Arsenio Rodríguez: From Subversive Nationalism to Prophetic Transnationalism

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When one thinks of the history of Cuban popular music, it is difficult to come up with a more influential figure than Arsenio Rodríguez (Güira de Macurijes, Cuba, 1911). He is one of those people who Leonardo Padura cites as having "forged a real mythology concerning his person, one of the most particular reflections of a 'Latin American' identity—for lack of a better term."[1] The few biographical tidbits that consistently appear in articles, reference texts or liner and compilation notes have become legend. As a blind musician with a dry and distant manner, and the fact that he granted very few interviews, ensures that his life will always border on mythology—but there is certain logic to that.

There are two key moments in the myth that have been created about his life, both directly linked to his blindness. The first is that his loss of sight was caused by a mule kick. The other is that he tried to recuperate his sight with help from a specialist in New York, in 1947, and that failure prompted him to write the hopeless and most famous of his *boleros* [ballads], "La vida es sueño" [Life is a Dream]. Both events attempt to encode adversity as the point from and against which the life of this musician was forged.

Even if none of his more than two hundred compositions achieved the popularity of songs like "Lágrimas Negras," by Matamoros, or "Échale salsita," by Piñeiro, scores of songs by this *tresero* [a *tres* player (a *tres* is a guitar-like instrument with three sets of double strings)], known as "El Ciego Maravilloso" [The Marvelous Blind Man], are part of the regular repertoire of musicians all over the world—from number like "Bruca Manigua" to "El reloj de Pastora" and "Mami, me gustó." As if that weren't enough, he is responsible for the greatest

evolutionary leap in the development of the '*son*,' the 'king' of Cuba's popular music genres: that leap was a switch from *septetos* (originally six or fewer member *son* groups to which a trumpet lead was added, making seven) to *conjuntos* (which added congas and piano), which led to a tonal, rhythmic and harmonic enhancement of their sound. Additionally, it was in Arsenio Rodríguez's *conjunto* that essential figures of Cuban and Caribbean music developed, people like Miguelito Cuní, Félix Chapotín, Lilí Martínez, Chocolate Armenteros, Rubén González and Johnny Pacheco.

It is hard to think of anyone else who introduced so many enduring changes to the history of Cuban music. That is why it is surprising that recognition for his great achievements does not generally extend much beyond that of musicians and specialists. There are not even institutions, events, streets or monuments that commemorate his name in Cuba (his place of birth), New York or Miami (last year, finally, the anniversary of his birth was celebrated in an official manner). Not even his burial site, in the Ferncliff cemetery, has a tombstone with his name.

To attenuate this marginalization, which is not suffered by much less important personalities, one could honestly say that Arsenio Rodríguez's influence is so much alive and current that it makes it invisible. Yet, the explanation for this, no matter how elegant, seems insufficient to me.

Cuban popular music experts implicitly or explicitly agree that the history of *son* or *salsa* could not be written without mentioning Arsenio Rodríguez's name; his influence can be found in the least likely corners of the Caribbean or United States.

One of the most renown Cuban musicologists—Leonardo Acosta—, someone not given to attributing to specific people concretely determining influences in a musical evolution that has been the result of collective efforts, as he puts it, agrees that "the rhythmic harmonic renewal of the *son* has two great innovators: Arsenio Rodríguez and Niño Rivera," and insists that:

"We must highlight the contributions Arsenio Rodríguez made to our popular music; his influence became decisive in the fusion styles that have come about from the 1940s till now. He kept the *tres* as an essential instrument (for accompaniment or solo). But the new format he created had various implications we should make note of: 1) the definitive inclusion of the piano as the main harmonic instrument, instead of the guitar; 2) the addition of the conga drum to the bongos… and 3) the use of an arranger (much needed with the inclusion of three or even four trumpets), with which jazz band-like harmonies are introduced, although different arrangers made their own innovations with regard to different music and formats."[2]

Radamés Giró, another musicologist, emphasizes that: "Arsenio makes the first big change to *son*. From that moment on, it begins an evolutionary course that is not yet over". Among the contributions he attributes to him are having created "a new *tres*-playing style different from that of *sexteto* and *septeto son* bands" and arrangements for piano that "blend with the *tres* and whose harmonies are also enriching, besides arpeggios and *'tumbaos'* [repeated rhythmic patterns on bass or conga drum] that even today sound surprisingly vital and original"[3].

Conscious of the danger facing Arsenio's legacy from those who capitalized on him, renowned pianist and composer Larry Harlow recorded two albums in his

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honor after his death. One of them is straightforward and just titled *Tribute to Arsenio Rodríguez* (1971). The second, on the other hand, is much more symbolic: it includes six Arsenio Rodríguez compositions and is called simply *Salsa* (1974), a title that uses the name of a music style whose origins and lineage are still under debate. Thus, Arsenio goes from being honored to being responsible for one of the most vital music movements of the second half of the twentieth century.

We admirers of this man's musical opus have recently had the satisfaction of enjoying David F. García's book *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music,* which for the moment (and probably a long time) is the most complete and systematic work on the musician's life's work. The lacuna it is filling is enormous, thus it is likely the book will be challenged often by criticisms as numerous as they will be unjust (for example, it should be clear that although it manages to clarify many obscure details about Rodríguez's life, the author's intention was not to write a biography, so much so that he put much of the biographical data in the book's margin notes).

Nonetheless, the laudable effort to compile information and study Arsenio's work and its impact not only on Cuban

music but above all on Latin culture in the U.S. seems to be unable to get away from that paternalistic and somewhat exoticizing view with which such phenomena are treated, due to their understanding as so-called "marginal cultures," a perspective that on the one hand harms the evaluation of the importance of Rodríguez's work and its impact on the dynamic of that culture. This perception also limits any understanding of the circumstances under which Arsenio Rodríguez's work—not just compositions and recordings, but also a specific way of understanding a culture's zone— inserted itself into those transnational flows to which the album's title alludes.

García's insistence on how the musician's 'Africanness' is "the core of Arsenio's racial identity" is more than just noticeable.[4] My intention is not to minimize García's more complex arguments about the evolution of Arsenio's work and the tensions that develop within it. However, despite the fact that the author gives a thorough account of Arsenió's rhythmic and harmonic contributions, repetitive statements about their rhythmic naturalness and his respect for tradition end up creating a much too simplistic view of the musician who for decades revolutionized Cuban and Caribbean music. He comes off as a sort of guardian of authentic Cuban musical traditions. This image is irreconcilable with that of a man who using his deep cultural heritage constantly experimented with rhythms and formats distant from those traditions.

As García's book highlights, Arsenio never hid his African heritage and he brought new dignity to it, avoiding the impoverished, folkloric versions that became the fashion of the thirties. The rebellion he spearheaded went precisely against any attempt to limit African tradition to liturgical ceremonies or tenement yard parties, or to disseminate them via a touristic perspective, as did many jazz bands of the 1930s. Arsenio's decision to express that Africanness through the vehicle of a relatively recent and rising music genre (as *son* was towards the end of the thirties) tells us that his desire was to demonstrate the vitality of that music (and with it, that of the culture that generated it) and highlight its contemporaneity. Consciously or not, his music was the product of a solid effort to update that musical tradition and expose it to other sounds and to claim the right of Afro-Cuban culture to not be marginalized and to incorporate, centrally, into both the national culture and the modernity of which it was a part.

The fact that Arsenio's music was 'king' both at popular dances and on Cuban vitrolas in the 1940s is the most directly visible result of that effort, an effort that found, as is easy to imagine, quite a bit of opposition. His songs were called vulgar in order to obfuscate the real origin of that opposition: the threatening popularity that kind of music represented for the subtle stratification of Cuban society, a meticulous stratification, based on economic and racial differences (much more complex than just the simplifying division of blacks and whites, rich and poor), that was threatened by music that was bent on overcoming those barriers. Both Arsenio's music and the verbal aggressiveness of his lyrics (with their explicit sexuality and unbridled machismo, practically the only way poor black men could express any superiority) possess a resolute attitude to not be apologetic for being who he is, to not domesticate the public face of that culture.

His insistence on keeping the *son montuno* as the basis for his music could be seen

as traditionalist, but there are three main points that could be used to argue against this elementary perception: one, that the rural adjective *'montuno'* was deceptive. Despite its rural origin, the *son montuno* developed in urban centers. Another objection is that Arsenio's decisive contribution to the development of the *son montuno* (and the role of the *tres* within it) says more about an enriching break with past paradigms than a strict observance of them. Thus, when Arsenio spoke about the *son montuno* he was not referring to an ancestral form, but rather a product of it that he and others had tirelessly enriched and modified. The third objection is that despite Arsenio's entreaties to that so-called paradigm, he also continued to experiment with musical forms increasingly distant from their origins.

Like it or not, it seems to me that Arsenio Rodríguez is the embodiment of the Cuban musical tradition's principal virtues (a virtue that Cuba, by the way, shares with other countries whose traditions are essentially modern, like Brazil or even the United States): turning the conflict between tradition and modernity into the focus of its creativity, based more on a persistent desire to create new paradigms than on any wish to slavishly venerate those of the past.

Arsenio's inability to adapt to the U.S. music market, once he decided to permanently reside there, has no doubt contributed to fixing his image as a musician rooted in tradition and even as someone against the commercialization of his music. Mario Bauzá, one of Afro-Cuban jazz's pioneers, said in an interview that Arsenio "played with a tempo that one had to be Cuban, a dancer and even black to follow, because it was too slow. That is the reason why his band in Cuba only played for blacks at places such as the Tropical and others. He chose to never speed up his rhythm; that is why he never achieved the success he deserved here (in the United States)."[5]

Yet, that inability to adapt to a new market could be read very differently. We should first consider Arsenio's own three limitations: his blindness, his lack of formal music training and the limited appeal and applicability of the *tres,* his music's main instrument. In an era when all the musical styles of dance music were increasing and expanding, at that time Arsenio found it increasingly difficult to handle an orchestra that went way beyond the manageability of a *conjunto.* To this, one must add that the sound of a larger orchestra almost totally eclipsed the sound of his very own instrument. There is even evidence of experiments with larger formats that Arsenio carried out and then abandoned, unhappy with the results. His resistance to accelerating the rhythm of his music, a relatively simple change, could be explained more by keeping in mind his personal conception of this music and his way of innovating, rather than by any desire to preserve inherited traditions that he, himself, took charge of modifying. Arsenio was more inclined to impose tendencies than to follow them; he simultaneously called for a need to preserve the *son montuno* and took on experiments with blues or boogaloo, whose styles are totally foreign to Cuban music. The evidence of this can be found on his albums *Arsenio Says* and *Quindembo*.

It is precisely David F. García's misunderstanding of this last record that reveals the especially sharp and limited nature of his analysis, particularly when he evaluates its technical or social aspects. García calls *Quindembo* a musically naïve album that

"does reflect a certain sense of indirection that…characterized Latin popular music in general in the 1960's."[6]

Conversely, in an interview with the book's author, García, Panamanian musician Mauricio Smith, who transcribed the music and created arrangements for that recording, said: "When I heard it the first time it was kind of funny to me. But it was swinging. It was really swinging…. He didn't say anything about trying to crossover. He was just going for something totally different" [Cuando primero oí la música, me sonó algo rara. Pero tenía *swing.* Tenía tremendo *swing*…. No dijo nada él de tratar de cruzar su estilo cubano con otro (hacer un *crossover*) para tener éxito en el marcado estadounidense. Sólo estaba buscando algo completemente diferente].[7] The album was a commercial failure but stood as an example of just how far Arsenio's creative imaginings could go.

Quindembo may be Arsenio's least *sonero* sounding record, but it is the most Afro-Cuban one (with the exception of *Palo Congo,* with Sabú Martínez). It is also, without a doubt, the most African-American. It uses an unprecedented format by including two saxes and eliminating the piano and his *tres.* The result was a tremendously interesting hybrid of ritual music of African origin and blues (especially in numbers like "Hun Hun" and "Oración Lukumí") that could easily be seen as precursors to the work of the great African blues man Ali "Farka" Touré, among others, and of fusions today, commonplace in world music that in Arsenio's era were unthinkable.

Smith's above cited observation is particularly important: Arsenio was not trying to cross over, that is, to simplify his music to make it more palatable for the U.S. market. Instead, he was trying to take advantage both of commonalities and differences between Afro-Cuban and African-American music to create something totally different. The album's commercial failure may have discouraged Arsenio from continuing to work along those lines. As his few interviews reveal, the Cuban musician did not disdain success and recognition: to the contrary, he anxiously sought them.

It is paradoxical that García was not able to see the value of this album. There is no better example of the transnational nature of Arsenio's music than *Quindembo.* Musically, though, the book limits this transnationality to a Caribbean and Latin context. García's book contains an anecdote that could allegorically represent Arsenio's musical career. The story, although quite incomplete, tells of how on one occasion Arsenio, who with his *conjunto* was playing to a non-existing audience at the Hotel Alexandria in Los Angeles, left the stage with all his band members and went to the place where the Sonora Matancera was playing, explaining that his motive was to welcome them. The real purpose or at least what resulted, was an attempt to draw the audience that had gone to see the Sonora Matancera to his venue, evidently convinced of the seductive power of his own music. This anecdote serves to illustrate two main things about his personality: his non-acceptance of the marginalized position to which he was supposedly condemned because of his race, culture, economic situation and physical disability, and, his boundless energy for doing just so (except for that which he spent staying faithful to his own musical search and accomplishments). In some way, in the 1940s, he had already achieved this in Cuba. He later tried

to do the same in the United States over the following two decades.

García's well-intentioned insistence on the authenticity of Arsenio's music leads us to believe in an affection for traditions (on Arsenio's part) that does not adequately explain his musical evolution. In the book, the author insists that "what made the *conjunto* and *son montuno* style so innovative was in fact Arsenio's and his musicians' deep knowledge of aesthetic principles and performance procedures rooted in Afro-Cuban traditional music, in which Arsenio had been immersed as a youngster in rural areas of Matanzas and La Habana."[8] The author's dogged persistence in the fact that Arsenio's childhood environment was rural seems to want us to indirectly accept his main thesis: that his musical achievements can be attributed to his musical purity—musical purity in the face of urban displacement.[9]

My study of his music has led me to believe that the singularity and value of Arsenio's music rests in his having achieved a wise balance between a respect for that tradition and the greatest possible freedom in its expression. If it is true that he was inspired by the aesthetic principles of traditional Afro-Cuban music, he also incorporated instruments and harmonic complexities already used in jazz. He integrated *rumba* and *guaguancó* rhythms into the *son,* the same way he used swing, as he does in a number called precisely *"Swing y Son,"* superimposing a *son montuno* on the Glenn Miller classic "In the Mood."

If we want our understanding of Arsenio and his work to go beyond certain historical and cultural frameworks, if we want to accept him as something more than a preserver and propagator of an ideosyncratic way of understanding culture, we should seek out his virtues somewhere beyond an elementary and bucolic understanding of what is African or rural. Afro-Cuban culture's vitality derives, in good measure, from the balance of its loyalty to its traditions and its ability to adapt and renew; in its insistence on occupying an increasingly central place in Cuban culture, despite the resistance it met (and meets) and its refusal to allow itself to be shut up in the ghetto of folklorization. That is the only way we can ever truly and deeply understand Arsenio Rodríguez's legacy.

I have not mentioned the more immediate presence of that legacy, which can be seen in the boom Cuban dance music experienced at the beginning of the last decade and even in the many singer-songwriters who tried to shake off the seriousness of their predecessors. It is no coincidence that this boom happened concomitantly with the rediscovery and reevaluation of Arsenio, his music and its merit. There began to be tributes to him. The music of NG La Banda, the group that signaled this change, contains many revelatory details of Arsenio's influence: from the inclusion in their playlist of traditional Afro-Cuban songs and the complexity of their brass percussion arrangements, to their search for a better connection with the dancer through aggressive, suggestive lyrics and constant references to Havana's barrios.

Not unlike Arsenio in his time, these musicians have also been accused of vulgarity in the name of "the original culture and values of our national identity, which were cultivated for many years by our best artists."[10] There is no doubt whatsoever that Arsenio Rodríguez's music is as current today as are the problems that he had to face in his time.

Notes and Bibliography

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2.- Acosta, Leonardo. Raíces del jazz latino. Un siglo de Jazz en Cuba (Barranquilla: Editorial La Iguana Ciega, 2001): 88.
3.- Giró, Radamés. Panorama de la música popular cubana (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1996): 228.
4.- García, David F. Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006): 12.
5.- Padura, Leonardo. Ob. Cit., 43.
6.- García, David F. Ob. Cit., 96
7.- Ibid, 97.
8.- Ibid, 41.
9.- The ruralness of Arsenio Rodríguez's childhood environment is very questionable. Even if Güira de Macurijes, his birthplace, had only 1,333 inhabitants, according to the 1919 census, the same census shows that Güines, where Arsenio moved when he was four years old had 13,679 inhabitants at a time when the total population of the country was less than 3 million people (2,889,000). The town's number of inhabitants was comparable to that of Guántanamo (14,762), Pinar del Río (13,728) and Holguín (13,768), all provincial capitals today. At least that is the opinion of their populaces: the Radio Güines website tells us that Güines is "a city marked by a historical process the wise Fernando Ortiz defined as transculturation" (http://www.mayaweb.cu/secciones/ tradiciones/caminoshango.htm).
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