



RIFFING ON IDENTITY

JAIRO MORENO EXAMINES THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS ON LATIN AMERICAN MUSICIANS

BY KATY JUNE-FRIESEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA GODFREY

Some of Jairo Moreno's past experiences as a professional bassist seem far removed from his work as a professor. "I played for drug dealers in Upper Manhattan, and I played at Avery Fisher Hall [at Lincoln Center]," recalls the Associate Professor of Music. "I played in Rome for 10,000 people on a live broadcast." Yet in his current research, Moreno's years as a practitioner are coming face-to-face with his theoretical approach to understanding music-making.

"I was part of a chain of production and consumption of music, and I tend not to idealize music because of that," he says. "I really take exception to scholarship that, with minimal encounters with music-making, just takes it as a thing in itself. That's when I pull my card and say, I'm so sorry, the world is actually a lot more complex than that."

Moreno came to the U.S. from Colombia in the early 1980s to study jazz at the University of North Texas. By 1986, he was working as a professional bass player in New York's Latin music and jazz scenes. During his graduate studies at Yale in the 1990s, he played and recorded with musicians such as jazz tenor saxophonist David Sanchez and Latin and jazz percussionist Ray Barretto, with whom he toured internationally and recorded five Grammy-nominated albums.

For Moreno and other Latin American immigrants, making music in New York meant working with other so-called minority groups: U.S.-born Latinos and African Americans. He observed first-hand the tensions and negotiations between musicians from these

different groups; the way they self-identified as well as identified—and even stereotyped—each other.

"The United States makes certain demands of these minorities on music-making," he says. "For instance, that music should be always of 'the people' or of an ethnicity or a race."

Moreno, who gave up playing bass several years ago, has been reexamining these interactions through an academic lens since he joined the Penn faculty in 2009 as a music theorist. His project, titled *Syncopated Modernities: Musical Latin Americanisms in the U.S., 1978-2008*, seeks to challenge the relationship between the production of music and the production of identity and to point out patterns of cultural transmission between northern and southern hemispheres. "I insist upon rendering music-making as a historically dynamic phenomenon," he says.

For his book, which is part ethnography, part cultural studies and part political history, Moreno is interviewing Latin American musicians—including old friends

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he used to play jazz with in New York City clubs and concert halls—about their experiences of coming to the U.S., entering the East Coast jazz scene and having to reconsider their identity. Traditionalists might say it has little to do with music theory at all, but Moreno delights in challenging expectations.

Only recently has it been in vogue for music theorists to link music and musical interpretation to cultural history, says Jeffrey Kallberg, Professor of Music and Associate Dean for Arts and Letters. Latin American music is also a relative newcomer to music theory, which has traditionally been concerned with Western art music. The academy, Moreno explains, was much more interested in relationships between the West and the East. “The North/South American axis—which is so

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evident in continental American history, society, culture, economics and politics—hasn’t been a central concern,” he says.

While Moreno approaches the research as an outsider, he cannot deny his insider status. “My experience as a professional musician is fundamental to this process,” he says. “I mean, the main claim, this idea that there are tensions, is my own. Clearly, it’s informed by my own experience.” However, he’s reticent to claim too much insider authority. “I’m very theoretically driven, and I think that begins to temper at least some of my own personal claims on the story.”

Moreno’s past as a musician contributed to what he calls his “anti-identitarian” approach to understanding music, culture and even academia. “I’m very resistant to claiming identity,” he says. “Can we think outside identity? Must it be the fundamental force by which one goes about teaching, learning, making music, listening to music, et cetera?” For him, identity—like music—is also historically evolving, and he’s concerned with the ways it saddles individuals with expectations.

He’s trying to understand the cultural expectations that professional Latin American musicians have encountered—what identity they should assume, what kind of music they should play, with whom they should play. “Immigrant musicians, not only because they’re professional musicians, but because they are people who come with different histories, come to the United States and have to negotiate a set of new contingencies or demands that are placed upon music-making,” he says.

Moreno’s story begins in the late 1970s, when South American, Puerto Rican and Cuban musicians who immigrated to the U.S. were reproducing music from their homeland—but with a new twist—then sending it back across the equator. This transmission of music becomes increasingly complicated over the next three decades.

Take Panamanian singer Rubén Blades, who serves sort of as a backbone for Moreno’s book. Blades came to the U.S. in the 1970s and realized that even though South Americans were consuming a huge amount of U.S.-produced Latin music, people in the U.S. didn’t really know anything about South American culture or history. “How is it possible for any social group, in this case Latinos in the 1970s, to speak so powerfully to an entire continent and know nothing about it?” Moreno asks.

Blades sought to teach the U.S. through his music, but then, in the 1980s, he began singing about the military dictatorships and disappearances in Latin America. “He begins to have a relationship to the south that he didn’t have in the ’70s when he was trying to ‘educate’ the Latino people about Latin America,” Moreno says. “Now he’s trying to sing from the north about what’s going on in the south because the south, in a sense, cannot really sing about those things.”

Moreno, practicing what he calls “kangaroo history,” goes on to highlight key moments and figures from the last 30 years. His final chapter is about international Colombian pop sensation Shakira, who Moreno says is fundamentally an American production but also represents “the possibility that Latin America is now as part of the world as any other place in the world.” He asks: Why is she popular on a scale that a Latin American musician—particularly a female Latin American musician—could not have achieved even a decade before?

In between early Blades and Shakira are the 1990s, a key period for Moreno. When he left Colombia in 1982,

Moreno couldn't get a string for an instrument or find an album to buy there. But by the 1990s, Latin America had become a huge consumer of U.S. music and was also producing more of its own. Latin American teenagers were listening to music from the north and learning jazz. So when they came to New York and found that the Latin music scene was too rigid and conservative, they went straight to the jazz scene—they didn't have to pay their dues. As Moreno explains: "My generation, you had to play a lot of Latin music, and then you played some jazz. This generation came straight to jazz. They've just been absorbing everything. There is no music that is not available anymore. So they simply begin to experiment."

Younger musicians have also been more reticent to claim intrinsic knowledge about music from their country of origin. "Instead the attitude is, I come from Puerto Rico and because of that I must study the music of Puerto Rico," Moreno explains. "There's a compulsion to investigate who you are, and there's no sense of ownership at all."

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In this new camp is alto saxophonist and composer Miguel Zenón, whom Moreno describes as "a kid from the toughest neighborhood in Puerto Rico." The MacArthur Foundation declared that Zenón is "at once reestablishing the artistic, cultural and social tradition of jazz while creating an entirely new jazz language for the 21st century." Zenón, who received a MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 2008 at age 31, has been exploring traditional Puerto Rican music and creating sounds that incorporate jazz and Puerto Rican *plena* folk music.

The counterpoint to Zenón's work is Lincoln Center's Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra, formed in 2002 and the subject of another of Moreno's chapters. Instead of looking forward and innovating, Moreno says, this group primarily played music from the 1950s. This was the



heyday of big-band Latin jazz, when crowds packed the Palladium Ballroom to hear acts like Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez, but it was also a period characterized by racial discrimination as well as racial progress. Jazz, because it arose from African American culture, remains connected to a specific history, Moreno explains. "This history for African American communities and intellectuals is lived so vividly," he says, "and you don't give up your history because, if you let go of that, you're just like the rest of us."

Yet, Moreno wonders, "What is the burden of history in this case?" When does history hold musicians back or pen them in? When do long-time ideas about what kind of music they should play and with whom stifle musical innovation?

Moreno notes that despite these expectations, the knotty relationships between Latin American, Latino and African American musicians have sometimes produced grand results. "The music is incredibly potent, beautiful—all those things that we like to think about music," Moreno says.

"But," he adds, "I want to look at what made it possible." ♦