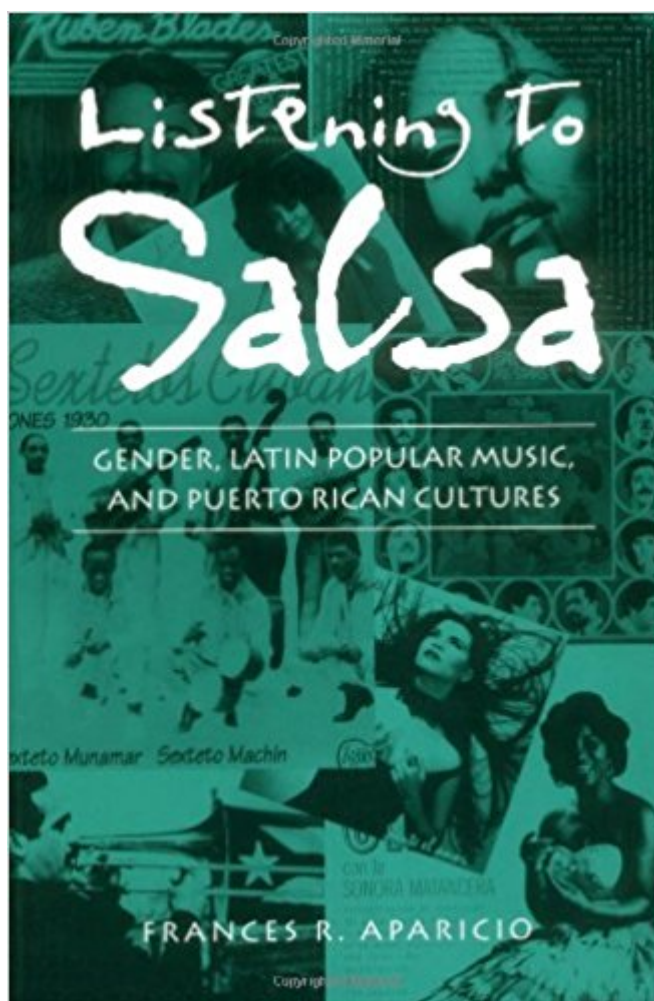


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# Listening To Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, And Puerto Rican Cultures (Music/Culture)



## Synopsis

Winner of the MLA's Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize for an outstanding book published in English in the field of Latin American and Spanish literatures and culture (1999) For Anglos, the pulsing beats of salsa, merengue, and bolero are a compelling expression of Latino/a culture, but few outsiders comprehend the music's implications in larger social terms. Frances R. Aparicio places this music in context by combining the approaches of musicology and sociology with literary, cultural, Latino, and women's studies. She offers a detailed genealogy of Afro-Caribbean music in Puerto Rico, comparing it to selected Puerto Rican literary texts, then looks both at how Latinos/as in the US have used salsa to reaffirm their cultural identities and how Anglos have eroticized and depoliticized it in their adaptations. Aparicio's detailed examination of lyrics shows how these songs articulate issues of gender, desire, and conflict, and her interviews with Latinas/os reveal how they listen to salsa and the meanings they find in it. What results is a comprehensive view "that deploys both musical and literary texts as equally significant cultural voices in exploring larger questions about the power of discourse, gender relations, intercultural desire, race, ethnicity, and class."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Two new books on popular music present contrasting approaches to the diverse world of Hispanic music. Aparicio's (Spanish and American culture, Univ. of Michigan) work, aimed at an academic audience, deals with salsa and Puerto Rican culture in a feminist context. McGowan, targeting a

general audience, presents a comprehensive history of popular music in Brazil. Aparicio analyzes salsa, boleros, and other popular musical forms in terms of cultural issues (race, gender, class), drawing on her own experiences, and those of typical listeners, to explore these issues. Readers may find their views on salsa altered by reading this book. A recommended choice for academic Hispanic studies collections and for music collections with a strong Hispanic emphasis. McGowan and Pessanha here update their original edition (Billboard Bks., 1991), bringing their extensive experience writing on Brazilian popular music for Billboard and other magazines to this extensive survey covering local jazz and rock as well as better-known forms. The accessible writing style and lavish use of illustrations help achieve the authors' goal of inspiring interest in this music. Updates cover recent music and musicians, provide more social analysis, and expand the discography to 1000 titles, adding much to the original edition. The best work on the topic, this is recommended for both academic and public library music collections. James E. Ross, WLN, Seattle Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"Deftly explores the cultural politics of Puerto Rican music, revealing how salsa illuminates the complexities of class, race, and gender identity among Puerto Ricans at home and in the continental United States." — ISAM Newsletter

I strongly disagree with the other reviewers. Some research was done in writing this book, but the writer lacks in depth knowledge of salsa culture. Also too much analysis is drawn from other genres such as the bolero, danza and plena and the conclusions applied to salsa too liberally. The author is happy to mention that black innovators Ismael Rivera and Cortijo they pushed black Puerto Rican culture into every household in the island. But rather than rejoice in this success, she destroys it by commenting that the contributions of light skinned latinos have "whitewashed" and diluted the music. Tito Puente, Ismael Miranda, Hector Lavoe and even the non-hispanic Larry Harlow were all light skinned innovators in the hard salsa scene of the 60s and 70s. Her second point of contention is the relationship in which salsa music deals with and portrays women. As the vast majority of musicians, singers and songwriters are men, it should be no surprise that salsa offers a mostly male point of view. But it is problematic that she chose to use a study of a Tex-Mex nightclub to make inferences about salsa when those genres never come together, and Mexican culture differs significantly from the Puerto Rican she focuses. Finally these two lines join together into a conclusion about Puerto Rican males and their view of women in relationships, white as wives, black as prostitute lovers. And hence she goes on to explain that in salsa lyrics when they sing

about "mi negrita" or "mi mulata", all they are talking about is their prostitute lovers. The problem is that all salseros, including her black heroes, use those terms. But the biggest problem is that a lot of her sources for explaining her viewpoints do not come from those same musicians, singers and songwriters who she is analyzing, so she makes basic mistakes. Regarding Cortijo's and Rafael Lthier's bands she claims that the "Combo", was a greater musical outlet than an "Orchestra". A problem arises when one considers that Puerto Ricans use the word "Orquesta" when referring to all salsa bands, regardless of whether it is a sonora (trumpets band), trombanga (trombones and flute band) or combo (trumpets and saxes band).

Frances Aparicio's work is a powerful blend of critical analysis of lyrics, styles of performance, and ethnography on the reception of listeners to salsa's meanings. She relies on an obvious and powerful training in literary analysis to consider the history and multiple uses of salsa as a form of expression, communication, and community formation. However, the most important contribution of this work is its concentration on gender and on the ways in which desire, identity and language are negotiated upon music. It is clear that years of research went into the production of this monograph, especially since it manages to balance historical exploration with critical analysis. The benefit to this multidisciplinary approach is that the book can serve a variety of purposes, from providing basic information, to offering complex textual analyses. This makes the book useful for non-academic readers, as well as the academics for whom it was intended. However, since the book doesn't come with a CD, those not well-versed in the songs discussed might need to do extra research. With the increasing popularity of Latin music, it is imperative that everyone who listens to salsa be involved in analyzing why we like it, and what we do with the music we consume. This book can help lovers of salsa start to frame these questions. Hopefully, it will also encourage other listeners to write their own perceptions on salsa and how it connects with other aspects of daily life and with self-identity. It is time to value popular culture in terms other than dollars and cents, which is what this project begins to do. Now, if only someone wrote a book on West Coast salsa my library would be complete.

Aparicio presents a thorough understanding of what she speaks, she states she comes from academia, so there should be no illusions. I have been started my own journey into discovering the roots and makeup of all Latin and Portuguese music since Colonial times, She dares to take a brave new look at the topic from a class-struggle perspective, from the anti-feminist perspective, (not likely to come from a male writer). She stated that salsa had its roots in Cuba. I think some people don't

want to hear the truth of Machismo, and the belittling of women to sensual, erotic roles or nether worlds. I wish she would turn her attention now to Mexican music. In examining Mexican music, I've found a dearth of female songwriters and composers, and few to hold the baton. When women first emerged as singers they wore manly costumes with sombrero, serape and the pistola in case a revolution should break out. SACM blacklists some, and others. Female singers at first did not change the pronoun of a song if it was written from the male perspective. Females took on manly names, Lucha this and Lucha that, or they were dubbed pejoratively "La Ronca" Pan-Latino musical embroidery is ever evolving. She deserves book awards & her book should be declared a work worthy of preserving. The class struggle and effect from dictatorships, and US intervention are experiences all Latino & Portuguese speaking countries share in common. Maybe the very macho and macho superimposed culture can't handle the Truth. And then the fight for copyrights, and the co-optation of pre-colonial songs by those who simply made an arrangement or made a claim to authorship, and SACM just gives them justification, or the changing of a verse and calling it yours. Bravo for this book. Juan Vargas

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