

4-2012

A Little Rumba Numba: Latin American Music in Musical Theatre

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A LITTLE RUMBA NUMBA:
LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC IN MUSICAL THEATRE

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Music

Major: Music

Under the Supervision of Professor Peter M. Lefferts

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2012

A LITTLE RUMBA NUMBA:
LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC IN MUSICAL THEATRE

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University of Nebraska, 2012

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Despite the prevalent use of Latin American musical styles in American musical theatre, little research has been done on the subject. Quite often the fact that a musical number even has a Latin beat goes unrecognized. This paper examines the various genres of Latin American music that have had an impact in the United States and in musical shows both on and off Broadway. Exploring a large number of examples from musicals throughout the 20th century has caused trends and tendencies in the way Latin music has been used come to light. These include common thematic content and stereotypes and similarities in mood and atmosphere. This work increases our understanding of how to identify various Latin styles in shows and how to discern why the composer made such a choice.

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Introduction

A couple of years ago, an e-mail was sent out on the American Musicological Society's listserv, asking for contributions for a list of Latin-style musical theatre songs from shows that do not necessarily have a Latin locale or theme. No definition of "Latin" was given, nor was a reason for the request. A variety of responses were sent, many of them seemingly confused by the question. The answerers all had their own definition of what Latin music is, and many suggested songs that do indeed have Latin-related content or are sung by a Latin character in the shows from which they originate. This e-mail set me to thinking about what Latin music is, how it reached the United States, and how it has been utilized in musical theatre and to what ends. Even a casual discussion of such a topic requires some definitions and some caveats.

I am defining Latin music as music that originated in New World countries where Spanish or Portuguese are the national languages. The music that has been influential in the United States, and thus on musical theatre, is primarily from the countries of Cuba and Brazil, where Spanish and Portuguese are the official languages, respectively. Mexico has often served as a gateway for Cuban music to reach the U.S., but music of Mexican origin has generally only had local popularity in the U.S. Southwest.

Latin music grew out of the interaction of European (primarily Spanish) and African musical traditions. The popular and folk musics of Spain itself were a mixture of the musical styles of the Roma, Jews, Spanish Christians, and Moors during the Moorish occupation of Spain. The slave trade brought Africans to the Caribbean islands and to Brazil, where the slaves retained much of their culture, but merged it with the Europeans' Christian religion and language. Their music remained much closer to its African roots than did the music of

the slaves' North American counterparts, featuring more percussion instruments and denser, more complex rhythms and textures.¹ This may be due to the fact that slaves in Latin American countries were often allowed the use of drums, whereas slaves in the United States were frequently banned from using percussion instruments to prevent their use as signals in uprisings. The preservation of these African rhythms greatly influenced the formation of Latin American music and consequently in the U.S., when Latin styles were introduced and developed there.

Tin Pan Alley and Broadway were significant in introducing and popularizing Latin music to a North American public. In his book *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States*, John Storm Roberts states that even though “Tin Pan Alley and Broadway’s way with Latin styles was always eclectic, and usually trivial,” they were, “nevertheless, part of the process by which U.S. idioms absorbed Latin ingredients.”² Roberts’ focus in his book is primarily on Latin jazz, although he does reference the occasional show that uses a Latin number. In a book on Cuba’s influence in the U.S., *The Havana Habit*, author Gustavo Pérez Firmat devotes a chapter to what he calls the “latune”: a song with a Latin beat and an English lyric.³ Even though these products of commercialization often water down the Latin styles they emulate, Broadway has been one of the few, if only, scenes in the U.S. where such original compositions have been continually written and performed.

¹ Michael Campbell, *Popular Music in America: The Beat Goes On*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Schirmer Cengage Learning, 2008), p. 119.

² John Storm Roberts, *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 34.

³ Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *The Havana Habit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 53.

I think it is a shame that more has not been written on the use of Latin American music in musicals, both on and off Broadway. When I told fellow musical theatre lovers that I was writing this paper on Latin American music in musicals, they invariably asked, “So you are writing about *West Side Story* and *In the Heights*?” This question illustrates a point that I would like to make. Many shows besides the obvious ones make use of Latin music styles, although they often may have little or nothing in the way of Latin subject matter or setting. Moreover, when a song with a Latin beat is heard in a musical, however overtly, it does not necessarily register with audiences that a style of Latin music is being utilized, nor would an audience member pause to ask for what purpose. But for the composer, the choice of idiom is deliberate and self-conscious. Identifying the style and its history in the U.S. brings us insight into the possible intentions of the playwright, lyricist, and composer.

I have chosen to focus on musicals that have been presented in the United States, because even though some European cities have developed large musical theatre scenes (i.e. West End in London), the musical is primarily an American art form. Also, because of Latin America’s proximity to the United States, Latin music has made much more of an impact on American musicals than in those of other countries. While I have tried to make my research into the use of Latin music in musicals as thorough as possible, many shows, particularly older ones, do not have extant recordings or scores, at least not ones that are readily available. The shows I have gathered examples from are those whose music has been preserved and reproduced and are the ones most likely to be revived and performed for today’s audiences. I have also chosen to only consider numbers with a Latin beat that include a vocal part. Many shows make use of Latin styles for sections of dance breaks, but these parts are the most likely bits to be altered or cut in revivals. Entire songs built on Latin

rhythms though, are rarely cut, and while new orchestrations or arrangements may alter the style of the songs somewhat, the Latin beat is generally preserved.

I have chronologically taken each Latin style that appears in musical theatre and discussed its origins, defining characteristics, and general history, before going into its use in shows. Creating a succinct synopsis of each given Latin rhythm has been challenging, for reasons Roberts cites well:

“Most Latin musical forms are remarkably resistant to being pinned down, since they usually involve a rhythm, a dance, a style or style of playing, typical tempi and even subject matter. Moreover their origins are often unclear and they frequently change greatly over a period.”⁴

I have done my best, however, to provide a summary of the various historical trends, highlighting the points that impact this paper’s subject. I have also tried not to go into too much detail in regards to each song example from musical theatre, but have striven to give enough information to draw parallels and make connections between shows in order to characterize how Latin music has generally been utilized on and off Broadway.

⁴ Roberts, p. 5.

1. The Cuban Habanera and Bolero of the later 19th century

The first Latin American dance musics to be influential in the United States both hailed from Cuba: the habanera and the bolero. Originating first, the habanera was named for the city of its birth, Havana. It derived from the French contradanza, which had arrived in Cuba at the end of the 18th century with refugees from the Haitian revolution, and in Cuba it blended with African rhythmic patterns. This kind of integration of European and African elements, “in varying proportions and degrees of homogenization,” is a feature of “almost all the Cuban styles that influenced music in the U.S.”⁵ During the latter half of the 19th century, the habanera spread in all directions. It is thought to have been brought back by sailors to Europe, where it became an established dance, especially in Spain, but also in France and England.

A graceful dance that is characteristically in a moderately slow duple meter, the habanera rhythm divides its eight subdivisions into groupings of 3 + 3 + 2. This rhythm is often used for a bass line figure that accompanies a vocal line (shown in Figure 1). “The habanera beat has been of enormous significance to popular music in the United States,” including several of Louis Moreau Gottschalk’s piano compositions and as an element in New Orleans ragtime for what Jelly Roll Morton labeled the “Spanish tinge.”⁶ Roberts claims that the feature that helped the dance’s successful absorption into U.S. music was that “its rhythmic pattern is contained in a single measure.”⁷

The Basque composer Sebastián Yradier is mostly known for his habanera compositions, one of which was the basis for Georges Bizet’s “Habanera” in his Spanish-set

⁵ Roberts, p. 4.

⁶ Jean Ferris, *America’s Musical Landscape*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 202.

⁷ Roberts, p. 6.

Fig. 1



opera *Carmen*. Yradier wrote his most famous composition, “La Paloma,” after a visit to Cuba in 1860; it became hugely popular, especially in Mexico, which was the habanera’s gateway to the United States. When the habanera was spreading like wildfire in the latter 19th century, it traveled south to Argentina, where its bass line became the basis for the most iconic Latin dance of all time: the tango.

The habanera features in just a handful of musicals, and when it appears, it seems like an antiquated cliché, used to give a “Spanish” flair, with castanets (a traditional Spanish percussion instrument) as a prominent part of the orchestration. I can only assume that the huge popularity of the habanera in Spain, despite its Cuban origins, is why it has become so associated with the European country. While many show tunes employ a habanera bass for a “Latin feel,” the first show that I have found that uses the label “habanera” is Kurt Weill’s 1938 Broadway musical *Knickerbocker Holiday*. At this late date, about fifty years after the style’s origin, using a habanera bass for the song “Sitting in Jail” would have likely seemed trite. The older style may also have been intended to serve as an introduction for the song that immediately follows in the show, the Latin rumba “We Are Cut in Twain,” which would have been a current Latin style at the time of the show’s production. Because the show is set in 17th-century Manhattan, it would seem that both songs would be out of place, but since the nature of the show is political satire of contemporary events, such anachronisms are expected. The only other reason that I can find that the song would even have a habanera rhythm is that the lyrics make mention of the Spanish novel *Don Quixote*, for the singer is

encouraging a character to make good use of his time in jail, as did Cervantes. Following the association of the habanera with Spain, the 1956 Broadway show *My Fair Lady* used a habanera for the nonsense song “The Rain in Spain.” Its use in this instance is even more clearly a cliché.

The Cuban bolero originated in the latter quarter of the 19th century at the hands of *trovadores*, traveling guitar players who made their living by composing and performing songs. Its style should not be confused with the Spanish bolero, which has different origins entirely, and is the basis for Ravel’s orchestral ballet *Boléro*. Originally a mid-tempo dance, the bolero has evolved into, and is known for being a slower version of the rumba, with graceful and romantic dance steps in duple meter. The Cuban style spread to Mexico and to the rest of Latin America, where the form became popular for romantic ballads. “The Bolero” appeared on Broadway in the 1906 show *Mexicana*, which is perhaps the earliest appearance of a Latin rhythm on a New York stage. George Gershwin’s “Argentina” in *George White’s Scandals of 1922* is also a bolero, and not a tango as one would expect (the tango being the national dance of Argentina).⁸

In the 1950s, the bolero “was gradually becoming naturalized as a basis for sentimental ballads,”⁹ which is how it appears in the 1955 Broadway show *Damn Yankees* in “Whatever Lola Wants (Lola Gets).” Lush orchestration, persistent Latin percussion, but a notable lack of guitars accompany the character Lola, who is posing as a South American singer, in a seduction attempt. *Damn Yankees* has an unprecedented total of three Latin numbers, the others being the mambo “Who’s Got the Pain?” and the rumba “Near to You” (although the latter two examples have no plot-related reasons for having Latin beats).

⁸ Roberts, p. 56.

⁹ Roberts, p. 134.

Another example is from a couple years later in 1957's *West Side Story*: the well-known romantic ballad "Maria" is representative of the Americanized bolero style that was becoming common. Although it is not as prevalent in the East coast's history, the bolero became quite popular at the end of the 1950s, influencing Anglo-American and Chicano country music in the Southwest.¹⁰ The overall lack of boleros in musical theatre points to the fact that the tango was the form that captured Broadway composers' imaginations for passionate and romantic songs, and became an enduring staple of the musical stage.

¹⁰ Roberts, pp. 144 & 179.

2. The Argentine Tango of the 1890s and the Tango Craze of the 1910s

The first Latin music to cause an international dance craze, and the best-known Latin style, is the tango. Originating in the slums of Buenos Aires & Montevideo, the two great cities in the Rio de la Plata basin region of Argentina and Uruguay, by the 1890s, it is this area's only contribution to popular music in the United States. It is generally thought that the tango's rhythm is that of the Cuban habanera bass combined with the native Argentinian milonga. Like Cuban music, the tango is a blend of African rhythms and percussion with European instruments and playing techniques. Unlike Cuba, however, Argentina had a large number of non-Spanish immigrants, and "lyrical tango melodies often suggest the influence of Argentina's large Italian population."¹¹ Argentinian jazz saxophonist Gato Barbieri said that "the tango is very European harmonically, and the melodies are almost operatic."¹²

Reflecting its birthplace in the brothels of Buenos Aires, the tango is a dance of passionate sexual aggression; one of its defining traits is the close embrace of the dancing couple. Its moderate 2/4 or 4/4 time punctuated by offbeat accents are echoed in its dance steps, characterized by smooth and intricate walking patterns, interspersed with quick movements, like the stereotypical head snap (Figure 2).

Fig. 2¹³



Traditionally, the tango was an instrumental form, performed by violin, flute, piano, guitar, and the newly arrived German concertina-style instrument, the bandoneón. It was

¹¹ Ferris, p. 202.

¹² Roberts, p. 16.

¹³ Alfred Blatter, *Revisiting Music Theory: A Guide to the Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 28.

brought to Europe by 1907, when the first recording of the tango was made in Paris. Even though the Parisians cleaned up its dance moves, it still caused quite the scandal, causing the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris to decry the tango, “which, by its nature, is indecent and offensive to morals.”¹⁴ Such protests did nothing to deter the tango’s growing popularity.

It was in the Café de Paris in 1912 that the American husband-and-wife dancing team, Vernon and Irene Castle, learned it. The Castles had become famous in Paris, presenting such American novelty dances as the Grizzly Bear and the Turkey Trot. They returned to the U.S. in 1913 in the Broadway musical *The Sunshine Girl*, which introduced the tango to American audiences and made an immediate sensation of the Castles. In 1914, they opened a dancing school called Castle House and were constantly in demand for teaching both private and party lessons. That same year, Irving Berlin wrote his first musical *Watch Your Step* for the Castles to star in and dance the tango. As in Paris, a moralistic outcry against the craze for the sensual dance prompted the Castles to create a hands-free version of the tango that they named the “Innovation.”¹⁵

Roberts points out several lasting trends for tango that began in the 1920s. This time period saw the establishment of the tango as “a near-permanent part of the social dance repertoire.”¹⁶ Also during this decade, “the enduring pattern was established by which genuine and imitation Latin songs both competed and reinforced each other, many of them becoming permanent parts of the popular repertoire in the process.”¹⁷ Broadway was a central scene for both of these developments. Ever since the tango’s earliest florescence, composers of musicals have consistently been drawn to its sultry mood and moves, and

¹⁴ Roberts, p. 213.

¹⁵ Roberts, p. 47.

¹⁶ Roberts, p. 51.

¹⁷ Roberts, p. 50.

because Broadway is a place where dance styles have continued long since social dancing passed out of fashion, tangos regularly appear in musicals up to the present day. While the tango often appears on Broadway as a dance, not many vocal songs were written as tangos until several decades later. One exception is the 1928 operetta *The New Moon* by Sigmund Romberg and Oscar Hammerstein II. This show includes a short song for dancers to perform the tango called “Fair Rosita.”

In the 1950s, almost every year included at least one Broadway show that contained a song set as a tango, generally used for romantic and sometimes iniquitous ends. These songs are almost always humorous, and rarely involve a Latin setting or theme to justify their musical style. Harold Rome’s *Wish You Were Here* (1952) has “Don José of Far Rockaway,” sung by a comic supporting character who proclaims what he wishes to be true: that he is a Latin lover at heart who women cannot resist. The play-within-a-play musical *Me and Juliet* (1953), one of the only comedic attempts by Rodgers and Hammerstein, includes the tango “No Other Love.” Sung in the show by a chorus girl for an audition to be a lead understudy, the romantic pull of the tango, and the warmth with which it is performed, draw in the girl’s coach and the solo becomes a love duet.

Two shows that play on the more sinister side of the tango’s nature came in 1954. The well-known “Hernando’s Hideaway” in *The Pajama Game* describes a “dark, secluded” secret club where couples can meet for surreptitious trysts. In a bit of cultural confusion, the lyrics tell that “all you hear are castanets,” and indeed the Spanish instrument is prominently featured in the song’s orchestration. Roberts claims that “Hernando’s Hideaway” was the last tango to be heard on Broadway until the 1980s. He also states that the popularity of this song is “a monument both to the tango’s durability and Broadway’s continued talent for squeezing

juice out of apparently long empty fruit.”¹⁸ As can be seen from the following, however, while the American public may have found new dances and musical styles to move and listen to, Broadway’s fascination with the tango was far from over.

In the 1954 musical version of J.M. Barrie’s 1904 play *Peter Pan*, Captain Hook’s band of pirates accompany him, at his request, with a menacing tango while he plots the Lost Boys’ death. The following year, the vaudeville throwback musical *Ankles Aweigh* had the passionate, and somewhat masochistic, tango “Kiss Me and Kill Me with Love,” which included the lyric “hold me, thrill me, kiss me, kill me” long before the popular 1995 song with that title by the band U2. (The *Ankles Aweigh* song lyrics may have been a play on the popular song “Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me” from 1952.)

A couple of tangos that poke fun at the cultural befuddlement in which the style was often used on Broadway to represent anything “Latin,” came in the latter half of the 1950s. Leonard Bernstein wrote “I Am Easily Assimilated (The Old Lady’s Tango)” for his 1956 operetta *Candide*, based on the satirical novella of the same title by the 18th century French author Voltaire. In the original version of the libretto, the characters arrive in Buenos Aires. The Old Lady, though her father was Russian and she grew up speaking Polish, is instantly speaking “Spanish” (although what she’s actually singing is a mix of Spanish, German, and French) and dancing a tango (which chronologically wouldn’t have been created for about another 150 years). In the more often performed revised version of 1973, this song is sung while the characters are still in Paris to attract the attention of some Spanish lords. It’s likely, however, that Bernstein chose the tango setting because of the original location, Buenos Aires.

¹⁸ Roberts, p. 135.

Bye Bye Birdie (1960) had the tango “Spanish Rose,” sung by a Hispanic American secretary of indeterminate Latin origin, as a comic act of defiance towards her boyfriend’s racist mother, who calls her Spanish. She claims she will marry her boyfriend and embrace every Latin stereotype, eating tacos, clicking castanets, drinking tequila, and dancing the tango.

Other tangos in shows at the end of the 1950s include “A New-Fangled Tango” from *Happy Hunting* (1956) and “I Know Your Mind” from *Destry Rides Again* (1959). “A New-Fangled Tango” is being taught at a party, where the characters are urged to “give up the mambo” (which had become popular in the past decade) in favor of this new take on an “old-fashioned notion,” which apparently didn’t require any movement. Keeping with the trend of titillating tangos, “I Know Your Kind” is a seduction attempt.

Roberts claims that “the tango had pretty much vanished from any U.S. scene to mention by the late 1940s, or ... early 1950s.”¹⁹ As the previous paragraphs show, however, the tango was far from dead on the Broadway stage throughout the 1950s. While his claim may be justifiable while looking at the rest of popular music, tangos continued to pop up in shows throughout the 1960s and 1970s, albeit with less frequency than in previous decades. This slippage reflects the decline of Latin music’s popularity in the U.S. in general, the rise of the popularity of rock and roll, and the relative decline of musical theatre’s popularity as a whole in these decades. Perhaps the image of the “hot Latin lover” was becoming tiresome because the new decade brought with it some original, if unusual, themes and contexts for the tango’s use.

¹⁹ Roberts, p. 245.

The Fantasticks (1960) includes a song with a “tango feel,” “Never Say No,” sung by two fathers reveling in how easy it is to manipulate their children. The composer Harvey Schmidt said of it, and the flamenco song that follows it: “We wanted it to be sort of Latin in feeling but evoking a *commedia* underpinning at the same time.”²⁰ While Schmidt may have achieved what he intended, it is unclear to me why he felt the need to mix a 19th century Cuban dance with a 17th century Italian theatrical style.

A few years deeper into the 1960s, the original 1963 production of *She Loves Me*, featured the cautionary tale “Tango Tragique,” a mocking account of a blind date that ended ominously. The song was cut from the 1993 revival, being merely referenced by the character who originally sang it. This song’s French title, along with two other show tunes that appeared in the late 1960s, highlight how the tango was embraced and assimilated into French popular music, “perhaps because one of its instruments was the accordion.”²¹ Interestingly enough, these songs also have melancholic subjects. *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* (1968) is a revue show of the songs of French-speaking Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel, whose work developed quite a following in France. His song “Funeral Tango (*Le tango funèbre*)” is included in this off-Broadway revue. Jerry Herman’s 1969 Broadway musical *Dear World* is also set in Paris: “Garbage” is sung by a madwoman and a sewer man about how the world has become an evil place as evidenced by the contents of its garbage.

The 1970s saw equally few tangos used in stage musicals, but these few examples are more in line with the conventional mood and thematic content of the dance. In “The Cell

²⁰ Donald C. Farber and Robert Viagas, *The Amazing Story of “The Fantasticks”: America’s Longest Running Play* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), p. 90.

²¹ Roberts, p. 213.

Block Tango” from *Chicago* (1975), an erotic display of passion and murder, six women recount how they murdered their husbands. In 1979, the rock opera *Evita*, which had already enjoyed success as a concept album and in London, opened on Broadway. While the score is primarily rock-based, there are a couple of tango-influenced numbers, which is to be expected considering the Argentinian locale of the story. “On This Night of a Thousand Stars” is a traditional Argentine tango, sung by a nightclub singer. The refrain of “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” is labeled a slow tango, but shares a lot of qualities with the bolero.

The Broadway show *Baby* from 1983, which concerns the stories of three expectant couples, uses a tango for an obvious cliché. In “Romance,” one of the couples, trying to conceive, uses the amorous nature of the Latin rhythm to prime for sexual intercourse. This idea of the tired middle-aged married couple attempting to reignite desire would be repeated in 1996 in the off-Broadway revue musical *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change* for the song “Marriage Tango.”

The 1980s saw a resurgence in popularity of the tango as a form of social dancing. This revival showed in the French dance show *Tango Argentino*, which moved to Broadway in 1985. Full of authentic music and dancing, the sophisticated production helped pique interest in learning the tango, and “as had been the case ever since the first tango in *The Sunshine Girl*, Broadway and the dance floor were somewhat in lockstep;”²² dance clubs offering lessons appeared all over the country. The developing rediscovery of the tango led to another Broadway event that opened about a decade later: the long-running *Forever Tango*.

Tangos in the 1990s and 2000s continued with already established trends. “Tango: Maureen” from *Rent* (1996) is about a sexual and unfaithful woman, and “The Madness of

²² Roberts, p. 246.

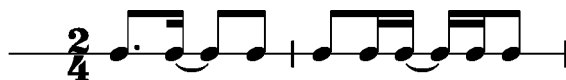
King Scar” from *The Lion King* (1997), “Dance with Me, Darling” from *Bat Boy* (2001), “Along Came Bialy” from *The Producers* (2001), and “Adolpho” from *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006) are all seduction attempts in some form. The latter example is from a show that is a homage/parody of musicals from the 1920s and 30s, and the song is sung by Adolpho, a buffoonish caricature of the Latin lover cliché.

A versatile dance that can showcase both romance and lust, elegance and vulgarity, the tango was utilized by musical theatre composers for expressing many different emotions and situations. It is the oldest Latin American musical style to make a significant impression on Broadway; several other types soon joined it.

3. The Cuban Rumba, and Beguine, and Cole Porter, 1920s and 30s

As a result of the Latin American tourism boom of the 1920s, Cuban rhythms became popular in the U.S. The most influential of all was what North Americans mislabeled the “rumba.” In Cuba, *rumba* is actually the name for several percussive rhythms. Most songs that Americans call rumbas are actually sones. The Cuban son (meaning “sound” in Spanish) is the oldest and the most quintessential Afro-Cuban form. Combining the structure and guitar of the Spanish canción with African rhythms and percussion instruments, it has “an almost perfect balance of African and Hispanic elements.”²³ In duple meter with a syncopated rhythm (Figure 3), the son, or “rumba,” is a sexually suggestive dance of courtship that mimics the mating rituals of barnyard fowl.²⁴

Fig. 3²⁵



Originating rurally, the son found its way to Havana shortly before 1920, where it became a popular urban music form and picked up the clave rhythm from Havanese rumbas. The clave rhythm (usually played on the percussion instrument also called claves), which is at the core of most Afro-Cuban musics, is a syncopated five-stroke pattern spread over two measures, usually in a 3 + 2 grouping (Figure 4).

Fig. 4



²³ Roberts, p. 267.

²⁴ Firmat, p. 60.

²⁵ Blatter, p. 28.

The America “rumba” craze of the 1930s and 40s started with the 1930 release of a recording made in New York by Don Azpiazu and his Havana Casino Orchestra of the Cuban son “El Manisero (The Peanut Vendor).” The song was composed by the Cuban Moisés Simons, who based the lyrics on the cries of Cuban street vendors, and it is perhaps the most famous piece of music ever written by a Cuban. Azpiazu’s performance featured authentic instrumentation and playing styles, and was the first exposure to real Cuban music for many Americans. Following the song’s success, a host of other Cuban tunes, whether authentic or imitation, were recorded, often being given an English lyric. Firmat calls these “latunes”: “a Latin beat but an English-language lyric.”²⁶ He points out that these songs create a Latin atmosphere, allowing the listener to experience Cuba without ever leaving home: “although the rhythm may transport us to Havana, the lyric strands us in the U.S.A.”²⁷

Broadway composers were quick to pick up on the latune trend and to write their own imitation Latin numbers in the new popular style. Cole Porter, a “self-adopted Latin,”²⁸ was one of the most prolific authors of such rumbas, or as he frequently called them, “beguines.” The *biguine* is a native dance of the French West Indies, which Porter claims to have seen performed while visiting Paris in the 1920s. In a much later interview, he claimed that “the rhythm was practically that of the already popular rumba but much faster.”²⁹ In reality, the *biguine* has traditionally been closer to the rhythms and phrasings of New Orleans jazz. Ironically, Porter wrote his most famous “Latin” number, “Begin the Beguine,” based on a native melody he heard while visiting Indonesian islands in the 1930s. (Roberts says this tune

²⁶ Firmat, p. 53.

²⁷ Firmat, p. 55.

²⁸ Firmat, p. 53.

²⁹ William McBrien, *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1998), p. 188.

“might more accurately have been called ‘Begin the Bolero.’”³⁰) The song was introduced in the 1935 Broadway musical *Jubilee*, but it wasn’t until Artie Shaw made a swing recording of it in 1938 that the song became a hit.

Porter’s beguines, though highly simplified from the son, have a distinctive and invariable style. The time signature will often be cut time, preserving the duple feel of the Latin rhythm. The bass line will have a half note on beat one and then move on beats three and four, outlining an octave. The vocal line will be a flowing, legato melody that makes use of chromaticism and triplets, while underneath, accompanimental chords will sound on the offbeat “and” of every quarter note. All these characteristic features can be seen in the example in Figure 5, an excerpt from the song “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” from Porter’s 1938 Broadway show *Leave It to Me!*

In the year before *Jubilee*, Porter had included the beguine-rumba “Gypsy in Me” in the 1934 show *Anything Goes*, sung by a character who is confessing that the gypsy blood in her lineage is only revealed in a certain romantic (Latin?) atmosphere. Earlier still, in the 1932 show *Gay Divorce*, Porter wrote perhaps his first Latin experiment and one of his most enduring standards: “Night and Day.” Porter continued including rumbas in his shows well into the 1940s: “Visit Panama” and “Make It Another Old-Fashioned, Please” in *Panama Hattie* (1940), “A Little Rumba Numba” in *Let’s Face It!* (1941), “He’s a Right Guy” in *Something for the Boys* (1943), and “I Love You” and “Sing to Me, Guitar” in *Mexican Hayride* (1944). As can be seen from the titles of these songs, Porter wasn’t necessarily concerned with using a Latin beat to express a South American theme or locale; he just liked

³⁰ Roberts, p. 83.

Fig. 5³¹

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of two systems of music. Each system has a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are: "While tear - ing off_ A game of golf. I may make a play for the cad - dy; But when I do_ I don't fol - low through 'Cause my heart be - longs to Dad - dy. If". The piano accompaniment features a rumba rhythm with a bass line that has a steady eighth-note pulse and a treble line with chords and melodic fragments. There are triplets in both systems, indicated by a '3' over a group of notes.

the rumba rhythm. The same is true in what I think is his last “beguine”: “Were Thine That Special Face” from the 1948 *Kiss Me, Kate*, which was his most successful show by far.

Porter’s contemporaries also dabbled with “rumba numbas,” if not as extensively. Harold Arlen included “La Rhumba” in *The Cotton Club Review of 1931*, close on the heels of the success of “El Manisero.” Irving Berlin wrote “Heat Wave” for his 1933 revue *As Thousands Cheer* and “Latins Know How” for the 1940 *Louisiana Purchase*. The latter example was written as a retort to a 1939 article in *Esquire* magazine titled “Latins Are Lousy Lovers” by Helen Lawrenson. Berlin’s defense of the Latin’s romantic skills is equally offensive, since it claims that Latins are not good at anything *but* making love. As can be seen, it was becoming common practice for musicals to have a fun, lighthearted Latin number.

³¹ Cole Porter, *The Great Songs of Cole Porter* (Secaucus, NJ: Warner Brothers Publications, 1986), p. 123-4.

Vernon Duke continued this trend with “Who Started the Rhumba?” in *Banjo Eyes* (1941) and Leonard Bernstein did as well in his first Broadway musical *On the Town* in 1944. The song “Ya Got Me” had no reason to be set to a rumba rhythm except for the fact that the scene takes place in a Latin nightclub: the Congacabana. The main characters arrive there, needing a “change of atmosphere,” after being at a previous club where the performer was singing a depressing torch song. The humor comes when the señorita performing at the new club sings the same sad song in broken English. They interrupt and perform their own number to a cheerful rumba. Perhaps in answer to *The Streets of Paris* song “South American Way” (a 1939 number that introduced Carmen Miranda to American audiences, discussed on page 27), Harold Rome wrote the comic dancer’s lament “South America, Take It Away” for the 1946 show *Call Me Mister*, where the singer tells the Latins to take back their conga, samba, and rumba, which are proving much too strenuous.

From the 1950s to the present day, rumbas have still popped up in musicals, albeit not as frequently as in the dance’s heyday. In the tradition of Porter, or perhaps in homage to him, they are still frequently labeled “beguines.” Alan Lerner and Frederick Loewe gave the song “I Talk to the Trees” from their 1951 Broadway musical *Paint Your Wagon* a rumba beat, no doubt because the character singing it is Mexican. As previously mentioned, 1955’s *Damn Yankees* has several Latin numbers, including “Near to You,” to which a rumba beat gives a mysterious sensuality. Sung by a man who has been transformed into a much younger version of himself to his wife who doesn’t recognize him, it gives the perfect mood to his subtle revelation that he is actually the husband whom she so misses. Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick played on the wooing potential of the rumba for their seductive “Ilona” from *She*

Loves Me (1963). The following year, Walter Marks used a rumba rhythm to give an exotic flair to a Ph.D. anthropology student's plea, "Where Is the Tribe for Me?" in *Bajour*.

Sometimes the rumba was used to give a tropical feel to songs about romance in ordinary settings. Such songs include "The Boston Beguine" from *New Faces of 1952*, a Broadway revue that helped launch the careers of several performers, including Mel Brooks, Eartha Kitt, Carol Lawrence, and Broadway lyricist Sheldon Harnick. Another example is called simply "The Beguine" from the 1968 Off-Broadway show *Dames at Sea*, a parody of the extravagant Busby Berkeley movie musicals of the 1930s and 40s. The song is sung by an actress reminiscing on the romantic times she shared with a former love in the scarcely tropical city of Pensacola, Florida.

Several examples of how Latin rhythms were influential in the 1940s and 50s on the emergent genres of R&B and rock and roll appeared in a couple of musicals in the 1990s and 2000s. The song "Early in the Mornin'," recorded by Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five in 1947, has Afro-Cuban rhythms and percussion incorporated into a 12-bar blues form, and serves as the opening number in the 1990 musical *Five Guys Named Moe*. The 2005 jukebox musical *All Shook Up*, showcasing the music of Elvis Presley includes the rockabilly rumbas "It's Now or Never" and "Let Yourself Go."

For his 2007 Broadway musical *Young Frankenstein*, based on his 1974 black and white film, Mel Brooks, whose musical scores are always written in conventional Broadway idioms, wrote the seemingly innocent, yet fraught with sexual innuendo, romantic supplication "Listen to Your Heart," giving it the tempo marking "1930s Cole Porter beguine."

Most often used to establish an exotic atmosphere, whether for seduction or for romance, the rumba has been a prominent rhythm on Broadway since its introduction to the United States, due to Cole Porter and his contemporaries' penchant for using it in their musicals. Two other Latin genres that emerged soon after would be popularized to a U.S. public in a different form of entertainment: the conga and the samba in the Hollywood movie musicals of the 1930s and 40s.

4. The Cuban Conga, from the late 1930s and 1940s on

The conga, originally a Cuban carnival march, was brought to the United States in the late 1930s. Often performed as a line dance, the simple pattern is comprised of three shuffling steps followed by a syncopated kick from alternating legs just before the fourth beat, usually accompanied by an exclamatory shout of some kind. Roberts writes, “The conga rhythm is more easily simplified than most Cuban rhythms and was a natural for nightclub floorshows.”³² The dance’s simplicity made it hugely popular in the 1940s, especially in film musicals, and “it became firmly associated in the U.S. with the name of one man: Desi Arnaz.”³³

Arnaz was a Cuban-born American actor and Latin bandleader who is best known for his role as Ricky Ricardo on the 1950s television show *I Love Lucy*. He had been working in New York City as a nightclub entertainer, when he was discovered by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, who gave him a lead in their 1939 Broadway show *Too Many Girls*. The show also included the pseudo-Latin numbers “All Dressed Up Spic and Spanish” and “She Could Shake the Maraccas,” but when Arnaz was cast, “his nightclub conga dance was written into the first act finale.”³⁴ In the following year, Arnaz went to Hollywood to reprise his role in the 1940 film version of the musical. His iconic conga performance fit right in with a flood of Hollywood musicals in the following few years that featured a conga number in some fashion.

While the conga line dance was prevalent on the silver screen, its use in musical theatre is minimal. Though the conga step may have been used in choreography to other

³² Roberts, p. 260.

³³ Roberts, p. 82.

³⁴ Roberts, p. 84.

Latin styles of music, only one number that I know of gives the dance an entire song, and that is the appropriately titled “Conga!” from the 1953 Broadway show *Wonderful Town*. The chronological problem with this song, however, is that the show is set in 1935, several years before it would have ever become popular in the U.S. Performed by a wannabe press writer who is attempting to interview a group of Brazilian naval cadets, not understanding any of her questions in English, they ask her to teach them the conga. She protests, “Conga’s a Brazilian dance!” A cadet corrects her, “No--Cubano!” but he is countered by another who asserts, “Conga *American* dance!”³⁵ She quickly teaches them, and ignoring any of her attempts to stop them with questions, they keep dancing, getting wilder, and pulling her into the frenzy with them. This is the same frenzy that consumes Arnaz’s character, Manuelito, and his classmates at the end of the film *Too Many Girls*. The conga line, which in today’s culture can start spontaneously without any music playing, is infectious, often forming a “long line that might eventually sweep in everybody in the place.”³⁶

³⁵ Betty Comden and Adolph Green, *The New York Musicals of Comden & Green* (New York: Applause Books, 1997), p. 145.

³⁶ Roberts, p. 81.

5. The Brazilian Maxixe and Samba, from the 1930s and 1940s on

According to Roberts, “the Brazilian influence on American ... popular music has been much more intermittent than Cuba’s, perhaps for geographical reasons,” and “most of Brazil’s musical riches are irrelevant to the story of Latin music in the U.S.”³⁷ There are, however, three styles of Brazilian music that have made an impression in the United States, and consequently on American musical theatre: the maxixe, the samba, and the bossa nova. The first of these dance fads, which was actually the least popular and the least influential, was the maxixe. Basically a Brazilian form of the two-step, the maxixe developed from Afro-Brazilian folk dances and European dances like the polka. Ethnomusicologist Oneida Alvarenga said of the maxixe, “The European polka gave it its movement, the Cuban habanera its rhythm, and Afro-Brazilian music added its syncopations.”³⁸

The maxixe originated about the same time as the tango was blossoming in nearby Argentina, and like the tango, which heavily influenced it, it traveled to Europe and was brought to the U.S. in the early 20th century. Popularized along with the tango by Vernon and Irene Castle, it enjoyed a brief heyday around World War I, but it didn’t thrive like the tango, perhaps because of its similarity to already established folk dances. With its cheerful quickness in 2/4 meter, it contrasted sharply with the slower, languorous mood of the tango. There are no examples of the maxixe in musical theatre that I have found. However, it is credited with being a main contribution to the next dance fad from Brazil, which enjoyed immense popularity in both Hollywood and stage musicals: the samba.

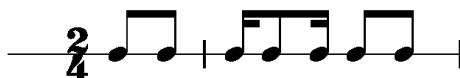
The samba has become the internationally known icon of Brazilian culture and of the annual Carnival festival of Rio de Janeiro. With a shuffling rhythm in 2/4 meter and a more

³⁷ Roberts, p. 12.

³⁸ Roberts, p. 13.

laidback feel than Cuban styles, samba utilizes a massive collection of percussion instruments in addition to brass and guitars (Figure 6). All over the world, schools of samba cultivate its historical culture, which includes food, dances, art, costumes and parade floats. The most significant musical contribution of Brazil to music in the U.S., samba owes its popularity to the Hollywood movie musicals of the 1930s and 40s. “These musicals greatly advanced the spread of Latin rhythms and melodies into American culture, and were in particular largely responsible for the introduction of the samba to the canon.”³⁹

Fig. 6⁴⁰



The first samba to be moderately successful in the U.S. was the song “Carioca” from the 1933 film *Flying Down to Rio*, also notable for being the first screen dance of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Their dance, whose steps were a mixture of maxixe, rumba, foxtrot, and samba, had the unusual feature of having the performers’ foreheads constantly touching. But the Hollywood performer who is most remembered for her samba performances was the Portuguese-born Brazilian actress and singer Carmen Miranda.

Nicknamed “The Brazilian Bombshell,” Miranda first rose to stardom in the U.S. from her Broadway debut in the 1939 Abbot and Costello revue show *The Streets of Paris*, where she performed the rumba “South American Way.” Moving quickly to Hollywood, Miranda appeared in fourteen films from 1940 to 1953, often sporting an extravagant fruit-covered hat and igniting the screen with a flamboyant generic “Latin-ness” that Hollywood loved. In *That Night in Rio* (1941), Miranda’s singing and dancing popularized two samba

³⁹ Roberts, p. 105.

⁴⁰ Blatter, p. 28.

numbers (“which, characteristically, were untouched by Brazilian hands, being written by Harry Warren and Mack Gordon”⁴¹): “I, Yi, Yi, Yi, Yi (I Like You Very Much)” and the dazzling “Chica Chica Boom Chic.” As can be seen from the titles of these songs, the choruses are filled with nonsense syllables to give a Latin flair without using any actual Portuguese or Spanish. Some of the Spanish lyric was preserved in the latune samba “Cuanto le Gusta” (a hit song for Carmen Miranda with the Andrews Sisters) in 1948’s *A Date with Judy*, but the foreign words are limited to the title text, which is repeated ad nauseum for a recurring intro and bridge between verses.

The earliest use of samba in musical theatre that I have found comes in the 1948 Broadway musical *Where’s Charley?* with the song “Pernambuco.” The song includes an extended dream ballet sequence where Charley, who is pretending to be his rich aunt from Brazil, recounts his imaginings of what her life has been like there. This example seems to be rather isolated, since it was not until over twenty years later that the samba was used again in the 1970 backstage musical *Applause*. Like Cole Porter in *Anything Goes*, Charles Strouse uses Latin music to give a “gypsy” atmosphere to “She’s No Longer a Gypsy.” In this case, however, “gypsy ... is the name dancers affectionately give themselves as they go camping from show to show.”⁴² The 1977 off-Broadway revue *Starting Here, Starting Now* uses an up-tempo samba beat to bitter ironic effect in the song “I Don’t Remember Christmas,” sung by a man who can’t forget his ex-lover no matter how much he tries. Aside from the several tango numbers in the previously discussed *Evita*, “Buenos Aires” is a samba. It is curious that a song about the birthplace of tango is set to a style from a different country and culture,

⁴¹ Roberts, p. 106.

⁴² Charles Strouse, et al., *Applause* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 44.

but as we have seen, the tango's usual association with sensuality and romance is probably not the right mood for a song about a character's hopes and ambitions.

The 1993 Broadway show *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, based on the novel by Argentine author Manuel Puig, is pervaded with Latin music of every sort, creating a generality that is perhaps fitting considering the locale of the story. While the novel is set in Buenos Aires, the setting of the musical is changed to a non-specific Latin American country, most likely to avoid the political specificity present in the novel. The score runs the gamut of Latin styles, including habanera, tango, beguine, rumba, mambo, with one samba number: "Where You Are." The song is about losing oneself in fantasy to forget one's unpleasant circumstances and surroundings, and makes another example of how Latin music, but especially samba in particular, with its casual laid-back beat and association with partying, is used to make a song feel fun and carefree.

This trend continued with two Broadway shows in 2005: the Sherman Brothers' stage version of the movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and David Yazbek's *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. Both musicals feature boisterous dance numbers that have no business being sambas. In *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, "The Bombie Samba" is sung by the court of Baron Bomburst of the imaginary eastern European bloc country of Vulgaria, to cheer up the baron on his birthday. More offending still is "Here I Am" from *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*; sung by an American visiting the French Riviera, there's not even a Latin reference in the lyrics.

In strong contrast to the romantic sensuality of the Cuban musical styles discussed so far, with the notable exception of the conga line dance, the samba has been associated in film and stage musicals with lightheartedness and certain freeness from care. This cultural difference was made all the starker by the next Cuban import to arrive: the mambo.

6. The Cuban Mambo, from the 1940s on

Following in the steps the tango and the rumba, the third Latin dance craze to hit the U.S. was the mambo: “the rumba may have been a rage, but the mambo was madness.”⁴³ With rhythms originating in the religious rites of African slaves in Cuba, the mambo became attached to the end of the Cuban danzón in the 1930s, the danzón itself being a descendant of the habanera. Cuban bandleader Pérez Prado was one of the musicians responsible for separating the mambo from the danzón in the 1940s and developing it as its own form. When it arrived in the U.S. shortly after, the mambo was given the brass and reed voicing of big band swing, becoming “the first Latin idiom largely developed in the United States.”⁴⁴ The contrasting brass and sax riffs that evolved out of this instrumentation change, became a characteristic element of the new style, and was a feature relied heavily upon by Prado in developing his sound.

Prado brought the mambo to Mexico, where recordings he made reached the U.S. and quickly became popular, even outside the Latin market. What aided his allure, especially to white audiences, was his simplification of the form and sound of the genre. “Because [his work] abolished the Cuban three-part structure, and has virtually no instrumental solos, it lacks both formal and internal complexity.”⁴⁵ While Prado’s recordings were enjoying success throughout most of the country, the Latin community of New York, which had been growing since the establishment of El Barrio (“the district”) in East Harlem in the early 20th century, demanded a more authentic sound. Tito Puente, born in Spanish Harlem of Puerto Rican immigrants, who received a formal music education at Julliard, fit the bill with his

⁴³ Firmat, p. 102.

⁴⁴ Roberts, p. 123.

⁴⁵ Roberts, p. 128.

mambo compositions. His band, which regularly performed at the Palladium Dance Hall (“the center of the New York mambo in the 1950s”),⁴⁶ kept the original structure and full Afro-Cuban percussion section of their Cuban prototypes, while moderating “his Latin rhythms with cooler European harmonies, timbres, and tempos.”⁴⁷

The mambo was primarily an instrumental form; if there were words, they were few, and were often chanted or grunted in exclamation. “Laconic rather than lyrical, iterative rather than narrative, the mambo does not believe in stories.”⁴⁸ It was music for dancing, and the quick tempo, fiery brass riffs, and whirlwind of moves made it exhilarating, and especially appealing to a younger audience. Based on steps originating with the mambo in Cuba, “New York Latinos, and notable the young Latino Palladium crowd, built a dance out of the neat, flowing yet bustling basic patterns.”⁴⁹ Despite this, based on description attempts in numerous contemporary news and magazine publications, everyone seemed to be puzzling over what exactly the mambo was. Perhaps the neatest description came from *Down Beat* magazine, who labeled it a “rumba with jitterbug.”⁵⁰ While Firmat likens the polite and more reserved rumba to a courtship dance, he claims the frenzied nature of the mambo is all about sex; “The mambo knows only one act and one movement: wham-bam, thank you, mambo.”⁵¹

Because it is primarily an instrumental dance form, the mambo does not pop up in many Broadway shows, with a few notable exceptions. A less frenetic Broadway mambo occurred in *Damn Yankees* (1955), which is performed in the show as a baseball fan club presentation at a pep rally. “Who’s Got the Pain?” almost seems to be making fun of the

⁴⁶ Roberts, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Harris, p. 205.

⁴⁸ Firmat, p. 104.

⁴⁹ Roberts, p. 131.

⁵⁰ Roberts, p. 131.

⁵¹ Firmat, p. 109.

mambo craze that would have been sweeping the nation at the time, asking, “Who’s got the pain when they do the mambo? Who’s got the pain when they go ‘ugh’?”

Perhaps the most famous musical theatre example is from Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story* (1957), a setting of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* amongst the racial tensions and gang violence of 1950s Manhattan. The teenage protagonists dance a mambo at a neighborhood gym, complete with guttural yells and flamboyant choreography. Such a display, which is no doubt very similar to what was occurring on dance floors across the country at the time, leads the character Anita to later comment: “You saw how they dance: like they have to get rid of something, quick.”⁵² Roberts claims that this show “failed to recapture the fiery mambos that were the music of Bernstein’s real-life prototypes,”⁵³ but I disagree. By comparison to Puente’s mambos, Bernstein’s might have a fuller orchestral sound (being written for a Broadway pit orchestra), but the brass riffs are just as fiery, and the heavy, complicated percussion rhythms are full of authentic Afro-Cuban instruments.

Many years later, the 2000 Broadway musical version of *The Full Monty* included the mambo “Life with Harold,” sung at a ballroom dance class. Both of these mambos are more along the lines of what Firmat labels “mamboids,” songs that were written during the 1950s to capitalize on the new dance fad, trying to capture the flavor of mambo by copying some of its elements: “Afro-Cuban percussion, a few trumpet riffs, and the imitation of Pérez Prado’s inimitable grunts.”⁵⁴ Though it was most likely its uninhibited ecstasy that made it so enticing, when the cha-cha-chá appeared at the height of the mambo’s popularity, the dance’s simpler steps and calmer tempo made it a welcome respite for many.

⁵² Stanley Richards, ed., *Ten Great Musicals of the American Theatre* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Co., 1973), p. 305.

⁵³ Roberts, p. 135.

⁵⁴ Firmat, p. 111.

7. The Cuban Cha-cha-cha, from the 1950s

With dance steps starting on the second beat, the cha-cha-chá gets its name from a double step on the fourth beat, producing this rhythm: “two, three, cha-cha-chá.” Like the mambo, the cha-cha-chá was developed from the danzón by Cuban dance orchestras, or *charangas*. It is said to have been created around 1953 by the Cuban composer and violinist Enrique Jorrín with the *Orquesta América*, but another famous charanga, the *Orquesta Aragón*, was influential in advancing and popularizing the new form. When the cha-cha-chá arrived in the States in the mid-1950s, it was immediately popular and favored over the mambo, most likely due to its slower tempo, easier steps, and mellower sound. Mambo bands in the U.S. quickly caught on to the change in tastes and started playing their own versions of the cha-cha-chá. This meant toning down the aggressive Afro-Cuban percussion, and changing the instrumentation from the charangas’ delicate flutes and violins to the brass and reeds of the mambo section. Roberts laments:

“The flood of attempts to capitalize on its popularity swamped the elegant original form. While the New York bands used its crispness and clarity to form an effective contrast to the mambo’s greater density of sound and rhythm, the chachachá became corrupted into something so simplistic as to be almost unrecognizable.”⁵⁵

He claims that this “corrupted” sound made the cha-cha-chá a novelty that didn’t last, and in the face of the emergent genre of rock and roll, Latin music’s decline in national popularity was inevitable. Firmat calls the fact that cha-cha-chá appeared during the birth of rock and roll a “fortunate” thing, because it gave rock a “Latin flavor.”⁵⁶ He goes on to list many doo-wop and rock and roll hits of the 1960s that made use of cha-cha-chá rhythms, whether

⁵⁵ Roberts, p. 132.

⁵⁶ Firmat, p. 117.

overtly or not. Regardless of its effects on later genres of popular music, the cha-cha-chá as its own style was only popular for a brief time, as is reflected in its use in Broadway shows.

At a time when it had become standard practice to include a Latin number in a musical theatre show, just a few shows included a cha-cha-chá, and they mostly hail from the time when this musical style was in fashion. The first is the 1956 Broadway show *Bells Are Ringing* with the not at all subtly titled song “Mu-Cha-Cha.” It is sung by the heroine’s friend as he’s teaching her the new dance before she goes out on a big date, saying, “You’re dead if you can’t cha-cha!”⁵⁷ The song’s gimmick is that the lyrics play on the dance’s rhythm and steps:

CARL (*Insinuatingly*): Mu-cha-cha, tell me, do you cha-cha?
 ELLA (*In a coy, high squeak*): Me-cha-cha? Señor, si-si cha-cha.
 CARL: Now, cha-cha, please show me how cha-cha.
 ELLA: I got-cha--you watch-a cha-cha.⁵⁸

However, Carl teaches Ella incorrectly: the rhythm of this song, and of the other examples from musical theatre is altered so that the double step is on the *third* beat (making the rhythm “one, two, cha-cha-cha”). The modification of the Latin rhythm reflects an anglicization likely perpetuated by social dancers who didn’t know better, and unfortunately makes a simple dance even more “square.”

In the 1961 Broadway show *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, the song “Coffee Break,” about corporate office drones’ angst at the lack of coffee, for some reason is set to a cha-cha-chá. The dance would have been on its way out of popularity, but perhaps the persistent Latin rhythm was chosen to represent the monotony of the workers’ lives and the continuous drip of the beverage that keeps them going.

⁵⁷ Comden & Green, p. 249.

⁵⁸ Comden & Green, p. 251.

A much more recent cha-cha-chá on Broadway appeared in the hugely successful *Hairspray* (2002), set in the 1960s: “(The Legend of) Miss Baltimore Crabs” is sung by a local television producer of a teenage dance show about her glorious pageant days. Even though there are no Latin references in the lyrics, the older ballroom style represents the more conservative, “white” styles of dancing that are being encouraged by the grown ups, who are trying to steer the teens away from the R&B rock and roll styles that make up most of the show’s score. While the show does not give much context for the song, the 2007 film version introduces the song as a new dance style being taught to the teen television performers.

Unlike the longstanding tango and rumba, the primarily instrumental genres of the mambo and the cha-cha-chá did not stick around for long, and their appearances on Broadway were restricted to presentations of what they actually were: dances that were popular at the time.

8. The Brazilian Bossa Nova, from the 1960s

The last Brazilian style to become popular in the United States was an avant-garde creation by primarily white middle-class musicians in Brazil in the mid-1950s. Based on the beat of samba, *bossa nova* (“new style”) is rhythmically simplified, with the mellow tempo and sophisticated harmonies of “cool” jazz. The primary instrument in the bossa nova style is the guitar, with piano and light percussion, and sometimes lush orchestral strings. A rhythmic motive often present in the bossa nova’s percussion, known as the “Brazilian clave,” is very similar to the Cuban clave, but it is not as crucial to the rhythmic structure of the style. With the last note slightly delayed from the Cuban version, enhancing the laidback feel, it is usually performed on the snare rim (Figure 7).

Fig. 7⁵⁹



João Gilberto and Antônio Jobim are considered the chief creators and developers of this “new style,” whose recordings launched a bossa nova craze in Latin America. The bossa nova soon spread to the U.S. in 1962 through the release of the LP *Jazz Samba* by American jazz musicians Charlie Byrd and Stan Getz. Getz, Gilberto, and Jobim created the jazz bossa nova album *Getz/Gilberto* in 1964, which became one of the best-selling jazz albums of all time. This release included perhaps the best-known bossa nova song, “The Girl from Ipanema,” featuring Gilberto’s wife Astrud on vocals. Capitalizing on the new Latin vogue were jazz vocalists like Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra, who performed several of Jobim’s songs, as well as popular artists like Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and The Doors, who all had hit recordings of songs in the bossa nova style.

⁵⁹ Blatter, p. 28.

Stephen Sondheim wrote a couple of bossa nova songs for shows, in the wake of the style's heyday. The first appeared in the 1966 off-Broadway revue *The Mad Show*, with music by Mary Rodgers and lyrics by various artists. "The Boy From..." is a parody of the hugely successful "The Girl from Ipanema." Like the song it spoofs, "The Boy From..." is about unrequited love, but the singer has no idea why her affections are not returned. "The answer to all the girl's perplexed questions ... is obvious: the boy is gay."⁶⁰

"Why are his trousers vermillion?
 (His trousers are vermilion.)
 Why does he claim he's Castillian?
 (He thays that he'th Cathtilian.)
 Why do his friends call him "Lillian"?
 And I hear at the end of the week
 He's leaving to start a boutique."⁶¹

Sung with a Castilian lisp, and racing to get through the lengthy name of the town from where the boy hails, "Tacarembo la Tumbe del Fuego Santa Malipas Zacatecas la Junta del Sol y Cruz," the lyric pokes fun at the breathless singing style of Astrud in the original song.

The second bossa nova tune by Sondheim is the legendary eleven o'clock number from *Company* (1970), "The Ladies Who Lunch." In a nightclub, the cynical, middle-aged Joanne gives a drunken toast to the idle rich housewives of New York, of which she realizes she is one. The bossa nova beat does nothing more for the song, which has no Latin references in the lyric, than to establish a lounge atmosphere. With their oftentimes orchestral, "easy listening" sound, bossa nova recordings were a popular element of nightclub culture in the 1960s.

⁶⁰ Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 28.

⁶¹ Stephen Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011)* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2011), p. 301-2.

Later musicals seem to carry on the idea of bossa novas being mood music, and utilize the style to give a non-Latin lyric a seductive flair or to establish a lounge setting. The 1978 Broadway show *Ballroom*, which is chock full of (what else?) ballroom dancing, includes the Stan Getz-style “I’ve Been Waiting All My Life,” sung by the ballroom band singer while couples dance the rumba. In the 2001 Broadway show *A Class Act*, “Mona” is sung by the titular character, who seductively compares her body to a town being visited. “John Paul,” from the 2003 off-Broadway show *Little Fish*, sets the scene as a Latin dance club in uptown Manhattan. In the song, the main character of the show recalls a time she went out with one of her best friend’s current boyfriend, who is hot and sensual, and perhaps a throwback to the clichéd Latin lover so popular in the first half of the century.

At the end of the 1960s, Latin rhythms were being mixed with various other styles of music like pop, jazz, rock, and R&B, creating an array of fusions and hybrids that required a generalized title; this was the beginning of salsa.

9. Salsa

The term *salsa* literally means “sauce” in Spanish, and has implications of spiciness or flavor. It was a label coined in the 1970s, primarily for commercial reasons, to give a name to Latin music as it was being created at that time, particularly in New York. Roberts says it is a “contemporary word for hot, up-tempo, creative Latin music,”⁶² but admits that its origins are uncertain, and the styles of music it applies to are ambiguous and varied. Generally, however, salsa tends to be in 4/4 meter, based on the two-bar clave rhythm, and is thus a descendant of Cuban music styles in this country.

The term is not used much in musical theatre except in the 2008 Broadway show *In the Heights*, written by and starring Puerto Rican-American rapper Lin-Manuel Miranda. The show is set in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in northern Manhattan whose population is mostly comprised of Dominican-Americans, and while the score of the musical is primarily infused with salsa and hip-hop, there are also several merengue numbers. Merengue, a musical and dance style from the Dominican Republic, has a rapid tempo in 2/4 time, “with a flavor very different from the somewhat more flowing Cuban and jaunty Puerto Rican dances.”⁶³

⁶² Roberts, p. 267.

⁶³ Roberts, p. 265.

Summary

Even before the beginning of the 20th century, Latin American music influenced popular music in the United States, and consequently, was taken up into musical theatre. Regardless of whether a show has any Latin themes or locales, Broadway composers have been drawn to the rhythms of South America and the Caribbean for the ambiance and implications that such beats bring.

In the late 19th century, the Cuban habanera and the Cuban bolero became internationally popular, but did not find their way onto New York stages until decades later. Both were clichés at this point, as their use in musicals reflects. Habaneras were used to create a “Spanish” sound and boleros were lushly orchestrated for sentimental ballads.

The early 20th-century Argentinian tango, filtered through Parisian refinement, became the first national dance craze in the U.S. and grew to be a permanent fixture in social dancing. On Broadway, the tango was, by its nature and origins, forever associated with sexual aggression, romance, and illicit deeds. Less than two decades later, the Cuban rumba started a second national rage for Latin dancing, and a widespread enthusiasm for Latin music in general. A dance of courtship, the rumba was favored by composers like Cole Porter and his contemporaries for creating an atmosphere of romance for wooing and seduction, regardless of whether there was any other overtly Latin content. Because of their versatility of mood and character, and their instant taking to by musical theatre composers, the tango and the rumba have turned out to be enduring components of musicals up to the present day.

The Cuban conga line and the Brazilian samba were social party dances introduced to the U.S. in the 1940s, and propagated by nightclubs and movie musicals. The simple instrumental conga has not featured prominently in Broadway musicals, but the vocal samba

has made some appearances, invariably to provide a fun and carefree environment. The primarily instrumental genres of the mambo and the cha-cha-chá were national dance fads of the 1950s. While they shared the same roots and instrumentation, the mambo was fiery and sexual and the cha-cha-chá was more refined. Neither had a lasting impact on stage musicals, but their Latin rhythms were influential on the developing pop styles of R&B and rock and roll.

The Brazilian bossa nova, based on the samba, appeared in the U.S. in the 1960s. Affected by the harmonies and tempos of cool jazz, the bossa nova became “easy listening” lounge music. Like the rumba before it, it was used in musicals to establish an atmosphere; instead of exoticism, this ambience was one of urban sophistication. Also a metropolitan avant-garde creation was salsa music, and its varied fusions and styles from the 1970s on. Although the occasional Latin-influenced rock or pop number has occurred on Broadway, musical theatre as a whole has favored the more clearly defined conventional ballroom dance styles that became part of U.S. culture over 50 years ago.

It is my hope that the reader of this paper will more readily be able to identify when a Latin style is being used in a musical theatre production, and to what ends. Knowing the cultural context and history of the Latin rhythm, the listener may have a keener insight into why the composer has made such a choice, and an understanding of any unspoken implications that it brings.

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