

---

## Introduction

### *Salsa in New York*

**A**ugust 1992. Hector Lavoe is putting together a new band, making a comeback after a self-imposed hiatus during which he fought for his life, tried to beat addiction, and, as we would find out later, battled AIDS.<sup>1</sup> A rehearsal is scheduled for 7 P.M. in the basement of the Boys and Girls Harbor School (“Boys Harbor”), located in El Barrio (Spanish Harlem) on the corner of East 104th Street and 5th Avenue, a favorite spot for salsa bands to work out new arrangements. Why? Cheap rates, an out-of-the-way place that fans don’t know about, and a location in the most historically significant neighborhood for Latin music in New York City. In fact, just blocks from Boys Harbor is where it all began back in the 1930s: Machito, Tito Puente, Eddie and Charlie Palmieri, everyone lived there. Most salsa musicians do not live in the neighborhood anymore, although many teach Latin music to kids and novices at the Harbor’s after-school program, one of the few places where 15 bucks will get you a lesson with Tito Puente’s *bongocero*.

Rehearsal begins just shy of 8 P.M. It was delayed while several musicians copped in the neighborhood. Copped what? Blow, *perico*, cocaine. Other musicians just straggled in late with no explanation, but no real need: No one complains about the late start. It’s par for the course. Regardless of their tardiness, everyone who enters the room makes his rounds greeting everyone else. No one is left out. Acquaintances shake hands, friends embrace, everyone touches. It would be rude not to. The atmosphere is formal, yet casual. In contrast to the strict dress codes for performances (coordinated formal attire, typically), the preferred rehearsal garb is cutoff jeans (with freshly ironed

creases), new white Nikes, T-shirts, baseball caps, and jerseys with such names as “Guillen” and “Martinez” emblazoned on the back (without accents). Spanish, English, and Spanglish are spoken simultaneously. Code switching is the norm. (“Oyeme . . . let’s take it from the top . . . arriba! Vamonos . . . one . . . two . . . a one, two, three, four.”) Everyone there understands at least part of it.

Dented metal folding chairs, music stands, and open instrument cases, all illuminated in a bright fluorescent glow, litter the small subterranean rehearsal space. A few framed Fania All-Stars concert posters from the 1970s hang on the wall; from them, such icons as Willie Colón, Ruben Blades, Ray Barretto, Johnny Pacheco, and even a young Hector Lavoe gaze out from the past, overseeing the next generation of *salseros*.

A much-older-looking Lavoe arrives around 8:30 p.m. with an entourage of family, friends, and amateur musicians/dealers. Though he can hardly walk and is strung out and weak, when he grabs the mike his slurred speech sculpts crafty witticisms and the inventive irony for which he is famous and so loved. His real name is Hector Juan Perez; *Lavoe* is a derivation of *La Voz* (translated as “The Voice,” but really meaning “The Voice of the People,” or, better yet, “Through Him the People Are Given a Voice”). He sings “Oye mi gente . . .” (“Listen, my people . . .”).

The sound system is deafening within that small space where walls, windows, and doors can do little to contain the music. The sheer volume is transgressive as it penetrates the cinder block, crossing boundaries and bleeding into the street. With cowbells ringing, maracas shaking, hands and sticks beating congas, bongos, and timbales, *coristas* (chorus singers) harmonizing 1970s anthems of Puerto Rican pride crowd around three microphones. Piano and bass amps are pushed just short of distortion (sometimes just past), trumpet and trombone players reach deep into their diaphragms to compete, dynamic marking . . . BLAST!

The twelve musicians—all male, several Puerto Rican and Nuyorican,<sup>2</sup> a Dominican, a Colombian, and myself (an Anglo), twenty- and thirtysomethings, some new to the city, others born and raised there, some of the best musicians on the scene—blast off, relishing in the old and outdated style of *salsa dura* (hard), not that new commercial *monga* (limp) shit everyone now plays. Improvisation, *sabor* (flavor), fire, *filin* (feeling), Latino pride, and *clave* are the keys in which these canonized classics are written, played, and remade.

Both the weather and the aesthetic are hot. No air-conditioning relieves this stifling New York summer evening. The pulsating rhythms coming from the instruments and the speakers provide the only air movement. The neighborhood children, most of whom live just around the corner in the public

housing projects that dominate the East Harlem cityscape, up past their bed-times (hard to sleep in this heat!), crowd around the barred and sidewalk-level windows to listen and dance to the music their parents were raised on, sounds that emanate from below as the musicians sweat.

At 10:15 p.m., *conguero* Eddie Montalvo gets up from his drums to rap about a musical passage with Gil “Pulpo” (Octopus) Colón, Lavoe’s longtime pianist. The door of the rehearsal room swings open, and a young Dominican hit man—whom many of us recognize because he always sits at the same table near the stage at Fuego Fuego (Fire Fire), a club at 157th Street and Broadway owned by C., a Dominican dealer who got busted with fifteen kilos in his trunk, they say—bursts into the room, brandishing a large gun. Pointing the gun at the empty chair behind the congas, he asks, “Where’s Eddie Montalvo?” Stunned, but not too stunned, we collectively band together: No one responds. We are a band, even more so now. Montalvo remains silently concealed behind Colón. The gunman orders all of us to line up against the wall as he threateningly points his gun at each of us. In a last ditch effort to lure out Montalvo, the hit man throws the conga drums out into the hall. No one moves. After a pause, he yells, “This is from Ramon!” and fires the gun twice into the ceiling before fleeing. As the bullets ricochet above our heads, I crouch next to trumpeter Ray Vega, praying. The music is silenced. The children are no longer at the window. Everyone splits before the police come. This incident is a matter that will be handled internally, in a manly fashion, *mano a mano*.

The trouble was fueled by an incident that occurred one month earlier, when veteran musician Montalvo took a stand against common salsa business practices (this is not usually done). Ramon, an established bandleader, hired Montalvo for a gig in Philly. Montalvo, along with the other band members, arrived in Philadelphia, a two-hour commute from New York, and waited several hours for Ramon’s arrival. Ramon never showed up (this sometimes happens). The irate club owner sent the band back to New York without pay (this occasionally happens). Ramon never gave an explanation for his absence, nor did he respond to messages Montalvo left demanding payment for the canceled gig. The evening of Lavoe’s rehearsal, as Montalvo arrived at Boys Harbor, Ramon, coincidentally, just arrived to rehearse his new band, since several musicians had quit after the Philly incident. Words were exchanged. Tempers flared. No resolution. When Ramon refused the request for compensation, Montalvo resolved to make Ramon pay in other ways (this is unusual). Montalvo then ventured out to the street and vandalized Ramon’s Mercedes by breaking all of the head- and taillights (this is really unusual). Montalvo returned to Lavoe’s rehearsal and began to play. Ramon sent the hit man in retaliation (this is *extremely* unusual).

The following week I received a message on my answering machine from Ramon. “I’m sorry that you were there last week, Chris, because it didn’t have anything to do with you. I want you to know that Eddie and I have worked it out. Everything is cool now. And I hope you are not scared of me and will still play with my band because I have lots of gigs coming up.” Several percussionists had banded together and gone to Ramon’s house in New Jersey to threaten the safety of his family if anything happened to Montalvo. Therefore, it was “worked out.” “Everything was cool,” then. I played for Ramon only once more, just so I could tell him face to face, man to man, how stupid he had been. I saved the tape from my answering machine, too. I still have it.

This incident became one of the most popular “salsa stories” among musicians and has been disseminated throughout the salsa community ever since the night it happened, told, retold, and remade. I continue that tradition. Ramon’s lack of judgment, his endangerment of twelve musicians, and his decision to hire someone to inflict bodily harm on or even to kill Montalvo was condemned by the entire salsa community. However, club owners still hired him. And Ramon continued to perform regularly with his band, some of whom were present at the ill-fated Lavoe rehearsal. Really.

Violence, community, drugs, cultural identity, exploitation, interculturality, and, above all, such beautiful music. Salsa allures me, yet I am troubled at times by the difficult conditions that my friends and fellow musicians endure to be salsa musicians. I needed to make sense of it all. That night in August 1992, I came home and began writing about salsa in New York.

I have written this book from the perspective of musicians.<sup>3</sup> Not all salsa musicians, but professional salseros who live in New York City and work in the highest echelons of the industry, doing the majority of the recording and performing with the most famous bands. Their/our/my perspective is captured by a photo taken in 1998 at a street festival on East 107th Street and 3rd Avenue, in the heart of El Barrio, not far from Boys Harbor.

Shot from the trombonist’s position at the back of the stage looking outward, just behind the music clipped to the stand, the photo shows a perspective against the grain, gazing in the opposite direction of the thousands of onlookers, but following the trajectory of the sound. The police barricades read DO NOT CROSS, but the traffic lights are green. Oh, how the sounds, images, and sung ideas disregard those prohibitive fixtures and flow freely between the audience and the musicians. The band, though elevated on the stage, remains firmly grounded, tied to the community, rooted to the people . . . “peopleness.” No possibility of containment, yet bounded in some ways by the music’s rich cultural history. Geographically, culturally, ethnically, and racially . . . the community transcends the authoritatively imposed order



**Figure I.1** Domingo Quiñones singing at a street festival in Spanish Harlem in 1998.  
(Photograph by Miguel de Casenave.)

while simultaneously being shaped by place, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and cultural affiliations in complicated ways.

The photo's vantage point frames singer Domingo Quiñones—who is Puerto Rican but lives in New York City from time to time—as he stands centered and draped in the Puerto Rican flag while singing *soneos* (improvised lyrics) about his love for Puerto Rico, positioned between a conga drum (an instrument that symbolizes salsa's African ancestry and more recent Cuban genealogy) and timbales (double-headed tunable drums derived from the European timpani, acknowledging a colonial past that remains so present). Beyond the stage, the audience, awash in red, white, and blue (just one star and five stripes on these flags, even though the flag-wavers all carry U.S. passports, acknowledge the colonial present), sings along with the *coros*, whose

repetitions serve as mantras for cultural pride (“Que cante mi gente,” meaning “Let my people sing”).<sup>4</sup> No guns fire today, just *orgullo profundo* (profound pride). This perspective shows the music looking out from the inside, where Puerto Rico is centered; awnings declaring AMERICAN and SAVERAMA (which is even more American!) frame the margins. The hegemonic American culture is temporarily relegated to the margins in this place, El Barrio.

Embodying several different layers of subjectivity, my dual roles as scholar and performer create an ongoing dynamic of alternating perspectives: At some points, my position as observer is one of identity, merging with the object of scientific investigation (I am playing that music seen in the foreground of the photo); at other points in my analysis, I strategically exploit my ability to retain a critical distance by assuming an observing participant role, introducing an alien terminology, a degree of otherness in the relation between my own discourse and the observed field. I step back, set my trombone aside, grab my camera, and take a photo.

From this inside-out perspective, I conduct an analytical and interpretive ethnographic journey into New York salsa of the 1990s. Using salsa musicians, performance events, and the salsa scene as the objects of study, I focus on processes embedded in performance events, music structure, and discursive practices in an effort to explore relationships among broader cultural issues. In particular, I examine how musicians navigate their everyday lives, grappling with the intercultural tensions and commercial pressures that are so pronounced on the salsa scene. I discuss their attitudes, working environment, education, difficulties they face, and how they conduct their business. I also explore the organizational structures, recording processes, rehearsals, and gigging of salsa bands. I pay particular attention to how bands create a sense of community, privilege *la gente* (the people) over artistic and commercial concerns, and incite cultural pride during performance events. I also examine how violence, the illicit drug trade, and issues of gender inform sound structure, salsa aesthetics, and performance practice. I conclude this study with a discussion of salsa style in the 1990s, focusing on how certain structural principles involved in music-making (e.g., clave) and the intercultural dynamics of Puerto Rico and New York inform performance practice and guide stylistic change, respectively.

From my perspective, the 1990s was a remarkably vibrant and pivotal era in salsa music history, marked by a second generation of salseros who co-opted the music of their parents, reinventing and transforming the salsa scene with sounds and expressions that better represented their own experiences as Latino<sup>5</sup> youth growing up in New York City. This generation experienced a

further expansion of the salsa industry into the global arena that resulted in the establishment of a number of significant centers of production outside of New York City. These developments introduced an overt commercialism to the music, expanded audiences, and heightened the stakes in the debates over cultural ownership, all of which prompted significant changes in style and performance practice. Regardless, I argue that the fundamental processes at work in the 1960s and 1970s, when salsa emerged as an identifiable Latin popular dance music genre, remained remarkably centered in these newer forms. As such, at the core of salsa music-making and performance lie the tensions involved in the dynamics of intercultural exchange, so fundamental to the cultural milieu of New York City and, more recently, throughout the “globalized” salsa communities, where diverse people collide and collude in their navigations of their everyday lives.<sup>6</sup> Through salsa, tensions of ethnic and national differences play out in fascinating ways as the music serves as an arena for contestations concerning ownership, authenticity, and representation.

At the same time, by embracing the cultural heterogeneity so fundamental in its production, salseros forge a counter-hegemonic space where diverse communities are brought together through performative constructions of *Latinidad* and a consciously constructed pan-Latino ethnic identity. Salsa events agilely function as communal glue, even though they remain highly contested spaces. I find the term “counter-hegemonic” more useful than “subaltern” in the case of salsa because it emphasizes the idea of an alternative power structure (Rowe and Schelling 1991). It better represents the position of El Barrio (the place from which salsa emerged) in relation to the rest of New York City, how the salsa community negotiates and grapples with the social disparities so endemic in this relationship, and the creation of an emergent transgressive space where marginalized communities take center stage and hegemonic forces are kept at bay (see Figure I.1, above). Indeed, the role of place is central in shaping performance practice and aesthetics. The everyday social issues faced by residents of El Barrio, and the barrios of the South Bronx and Brooklyn—such as violence, the illicit drug trade, and economic and political marginalization—remain significant factors in how salsa in New York sounds, how it is performed, and how it is produced. But these factors are not based solely upon bounded physical locations; rather, they extend beyond into the realms of the psychical, cultural, historical, and social. I am guided here by the writings of Ed Casey, who urges a conception of place as an “open system,” fleshlike and porous, something that we continually have to discover and invent new forms of understanding (Casey 1996). For salseros, El Barrio remains emergent; they rely upon a variety of strategic conceptions of that place to serve as tools in forging an alternative social milieu that unites the disparate groups and diverse communities living in those spaces.



**Figure I.2** Mural entitled “Nuestra Barrio” on a building facade in Spanish Harlem, 1998. Included on this triptych are portraits of Puerto Rican composer Rafael Hernández and salsa singer Marc Anthony, depicting music, and specifically salsa, as significant symbols associated with *El Barrio*. (Photograph by Christopher Washburne.)

Indeed, salsa’s alterity has been fundamental from its inception. Salsa emerged in New York in the 1960s in the aftermath of the Cuban embargo, in the shadows of rock and roll, and at the forefront of political and racial strife in the United States—especially for Latino communities, which adopted the rhetoric and stances of the civil rights movement. Salsa initially served as what Jorge Duany calls “the unmistakable voice of the Puerto Rican barrio,” being marketed as alternative, representative, and voice-giving to an unheard and disenfranchised people (Duany 1984: 198). Though historically salsa was “bounded” by the confines of the barrios in New York City and played and produced mainly by Puerto Rican New Yorkers (Nuyoricans), over time its popularity transcended those original city blocks as Latino populations grew, more Latino enclaves formed in other cities in the United States, and the music began appealing to a growing international market.<sup>7</sup> Partially out of a need to appease this expanding market and the reality of who was making and consuming the music, as well as from a shift in the political landscape (at least publicly) from divisive nationalistic politics toward the establishment of coalitions among various Latin American and Caribbean nations in the United

States (*la raza latina*), salsa producers soon began fashioning the music as something much more multivocal—“Nuestra cosa latina” (“Our Latin Thing”).<sup>8</sup>

Throughout these changes, however, salsa as symbolic cultural expression never became divorced from its barrio roots. Instead, as a cultural construct, El Barrio underwent a conceptual shift, emerging more as a symbol of shared experience based on real or imagined common linguistic (Spanish), cultural (Latino), historical (colonization), and geographic bonds (Caribbean and Latin America) rather than the boundaries of a particular neighborhood. Reminiscent of Arjun Appadurai’s ideas concerning the contemporary world as one in which “groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous,” salsa and the groups that associated themselves with the music were “deterritorialized” through travel, immigration, commerce, and communication (Appadurai 1991: 191, 193). Similarly, conceptions of El Barrio also became deterritorialized, morphing into a metabarrio of sorts, an imagined international shared space of commonalities based upon experiences of immigration, discrimination, language differences, and culture clashes that suspended the locally inflected specificities and, instead, embraced broader postcolonial, sociopolitical trends. Salsa was the music at the forefront of these trends for Latinos living in New York City.

As such, I conceive of salsa as an “inter-Latino” and “trans-Caribbean” music, regardless of the fact that it emerged from the cultural climate of New York City, owes much of its stylistic particularities to African American expressions (jazz and R&B in particular) and Cuban music practices as performed in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, and has maintained a vibrant presence on the musical landscape in the United States for more than forty years (ignored by most scholars of American music, I might add). These labels assert social difference and reflect the cultural resistance that is so essential to salsa performance. As Hernando Calvo-Ospina points out, even though salsa is a mass-mediated and -produced popular music, it strongly resists assimilation in the English-speaking hegemonic U.S. culture, retaining a perspective of alterity despite its dependence on U.S. economic structures (Calvo-Ospina 1995: 56). Salsa subverts and colludes with the mainstream, depending on an imagined conventional U.S. culture that it sets out to resist. It operates in a shadow economy, at times appearing to be aligned with mainstream cultural constructs, and at other times remaining on the margins, unseen, often heard but not recognized when souped-up Toyotas with tinted windows and open hatchbacks cruise down Broadway with sound systems blasting. As the cowbells dopplerize past, those who cannot recognize the myriad meanings and associations of those clave-inflected rhythms are nonetheless forced into a sonic space of difference. Street conversations are



**Figure I.3** Bicycle revelers in Spanish Harlem celebrating during the Puerto Rican Day Parade. (Photograph by Christopher Washburne.)

quelled temporarily, if only for moments until the sounds subside. Varying degrees of misunderstanding accompany a microcosm of cultural mixing. The reaction to those rhythms ranges from annoyance to engagement, at times creating a momentary and spontaneous concrete dance floor. Salsa opens an alternative space.

Because Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans primarily drive those Toyotas, playing, producing, and consuming the music in New York, many mark salsa as something essentially Puerto Rican. Indeed, Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans often use salsa to incite nationalistic pride. New York's Puerto Rican Day Parade, which features numerous salsa bands, provides just one example among many of how salsa is engaged for nationalistic purposes. Experiencing the parade, one cannot avoid noticing what Frances Aparicio labels the "*gran familia puertorriqueña*," which is the "central political, cultural, and social rhetoric on the island" that aims to purport an emblematized image of a "unified, homogeneous, and harmonic society devoid of racial and social conflict" (Aparicio 1998: 5). This unified public image politically empowers the Puerto Rican community within a larger New York City context. However, it does not reflect the divisive and disparate groups found within the island and within the Nuyorican community. Associating salsa solely with a monolithic assertion of Puerto Rican and

Nuyorican culture without interrogating the intracultural dynamics involved in such an association is problematic, to say the least. Moreover, not accounting for the broader intercultural transethnic, transracial, transgeographic, and transnational dynamics fundamental to the music's production misses an important, large part of the picture. The heteroglossia of the intercultural dialectics involved in salsa music-making and production makes it so pliable to serve simultaneously as Puerto Rican, Cuban, Colombian, Venezuelan, and New York music. Salsa can and does represent a multitude of diverse perspectives and richly signifies a diverse set of perspectives. What is obvious from the wide range of discursive interpretations related to the music is that a prismatic study of salsa is essential to attend to its multifarious uses, the wide-ranging claims of ownership, and the myriad ways that the music is central to cultural and personal expressivity.

Marking salsa as something “inter-Latino” and “trans-Caribbean” assists in this venture and suggests an alternative genealogy: that of the Caribbean. The Caribbean, in this case, is not solely a geographic location, but also a conceptual framing that is marked by migration, immigration, movement, and flow. As Puerto Rican bandleader and pianist Papo Lucca observes, “[Salsa] is a more contemporary treatment of the Caribbean music that originated in Cuba . . . it’s a movement that has transcended all national affiliations to become a musical phenomenon of the entire Caribbean.”<sup>9</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo is particularly helpful here; he writes, “To refer to the culture of the Caribbean as geography—other than to call it a meta-archipelago—is a debilitating and scarcely productive project” (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 24). Rather, his postmodern reading interprets the Caribbean at large as sharing tropisms that are girded by migration, travel, and search for fluvial and marine routes. They transcend borders and are emplaced in multiple ways. For Benítez-Rojo, the Caribbean is an island bridge that extends globally and is difficult to pin down geographically: “There is an island that repeats itself until transforming into a meta-archipelago and reaching the most widely separated trans-historical frontiers of the globe” (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 24). At the core of these ideas is a ruptured history that, according to Aimé Césaire, all Caribbean people share: “Throughout their history, people in the Caribbean . . . have suffered a great deal. . . . What we have suffered from the most, more than any other people, is really alienation, in other words, the lack of knowledge of oneself. . . . The Antillean being is a human being who is deprived of his own self, of his history, of his traditions, of his beliefs . . . he is an abandoned being” (Sephocle 1992: 360). Jorge Duany adds the important point that, during colonial times, both European and African cultures in the Caribbean were “equally uprooted, in the process of adapting to an alien environment . . . incapable of fully reproducing their ancestral lifestyles in the colonial setting” (Duany

1984: 188). I examine salsa in light of these postcolonial conditions fully reverberant with alienation, hardship, homeland, uprootedness, diaspora, cultural pride, and displacement. It is from this metacontextual backdrop that I enter the salsa stages of New York City in the 1990s. As the processes of the colonial past repeat, salsa musicians must grapple with and navigate through multilayered complexities that often create extremely difficult working conditions in which to make beautiful music. These conditions inform their sonic expressions in elusive and subtle ways. The study of these conditions and their correlative musical expressions are the subject of this book.

## Salsa History

“To search for the first moment in either time or space is to incur shipwreck on the shoals of Pure Reason.”<sup>10</sup>

—ED CASEY

I now turn to the historical backdrop from which I conducted my fieldwork. My aim is not to construct a comprehensive historical narrative here, but rather to highlight significant moments and trends that are particularly salient to the development of New York salsa in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

Salsa’s emergence was contingent upon the vibrant Latino immigrant communities that settled in East Harlem in the first half of the twentieth century. By the late 1920s, Spanish Harlem was established as the center for Latin music production, performance, and business in New York City. In fact, salsa’s emergence began just around the corner from Boys Harbor. In 1927, on Madison Avenue, between 113th and 114th streets, Victoria Hernández opened Almacenes Hernández, the first Puerto Rican–owned record store, which soon became a record label, booking agency, and management company for Latino musicians. In 1930, her brother, Rafael Hernández, wrote “Lamento Borincano” (“Puerto Rican Lament”), the unofficial national anthem of Puerto Rico, in a neighborhood restaurant. Throughout the 1930s, Gabriel Oller’s Tatay’s Spanish Music Center on Fifth Avenue and East 110th Street was the preferred meeting place for Latino musicians. It was the first stop for those “fresh off the boat” who were looking for work. In the mid-1920s, the Golden Casino, on East 111th Street and 5th Avenue, and the Park Palace Caterer’s Hall, located on the corner of 110th Street and 5th Avenue, were the first places in the city to host Latin dances. Many of the most influential musicians and bandleaders lived in this community. Longtime residents Frank “Machito” Grillo and Tito Puente now have streets named in their honor. Machito Square is the stretch of East 111th Street between Third and Lexington Avenues, and Tito Puente Way extends the entire length



Figure I.4 Machito Square in *El Barrio*. (Photograph by Christopher Washburne.)

of East 110th Street. Charlie and Eddie Palmieri lived on East 112th Street and Madison Avenue. And the list goes on and on.

The residents of East Harlem in the early part of the twentieth century included people from a variety of Latin American countries, but Puerto Ricans represented by far the largest numbers due to that island's unique relationship with the United States. In 1898, Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War, beginning a long and complex relationship of intercultural exchange. As the new colonial power, the United States quickly established regular travel and trade routes upon which an immigration wave soon followed. Within the United States, the Puerto Rican population grew rapidly, especially after the United States began granting citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917, and later in the aftermath of the collapse of the coffee industry in 1930. In 1910, it was estimated that 5,000 Puerto Ricans were living in the United States; by 1930, the number had grown to 45,000. A second, even larger immigration wave began after World War II, facilitated by Puerto Rico's acquisition of its commonwealth status in 1952. By 1960, there were 600,000 Puerto Ricans living in the United States (U.S. Census of 1960), and by 1980, it was believed that one million Puerto Ricans were living in New York City alone. As these numbers grew, so did the demand for music.

The burgeoning community in East Harlem, which eventually spread to the other boroughs (the Bronx, especially), did not exist in isolation, but, rather, was engaged in various ways with the surrounding cultural milieu, in particular with the African American communities living in close proximity.



**Figure I.5** Tito Puente Way in *El Barrio*. (Photograph by Christopher Washburne.)

Ruth Glasser has examined how Puerto Ricans became caught up in the rigidly biracialized North American society, and like African Americans, faced increasing segregation and discrimination. She writes, “their musical development in New York City music must be understood within the context of opportunities for black artists” (Glasser 1995: 66–67). Confronted with many of the same prejudices and difficulties as black musicians, many early-immigrant musicians were forced to either pass for white or black, working in whichever scene would accept them. In response to these difficult conditions, many allied themselves with African American social movements, playing a role (though often ignored) in the racial formation of the United States. J. Lorand Matory importantly observes that “the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s extensively involved Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the reformulation of African-American collective identity” (Matory 1999: 42). This affiliation would be a significant factor in the emergence of salsa in the 1960s.

Regardless of the large number of Puerto Ricans living in New York City throughout the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, Cuban styles (*son*, rumba, conga, *guaracha*, mambo, and cha-cha) dominated. Many factors contributed to the popularity of Cuban music in the United States, including Cuba's economic dominance in the Caribbean, its close proximity to the United States, and a vibrant sheet music industry. By the 1920s, the Cuban *son* had evolved into a cohesive set of commercial popular styles, and, starting in 1930, RCA Victor began an aggressive campaign to monopolize the recording industry in Cuba and internationalize its popular appeal (Manuel 1991b: 104).<sup>12</sup> U.S.-based

record companies RCA Victor, Columbia, and Decca dominated Latin music throughout the 1940s, capitalizing on the music's exotic appeal to white audiences. These white-owned and -operated majors tended to limit diversity in style, producing music about which the executives knew almost nothing. However, the recording strike in 1942–44 by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM, the musician's union) and the dispute in 1941 between the royalty collection agencies—the American Society of Composers, Authors and Producers (ASCAP), and Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) that led to the banishment of all ASCAP-associated composers from radio airplay—prompted an upsurge in “alternative” music production that served niche markets in more innovative ways. Since Latin music was not covered under the auspices of these agencies, producers of Latin music were not affected by the strike, and, thus, benefited by the emergence of a number of small independent labels that were dedicated solely to Latin music production; these included SMC, Tico, Alegre, TR, Montuno, Coco, and Salsoul, among others. These companies supported a wide range of experimentation, and the 1950s proved to be one of the most fertile eras for Latin music performance in New York. In particular, blendings of African American and Latin music styles spawned striking and imaginative Latin jazz mixings and innovative approaches to the mambo, cha-cha, and, later, *pachanga* and *boogaloo* genres, all of which provided the foundation for the development of salsa. This designation to a niche market remained commonplace until the late 1990s, relegating Latin music productions to the domain of small independent labels. Excluded from the mainstream music industry in New York, the business of Latin music would remain separate and distinct, and often a different set of structures and unique ways of doing business were established that operated independently from the mainstream.

In the 1960s, the social landscape of the New York Latin music scene changed dramatically. First, the cessation of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba in 1962 and the subsequent economic and travel restrictions greatly reduced the influence of Cuban music styles, opening new opportunities for other Latino communities. Second, the dominance of rock and roll led to a decline in Latin music's popularity, especially among English-speaking youth. On the one hand, this situation caused economic difficulties for Latin musicians as performance opportunities dwindled; on the other hand, it prompted a new wave of experimentation as musicians sought to develop a new sound that would capture the next generation of audiences. Third, the civil rights movement profoundly changed the political climate within the barrios as many Latinos adopted similar modes of protest and organization (Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964). Fourth, by this time Latino populations in New York had grown large enough to support a music

scene that was separate from the English-speaking mainstream. Indeed, in 1961, WADO was the first radio station to adopt an all-Spanish-language format.

Young musicians reacted to these developments by seeking a new sound that would capture the sentiments of the street and speak to Latino youth living in the New York barrios. Rejecting the assimilation goals of immigrant communities of the past (i.e., that of their parents), which sought economic prosperity and a modicum of acceptance into mainstream Anglo American culture, these new artists turned to their own culture for inspiration and support. With American racial conflicts coming to the political forefront and frustration growing from continual prejudicial obstacles barring Puerto Ricans and other Latinos from attaining upward mobility, a shift toward a more pluralistic stance began. The Young Lords, a New York-based militant and activist Puerto Rican organization, reacted by calling for Latinos to be proud of their heritage and to view it as a strength rather than a hindrance. Their activism is credited for creating a new sense of pride of being Latino. El Barrio became a “cauldron of militant assertiveness and artistic creativity” (Manuel 1995: 73). These changes in the political climate were concurrent with the advent of salsa and were intrinsically tied to its emergence as a music style. As Roberta Singer writes, “The large and powerful Latino identity movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with their focus not only on social and economic justice but on seeking their roots of their own cultures, brought about a renewed interest in traditional music forms on the part of younger New York Puerto Ricans” (Singer 1983: 139). The music originating from the New York barrios then became more culturally introspective (i.e., made for and by Latinos), incorporated a wider range of traditional music from the Caribbean, and often included politically charged lyrics. Using the Cuban son as the foundation and building upon the Latin and jazz mixings of the mambo and the Latin soul, and rock mixings of boogaloo, the next generation of Latin musicians in New York City developed a new style that had, at its core, an aesthetic of high energy and an unrelentingly hard-driving sound that was viewed as uniquely of the New York barrios. This new sound would eventually be referred to as *salsa dura* (hard salsa).

The establishment of Fania Records in 1964 must be understood against the backdrop of the Cuban embargo, the wane of Latin music markets, the political fervor of the times, and the emergence of this new style of music. This seminal record company, founded by Dominican flautist and bandleader Johnny Pacheco and his Italian American lawyer, Jerry Masucci, had as its main objective the revitalization of the Latin music scene by transforming music emerging from New York’s barrios into a commercially viable commodity. Their

efforts resulted in salsa becoming an international phenomenon, with the music being widely associated, especially with respect to barrio culture in New York City, with Latino essence in a way that is analogous to the word “soul” as a description for black American essence (Baron 1977: 217). Pacheco commented, “Blacks had Motown, the Whites or Anglos had their own sound, and here we come with a different sound for Latin music” (Contreras 2006).

A dispute with Pacheco’s former record company precipitated the formation of Fania Records. In 1960, Pacheco had signed with Al Santiago’s Alegre Records and quickly became a partner, assisting in productions and bringing new artists to the label. In a dispute over royalty payments, Pacheco left Alegre in 1964. Together with Masucci, his divorce lawyer at the time, he borrowed \$3,000 to record his next album, *Cañonazo* (LP 325), with his group Pacheco y su Charanga. The recording included a composition by Cuban composer Rolando Bolaños entitled “Fania Funché.” According to Pacheco, that is where the record company’s name originated: “The word is catchy not only for Latinos but for Anglos as well, we wanted to reach all markets” (Padura-Fuentes 2003: 58). However, there is some contention concerning the true meaning of *Fania*. Cesar Miguel Rondón simply states that it is a female name (Rondón 1980: 48). Pacheco claimed that it meant “family” in an unspecified African language (Contreras 2006). Larry Harlow claims that there was a café in Havana named Fanía where he and Masucci used to hang out in the late 1950s. And musicians involved with the record company in its earliest days believe that Fania was the name of a drug-smuggling ring operating in Mexico, although the connection between Masucci and that outfit is unclear and based on hearsay.

Pacheco and Masucci started by selling records out of Pacheco’s old Mercedes trunk and realized they were on to something when more than 100,000 units of their first record sold. They then started signing a slew of other artists; the first included Bobby Valentín, Larry Harlow, Willie Colón, Hector Lavoe, and Ismael Miranda. The rhetoric of “family” was central to Fania, even though Masucci and Pacheco employed ruthless business tactics that included underpaying musicians, buying up all of the competition (other small labels), securing radio airtime through elaborate payola schemes, and establishing a monopoly of club bookings in New York, often through the use of heavy-handed tactics. Regardless, Pacheco stated that his philosophy with Fania artists was to “respect the rights of musicians and make them feel like they were a part of a family” (Padura-Fuentes 2003: 58). The establishment of the Fania All-Stars in 1971, a group consisting of bandleaders signed to Fania and highly regarded musicians who regularly recorded with them, enabled the label to showcase all of their talent while portraying a unified family of

salseros. This notion of family extended beyond the musicians and was marketed to the communities to which they targeted their sales. This strategy capitalized on the newfound cultural pride being incited within Latino neighborhoods, as well as the calls for a unified Latino consciousness by new political movements. Fania deliberately constructed salsa as an exclusively Latino cultural expression, a discourse that reverberated through the barrios and swiftly transformed the fledgling company into an economic powerhouse. Though still considered an independent label compared to the majors, by the mid-1970s Fania accounted for 70 to 80 percent of all salsa record sales.<sup>13</sup> Singer Ruben Blades pointed out that there were both positive and negative aspects to Fania's monopoly: "Masucci was clever enough to understand the potential of the music and he made it big . . . he facilitated the talent's opportunity, but he ended up keeping all of their money . . . if it hadn't been for Jerry Masucci and Fania, the impact of salsa music would never have occurred . . . he ripped off everybody . . . but there was nowhere else to go. Fania was the only game in town" (Polin 1996: 6).

In order to accomplish such success, Fania needed to distance postrevolutionary Latin music in New York from Cuba, both as an economic necessity due to the U.S. government-imposed sanctions and because it conveniently opened a space for others to stake their claim of ownership. Even though much of the repertoire recorded by the label was composed by Cuban composers, Fania began substituting the initials D. R. (meaning *derechos reservados*, or "rights reserved") for the composers' names in the record liner notes. In this way, the prolific Cuban contribution was obscured, distanced, and denied. Without documentation of publishing and composition rights, ensuring that royalty payments were properly distributed was difficult (Fania was notorious for not paying royalties). Fania further promulgated an anti-Cuban stance in its 1971 release of *Nuestra Cosa Latina* (*Our Latin Thing*), a promotional film in which live concert scenes from the Cheetah dance club in New York were spliced with a montage of street scenes of New York's barrios, visually positing salsa as inherently of those streets. Their later films went further by including montages of Africa and African musicians. The obvious suggestion was that this barrio expression was intrinsically tied to "Mother Africa," which conveniently played into the popular pan-Africanist discourse of the day; it also assisted in the erasure of the Cuban influence, the route many of those African roots took in order to proliferate in the New York barrios. Additionally, Fania passed over many Cuban artists with established careers in New York City, refusing to sign the likes of Arsenio Rodríguez, for instance. This omission is particularly significant considering that Rodríguez continued to perform regularly during the initial rise of Fania, and, as David García (2006) has pointed out, his performance practice, arranging style, and

compositions heavily influenced Fania's early productions. Recognition only came after his death in 1970, when Larry Harlow recorded his *Tribute to Arsenio* album (SLP 00404). For Fania, omitting Cuba in salsa opened the music up for greater pan-Latin American identification and, eventually, greater record sales and profits.

Marketing this new music was a central concern for Fania. Prior to the 1970s, Latin music either fell under the marketing rubric of tropical, which covered a wide range of music, or it was listed in a genre-specific way (mambo, cha-cha, etc.). Fania wanted a new appellative that would differentiate the music from its antecedents, especially from Cuban styles. Salsa, literally meaning "sauce," would prove to be the catchy marketing label they sought, serving as an umbrella term for diverse musical performances and productions. Though popularized by Fania, this culinary metaphor was not foreign to Latin music performance and had played a role as a performative exclamation and aesthetic trope for quite some time. Cuban musicians in the first half of the twentieth century used the phrase "*Toca con salsa!*" as a bandstand interjection, meaning "swing it" or "play it with feeling." The title of Cuban composer Ignacio Piñeiro's famous son "Echale Salsita" ("Put a Little Sauce in It"), written in 1933 and performed by the Septeto Nacional, aptly captures this type of usage.

The word "salsa," however, reemerged more prominently in the 1960s in several ways. In 1962, Joe Cuba's release *Steppin' Out* included a composition by Jimmy Sabater entitled "Salsa y Bembé" (Seeco Records 9292). Sabater later claimed that he was using the word to label the music, although the lyrics suggest that it was more of a call to the dancers to "spice things up a bit" (Salazar 2002: 255). In 1963, Charlie Palmieri recorded an album called *Salsa Na' Ma'* ("Salsa, Nothing More") for Alegre Records. The lyrics of the title track suggest that "salsa" was the name of a new dance. However, Santiago's liner notes use the term more in the traditional sense, writing that Palmieri's band "possesses that all important 'sauce' necessary for satisfying that most demanding of musical tastes. It is for this reason that the album . . . is titled *Salsa Na' Ma'*" (Salazar 2002: 255–256). According to Max Salazar, Cal Tjader's album *Soul Sauce* (*Salsa del Alma*), released in 1964, started a trend among Latinos living on the West Coast to use "salsa" as a label for Tjader's "groovy" Latin jazz mixtures (Salazar 2002: 256). Most likely, though, salsa as a generic label stems from Venezuelan disc jockey Phidias Danilo Escalona, who launched a show in 1966 entitled "*La Hora del Sabor, la Salsa y el Bembé*" ("The Hour of Flavor, Salsa, and Party"), playing a variety of modern Cuban dance music, most of which was produced in New York City. Salsa was soon adopted by audiences in Carácas to refer to Latin music coming from New York in the 1960s, which included bands playing pachanga, guaracha, boogaloo, cha-cha, and mambo, specifically.

It was not until the early 1970s in New York that salsa became widely accepted as a generic marker. At that time, numerous song titles and albums were produced that included the word “salsa”; promoter Ralph Mercado launched an advertising campaign in which he called the Cheetah club “the home of salsa”; radio disc jockey Polito Vega began announcing his WBNX show as “100 percent salsa”; and Izzy Sanabria, publisher of *Latin New York* magazine, began systematically writing articles about salsa (he also claimed that he coined the term while emceeing a Fania All-Stars concert). Finally, Fania’s release of Larry Harlow’s *Salsa*, recorded in 1973, and its subsequent success left no doubt as to the name of this new music. In fact, in 1973, Fania also released its second promotional film, simply titled *Salsa*. Pacheco commented: “The word ‘salsa’ came about when we started traveling in Europe with Fania and I realized that, except in Spain, no one knew anything about Cuban music. After all, what we were doing was taking Cuban music and adding more progressive chords, emphasizing rhythms, and highlighting certain aspects, but without changing its essence. And since the word . . . has always been associated with the music, it seemed logical to call it that. Likewise, since in Fania we had Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Anglos, Italians, and Jews, that is, a diverse group of condiments that would make good sauce” (Padura-Fuentes 2003: 58–59). Indeed, this diversity involved in salsa production in New York would prove to be key to the music’s wide appeal that crossed ethnic, racial, and national boundaries.

However, it is important to note that a minority of traditionally minded musicians, some of whom were performing Latin music prior to the founding of Fania Records, continued to reject this commercial label. For instance, in 1978, bandleader Tito Puente remarked, “This is not a musical terminology at all. The music that I am playing today, which I have been playing for the last 20 years or more, if they want to call it salsa or matzoh ball soup, the name doesn’t make any difference to me” (Blum 1978: 144). Throughout his career, from the bandstand and in interviews, he continually reiterated this perspective, reminding everyone that “salsa comes in a bottle and is something you eat,” and what he played was “Cuban music.” Bandleader Eddie Palmieri added, “We must eliminate that [salsa]. It’s Afro-Caribbean music” (Birnbaum 1994: 17). And bandleader Mario Bauzá asked, “Who said salsa exists?” (Padura-Fuentes 2003: 23). Regardless of these objections, salsa has been widely accepted as a generic marker since the 1970s, stylistically binding a diverse collection of produced recordings and performance practices, unifying the positioning of recordings in stores and on websites, dictating radio programming, and designing marketing campaigns.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1970s, Fania controlled most aspects of the salsa business and performance scene in New York City. In fact, the practices it developed

in that decade remained the models for future generations of salseros and producers. The Fania All-Stars became an essential marketing tool and disseminating vehicle. By sending only one band on tour to back up a number of its singers, Fania was able to reduce touring costs and to produce concerts throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. These salsa ambassadors internationalized the music and greatly expanded markets. Their growing popularity through the promotional films, record releases, and touring enabled them to play for larger and larger crowds. Eventually, Fania started booking them in large stadiums, including Yankee Stadium in August 1973, with 44,000 people in attendance, and, for their Puerto Rican debut, the Roberto Clemente Coliseum in August 1974.<sup>15</sup> Each of these concerts was filmed, recorded, and later commercially released, maximizing their economic potential. Fania's promotional efforts paid off as its success became noticed by the larger mainstream music industry. In February 1973, *Billboard* started reporting the top Latin music LPs for the first time. In the June 12, 1976, issue, it included a twenty-four-page supplement entitled "The Salsa Explosion," announcing this new genre to the non-Latino market. In March 1975, salsa was programmed for the first time on Don Kirshner's *Rock Concert*, a popular television program on NBC. Due to a performance by Eddie Palmieri at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, *Time* magazine published an article on May 5, 1975, introducing the music to its readership. And, most significantly, in 1975 a new category, "Latin Record of the Year," was implemented at the Grammy Awards. Eddie Palmieri won for his *Sun of Latin Music* album (Coco CLP-109XX).

Fania's early success was due in part to its ability to capitalize on salsa's resistant tendencies through its connection to the culture of El Barrio. Salsa became emblematic of that culture and, by extension, Puerto Rican culture at large. This connection remained strong throughout the 1990s. As Marisol Berrios-Miranda observes, "For Puerto Ricans, for whom identification with a wider community of Latinos is a source of strength and resistance to U.S. domination, salsa provides an exuberant experience of pride, independence, and solidarity" (Berrios-Miranda 2000: 20). However, as salsa's international markets grew, Fania moved the music away from being associated solely with Nuyorican barrio life, an experience that did not necessarily translate crossculturally. Subsequently it initiated a push to "Latinize" (i.e., market the music as representative of a shared common Latino experience both in New York and abroad) in order to appeal to a broader Spanish-speaking audience. These efforts proved successful because, once again, they paralleled political movements of the 1970s that sought empowerment through coalition-building among Latino groups, thereby establishing a "pan-Latino identity." Panamanian vocalist Ruben Blades was key in Fania's efforts since he was the first lyricist and singer to

bring a broader Latin American perspective to salsa, as well as a penchant for writing political songs that resonated across nationalistic and ethnic lines.

Fania's success in this pan-Latin America venture, though, was double-edged. As Keith Negus (1999) points out, salsa helped unify Latin American cultural expression in the 1970s and provided many Latino musicians great performance opportunities and recognition, but, at the same time, it limited the proliferation of other localized styles that did not fit into the salsa rubric. In order for a cohesive pan-identity to be constructed, the interplay of cultural and national difference had to be set aside and temporarily suspended.<sup>16</sup> As Aparicio points out, this played into the larger "tendencies of the mainstream to conflate all Latin(o) popular music as one homogeneous, tropicalized cultural expression" (Aparicio 1998: 116). This conflation was convenient for Fania, which planned to cross over to even larger English-speaking audiences, a goal that it would never realize due, in part, to the vitality of those local scenes that it had penetrated.

In fact, its resounding success in Latin America was the beginning of the end for Fania. Salsa's popularity spawned many localized scenes, where outposts of salsa production were established throughout the Caribbean and Latin America that would eventually compete for market share and decentralize the salsa industry. A number of influential Colombian, Venezuelan, Dominican, and Puerto Rican bands emerged in the late 1970s. These local productions co-opted this barrio-inflected expression and made it their own, as each was imbued with local sounds, particularities, and experience, which in turn captured local audiences. Claims of ownership began to cut a broad cultural swath. For instance, in salsa's first historical monograph, Venezuelan writer Rondón states, "Salsa is a music that we legitimately consider ours" (Rondón 1980: 6). Colombians, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, and Nuyoricans made similar claims.

As these localized and innovative music scenes grew, Fania seemed to lose its experimental edge, and, instead, relied upon time-tested formulas for its later productions. Unable to change with the times and capture the next generation of listeners (who were more inclined to listen to pop, rock, and more locally inflected music), by 1979 Fania's sales had dropped substantially. Adding to this decline was the general financial slump in Latin music markets stemming from currency problems in various Latin American nations. Further, this decline coincided with imminent financial problems for Fania that stemmed from the strident greed of its business practices. Many musicians, promoters, composers, and producers that Fania had underpaid for years began a forceful campaign to collect and share in the profits from the salsa boom. Masucci responded in 1979 by ceasing further productions and, in 1980, he sold the company to a group of South American investors. Masucci immigrated to Argentina

to pursue other business interests, although he ended up with the label in the end, and his family still owns it today.<sup>17</sup>

The demise of Fania set the stage for the emergence of a new salsa sound that would predominate through the end of the twentieth century; however, it would take a few years for the industry to rebuild. Fania's decade-long monopoly caused a real vacuum when it left. Other companies, promoters, or producers just did not possess the infrastructure, economic means, or artistic vision to replace the label. A few small companies made attempts to reignite interest in salsa, but with only limited success. SAR, formed by three entrepreneurs (Sergio Bofill, Adriano Garcia, and Roberto Torres), focused on older Cuban styles; the TH record label promoted older stars like Oscar D'Leon and Willie Rosario. The growing popularity of merengue further contributed to salsa's decline, sparked by the influx of Dominican immigrants to New York and Puerto Rico in the early 1980s. Such singers as Wilfrido Vargas and Johnny Ventura, with their flashy staging; humorous, light, and often overtly sexual lyrics; and easy merengue dance steps appealed to younger generations of Latinos. Many salsa clubs in the United States and Puerto Rico began programming merengue bands instead of salsa acts. In addition, the rise in popularity of North American pop music, rock, and urban dance styles (e.g., rap) among Latino youth was a factor. This was especially true for second- and third-generation Latinos living in the United States who associated salsa with their parent's generation.

Emerging from the vacuum left by Fania in the 1980s were two interdependent and closely aligned centers of salsa production in New York and in Puerto Rico. Both adopted a similar approach to salsa production that significantly changed the music's stylistic direction and aesthetic. Proponents in both locations were concerned with rejuvenating the salsa scene and providing a new marketable product. Taking note of the popularity of rock and pop music among Latino youth in both places, salsa producers turned to those styles for direction and influence. New York-based arranger and percussionist Louie Ramírez and Puerto Rican producer Isidro Infante (who had relocated to New York in 1976) are widely credited with the introduction of the new salsa sound of the 1980s. Ramírez, an arranger who regularly worked on Fania productions, was the first to experiment with combining salsa rhythms and familiar rock tunes. In 1978, he recorded two Beatles' songs, "Something" and "Because," arranged in a salsa format. Both songs were not particularly successful in terms of sales, but they sparked the interest of Joni Figueras, a representative of K-tel Records (a mail-order company and subsidiary of CBS Records that built its sales through late-night television commercials). Figueras contacted Ramírez in 1982 and proposed a project that would capitalize on the widespread popularity of romantic songs used in *telenovelas* (soap-opera-like

miniseries) and hit *baladas* (ballads) from South America, Spain, and Mexico, sung by the likes of Julio Iglesias and Roberto and Raphael Carlos. Inspired by the Beatles' remakes, Figueras suggested recording remakes of these widely known songs featuring young salsa singers. In 1982 and 1983, Ramírez teamed up with arranger Infante and they co-produced two recordings for K-tel Records, known as *Noche Caliente* (commercially available as *Lo Mejor De Noche Caliente, Volume 1 and 2*; Caiman 2888 and 2889). The album featured up-and-coming salsa singers José Alberto, Tito Allen, Johnny Rivera, and Ray De La Paz. The arrangements, written by Ramírez, Infante, and Marty Sheller, toned down the "hot" or hard-driving sound that dominated the recordings associated with Fania. Instead, these new productions featured a milder and more tranquil sound, with a slick and highly polished, pop-influenced studio production. Tempos were slower, percussion and brass parts were executed in comparatively subdued fashion, and vocals were sung in a smooth, "crooning" style. The lyrics centered on topics of love, replacing the politically charged lyrics of Blades, Lavoe, and their contemporaries.

K-tel promoted these releases by assembling a pickup band led by Ramírez and Infante and sending them on a promotional tour throughout Latin America. Sales began to soar thanks to K-tel's late-night TV commercials and supermarket promotions, much to the surprise of its originators. Infante commented, "Everyone involved in the *Noche Caliente* recordings had all been working for Fania, and we had no idea at the time how influential these records would be. It was just another project for us. I was playing for Machito at the time and out of the country on tour for a few months when the first record came out. When I got back everything had changed. Everyone was copying us" (I. Infante, pers. comm.). This new stylistic approach reached beyond New York City, appealing to a wide demographic of Latinos throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and in other U.S. cities. And, like the popularity of the original material (*baladas*), it cut across national, ethnic, racial, and class divisions. In some ways, *Noche Caliente* surpassed the pan-Latin appeal for which Fania had been striving. The commercial success of these releases established a subgenre of salsa that would eventually become known as *salsa romántica*. In 1983, capitalizing on their success, Ramírez partnered with Ray De La Paz to launch the first salsa band that played with this new aesthetic exclusively.<sup>18</sup>

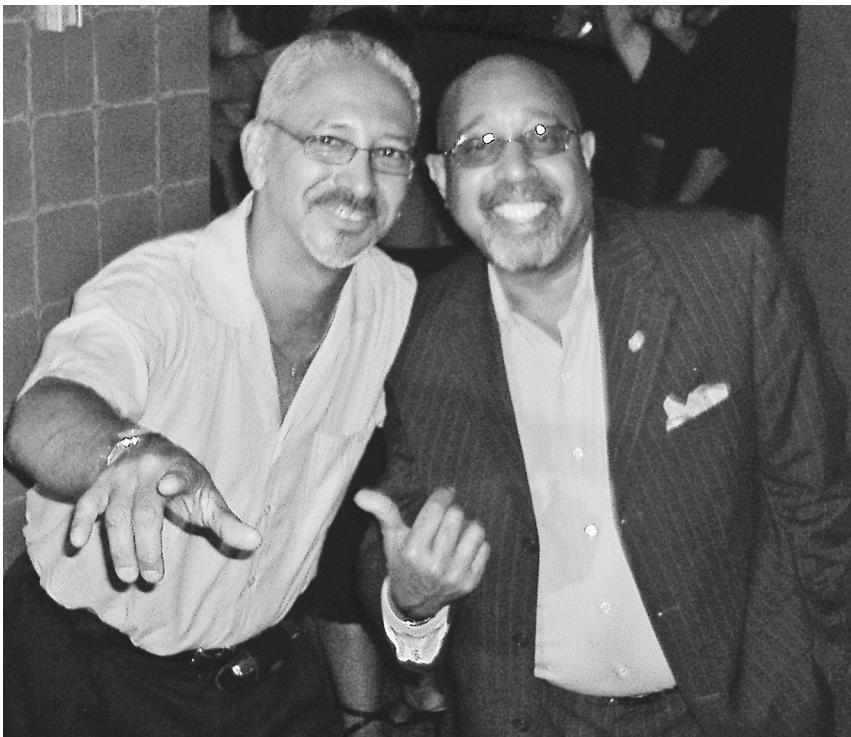
Producers in Puerto Rico were quick to follow, adopting this new approach, albeit with their own locally inflected sound. Infante commented: "If you listen to our *Noche Caliente* records you can still hear instrumental solos, danceable tempos, and high-energy coros. We even used Pacheco on coro and all the musicians from the Fania All-Stars to record. We still left some of the Fania sound in there. But in Puerto Rico, it was very different. It is a tropical

island, a more laid-back lifestyle, and their version of the music was slower, focused on the lyrics, and had no solos" (I. Infante, pers. comm.). Producer Bobby Valentín's work with singers Ubaldo Rodríguez and Tito Rojas, Tommy Olivencia's productions with vocalists Paquito Guzman and Frankie Ruíz, and Julio Caesar Delgado's productions for Eddie Santiago and Lalo Rodríguez were central in establishing a distinct Puerto Rican sound. In order to distinguish the Puerto Rican sound from the productions in New York, the labels *salsa erótica* and *salsa sensual* were preferred. Eventually, though, salsa romántica was used for both productions in Puerto Rico and in New York. A second wave of producers—such names as Humberto Ramírez, Cuto Soto, and Ramón Sánchez—sustained this Puerto Rican sound throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s by working with a new crop of singers that included Luis Enrique, Jerry Rivera, Domingo Quiñones, and Rey Ruíz.

This new approach to salsa deemphasized images of barrio life, reduced calls for Latino unity, and avoided political lyrics; hence, it aligned with the sociopolitical environment of the Reagan era, where political activism and global awareness were largely pacified (at least in the United States). Moreover, borrowing from pop music, a salsa artist's physical and sexual image became increasingly more important than his or her musical prowess. Record companies sought young, predominantly white or light-skinned male singers with sex appeal. Many middle-aged and well-established singers, such as Pete "El Conde" Rodríguez and Adalberto Santiago, found themselves without recording contracts.<sup>19</sup> The words used to distinguish this style—sensual, erótica, and romántica—reflected both the content of lyrics as well as images used to market these artists. Singer "Giro" López commented: "Salsa used to have a nasty image, with its sexuality and rough performers, but my salsa is romantic, soothing, pretty . . . sort of like a rhythmic *bolero*, and that's today's salsa, which has changed a lot from the original style. Salsa used to be all about the timbales and bongó, but now it's about sweet and elegant words, and the girls like it much more than the earlier, macho salsa" (Manuel 1995: 91).<sup>20</sup>

The proliferation of the new sound was further facilitated by the start of RMM Records in 1987, a company founded by Ralph Mercado, a concert promoter and talent manager turned entrepreneur. Mercado first approached the musicians involved in *Noche Caliente* to help launch his company, relying on the formulas they borrowed from pop music in which the bands were formed and arrangements written with the sole purpose of featuring star singers as bandleaders. Mercado hired Ramírez and Infante to produce and arrange his first production, which featured José Alberto. From the beginning, though, it was apparent that Mercado had a different goal than just re-producing romántica copies. Coming of age in the salsa business during the

heyday of Fania, Mercado retained his love for the older, hard-swinging styles, but he also knew that the music he produced had to evolve and appeal to younger generations to enjoy any longevity. So his productions, though firmly rooted in the romántica style, often included unique blends of older styles or other types of music, such as soul, R&B, and hip-hop. The turning point for his company came in 1989 with his first production for Tito Nieves. Nieves and Ramírez had a falling out during the initial sessions that resulted in Ramírez's quitting. Infante was unavailable to step in and recommended a young Nuyorican pianist, Sergio George. George took over the production, inflecting it with a blend of romántica, pop, and soul that took full advantage of Nieves's versatile vocal abilities. The overwhelming popularity of that release, *The Classic* (Sony 80707), propelled the team of Mercado and George to a dominant position in the New York salsa scene. Mirroring the Masucci and Pacheco relationship, George was hired as producer and arranger for Mercado's productions and eventually was promoted to a full-time position in charge of A&R (Artists and Repertoire).



**Figure I.6** Ralph Mercado (Right) and DJ Ricky (Left) backstage at the Latin Quarter in New York, 2005. (Photograph by Christopher Washburne.)



**Figure I.7** Sergio George at his home studio, Teaneck, New Jersey, 2002. (*Photograph by Enid Farber.*)

Well-schooled in Masucci's business practices, with whom he collaborated while running the Cheetah club, Mercado modeled RMM on Fania: RMM quickly absorbed all of the competition, signed almost every major salsero, and established control over radio airplay and club bookings. By the early 1990s, RMM Records had effectively filled the void left by Fania's dissolution to become the largest and most influential Latin music record company and concert promoter in the salsa business. In 1994, they even started the RMM All-Stars, modeled on the Fania All-Stars, consisting of studio musicians who regularly worked on RMM productions.<sup>21</sup> RMM began producing large-scale concerts at venues like Madison Square Garden and Carnegie Hall, where Mercado had his All-Star band back up the singers signed to his company. This group also toured regularly in Latin America, Europe, and around the United States. These concerts were often filmed, recorded, and later released

commercially. Their most notable video was filmed during a live concert at the Miami Arena and was released as *Combinación Perfecta (The Perfect Combination)*.<sup>22</sup> These tours and commercial releases served as highly effective promotional campaigns for Mercado's roster, bolstering the careers of his mainstay artists, including José "El Canario" Alberto, Tito Nieves, Tony Vega, Ray Sepulveda, Domingo Quiñones, Johnny Rivera, Oscar D'Leon, and Ray De La Paz. Further, Mercado did not forsake the older salseros he had been working with since the 1970s and signed them to his label as well. Such singers as Cheo Feliciano, Celia Cruz, Pete "El Conde" Rodríguez, and bandleader Tito Puente all had their careers reinvigorated. The RMM All-Stars concerts featured a unique generational mix ranging from performances by septuagenarian Cruz to twentysomething newcomer Marc Anthony. Mercado commented, "The '90s belonged to RMM the way the 1970s were Fania's. RMM created a second wave of an explosion" (Navarro 2001). By the mid-1990s, Mercado had fifty-five employees and distribution deals in forty-two cities around the world, and his offices occupied a chic 9,000-square-foot SoHo loft.

George's ability to recognize and adapt to changes in the salsa audience as second- and third-generation Latinos living in the United States came of age contributed to his success. Many had grown up in the suburbs of New Jersey and Long Island, far removed from the barrio where George was raised. Some did not speak Spanish or know how to dance. He reached out to this audience by having many of his artists sing cuts in English on each of their recordings. The most successful song was Nieves's version of Taylor Dayne's "I'll Always Love You," a top-forty hit from 1987. In addition, he sought new talent that shared this younger generation's experiences and musical sensibilities. La India and Marc Anthony are two artists who are credited with bringing younger audiences to salsa in the late 1990s. Both were known for their work in the underground dance music scene in New York, but they had no experience in salsa and they did not speak Spanish fluently. George combined their styles of house music, soul, and salsa to change the direction of salsa once again. George explained: "I am not interested in crossover. I want my market expanded to include reggae/rap/salsa. I want to bridge the gap in the Latino market between Colombians, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans, not crossing over to the Anglo market. If we unify the Spanish-speaking market, stay true to the art and music, people will buy it" (S. George, pers. comm.). And they did.

Their preponderant role and commercial strength contributed to the success and dominance of George's pop-oriented style of New York salsa throughout the 1990s; however, Mercado also supported a separate group of arrangers and studio musicians in Puerto Rico that produced milder forms of romántica,



**Figure I.8** Marc Anthony backstage before his salsa debut in Madison Square Garden, 1994. (Photograph by Enid Farber.)

thereby promulgating these two distinct scenes. This Puerto Rican-based group would eventually prove very influential in the late 1990s. As with Fania, however, the growing success and dominance of just one company was double-edged. Opportunity for other voices and alternative approaches, save for these two scenes Mercado supported, was nearly nonexistent. One struggling salsa artist complained, “If you are not signed with Ralph [Mercado], you are nowhere. He’s got the market locked up. You can’t get on his Madison Square Garden concerts, the other companies don’t have the same record distribution capabilities, and forget about radio airplay” (Anon., pers. comm.). Mercado’s monopoly on all aspects of the business allowed him to dictate how business was conducted, and his choices often involved questionable practices that contributed to the continued marginalization of salsa within the music industry at large. For instance, since Mercado did not properly report sales figures, traditional indicators used by the recording industry (e.g., Nielsen SoundScans that track commercial sales) could not be applied. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) did not even establish a separate report for salsa that distinguished it from other tropical genres until 1997. Further, many of the smaller mom-and-pop record stores where salsa was primarily sold, both in the United States and in Puerto Rico, did not report their figures. According to Keith Negus, salsa held 4 to 7 percent of the market

share of the recording industry in the 1990s, but only 1 percent was reported (Negus 1999: 141).

As RMM grew, major record labels slowly began to recognize the economic potential of the Latino market for salsa. Mercado partnered with Sony and BMG in the mid-1990s, greatly expanding his distribution and business opportunities. However, Mercado's expansion into the legitimate business world would lead to the eventual demise of RMM. George stated, "When I started with Ralph [Mercado], everything was informal. We came to terms over a handshake, there were no contracts. But when we started to work with Sony and other companies, we had to change how we did business" (S. George, pers. comm.). Most transactions between RMM and musicians had been in cash and remained unreported. Changing how RMM did business meant paying taxes, royalties, residuals, and reporting sales figures. As the company began transforming and legitimatizing their business practices, the changes sparked the scrutiny of the Internal Revenue Service. In the mid-1990s, RMM and a number of its artists were audited. As proper sales reports were published, artists, producers, and composers began to realize the amount of royalties that they rightfully deserved but had never received. George was one of the first to demand better compensation. When Mercado refused, George left in 1996 to form his own record and production company, Sir George Records, where he experimented further with hip-hop, rap, reggae, and salsa mixtures. *DLG* (Dark Latin Grooves) was his first highly influential project. (Isidro Infante was hired as his replacement at RMM). Some artists began seeking relationships with other companies who were willing to offer better deals. For instance, in 1999, Marc Anthony threatened to sue Mercado and expose his questionable business practices in order to terminate his contract with RMM and sign with Sony Records. Mercado was forced to let him go, settling out of court. In 2000, La India sued Mercado for \$500,000 in unpaid royalties. However, it was another lawsuit that same year that closed his company for good. Songwriter Glenn Monroig in Puerto Rico brought the suit, claiming that RMM had used one of his songs in several recordings and in a documentary without obtaining permission, and that he had never been paid royalties for that use. The federal jury in Puerto Rico awarded Monroig \$7.7 million in damages, forcing Mercado to seek Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in November 2000. As part of that settlement, Mercado was banned from the record business for several years. In 2001, the Universal Music Group acquired RMM Records for \$16 million. Mercado remains in the salsa business as a promoter and club owner, but the absence of RMM records created another vacuum in the salsa scene, the effects of which still linger as of the writing of this book. Performance opportunities

remain limited in New York, with only a few clubs programming salsa with any regularity; no new company has emerged to fill this void.

This book focuses on the RMM era, investigating how its business practices and stylistic dominance impacted the performance practice and sound of salsa in the 1990s. The dominant discourse in salsa scholarship frames salsa romántica as something distinct from salsa dura. Such scholars as Peter Manuel, Jorge Duany, and Cesar Rondón have criticized, in differing ways, RMM's preference for a depoliticized, commercialized, pop-music approach. For them, salsa romántica productions lack the authenticity, creativity, and artistic integrity so fundamental to the Fania era. My analysis goes against this scholarly trend. Though romántica differs substantially from salsa dura, both in terms of lyric content and sound aesthetic, its performance practice remains firmly grounded in the tropes and strategies developed in the 1970s, where Latinidad, pan-Latino identity construction, and self-empowerment remain firmly centered in performance. The same social struggles remain, but they are couched in a new era and generation. Indeed, Mercado and George achieved their success by their ability to keep the music "in the family" and "of the people," despite its overt commercialism. Live performances were key in this venture. The subdued sounds heard on their recordings rarely matched the performance practice of live shows, where grittier, pride-inducing aesthetics were privileged. The ethnographic perspective put forth in the following pages, its view from the "trenches," examines just how these ideas were sustained on the New York salsa scene.

## Fieldwork

"[T]o ignore the encounter not only denies the power of such factors as personality, social location in the community, intimacy of contact, and luck (not to mention theoretical orientation and self-conscious methodology) to shape fieldwork and its product but also perpetuates the conventional fictions of objectivity and omniscience that mark the ethnographic genre."<sup>23</sup>

—LILA ABU-LUGHOD

In the 1990s, salsa was performed, produced, listened to, consumed, and danced to throughout the world. Its global reach and the cultural complexities involved in its creation required some limitation in the scope of this fieldwork-based project. I focused primarily on the salsa scene in New York City, the place that was central to the emergence of the music as a distinct

genre and that served as the epicenter of salsa performance, production, and promotion throughout the 1990s. Most major salsa performers, producers, composers, and arrangers either resided in or regularly performed in the New York metropolitan area. The majority of record companies, record distributors, and concert promoters had offices in Manhattan. A significant number of recordings were made either in the city or nearby. In addition, the premier salsa performance venues that featured the most famous bands were located in Manhattan. These top-level bands, and the musicians who performed and recorded with them, served as my focus in this study. I studied people who self-identified and were recognized in their communities as “salsa musicians.” All were professional musicians for whom salsa was the central monetary and artistic focus of their musical careers.<sup>24</sup>

My decision to study this particular group reflected my own personal performance experience. Those musicians with whom I consulted, interviewed, observed, “hung out,” and researched were the same individuals with whom I had been performing for the last eighteen years. I played with everyone whose voice is represented in this book. I had intimate working and personal relationships with many. To use the conventional anthropological term “consultants” to label their role in my research thus seems inadequate. Rather, the salseros involved in this project included fellow musicians, bandleaders, music directors, record producers, concert promoters, radio disc jockeys, club deejays, and academic colleagues, most of whom I considered to be my friends. Aaron Fox (1995) prefers the term “interlocutors,” in order to emphasize the roles of speech, silence, dialogue, and their importance in the research process. Reflecting my own experience, this term acknowledges the central role of interchange, the sharing of ideas, observations, perceptions, and conceptions of the music and the scene in the development of the perspective put forth in the following pages. Several groups with whom I performed on a regular basis played a more pronounced role in this research. Indeed, I viewed the musicians who played in the bands of Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Ray Sepulveda, Tito Nieves, Marc Anthony, La India, and RMM All-Stars as my collaborators.

Participation through performance served as my principal means of collecting data. As a musician participant, I was privy to many aspects of both the music and social conditions that other scholars in this field either have not seen or have chosen to ignore. I focused upon these uncharted waters and wrote about the parts of the New York salsa scene with which I was most intimately acquainted. This level of close intimacy provided unique opportunities for insightful observation; however, it presented problems, too, especially when attempting to distance myself for the sake of objective analysis and interpretation. As I spent more time on the salsa scene, it became increasingly



**Figure I.9** Tito Puente and Christopher Washburne performing at SOBs in New York, 1998. (Photograph by Maiken Derno.)

difficult to distinguish between “fieldwork,” “gigging,” and “just hanging.” These modes of being were inseparable and this blurred and multivalent position felt like the most natural course to take in my fieldwork. But where does ethnography begin and real life end? Aaron Fox relates about his own work, “Fieldwork, music making, friendship, and writing have grown together into a dense thicket of stories in which knowledge, memory, emotion, and practice are simply inseparable. Making an analytic, scholarly path through this thicket is a tricky, though pleasurable business” (Fox 1995: 64). Indeed, the very act of engaging my interlocutors in ongoing dialogues concerning the issues examined in this project contributed to my navigation through this “tricky thicket.” Consequently, their criticisms and feedback played an integral part in forming the observations and conclusions put forth in this book. John Blacking continually stressed the importance of musical performance as a research tool (1973), though he added that an “ethnography of performance must include as many perceptions as possible of what is happening when music is played or sung, and what are the relationships between the

sounds produced and the attendant social and cultural process" (Blacking 1977: 2). As such, my aim was to maintain a level of multivocality, presenting diverse perspectives and allowing the voices of my friends to be heard.

As a white musician born and raised in rural Ohio, steeped in rock and roll, and schooled in jazz and classical music, I had little exposure to Latin music and culture before I began performing with salsa bands in Boston in the late 1980s while attending the New England Conservatory. I played my first salsa gig as a complete outsider. I had never heard salsa (except for brief moments when blasting car stereos passed me while driving through Boston's Latino neighborhoods); I had only met a few Latino musicians; I had never visited a Caribbean, South, or Central American country; and I did not speak Spanish. I was sent as a last-minute substitute player for Jim Messbauer, a white, North American trombonist. When I asked how to play salsa, Messbauer responded, "Just show up on time. Smile a lot and have a good time. And most importantly, play really LOUD. They are going to love you!" Armed with this scant but essential advice, I possessed just enough insider information to be hired as a regular member of the group by the end of the evening's performance. After moving to New York City in the summer of 1989, I began performing in the "salsa scene" almost exclusively, playing four to seven nights a week. Since I worked as a freelance trombonist, performing with various groups at one time, I had the opportunity to play in a number of diverse contexts, including rehearsals, clubs and discos, private parties, festivals, on television, and on music videos. In addition, I toured extensively with salsa bands throughout Central and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States. Further, I participated in a number of Latin music recordings during my research.<sup>25</sup>

In total, my acceptance into the salsa scene was rather swift, attesting to a sincere openness of the Latino community in New York City for cultural interchange. This is something for which I am most grateful, but I am equally troubled by the lack of reciprocation (Latino musicians continually have difficulties breaking into the New York's jazz scene, for instance). My acceptance was not unprecedented, though. Latin bands in New York typically included white horn players, a practice that was established in the 1940s during the mambo era. The large horn sections required a number of skilled players, more than any one community could support. In fact, arguably the most influential salsa trombonist was Eddie Palmieri's longtime collaborator Barry Rogers, who was of Jewish descent and born and raised in Brooklyn. Because of his influence, white trombonists represent the most common participants of non-Latinos in salsa bands. Their participation and influence on the salsa scene is indicative of its intercultural nature, but it also calls into question the simple binary drawn between cultural insiders and outsiders, still widely discussed in

the social sciences today. My own experience was much more fluid and multi-layered instead of being a simple shift from “out-ness” to “in-ness.” As my competency level in playing salsa increased, and as I learned how to navigate the cultural cues and behaviors of the scene, I became more deeply entrenched and many more performance opportunities arose. However, my background and physical appearance (6 feet 3 inches tall, and of fair complexion), continually marked me as an outsider. Even after I appeared on numerous recordings and videos and performed with the busiest salsa groups, the issue of my insider/outsider status continued to play a role in my interactions with Latino musicians, especially when making new acquaintances. Such questions as “Why do you play our music?” or “You prefer playing jazz, right?” were not atypical. On a few isolated occasions I received jealous remarks, such as “Why did they hire you, a white boy, instead of me?” But for the most part, salsa musicians readily accepted my participation after I conveyed my respect for and knowledge of the music. Further, some fluency in Latino social expectations and my willingness to exhibit acceptable behavioral skills also expedited my cultural acceptance. I found that such displays of cultural competence were not singular affairs, required only in the case of each new acquaintance, but rather were continual processes in which I often was made to feel that I must re-prove my sincerity and respect for musicians with whom I had performed for a significant number of years. In contrast, I did not notice the same level of recurring critical examination of Latino musicians. At times, the challenges caused by the harsher standards that I was held to, which emphasized my “otherness,” spawned my own ambivalent feelings about the scene. I desired to be treated as just any other salsa musician. However, the objective distance I needed as a researcher conducting fieldwork did set me apart from the other participants. The process of stepping back from the scene, analyzing, and interpreting cultural data was most likely not a process in which other salseros were routinely engaged. Ultimately, I chose to use these heightened critical standards as inspiration to foster deeper levels of examination and analysis and to strive for higher levels of artistic competence in performance. When my last name was transformed from “Washburne” to “Whiteboy” by several Puerto Rican musicians and the nickname “Chris Whiteboy” began to be used with some frequency, I did not interpret it as an exclusionary gesture. Instead, I came to realize that for these musicians, it was a reflection of their need to assert their Puerto Rican status and cultural ownership of the music. At the same time, it served as an endearing appellative for a colleague who shared their love for salsa and their desire to make great music. I felt fortunate to be included as a participant in such a dynamic scene.

In this way, I straddled various complex positions within the salsa scene simultaneously. I found that other musicians I worked with, no matter what

their cultural affiliations, also were positioned in multivalent ways. These positions remained in constant flux.<sup>26</sup> I, however, came to view such multipositionality as a strength for conducting fieldwork. As Renato Rosaldo points out, we must recognize that a researcher's "multiplex personal identities," which are constituted by the sum of researcher's various identities, enable multiple sources of knowledge and perspectives for social analysis. Each offers unique ways of approaching various circumstances encountered in the field (Rosaldo 1989: 168–195). I tried to incorporate such an approach in the following pages, often drawing upon personal interactions for insight and analysis.

Engaging in fieldwork also served as the means by which I endured some difficult real-life experiences. When performance conditions became dangerous, exploitative, or degrading, my position as participant-observer was arduous. At times, I only found solace in the knowledge that these situations provided provocative and racy insight; at other times, I hoped that, through publication and documentation, I could possibly precipitate change and improve the situation for future salseros. For instance, during a performance with Ruben Blades in Venezuela in 1995, a gunfight erupted in front of the stage. Witnessing such violence as the band played on was disturbing and painful. As a performer, I deeply questioned my motives for placing myself in such close proximity to danger. Simultaneously, I was awed and inspired as Blades used his music to douse the fires and bridle the audience's aggression by singing of his love for his deceased parents. Witnessing the transformation from social chaos to literally tearful cell-phone calls home, and a general feeling of brotherly and sisterly love, was invaluable to me as a researcher. E. P. Thompson observed, "One way to discover unspoken norms is often to examine the untypical episode or situation . . . a sudden breach of deference enables us to better understand the deferential habits which have been broken . . . even a highly untypical ritual may thus provide a valuable window onto norms" (Thompson 1977: 251–252). After witnessing this incident, the insight gained into family structures, cultural role models, psychological effects of music, relationships between audiences and performers, and relationships between violence and music was monumental. It was in this way that I took advantage of my position as researcher, performer, and participant-observer to access diverse resources and experiences that ultimately served to enhance scholarly knowledge of the field, hoping to strike a balance between performance-oriented data acquisition and pre- and post-performance interpretive analysis.

In Chapter One, I focus on salsa bands working in New York City in the 1990s, exploring their organizational structures and highlighting several features of the scene within which the bands performed. The chapter is organized

to mirror the steps involved in the formation, preparation, and performance of bands, exploring issues associated with each formative step. The discussion then progresses to address specific topics involved in performance practice, providing insight into a variety of cultural structures, relationships, and processes within the salsa community. Professional salsa bands work in a highly structured performance environment; however, much of their performance practice involves the concealment of those structures and the blurring of boundaries associated with staged performance. Underlying this trend is a drive to construct the music as “people’s music,” regardless of its overt commerciality. Bandleaders accomplish this through performative strategies that promote collective participation and inclusiveness. Through the use of blurring and boundary-crossing techniques, salsa performers are able to maintain a connectedness to the urban barrio culture from where salsa emerged, which in turn invites a wide range of personal and cultural identifications.

In Chapter Two, I focus my ethnographic study on salsa musicians. I explore their attitudes, working environment, education, and business practices. In particular, I discuss how they navigate through a variety of conflicting agendas involved in salsa performance. Salsa, as cultural expression, straddles various identificatory positions simultaneously (i.e., embracing cultural pluralism, signifying disparate cultural particularities, and erasing cultural difference). Salsa musicians work, create, perform, and live on the front lines of contentious battles concerning ownership, nationality, and ethnicity. Performing salsa demands the mastery of an intricate array of social strategies to contend with these concerns, all the while balancing issues of personal artistic expression and economics. I examine the fluid negotiations that musicians must engage to navigate this challenging terrain.

After completing the ethnographic mapping of bands and musicians, I adopt a more pointed and issue-oriented approach, turning to three relatively underexplored areas in salsa research: violence, the illicit drug trade, and the role of gender. New York salsa has long been associated with urban street life, a life that violence commonly permeates. This violence stems from various societal factors, including poverty, unemployment, lack of education, the illegal drug trade, and gang activity, among others. Since much of New York’s salsa performance takes place in locations where violent acts are typically experienced (night clubs and after hours in dangerous neighborhoods), and the salsa business’s infrastructure often is tied economically to the illicit drug trade, makers and consumers are frequently exposed to violent acts or are participants in those acts. In Chapter Three, I explore the role these experiences play in how the music sounds and is performed. My contention is that the violence inherent in the scene manifests itself in sound, and tropes of violence inform performance practice.

In Chapter Four, I explore the dynamic relationship between salsa and the illicit drug trade. The emergence of salsa in the late 1960s and early 1970s coincided with the establishment of an internationally organized narcotics trading industry for cocaine. The pervasiveness of cocaine, the impact of its physical and psychological effects on the body, and its associated business practices on the salsa scene over the last thirty-five years have fundamentally informed salsa aesthetics, sound structure, and performance practice. Through a historical perspective, this chapter shows how salsa has been shaped by complex economic forces, illicit activity, and identity politics.

In Chapter Five, the fluidity of identity construction is interrogated through the performances of salsa singer La India. This chapter focuses on India's ambiguous manipulation of her stage selves, caught in the negotiations between the effect of stereotypical notions of masculinity and performative excess, and it offers a critical rereading of certain controversial and violent events in the singer's career. India is reconsidered for her radically gendered performance practice within a male-dominated music industry, as her presence on the salsa scene transcends the simplistic male-female binary that fails to articulate the multiple modes of gendered subjectivity. I argue that India's musical innovation and her nontraditional stage image had a profound effect on the salsa scene in the 1990s. Her pioneering efforts led the way for a number of other female singers/bandleaders to follow, and they collectively forged a space for female voices and perspectives to be represented in a significant way for the first time in this traditionally male-dominated domain.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I focus upon issues involving music style, demonstrating how cultural factors are intrinsically tied to, reflected in, and affect the sonic qualities of the music. This chapter provides the musical scaffolding from which I conduct my ethnographic research.<sup>27</sup> Through an analysis of various elements of salsa's sound structure, I explore how salsa's rich intercultural production reverberates sonically in ways that play out larger cultural processes microcosmically. I contend that the fundamental intercultural history of the music imbues it with a wide range of interpretation and inscription, making it pliable to serve as ethnic code, nationalistic pride, and essence for a wide variety of peoples. Specifically, the discussion explores elements of salsa's sound structure by examining performance practices associated with the predominant style of the late 1980s and 1990s—salsa romántica. The role of clave in salsa performance, as well as the relationship between New York and Puerto Rico, will be central to this discussion.