that not all Cubans are musicians and that not all Latin Americans can play salsa may seem obvious ones to make, yet I have been struck by how 'globalized incuriosity' leads some in the audience to assume certain band members are experts in Cuban music purely because they are Cuban or Latin American, despite several of the British musicians who regularly perform with the band having more knowledge and training in the idiom. Sometimes this 'incuriosity' is racialized. Many in the audience at Charanga del Norte concerts presume our music is authentic if performed by 'foreigners' of African origin. Such is the case that those musicians from British Caribbean backgrounds in my band have sometimes been presumed to be Cuban by some in the audience. Both are from Wolverhampton. Conversely, my Venezuelan percussionist was taken to task for not being 'Latino' enough (read black) at a gig in Grimsby in 2010. Additionally most Latin American musicians in my band are not

questioned on their ability to sing or play this music whereas the white English players are often under far greater scrutiny. In any discussion on the ethnicity of musicians, I would therefore argue that there needs to be more acknowledgement of our own multiracial realities. Not only are British people made up of second, third and fourth-generation immigrants but also many are from ethnically mixed backgrounds that defy labelling. A cursory glance at some of my British musicians' surnames past and present give an indication of this: Lindh (Scandinavian), Bitelli (Italian), Singh (Sikh), Sliwa (Polish), McCarthy (Irish) and Jayasuriya (Sri Lankan).¹¹ Additionally the band's Cuban dancer Guillermo has an English surname, Davis, revealing the legacy of the slave trade in Cuba where many Afro-Cubans have English and French surnames as well as the more dominant Spanish ones.¹²

The cultural make-up of Charanga del Norte alluded to here has varied throughout its fifteen-year history, my choice of musician being dependent on the availability and capabilities of UK-based performers. The Cuban music and salsa scene is a relatively small one here and, as I was based outside the capital, I therefore had to train up musicians from other fields such as jazz, classical and folk to play Cuban styles. This has resulted in an increased quota of women and younger players in the group in recent times as I have been willing to provide a training ground for those musicians previously not encouraged to play salsa or Cuban music.¹³ The Latin scene is still proportionally dominated by men and these players typically do not invite female musicians to play, tending to offer work to specialist players from within the small UK salsa and Latin community. In addition to white British musicians in the band there have been second

and third-generation British musicians from a variety of backgrounds (Asian, Caribbean, Chilean) alongside musicians from Cuba, Colombia, Venezuela and Sene-Gambia. Additionally, in 2005 I invited three French musicians from Paris-based Charanga Keto to join the band for a summer tour, having met them while on research in 2003. With these French charanga players (all of whom were of mixed race: French Tunisian, Moroccan and Congolese) the band was truly international and tri-lingual. Later in 2008, a professional Cuban dancer from Guantánamo, Guillermo Davis, took centre stage in Charanga del Norte. He demonstrated the dance steps and animated the audience, giving the band an additional ‘edutainment’ remit as the dance steps for the musical styles of *danzón*, *mambo*, *son* and *chachachá* were demonstrated and taught during the band’s performance. This was a successful collaboration, and Guillermo has enjoyed demonstrating dance styles such as *danzón*, *chachachá*, *mambo*, *pilón* and *son*. In particular, he appreciated being able to promote *changüü*, the music and dance of his home town Guantánamo, as he was tired of seeing his home town associated solely with Guantánamo Bay here in the United Kingdom.

Indeed, being white and English is definitely not a selling point for this music. Unfortunately, dark skin – whether connoting African ‘rootsyness’ or ‘hot spicy Latino-ness’ – sells. For example, I was once asked by a Cuban bandleader to wear fake tan when I played in a Cuban *son* function band in London as apparently ‘I sounded Cuban but did not look Cuban’ (incidentally I refused to follow his suggestion and no problems were encountered during that particular engagement). In contrast, in Cuba I am a novelty as an English woman playing charanga *típica*, and the incongruity of my ethnicity and

my playing style continue to engage the curiosity of musicians, musicologists and TV and radio presenters. Interestingly, the fact that Charanga del Norte's 2005 tour involved the aforementioned French-African musicians was not used in the press and publicity we received during this Arts Council funded tour, perhaps as promoters thought it might put off audiences expecting 'authentic' Latin music.

Why is Latin music not world music?

In spite of the band's perceived musical authenticity, Charanga del Norte does not really fit into any marketing category directly. Whilst related to salsa and jazz, we are not a complete fit for the salsa clubs due to the violins and flute line-up and the absence of a brass section, nor for jazz venues, since our dance music does not coincide with the 'sit-down' Latin jazz category. We therefore found ourselves obliged to cross over into the world music scene to some extent, playing the roots stages of folk festivals like the Trowbridge Village Pump Festival and world roots programmes at theatres and arts centres such as The Castle in Wellingborough. In this sphere, our cultural inauthenticity was difficult to contend with appropriately without lapsing into 'globalised incuriosity'. World roots and folk festival promoters emphasized the music's African roots and the band acquired the label 'African Salsa' for a time when we had a Sene-Gambian singer in the group in 2000 and 2001. Although our African singer added elements from his own Senegambian culture (in terms of vocal delivery in Wolof and Mandinka languages), structurally the music remained Cuban and was not at all like the Congolese rumba

promoters compared us with. Similarly the flute and strings were seen as ‘roots’ or folk rather than classical instruments in this context.

Deborah Pacini Hernandez has highlighted this particular focus on African-ness by world music promoters, stating that ‘many [...] capitalise on the appeal to Northern consumers of exotic and rootsy – read black – diasporan music and culture’ (1998: 121). In contrast most Latin music promoters emphasize the whiter Hispanic image, as Hernandez continues ‘within Latin music networks, the opposite has been true; the images on the jackets of salsa, merengue or balada recordings suggest a clear preference for whiteness and a culturally homogenized, transnational, pan-Latino modernity’ (1998: 121). This explains why New York-based Latino musician and Cuban music *aficionado* Henry Fiol did not manage to succeed in the world music market despite having been selected for the Virgin Earthworks series:

To my knowledge, I was the only Latin or salsa artist that had been selected for the Virgin Earthworks series, and I had very high hopes that this *Sonero* compilation would help me cross over into the ‘world music’ market and put me on a different place on the map, where I would begin to get more American (non-Latin) and European gigs, and start performing for an ethnically-mixed, world music audience. For whatever reasons, this never panned out, and it definitely was a disappointment for me. (Child 2008)

I would argue that Fiol, as a white Hispanic musician, did not fit the African roots image for the world music market. Moreover, he may have been ignored due to the perception of him as belonging to the white 'Pan-Latino' category outlined above by Pacini Hernandez. Similarly Cuban music is often ethnically categorized into two forms, Cuban popular dance music (*son, charanga, música campesina, trova*) on the one hand, and Afro-Cuban forms (*rumba, comparsa, santería* and *folklórico*) on the other. These distinctions of 'Cuban' and 'Afro-Cuban' give the impression that popular styles are more Hispanic and white, and that Afro-Cuban forms are performed by black Cubans only. However this is not strictly the case. Many outside Cuba assume that charanga is a purely white Cuban musical form (perhaps due to the fact that many Hispanic Cubans left Cuba for the United States after the 1959 revolution and started charanga bands there) when in fact most of the famous charanga bands in the 1950s consisted of mixed race musicians. Cuban charanga, whilst secular entertainment music, is nevertheless influenced subtly by *santería*, the religious music and dance forms associated mainly with Afro-Cubans. Many promoters were keen for me to have an African or black Cuban front singer to appeal to the world music audience regardless of my artistic aims for the band and they all focussed on the band's ethnicity in their promotion materials. As S. Feld remarks:

Tied to a long history of essentializing and racializing other bodies as possessing a 'natural' sense of rhythm, the invention of 'world beat' reproduces a Western gaze towards the exotic and erotic, often darker-skinned, dancing body. (2005: 266)

The world beat fusions encouraged by world music organizations such as Womad, particularly in the 1990s, were devised as a way to promote collaborations between first and third world musicians, where hybridity became a fashionable element in world music promotion. In this context, Simon Frith has commented on the fact that hybridity has become a new form of authenticity with world music promotion networks adapting aspects of academic work on culture and identity to meet their own commercial needs:

The postmodern condition is reflected both in the collapse of grand musical narratives and authorities and in the blurring of musical borders and histories. World music can thus be treated as the sound of postmodern experience... academic music studies look to world music for clues about the postmodern condition, for examples of hybridity and lived subjective instability, but to understand this phenomenon we also have to recognize the ways in which world music has itself been constructed as a kind of tribute to and parody of the community of scholars. (2000: 315, 320)

I would argue, however, that 'hybridity' was more of a marketing concept than a true reflection of cultural complexity. Perhaps this emphasis on the hybrid was a way of side-stepping issues of authenticity, musical ownership and the exploitation of third-world artists, or more charitably, viewed as an attempt to acknowledge today's culturally mixed realities. I suspect, however, that much of this trend was fuelled by promoters trying to make world music more accessible and mainstream for a western audience. For example,

I was asked to add hip hop elements and other drum and bass beats to the Charanga del Norte mix by one promoter keen on ‘world beat’ music. This did not interest me musically as I enjoy the live cross-rhythms of the three piece charanga percussion section; nailing these rhythmic games down with a ‘four to the floor’ beat did not appeal to me artistically, so I did not join in with this particular trend. Whilst not averse to musical experimentation (and I am more than happy for studio musicians to use my music for their own mixes when permission is asked), my inspiration for Charanga del Norte lay with the charanga flute soloing style and the 1950s charanga sound rather than in any studio production. In any case I prefer organic developments to ‘top down’ industry-led fusions, where motivations are market-driven rather than artistically led.

Macho and Hembra: Gender and authenticity

In addition to the racial stereotyping on the Latin and World music scene in the United Kingdom, many of the obstacles I have faced arise on account of my gender, a matter woven into the fabric of musical performance in Cuba. On the one hand, musical performers are predominantly male. Moreover, if a band in Cuba plays badly, they say it is *hembra*, that is, female (after the larger female drumhead). If it plays strongly it is referred to as ‘macho’. This equating of male playing as good and female playing as bad has made my dialogue with charanga a particularly difficult one. In Cuba participating in improvisation cutting contests alongside giving talks and interviews has gradually built up mutual respect within the charanga community. In the United Kingdom, I believe it

has been harder than it should have been to attract good players, perhaps as there is less prestige to be gained for male musicians working for a female bandleader. Persistence seems to have eventually garnered respect: as I have got older band leading has got easier, which suggests that younger women in perceived positions of authority (as band leaders in this case) are not listened to or respected immediately whereas their male counterparts are more readily accepted. Questions of gender also impact on promotion in the United Kingdom. Even when the performers are all male, use of images of dancing women is preferred to a band photo. This association with (female) sexuality was reinforced in the flyers and posters by Leeds-based Casa Latina club promoters, who referred to salsa bands they promoted as ‘hardcore’, ‘hard hitting’, ‘heavy’ or ‘X-rated’.

The violins and flute line-up of the charanga *orquesta* is similarly gendered as feminine, where a lighter texture equals ‘lightweight’ for some. It needs noting that most traditional charangas in Cuba are made up of male musicians and the sound is not generally considered to be at all lightweight. Similarly, in the popular music domain, violinists are regarded by some as effeminate, ‘lacking the balls’ of hard-drinking brass players. The flute is generally perceived as an instrument for girls and as a classical instrument not a Latin one despite its important role in the development of *danzón*, *mambo*, *chachachá* and *pachanga*. Thus the violins and flute represent the effeminate (or feminine) world of classical music. This conflation of the ‘feminine’ with the ‘classical’ is reflected in many of the reviews we have received. The violins and flute are equated with classical music and distinctions between ‘African’ and ‘European’ instruments are often made in these

reviews and previews. This is exemplified by this preview from the Yorkshire Evening Press in May 2010:

Charanga del Norte, a 14-piece band, plays traditional Cuban music, such as mambo on European instruments. They will perform tracks from latest album *Look Back in Charanga*. Expect highly improvised flute blown out over pulsating African rhythms created by a funky string, piano, base [*sic*] and percussion collaboration. (Hazan 2010)

While charanga music possesses classical roots, the oft-cited statement on Cuban music that it is a marriage of African drum and Spanish guitar (or European melody and harmony) is not an accurate one. Nevertheless it is repeated in many reviews of Charanga del Norte such as the one below from the London Evening Standard, where we are seen to be ‘blending’ the African with the European:

Leeds-based Charanga del Norte were an ensemble of Latin-loving northerners that included a cellist from the Liverpool Philharmonic. Their blend of European classical music and African rhythms sparkled in the afternoon sunshine, buoyed by founder Sue Miller’s ubiquitous flute. (Cornwell 2009)

Initially categorized as a UK-salsa band it was common to have the tag ‘salsa without brass’ or ‘salsa with strings’ under our gig entries in the press listings. Compared to brass-led salsa, we were often described as lighter or cooler that could be read negatively

or positively, as there is a genuine difference in texture between the two formats, although reviewers tend to make gendered distinctions. For example, a *Musicians Union* magazine review in 1999 stated that my intricate arrangements had to compensate for the ‘lack of brass’ (an implied lack of balls?), whereas *The Guardian* newspaper described the band as an ‘outfit offering the violin-flute charanga sound as a change from the more boisterous salsa bashes’ (feminine, nice and easy listening?) (*Guardian Guide* 2000).

One of Charanga del Norte’s most contested musical elements is our use of female vocals. Charanga music has developed around the male tenor register but, due to the lack of good, reliable male charanga singers in the United Kingdom, I have had to adapt my band’s sound to female vocals. My higher, more breathy vocals on the two most recent recordings have met with opposition from traditional salsa promoters and musicians, but have been well received by others from different music scenes (popular, folk and classical), although some traditional Cuban musicians liked the change. Whatever the music’s reception in this respect, neither salsa nor roots promoters have acknowledged that I have female musicians in the band, unlike most other salsa groups, perhaps as gender balance is not a marketable issue unless the band members are all female and under 25 (what I term the ‘Ivy Benson’ syndrome). There are a few female singers on the scene but very few instrumental musicians in comparison with the number of men performing professionally. In the United Kingdom Cuban music and salsa bands tend to consist of male musicians with an occasional female singer. Where there are professional female musicians, they tend to be bandleaders with strong personalities who have created

their own musical opportunities, much as Raymond Macdonald and Graeme B. Wilson have observed in the perceived meritocratic environment of jazz:

It has been observed elsewhere that one way jazz musicians identify themselves as such is by asserting that status is entirely down to effort and abilities, a denial of social influences or 'inspiration'. (2006: 68)

This representation is meagre, it is often presumed, because female salsa musicians are not good enough; no thought is given to the possibility that they are not encouraged to join the Latin music-making scene in the first place. I certainly felt I had to work twice as hard as my male counterparts to gain recognition in this respect. In Cuba and New York I have been part of all male bands and, whilst the same attitudes exist there, I have, on the whole, been made to feel more welcome there than in the UK-based Latin bands for the sole reason that I play in style.¹⁴

Marketing and reception of Charanga del Norte

When marketing my own band I resisted these stereotypes of Cuban music, typically tied to Fidel Castro, cigars, old cars and palm trees, or to spicy, hot, sizzling sex.¹⁵ With hindsight, it may have made more sense commercially to have adopted the ubiquitous yet questionable Latin imagery (of bikini-clad women astride congas or images of mojitos, palm trees and happy smiling Cubans) taken by many Cuban music and salsa bands both in the United Kingdom and abroad. Perhaps I should have made more of the rootsy

appeal of the violin section for the world music stage. I could alternatively have been more fusionist in approach in the same vein as bands such as Salsa Celtica and Ska Cubano.¹⁶ Had I given the group an English name, I might have avoided the inevitable tropical party gigs we were engaged for in 1998 and 1999, many of which have been erased from my memory in the interests of sanity. For the purposes of exemplification and entertainment, however, I resurrect a few of these experiences shaped by ‘global incuriosity’ here.

In the early days, the band was often booked by salsa dance agencies for function parties where Charanga del Norte typically performed after a show from exhibition dancers of the Tropicana or Brazilian g-string variety.¹⁷ Apart from the incongruity of these affairs they were generally embarrassing, made more so by the fact that the band did not conform to the aforementioned stereotypes, required by the promoter. After many similar (but sometimes hilarious) experiences I set about creating my own publicity and website. On receipt of Arts Council funding, I gained more control over how the band was marketed using touring funding to produce quality marketing materials that helped to counteract misleading publicity. Despite being in greater control of the band’s marketing, however, most promoters were still more interested in the Cuban and Latin American musicians in the band. This demand became problematic at times when some of these players failed to show up to rehearsals and sometimes even gigs, were unprofessional in other ways (having tantrums onstage, being drunk or ‘busking the gig’ because they had not practiced the repertoire beforehand), and occasionally they were simply not up to the mark musically.¹⁸ In the poster below, a photograph of Charanga del Norte from the

band's website was transplanted onto a map of South America (not even Latin America or the Caribbean!), de-emphasizing the band's English base (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Charanga del Norte: Transplanted to South America for Hull's Refugee Week on 21 June 2003.¹⁹



Due to the lack of more consistent financial backing, I was unable to promote the band continuously to any large extent. Lacking distribution, an agent or manager the band has received sporadic independent reviews and uneven promotion from venue promoters. Some of this promotion has drawn on the band's own press and publicity packages and website materials, initially on the website www.charangadelnorte.co.uk and now on

www.charangasue.com; others have made their own copy. Perhaps as I have not over-promoted the Latin American or Cuban members of the band in the last few years, it has sometimes been assumed that Charanga del Norte comprises solely of English musicians from Leeds (although there's nothing wrong with that!). It has also been assumed by my Havana-based colleagues that we are all English, and the few stylistic mistakes on our recordings have been attributed to English players not knowing the style, when in fact the (relatively few) stylistic errors on these more recent albums are mostly made by UK-based Cuban and Colombian percussionists. This attitude may relate to perceptions of 'authenticity' or typical Cuban chauvinism (there is understandably considerable pride in their own cultural heritage) but it also needs noting that many older Cubans have not been to the United Kingdom and their image of the country is not one of a multicultural Great Britain but rather one of Shakespeare, tea and the Queen.

Although I have taken pains to produce press and publicity that accurately reflects Charanga del Norte's music, a venue can choose to veto material given to them by artists themselves. An example of this, which exemplifies how Latin music is perceived in the United Kingdom, occurred in 2008 when Lawrence Batley Theatre's marketing department refused to publicize our concert there with our own poster design *Our Mam in Havana* (Figure 2) that features a Cuban woman in curlers, an image I chose in order to play on stereotypes of the 1950s Yorkshire woman, the north and the 1950s' Cuba time warp following the revolution.

Figure 2



I was told such an image simply would not do as they were marketing the event as a ‘sexy salsa night’ and they substituted the band poster with their own more generic one. All this despite having a big poster advert hanging outside the theatre that summer for a John Godber play *Our House*, which featured a northern woman in curlers (Figure 3).²⁰

Figure 3: *Our House*’s northern working class woman. Photograph by Louise Buckby, Image courtesy of Hull Truck Theatre



In the United Kingdom, very little knowledge of charanga music is possessed, so audience response depends very much on the different expectations of festival crowds, salsa aficionados and jazz lovers. Charanga del Norte performances in the United Kingdom are better received by a mixed festival or theatre crowd rather than by audiences made up solely of salsa dancers in clubs. Our most receptive audiences were those associated with the Buena Vista Social Club: we supported Buena Vista's Eliades Ochoa at The Bridgewater Hall in Manchester in 2003, and Orquesta Aragón at The Barbican in 2009.²¹

One could question whether the niche marketing of music genres prevalent today in our Amazon world of ‘People who chose this also bought this’ makes people less open-minded when it comes to hearing music that lies beyond their previous experiences. As G. Lipovetsky predicted in his *L'Ère Du Vide/The Era of Emptiness*):

Bientôt le vidéotex présentera des <<arbres de décision>>, des systèmes questions-réponses permettant au consommateur de faire connaître à l'ordinateur ses propres critères afin d'effectuer un choix rationnel et néanmoins personnalisé. La séduction n'est plus libertine. ([1983] 1993: 35)

Soon the videotex will present a ‘decision-tree’, a system of question and answers that allows the consumer to make choices by letting the computer know his or her preferences in order to make a rational but nevertheless personalized choice. Seduction is no longer a matter of free choice. (my translation)

Some concluding thoughts

The bias of my academic research towards music analysis and performance means it has not been directly concerned with issues of gender and ethnicity. This is the first time I have reflected in writing on my experiences as a performer on the UK scene. I have been fairly negative about the essentialized marketing of salsa and world music in the United

Kingdom as the emphasis on ethnicity in the promotion of Latin and world music does deny the more complex realities of a multiracial and digitized world. Furthermore salsa music has been promoted in the main as a lifestyle rather than a cultural phenomenon, and only a small proportion of salsa dancers are informed about salsa or Cuban music's history and culture. For example, UK Latin DJ Lubi Jovanovich wanted to compile a charanga compilation CD but the idea was turned down. As he explained to me: 'Sue... I compile CDs for UK-based compilation labels... they sell Latin music as a "lifestyle" thing not a cultural one' (Jovanovich 2010). When music is consumed as a lifestyle choice there is no curiosity about a music's history, how it works or where it originated from. As Eduardo De la Fuente remarks in his writing on consumption and lifestyle versus spiritual fulfilment: 'The "infinite" and the "unattainable" become questions of gratification, or what we moderns term "consumption". Culture becomes reduced to taste, or to lifestyle choices' (2011: 39–40).

This disconnect between music and dance (that evolved together in the case of Cuban charanga) and their cultural background has resulted in a marketing of Latin music informed by 'globalized incuriosity' in terms of music and a clumsy understanding of ethnicity. My promotion of Cuban charanga music, informed both by my performing and research work, has enjoyed relatively little commercial success (although I have provided paid work for professional performing musicians and secured touring grants from the Arts Council of England). Despite the difficulties encountered, I have had the privilege of studying with one of the most famous Cuban musicians of the twentieth century, Richard Egües from Orquesta Aragón and have enjoyed performing charanga music in the United

Kingdom, Havana and New York. It has brought me enormous pleasure, particularly when musicians connect with the audience and have a good time together. Through my improvisations and arrangements I hope to have added my own flavour to the charanga tradition and believe that Charanga del Norte have contributed something original and worthwhile, however small, to this rich Cuban dance music tradition. I also hope to have been a role model for other women musicians who would like to perform Latin music both on an amateur and professional level. There is still a long march ahead before any gender equality exists in this particular performing arena.

When marketing and good music combine well (and this now requires considerable financial backing),²² this pleasure can be disseminated further afield as Paris-based salsa and charanga pianist Emmanuel Massarotti remarked to me in a 2003 interview:

Le marketing et la musique sont deux notions différentes, l'un travaillant pour l'autre avec tout de même parfois d'excellents résultats : Cachao Master Sessions, Orlando 'Cachaito' López, Rumba All Stars (Grammy Award), Jesus Alemany, Irakere etc ont bénéficié du marketing en présentant un travail phénoménal – sans le négociant on ne peut pas vendre ses patates en dehors de la ferme.

Marketing and music are two different notions, one working for the other, sometimes with excellent results such as the Grammy award winning recordings of the Cachao Master Sessions, Orlando 'Cachaito' López, the Rumba All Stars, Jesus Alemany and Irakere – they've all benefitted from marketing that has

showcased their phenomenal work - without the businessman you cannot sell your potatoes beyond the farm gates. (my translation)

I look forward to the day when the marketing of Latin music does not fall back lazily onto stereotypes that do not reflect lived global realities. I conclude that on the UK Latin and world music scene, issues of ethnicity and gender certainly do affect music's production, dissemination and reception in ways that are not always conducive to the artistic life. I believe that there are positive changes afoot however and hope for more reviews like the one below where the reviewer, in lieu of the usual Cuba/UK comparison, cites the traditional rivalry between Lancashire and Yorkshire, referring obliquely to the War of the Roses,²³ by saying that it does not really matter which side of the Pennines you come from when performing Cuban music:

Nearly a decade or so ago, I saw this outfit playing in the town square in Bolton, Lancashire. They really impressed me with their retro Cuban sounds, led by a front-line of massed violins (okay, then; four) and flute, laced with delicate but adept improvisations and sounding totally authentic. Things change, and so do bands, of course. Charanga del Norte celebrates its tenth anniversary this year – and it's even better. Leader and flautist Sue Miller has studied with and learned from several of Cuba's top traditional charanga players, and it's evident in her playing; she handles the vocals too, with a sultry, breathy style that certainly suits the sound. Her fellow musicians seem to have similarly absorbed the Cuban style, as though from birth, and the result is a bright, good-natured, very listenable and

highly entertaining release. It really doesn't matter that it happens to come from over the other side of the Pennines – Havana, Yorkshire, anyone? (Darwen 2008: 83)

Ultimately, however, power resides not with reviewers (although they too have some responsibility), but with those who put forward these exoticized images (or those that veto other forms of alternative publicity) and those who propose and fund musical projects, whether these be performances, recordings, festivals or community events. My experience tells me there is still no equal relationship between musicians and promoters despite all the media hype for the power of social networking and YouTube. You could say that the public influences the popularity of bands and musicians but marketing and distribution do play a very large part in this. As Kelly Keto, ex press officer for Polygram Records France (and a salsa/charanga bass player in his own right), told me in 2003, popularity is formed by media exposure:

SM: On dit que c'est le peuple qui décide les tubes.

KK: Non, c'est les plus gros... Le peuple décide de rien du tout, non, non..je suis catégorique, je suis méchant, mais le peuple, il décide de rien du tout. Le peuple on le prend par le bout du né, on l'emmène où on veut l'emmener quoi et après on dit les gens ont décidé ça... T'as regardé les pubs télé machin « le meilleur de piano, le meilleur de la musique... le meilleur de machin » et après on dit « oui, regardez, c'est le public qui a décidé que lui c'est le meilleur » !

SM: It's said that the public decide on the hits.

KK: No, that's the biggest... The public don't decide anything, no, no. Let me be clear about this, I'm being naughty but, the people, they don't decide on anything. The public are led by the end of their noses, led wherever they want to lead them and then they say 'oh look the people decided that'. You've seen the TV ads saying something like 'the best piano music', 'the best musician', 'the best whatever' and then they say 'look, the public have chosen him as being the best'.
(my translation)

Those who fund production and control the channels of distribution, whether that be for live or recorded music 'products' are the people with the power to change these perceptions. Whether we as artists conform to their particular world-view or not is another matter as promotion of Latin and world music is in the hands of those who define our 'global village'. It is they who have the power to invite you to their multicultural or Latin party or to exclude you if you do not look the part.

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Notes

¹ For a detailed analysis of the US *rumba* phenomenon of this period see Robin D. Moore (2006).

² For the purposes of this article, I use the term ‘Latin’ to refer to both Cuban music and salsa forms, referring in the main to Cuban and Latin USA forms rather than Brazilian or other Latin American genres. The musical forms discussed in this article all use Cuban *clave* as an organizing principle.

³ For a historical and analytical account of the style’s development see Miller (2013).

⁴ The disparity of wealth between the United Kingdom and Cuba, alongside the political situation means that it is very hard to forge real friendships there. I naturally paid for lessons as I would in the United Kingdom but these established players gave me extra hours of their time voluntarily and ultimately became my friends.

⁵ Interviews with Policarpo ‘Polo’ Tamayo, Havana, 19 February 2006, 3 March 2006 and 25 March 2007.

⁶ In telephone conversations and personal correspondence, the singer-songwriter Robert Wyatt (1999, 2000, 2004) has told me how he enjoys my ‘quiet innovations’ regarding

the use of vocals on my recordings. On a postcard from 12 February 2004 he wrote ‘seriously terrific writing, arranging Sue and wot I think, I could listen to much more of your coros! The two of you’s sing so good together! Salud y Paz (Alfie +) Robert (Wyatt)’.

⁷ For reasons of space, I do not examine here the issue of authenticity as an emotional sincerity in performance.

⁸ Whilst every era in the charanga styles’ development, from the early twentieth century to the present, has had its own flavour, mid-century charanga performance was the inspiration for my own group as it provides the perfect musical environment for flute improvisation. This exemplifies the fact that musical styles ought to be looked at as snapshots in time as they have no single original source and develop diachronically (there are always earlier forms of one sort or another). It is also important to realize that stylistic change does not equate with stylistic evolution: styles emerge at certain points in history for various social, cultural, economic and political reasons. For example, from the 1970s onwards, the charanga format was often fused with rock and *timba* styles. In these instances it was harder for the flute to compete dynamically due to busier percussion and horn sections. Many popular fusion-style groups such as Los Van Van and NG La Banda maintained elements from the charanga initially, but the flute’s role became less central in these groups, and therefore less interesting for someone like me wanting to improvise on flute within a dance context.

⁹ Salsa was formed in the United States when Puerto Ricans and NuYoricans adapted Cuban charanga, *mambo* and *conjunto* models and made them their own. For a more detailed analysis of salsa as musical ‘genre’ see L. Waxer (2002).

¹⁰ *Strictly Come Dancing*, a BBC TV series featuring dance competitions in the United Kingdom presented by Bruce Forsyth, may have given *chachachá* a bad name.

¹¹ Obviously this name tracing is a blunt tool. My surname Miller does not reveal that three generations back, my family were of mainly Irish, Jewish and French extraction.

¹² The British occupied Havana for ten months in 1762 and were also heavily involved in the slave trade alongside Spain, France and Holland (see Gott 2004).

¹³ In particular I use female vocalists due to the scarcity of male tenor singers.

¹⁴ I have performed with other salsa and Cuban music bands in the United Kingdom and whilst holding my own, I have always been conscious of being female and in need of proving myself as a musician in contrast to feeling more relaxed in my own band (in more recent years) where there is an equal distribution of gender. Additionally, there are London-centric attitudes on the UK salsa scene that affect all musicians who play this music outside of the capital.

¹⁵ Indeed some Cuban musicians in the United Kingdom play to these expectations as they get more work that way: many Cubans and Colombians currently parade as Mexicans to get Mariachi band wedding gigs in London.

¹⁶ English salsa pianist Alex Wilson has undertaken several fusion projects such as *Mali Latino* (2010), *Salsa con Soul* (2008) and *Inglaterra* containing the bhangra–salsa number ‘Oh Kuri’ (2008).

Ska Cubano is a group formed by record producer Peter A. Scott in 2002 to combine Jamaican ska with Cuban music, <http://www.skacubano.com/index.php/en/content/index>, accessed 18 November 2010.

Salsa Celtica, originally a straight ahead salsa band from Edinburgh (formed in 1995) later added traditional Scottish instruments into the mix becoming well known for their unique brand of ‘Celtic’ salsa.

¹⁷ The Hothole, for example, was a Leeds-based agency that booked salsa bands and dancers for function parties and local council-run ‘multicultural’ events.

¹⁸ As in other respects mentioned above, this lack of professionalism was often excused by some audience members and promoters in contrast to harsher criticism of the non-Latin musicians in the group. It has to be said that this music is hard to learn and musical mistakes were made by all band musicians regardless of cultural background, particularly in the early years of the band’s development.

¹⁹ This image is part of a poster advertising a world music event in Hull on 21 June 2003 in support of refugees (n.a.). The poster forms part of Charanga del Norte’s poster and flyer archive and, to my knowledge, no longer exists in printed form or online.

²⁰ Poster for Hull Truck theatre’s play *Our House* available from <http://www.thelowry.com/event/Our House>, May 2008. Image courtesy of Hull Truck Theatre. Photograph by Louise Buckby.

²¹ Buena Vista Social Club was a group formed by Juan de Marcos González and Ry Cooder after an initial recording project and film of the same name in the late 1990s.

²² The fact that music now costs far more to promote than it does to create is critiqued by Mat Callahan in *The Trouble with Music* (2005). Financial aspects of music promotion are thus intertwined with power relationships. Both reception and promotion of my band have always been tied up with a lack of finance and distribution.

²³ The Pennine Hills divide Yorkshire and Lancashire, symbolizing historic rivalries since the War of the Roses during the fifteenth century, when battles were fought between the Houses of Lancaster and York.