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The Interstitial, Musical Authenticity, and Social Identity

Resumen: Se exploran los procesos de autenticación musical examinando las reacciones de expertos de música y auditorios frente a la música de un grupo neoyorquino ‘intersticial’, es decir, entre diferentes géneros, “Los Cubanos Postizos”. Parece que cuestiones de autenticidad musical son de importancia para los críticos y el auditorio del grupo, al contrario de las expectativas basadas en características del arte posmoderno, de la globalización social y de la constitución compleja del grupo mismo. De 54 comentarios examinados (impresos, distribuidos por el Internet, o en entrevistas), 40 definen autenticidad por uno o más de los cuatro criterios siguientes: intención artística, características musicales técnicas, emoción musical y las credenciales de los artistas. Esto sugiere la continuidad de la relevancia de la autenticación para la formación y el mantenimiento de identidades de grupos en la sociedad contemporánea.

Summary: This paper explores the process of musical authentication by examining the reactions of music experts and audiences to the music of an interstitial (inter-genre) New York group, “Los Cubanos Postizos”. Contrary to expectations based on characteristics of postmodern art, social globalization, and the complicated nature of the group itself, issues of musical authenticity appear to be important to the band’s reviewers and audience. Of 54 print, web, and interview commentaries examined, 40 address authenticity by means of one or more of the following four criteria: artistic intent, technical musical characteristics, musical emotion, and the credentials of the artists. This suggests the continuing relevance of authentication to the formation and maintenance of group identities in contemporary society.

Ethnicity is one of the most common categories of social identity discussed in anthropology (at least in the United States). It is generally defined as a means of group identification based on perceptions of common origins and distinctiveness, occurring in the

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context of two or more categories of people in the same social system (Hicks 1977: 3; Crews/Bindon 1991). Ethnic identities are, at least in part, “emic categories of ascriptions” (Eriksen 1993: 11), labeled and identified through shared symbols. These symbols, often referred to as markers (or badges, or labels), highlight similarities among group members and establish or reinforce boundaries between groups. Ethnic markers are typically derived from perceived shared ancestral origin, physical characteristics, or culture, and can involve any cultural domain: religion (Eriksen 1997), language (Meintel Machado 1977), stories (Williams 1997), humor (Hay/Holmes 1997), and music (Baade 1998; Killick 2001; Manuel 1994; Trimillos 1989).

Ethnic markers are often described as arbitrary, that is, unrelated (or not necessarily related) to the actual history or culture of the groups they label. For example, Manuel (1994) reports that music understood as traditional in Puerto Rico is in fact typically appropriated from Cuba. Melville (1988) notes that the most important marker of U.S. Hispanic/Latino membership, the Spanish language, is in fact the easiest means through which to identify specific heritage among people of Spanish or Latin American background. Such incongruities arise because group identification is related as much or more to social relations, particularly with respect to resource access, than to historical or cultural accuracy.

But of course markers are not arbitrary at all, in the sense that in order to effectively identify in- and out- groups they must be authenticated, or accepted as genuine, by members of the groups involved. And while ethnic groups and boundaries can be flexible, permeable, and even situational (Barth 1969; Borgo 1998; Cohen 1988; Hicks 1977), the logic that associated markers must be selected and in some sense authenticated remains relevant. This logic extends, of course, to many other social categories, including those based on generation (Frith 1981), gender, and class (Boo 1993; Eriksen 1993: 53-54; Peña 1985).

However, two factors complicate this model in current times. One is social globalization, where “the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and [...] people become increasingly aware that they are receding” (Waters 2001: 3). The appropriation and commodification of “world music” is one example of the consequences of this process to musical and social group identification (Keil/Feld 1994).

The other factor is postmodern art, particularly its “pick and choose” approach to music of different cultures and eras, as well as its emphasis on the ironic (Conner 1989; Lipsitz 1994; Théberge 1993). In fact music, “because of its relative immateriality and discursive autonomy, may be particularly well suited to participate in the fluid relationships of discourses and history that we associate with postmodernism” (Walser 1992: 198).

Thus it might be that responses of listeners to music in global, postmodern contexts would be highly individualized, flat, ahistoric, and ironic (Jameson 1985). The question, therefore, is if ethnic or other social identification through the authentication

of musical markers might still be relevant and, if so, by means of what criteria might evaluations be made.

Christopher Waterman (2000) discusses the value of exploring the interstitial (or the margins, spaces between) in the categorization of popular music genres in the United States. Tracing the history of one popular song, “Corrine Corrina”, in the context of 1930s Mississippi, Waterman describes a world of fluid interactions between black and white, hill and delta, and primitive (as in barn dances) and sophisticated (as in recording studios). He shows how the powerful racial logic of musical and social identity, with its assumption that hybridity signals cultural dissolution, ignored this complexity and replaced it with segmented and delineated markets and conceptions of “race” (later R&B) and “hillbilly” (later country) music (Garofalo 1997).

Based on Waterman’s perspective, I have become interested in using the margins and interstices of musical genres to explore contemporary social identity formation. This in turn led me to look at the music and audience of a New York group, *Los Cubanos Postizos* (‘The Prosthetic Cubans’). The group was formed in 1997 by Marc Ribot, a guitarist known in the United States and internationally through his association with the Lounge Lizards, Tom Waits, Elvis Costello and others. He is a member of a New York scene that emerged in the early 1980s and is often described as performing “no-wave” or “Knitting Factory” music (the latter for one of the clubs in which they often perform). This movement is characterized by “deliciously referential, post-modern pastiches of genres that ranged irreverently across free jazz, punk rock, classical modernism and B-movie soundtracks [...]” (Shatz 1999). More recently, many of the artists involved have developed an interest in music with identity, that is, that evokes a “community of listeners” (Shatz 1999). In Ribot’s case, the music has been the Cuban *son*, due to his having been introduced to the music of Arsenio Rodriguez, an important figure in Cuban and New York music as a singer, *tres* soloist, bandleader, arranger and composer. Rodriguez emphasized Afro-Cuban instruments, song forms, and themes, and his innovations made him a Cuban national star in the 40s and 50s. He powerfully influenced the subsequent development of salsa (Herman 2003; Salazar 2002).

In 1998, Ribot released “Marc Ribot y Los Cubanos Postizos” to critical praise. It consisted almost entirely of songs by Rodriguez or from his repertoire. A 2000 release, “Muy Divertido,” drew less directly from Rodriguez’s work, but still focused on Cuban music and musical responses to it in the United States.

I chose to look at *Los Cubanos Postizos* for several reasons. One is the announcement of falsity in their name accompanied by a complementary (or paradoxical) message of musical authenticity in the use of songs by Arsenio Rodriguez. Another is their appearance on a major international label, Atlantic, and the accompanying publicity, promotion, and general visibility this brings. Additionally, the band, given the background and location of its members, is centrally positioned with respect to world mu-

sic movements and postmodern sensibilities as discussed earlier. Finally, one factor influencing the choice of *Los Cubanos Postizos* is my own interest, as someone of Cuban descent, in their music.

For this study I examined reviews of the band from print sources and the Web, as well as articles about the band and its music, internet blogs (web diaries), customer reviews such as those on <Amazon.com>, and some personal communication. In addition, I interviewed three of the five band members by telephone: Marc Ribot, Anthony Coleman (keyboards), and E. J. Rodriguez (percussion).

On the surface, *Los Cubanos Postizos* seem to embody the ironic postmodern, and several reviewers speak of their music almost exclusively from that point of view. Tarte (1998), for example, writes: “Ironic detachment tangles up with adhesion to the music Ribot loves in a B-movie approach that pushes the noir quality of the classic rumba sound until it skirts the penumbra of camp”. However, implicitly and often explicitly, the musicians, reviewers, and fans nevertheless wrestle with the issue of authenticity. Of the 54 commentaries examined to date, 40 address authentication. There appear to be four major criteria used to do so. Following is a brief description of these criteria, a selection of comments that illustrate them, and some discussion of the problems each presents to those seeking to make unambiguous evaluations of authenticity in this interstitial context.

1. Artistic intent

Ribot is explicit and consistent in asserting that the band does not make authentic Cuban music. For example, in his Web page <marcribot.com>, he states:

I don't want to present this as a work of scholarship or make any claims to authenticity. This is my usage of Cuban music, of the music of Arsenio Rodriguez and some other Cuban musicians.

Moreover, several of the band's songs include narration or singing in a heavily accented Spanish, impossible to misconstrue as genuine. (The band ends many performances with a unison and exaggerated “muchas gracias”.)

While many commentators point to the band's name as indicative of its lack of genuineness, others make a point to contradict that notion. “Despite the ‘prosthetic’ of the band name”, one Amazon reviewer notes, “[Ribot] creates a very convincing period sound”. Bautz (2000) adds, “[Muy Divertido] might feature the ‘fake Cubans’ of the band's title, but there's nothing phony about the stellar musicianship on display”.

One problem in using intent as a criterion of authenticity, however, is that art is often not received as the artist intends. For example, Bruce Springsteen's “Born in the USA” became the theme song of Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign – notwithstanding its anti-establishment lyrics. Another issue is that in *Los Cubanos Postizos* one finds mixed statements of intent. In interviews, percussionist E. J. Rodri-

guez described the band's music as "traditional" and a personal "homecoming", even as Ribot and Coleman emphasized non-traditional instrumentation and influences.

2. Technical musical characteristics

Technical characteristics of the music are by far the most common criterion through which the authenticity of *Los Cubanos Postizos* is discussed. Some commentators describe "Cuban cross-rhythms;" and the "delicate instrumentation" characteristic of genuine Cuban music. Other cited examples are the use of the Cuban clave, the "faithful" song arrangements, and, in the case of one Amazon UK reviewer, the overall sound and ambience, "full of evocations of old Havana [...]".

Similarly (although less frequently), specific musical attributes are used to support claims of inauthenticity. A "music fan from Venezuela", commenting on Amazon, describes "a total lack of swing and Latin feeling, [and] an almost pathetic percussion [...]". Because of the distorted, heavy metal-influenced solos of Ribot, the absence of horns, and other musical factors, another commentator writes, world music "purists should beware".

One Amazon buyer takes great pains to discuss the legitimacy of the music in specific terms. Since the *son* is a blend of Afro-Cuban and Spanish-inspired elements that Arsenio modernized, "who can claim that [*Los Cubanos Postizos*] are not being authentic? Actually they are, in their own way!".

Complicating the use of these technical criteria in this interstitial context are the many introduced musical attributes found in the music. The electric guitar, organ, and trap set, of course, are good examples, but there are many more. The "four to the floor" rock and roll beat, as Coleman describes it, is a far cry from "Cuban cross-rhythms". The "Havana sound" claimed as authentic by one is criticized as "circus-like" by another.

3. Musical emotion

For many, emotional criteria authenticate the music in spite of superficial or structural lack of genuineness. The logic is usually that Ribot and his band succeed in tapping into an authentic core of the music despite their technical and cultural distance from it. One reviewer writes, for example, "[When Ribot discovered Arsenio], the natural emotion of the melodies nullified the irony that's become so rote in some New York music circles" (Macnie 2000: 60).

Another notes,

[T]he roughness around [the groups'] romantic heart makes Ribot's skewed take on Cuban sounds just as compelling in its own way [...] Ribot essays the sexy songs and spirit of Arsenio Rodriguez [...] (Verna 1998: 20).

“Soul” is mentioned a great deal: “the most beautiful, soulful electric guitar I have ever heard [...]” or “soulful/yearning/romantic sound [...]”. On the other hand, a *lack* of emotion is used as a signal of lack of authenticity in one Amazon customer review:

[A]s these lively and engaging [Cuban] rhythms are played by an American, there is a lack of “warmth” in the pieces. On the other hand, it’s this lack of warmth that gives it the touch of newness and originality. Cuban music played in the American style.

Generally, however, the spirit in which affect is used to legitimize the music is to argue that the treatment, even if not faithful, is genuine: “[Ribot’s] current take on classic Latin music plumbs the genre’s emotional core without literalism or irony” (Gore 1999: 95).

The main complication with this criterion is that cues to emotion in music are always situationally defined and read (Shannon 2003; Stivale 2002). As both Ribot and Coleman point out in interviews, they do strive to be emotive and emotional musicians. However, Coleman adds, the emotion that listeners of *Los Cubanos Postizos* identify as genuinely Cuban might just as easily be due to their misreading of more familiar, non-Cuban signifiers (for instance, the “bluesy” bending of Ribot’s guitar strings).

4. Artist credentials

Finally, credentials are an often-used criterion of authenticity. Artist background and biography, including place of origin and upbringing, training, payment of “dues”, etc. are treated as barometers of the legitimacy of the music. According to Borgo (1998), “[ethnic] musical authenticity is often conceived as a birthright [...] it seems that lived experience, early exposure, and continual immersion are [its] most crucial requirements [...]”.

The obvious “logic” stemming from this criterion is: “Ribot is not Cuban, so this is not Cuban music”. For instance, Ribot himself says that “Being a Jewish guy from New Jersey [...] I just hope that I’m not being offensive” (Gore 2000: 84). Another example is the number of categories to which the music of *Los Cubanos Postizos* is assigned. Reviewers call it “jazz”, “latin-jazz”, or “pop jazz”, even though Ribot explicitly states that there is little jazz in the music. Since some of Ribot’s prior work and influences have been identified, in print, as jazz, the logic may be: “He’s a jazz musician, so this must be jazz”.

Another example is the “authentic” percussion provided by E. J. and Roberto Rodriguez (no relation to each other or to Arsenio). For example “[...] but it’s E. J. Rodriguez’s deep, traditional Cuban percussion that fattens this CD for its Best of 1998 status” (Andrew Bartlett for Amazon). However, E. J. is, by his own admission, trained in the hybrid styles of Central Park jams, not Cuba, while Roberto, according to Coleman, grew up playing Yiddish theater in Miami, and his most well-known mu-

sical association is with the Miami Sound Machine. References to the two Rodriguez'es by name in this context are frequent. It could be that their Latin names are themselves construed as a signal of authenticity.

Another is the logic that, because Ribot is accomplished, his playing must in some way be authentic: One Amazon customer says "[...] Ribot gives his enunciation of a Cuban-influenced style [...] to which his own background as an unusually versatile musician cannot be alien". And, of course, there's the logic that because the group is playing the music of Arsenio Rodriguez, who is authentic, the "Postizos" are, at least to some degree, also authentic. Thus, as one reviewer says of Ribot, "The self proclaimed rootless cosmopolitan got some history he could finally bite into" (Macnie 2000: 60).

Again there are obvious complications that the musicians themselves are the first to explore. Coleman describes how the band was formed by "white guys, mostly Jewish, playing rock music, and then you've got a guy from Cuba and he's studying Hebrew. You couldn't be more perfect [...]" Coleman concludes, only half-jokingly, that the most authentic and traditional aspects of the band relate not to its music but to the twenty-five year old no-wave, anti-genre movement to which its members belong.

This preliminary discussion of authentication processes and criteria has some obvious problems. Only one band was examined, and the sample of commentaries is small and no doubt biased. The strength of the theoretical concepts underpinning it is debatable (and debated) as well. Operationalization of interstitiality is difficult. Views of ethnicity and music are mixed. Keil (1994) calls ethnicity "the source of all powerful musical styles" and worries that the commodification of world "grooves" will dilute that power (Keil/Feld 1994). However, others caution that a U.S. preoccupation with race has led to the use of ethnicity as an untenable (Baade 1998), if not wholly culture-specific (Spindler/Spindler 1983), substitute for it. Musical authenticity, too, has been criticized as an artificial concept, of little concern to actual performance (Walser 1992), and perhaps even a means through which westerners can demand "natural" (i.e., local, pre-modern) culture of non-westerners, and as a consequence deny the artistic and commercial benefits of more flexible creative strategies (Taylor 1997).

However, it is interesting to find attention paid to authenticity in the context of a musical group that proclaims its falsity and is part of a longstanding movement that rejects traditional genres and their social associations. In my view, this supports the likelihood that "globalized", post-modern audiences remain concerned with the authentication of musical markers. If so, why is the obvious question. For "Postizos" listeners, it appears that no one measure of authenticity serves across the board. No patterns of consensus seem to be present, and the music is as authentic or inauthentic as individual participants deem it to be. The complications the band itself provides may be one reason for this, as the arbitrariness of the authenticating criteria are made

more obvious by the interstitial nature of the music. However, another reason may be that the band and its music have not been part of larger political or social debates where marking ethnic identity might be important. As Eriksen (1993: 100) has put it, “ethnic identities tend to attain their greatest importance in situations of flux, change, resource competition, and threats against boundaries”. The contrast between *Los Cubanos Postizos* and the recent, Havana-based *Buena Vista Social Club* recordings is potentially instructive. Notwithstanding the manifestly foreign musical and economic influence of producer Ry Cooder and others, in both Havana and Miami the Buena Vistas immediately became the center of discussion and even conflict with respect to Cuban and Cuban-American identity and U.S. Cuban relations (Levine 1999). The “Postizos”, on the other hand, have not been identified as relevant to those debates.

Perhaps even in the case of those individuals for whom the consequences of globalization and postmodernism are most relevant, social identity, and means through which to affirm it, remain as important as ever *if* access to power is involved. As, worldwide, power inequalities continue (or increase), the process of group (ethnic and other) identification as a means to address them continues as well, including the legitimization of markers through assigned authenticity. In reactions to *Los Cubanos Postizos* we may be seeing glimpses of the way that process works without the power issues that, in other circumstances, lead to conflict and negotiated patterns of consensus.

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