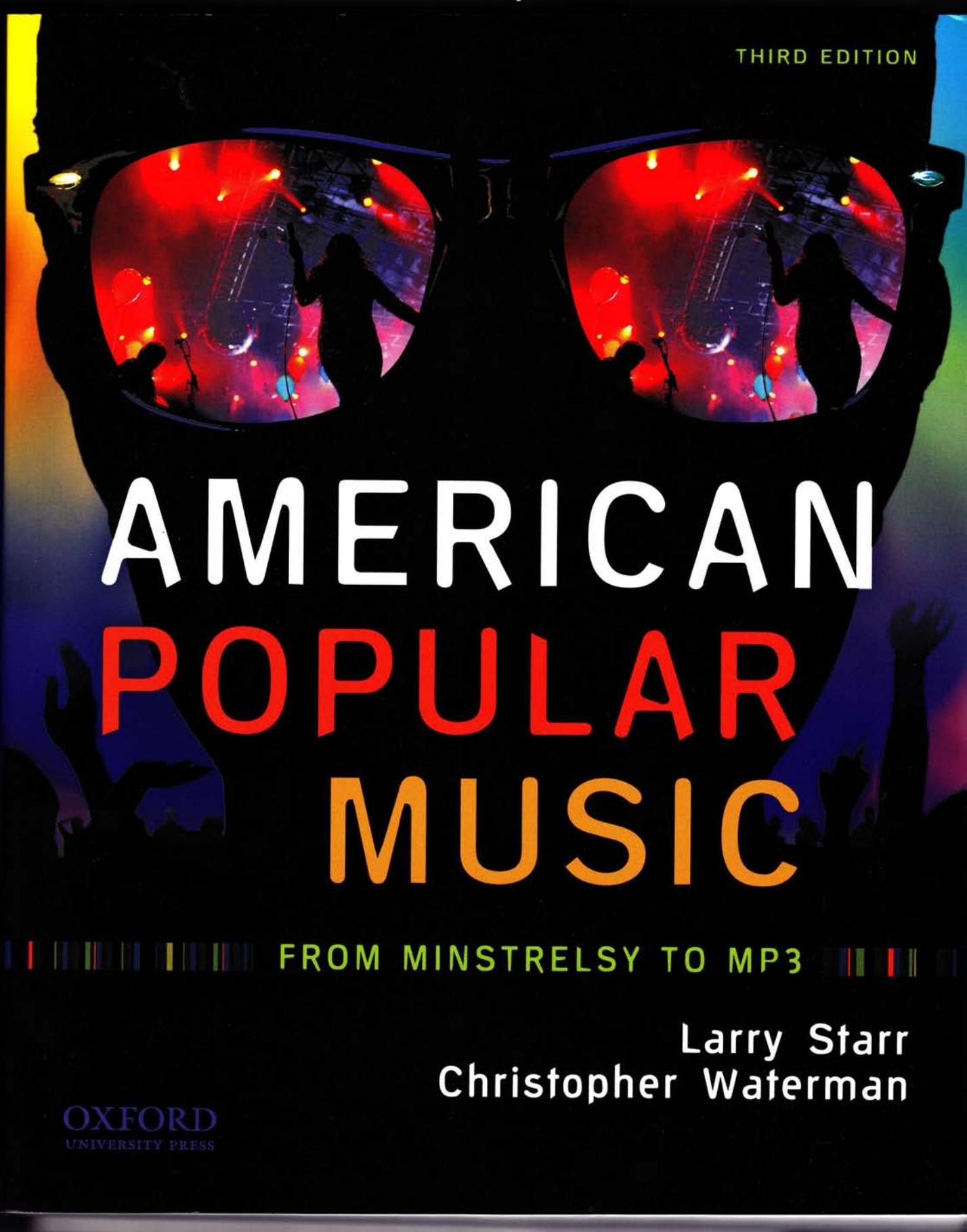


THIRD EDITION



AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

FROM MINSTRELSY TO MP3

Larry Starr
Christopher Waterman

OXFORD
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appeal and popularity, both in America and worldwide, has only grown in the years since his death: the 1984 LP compilation *Legend* has sold over eight million copies in the United States alone.

The Rise of Salsa Music

Latin American influence on mainstream popular music appeared to wane during the early 1970s, as rock music consolidated its dominance in the popular music marketplace. In the aftermath of the *bugalú* movement, which had mixed Latin styles with African American R&B and jazz—and despite a few successful attempts at melding the mambo with guitar-based rock music (e.g., Santana’s “Oye Como Va”; see Chapter 11)—most Latin musicians in New York City returned to the *típico* (traditional) sound of Cuban dance music, rooted in the *son montuno* form.

In his pioneering book *The Latin Tinge*, John Storm Roberts quotes Louie Ramirez, a successful dance band arranger, who speaks about the Latin music scene in New York in the early 1970s:

If it’s not *típico*, [they say] it’s no good. It’s a thing like, “let’s progress, but at the same time let’s keep it *típico*!” But *típico* music is two chords. It’s soul, but musically it’s primitive! Aretha Franklin’s drummer told me, “You know, in the fifties and sixties you guys were doing some heavy things. Now you’re kind of like calypso [tourist] bands!” (Roberts 1998, p. 187)

Perhaps in response to the musical conservatism that Ramirez bemoaned, by the mid-1970s a rhythmically charged, harmonically advanced style of music was coming into its own in the dance clubs of New York. The genre was being called *salsa*, or “[hot] sauce,” a verbal metaphor for the intensity, passion, and rhythmic flow of well-played dance music that had long been in circulation among Latin American musicians. Like “jazz,” “swing,” and “rock ‘n’ roll,” *salsa* was at once an aesthetic sensibility, a genre classification, and a marketing label. One of *salsa*’s most widely cited origin myths credits the introduction of the term to Izzy Sanabria, publisher of *Latin New York* magazine, who played an important role in promoting the music during the 1970s.

Another important factor in the emergence of *salsa* music was the rise of independent Latin-oriented record companies. The most successful of these was Fania Records, founded in 1964 by the Dominican Republic-born bandleader Johnny Pacheco and an Italian-American lawyer named Jerry Masucci. In the early 1970s Masucci, a capable though famously tough businessman, began promoting a group called the Fania All-Stars, which included Pacheco, master conga player Ray Barretto (see Chapter 9), trombonist and arranger Willie Colón, and singer-songwriter Rubén Blades, with frequent guest appearances by established stars like the bandleader and timbalist Tito Puente and the Cuban-born singer Celia Cruz. Masucci booked the superstar group into a series of increasingly capacious venues; they presented a 1973 concert for 44,000 fans at Yankee Stadium, followed the next year by a concert in the central African country of Zaire, pre-

ceding the notorious “Rumble in the Jungle” heavyweight title fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, and in 1976 by a return appearance in Yankee Stadium. (Documentary footage of these performances is included in the films *Our Latin Thing* [*Nuestra Cosa*], released in 1972, and *Salsa*, released by Columbia in 1976.)

In musical terms, salsa music was an extension of the experimental blend of Latin ballroom dance music, Afro-Cuban rumba drumming, and modern jazz forged by Mario Bauza, Machito, and Dizzy Gillespie back in the 1940s (see Chapter 6). As Bauza himself suggested, “What they call *salsa* is nothing new. When Cuban music was really in demand the kids didn’t go for it. Now they call it *salsa* and they think it belongs to them. It’s good as a gimmick” (Roberts 1998, p. 188). While Bauza’s emphasis on musical continuities (and the commercial function of musical genres) makes sense, salsa can also be viewed as a product of the stylistic and ideological tension between *típico* roots and modernist experimentalism, Latino community identity and urban cosmopolitanism.

The two most influential figures of early salsa were **Eddie Palmieri** (1936–) and **Willie Colón** (1950–), both born to Puerto Rican immigrant parents in New York City. Palmieri’s musical development was influenced by his older brother, the pianist and bandleader **Charlie Palmieri** (1927–88), who began playing with Tito Puente’s mambo band in the late 1940s, and had a key role in the Latin music of the 1960s. Eddie’s approach to the piano was strongly shaped by modern jazz of the 1950s and 1960s, and his breakthrough albums *Sentido* (1973) and *Sun of Latin Music* (1974) juxtaposed his deep knowledge of the stylistic history of Latin music with various experimental moves, including solo piano preludes influenced by the style of Miles Davis’s pianist McCoy Tyner, and the incorporation of tape-based sound effects. Working with musically sophisticated arrangers, Eddie Palmieri’s band pushed the compositional and harmonic limits of Latin dance music, while always maintaining a connection to the *típico* style. As Palmieri himself put it:

I can use the same phrasing as the old groups use, and I could extend it, and build master structures around it—make it with such high-tension chords that everybody would blow their minds—but the phrasing would not disrupt the rhythmic patterns. Rhythm is your foundation. (Roberts 1998, p. 189)

Willie Colón, fourteen years Palmieri’s junior, grew up during the bugalú era, and was less directly influenced by the Cuban *típico* style. His distinctive approach to salsa music added touches of West African, Panamanian, Colombian, and Brazilian music as well as Puerto Rican styles such as *jibaro* (“country”) songs accompanied with the *cuatro* (a small ten-stringed guitar), and the *plena*, an African-influenced narrative song genre with percussion accompaniment. Like Eddie Palmieri, Colón gave the trombone a lead role in the horn section of his band. His first album, *El Malo* (The Bad Dude), released by Fania in 1967, helped to create an image of Colón as a tough, streetwise guy—an impression reinforced by his band’s restlessly energetic, gritty sound, an alternative to the more polite flute-and-violins texture of the then still-popular *charanga* (see the discussion of “El Watusí” in Chapter 9). The popularity of Colón’s band was reinforced by a series of excellent lead singers, including **Hector Lavoe** (1946–93), who became an icon of Nuyorican (New York Puerto Rican) immigrant identity during the 1970s, and **Rubén Blades** (1948–),



Rubén Blades (left) and Willie Colón. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images.

the son of a middle-class family in Panama (his father Cuban, his mother Colombian), who had attended Harvard Law School.

Blades got his start in the music trade as a stock boy at Fania Records and soon rose to become one of the label's biggest stars. A gifted singer-songwriter, film actor, and political activist, Blades is best-known for a series of story-songs that capture the feel of life in the neighborhood *barrio*, populated with memorable characters. His composition "Pedro Navaja" ("Pedro the Knife"), included on the album *Siembra* (released by Fania Records in 1977), never saw action on the pop music charts in the United States, but it is the most popular song to have come out of the salsa movement of the 1970s, in large part because it drew upon the experience of millions of people living in urban neighborhoods throughout Latin America.

Listening to "PEDRO NAVAJA"

Written by Rubén Blades, performed by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades; recorded 1977 in New York City



Conceived as an homage to the song "Mack the Knife" (originally from *The Threepenny Opera* by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht), "Pedro Navaja" ("Pedro the Knife") tells the story of

the violent demise of a street tough who attacks a prostitute. As Navaja stabs her, the woman defends herself by shooting him with a handgun. Both of them die on the spot, and their



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... (police sirens)

CONGA

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...on el tumbao' q
...Las manos siemp
...pal que no sepan

ADDITIONAL AND

Use un sombrero
...y capatillas por si
...lentes oscuros pa'
...y un diente de oro

ADDITIONAL AND PIANO

Como a tres cuadra
...va recorriendo la á
...yem un zaguán en
...que el día esta flojo

TRIMONES ENTER, K

Un carro pasa muy d
...No tiene marcas per
...Reto Navaja las man



bodies are soon discovered by a drunk, who searches them, empties their pockets, and stumbles off. As he weaves down the street, the drunk sings an out-of-tune refrain that is immediately adopted as the call-and-response *coro* (chorus) of the **montuno** section that follows.

The arrangement, by Luis "Perico" Ortiz, provides a sophisticated musical frame for the narrative portrait of "Pedro Navaja." The track begins with an instrumental introduction, with the sound of police sirens placing us directly in the gritty urban environment of the *barrio*. The instruments enter one after another to accompany Blades's voice: congas during the first verse, bongó and timbales during the second, the bass and the piano on the third, and finally a four-trombone brass section on the fourth verse. When the trombones enter, the key rises, ratcheting up the dramatic and musical intensity, a strategy that Ortiz repeats on the sixth, eighth, and ninth choruses, before we are launched into the **montuno** section.

Because its lyric is so central to the enormous impact that this song had on audiences throughout Latin America (including Latin New York), it is worth presenting in its entirety. (See the Companion Website for a complete line-by-line English translation of "Pedro Navaja.")

INSTRUMENTAL INTRODUCTION (with recording of police sirens)

CONGA

Por la esquina del viejo barrio lo vi pasar,
con el tumbao' que tienen los guapos al caminar
Las manos siempre en los bolsillos de su gabán,
pa' que no sepan en cual de ellas lleva el puñal.

ADD TIMBALES AND BONGO

Usa un sombrero de ala ancha de medio lao'
y zapatillas por si hay problemas salir volao',
lentes oscuros pa' que no sepan que esta mirando
y un diente de oro que cuando ríe se ve brillando.

ADD BASS AND PIANO

Como a tres cuerdas de aquella esquina, una mujer
va recorriendo la acera entera por quinta vez,
y en un zaguán entra y se da un trago para olvidar
que el día esta flojo y no hay clientes pa' trabajar.

TROMBONES ENTER, KEY RISES HALF-STEP

Un carro pasa muy despacito por la avenida
No tiene marcas pero todos saben que es policía.
Pedro Navaja las manos siempre dentro el gabán,

mira y sonríe y el diente de oro vuelve a brillar.

Mientras camina pasa la vista de esquina a esquina,
no se ve un alma está desierta toa' la avenida,
cuando de pronto esa mujer sale del zaguán,
y Pedro Navaja aprieta un puño dentro el gabán.

KEY RISES ANOTHER HALF-STEP

Mira pa' un lado mira pal' otro y no ve a nadie,
y a la carrera pero sin ruido cruza la calle,
y mientras tanto en la otra acera va esa mujer,
refunfuñando pues no hizo pesos con que comer.

Mientras camina del viejo abrigo saca un revolver, esa mujer,
iba a guardarlo en su cartera pa' que no estorbe.
Un treinta y ocho el Smith and Wesson del especial
que carga encima pa' que la libre de todo mal.

KEY RISES ANOTHER HALF-STEP

Y Pedro Navaja puñal en mano le fue pa' encima,
el diente de oro iba alumbrando toa' la avenida, quiso facil!,
Mientras reía el pual le hunda sin compasion,
cuando de pronto son un disparo como un cañon.

KEY RISES ANOTHER HALF-STEP

Y Pedro Navaja callo en la acera mientras veía, a esa mujer,
que revolver en mano y de muerte herida ahí le decía:
"Yo que pensaba 'hoy no es mi día estoy sala,'
pero Pedro Navaja, tu estas peor, no estas en na'"

Y creanme gente que aunque hubo ruido nadie salio,
no hubo curiosos, no hubo preguntas, nadie lloro,
Solo un borracho con los dos cuerpos se tropezo,
Cojio el revolver, el pual, los pesos y se marchó,

Y tropezando se fue cantando desafinao'
El coro que aqui les traigo y da el mensaje de mi canción.
"La vida te da sorpresas, sorpresas te da la vida, ay Dios"

The scene opens with Rubén Blades describing a young street tough, Pedro the Knife, walking down the streets of the barrio with an easy, sinister gait. He is a striking figure, sporting a shiny gold tooth, dark sunglasses, a stylish wide-brimmed hat, and state-of-the-art sneakers, in case he needs to flee from trouble. Pedro keeps his hands deep inside his coat pockets, so that no one can see which hand is holding the knife. Down the street he sees a prostitute, going into a bar to drown her sorrows. An unmarked police car glides

(continued)

slowly by, and Pedro smiles, his gold tooth lighting up the street. Suddenly the woman emerges from the bar onto the deserted street, and Pedro runs silently toward her. As he stabs her in the chest, laughing, she shoots him with a gun that she carries in her purse for protection. Fatally wounded, Pedro falls to the sidewalk, and the woman, who is also dying, says "I thought my luck was bad, but you are worse off, you are nothing." There follows a great silence, no one coming out to see what has happened, no one asking questions, no one crying—until a drunk stumbles up, pockets the gun, the knife, and the money, and weaves down the street singing the song's existentialist moral: "Life gives you surprises, surprises give you life, oh God." Blades sings this last, pivotal line in a slurred manner, inhabiting the character of the drunkard who has been unexpectedly blessed by serendipity.

After a three-measure instrumental transition, the call-and-response dominated montuno section of the arrange-

ment begins, with the band singing the refrain. Blades improvises a series of solo vocal responses, including traditional proverbs ("He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword" and "He who laughs last, laughs best"), the tagline from a popular television police drama ("There are eight million stories in New York City"), and literary references ("As in a Kafka novel, the drunkard turned at the corner").

The call-and-response montuno form is interrupted by an instrumental section, with the piano playing a harmonically complex 5-measure pattern and the trombones joining in with a unison melody. (All the while, police sirens are wailing in the background, reminding us of the dramatic context.) The next sixteen measures of the arrangement feature the voices singing a soaring melodic line, alternating with trombone riffs. The band then sings the phrase "I like to live in America," adopted from Leonard Bernstein's Broadway musical *West Side Story*. This edgy, sarcastic reference to mass media portrayals



Reuben Blades performs at the 2009 Billboard Latin Music Awards in Miami. John Parra/Getty Images.

"Psycho"

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of daily reality in New York City's Latino neighborhoods—all the more pointed given the pointless street corner tragedy described in Blade's song—is followed by a dissonant melodic pattern in the trombones.

The rest of the arrangement carries on in much the same manner, alternating the call-and-response montuno section with the varied instrumental material that we have just discussed. As the recording fades, we hear a television newscaster speaking in Spanish: "In New York City two people were

found dead. Early this morning the lifeless bodies of Pedro Barrio and Josefina Wilson, of unknown address . . . "

The combination of gritty realism, cinematic imagery, literary and pop culture references, an air of knowing fatalism, a well-crafted arrangement (grounded in the old Afro-Cuban son montuno form) and an irresistible groove made "Pedro Navaja" an instant transnational classic, an iconic representation of the spirit, sophistication, and community orientation of the best salsa music of the 1970s.

"Psycho Killer": 1970s Punk and New Wave

During the 1970s the first "alternative" movements emerged within rock music. While rock had begun as a vital part of the 1960s counterculture, by 1975 it had come perilously close to occupying the center of popular taste, a development that left some young musicians feeling that its rebellious, innovative potential had been squandered by pampered, pretentious rock stars and the major record companies that promoted them. The golden age of *punk rock* a "back to basics" rebellion against the perceived artifice and pretension of corporate rock music lasted from around 1975 to 1978, but both the musical genre and the sensibility with which it was associated continue to exert a strong influence today on alternative rock musicians. *New wave* music, which developed alongside punk rock, approached the critique of corporate rock in more self-consciously artistic and experimental terms. (The term "new wave" was soon picked up by record companies themselves, who began using it in the late 1970s to refer to pop-influenced performers such as Blondie). Although the initial energy of the punk and new wave scene was largely expended by the start of the 1980s, young musicians inspired by the raw energy and minimalism of this movement went on to create distinctive regional music scenes in Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Seattle; Athens, Georgia; and elsewhere.

Punk was as much a cultural style—an attitude defined by a rebellion against authority and a deliberate rejection of middle-class values—as it was a musical genre. The contrarian impulse of punk culture is evoked (and parodied) in the song "I'm against It," recorded by the Ramones in 1978.

*I don't like sex and drugs
I don't like waterbugs
I don't care about poverty
All I care about is me*

*I don't like playing Ping-Pong
I don't like the Viet Cong
I don't like Burger King
I don't like anything*

Well I'm against it, I'm against it