SO! Reads: Marisol Negrón's Made in NuYoRico: Fania Records, Latin Music, and Salsa's Nuyorican Meanings

Vanessa K. Valdés

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Book Review, Caribbean Studies, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Cultural Studies, Dance/Movement



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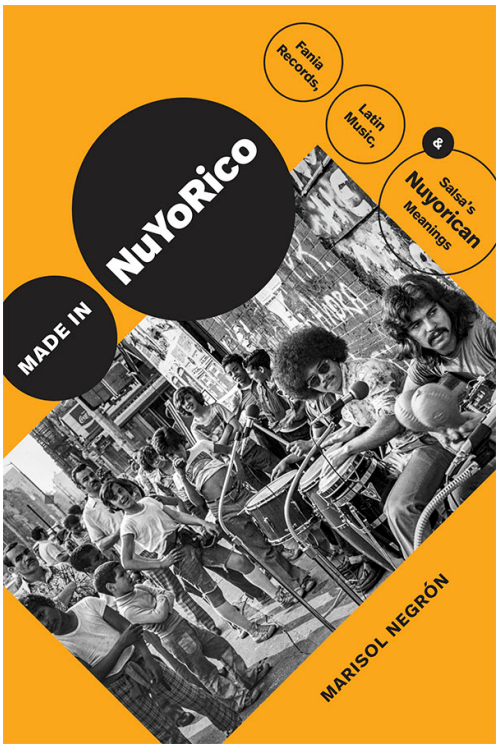
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I began reading Marisol Negrón's *Made in NuYoRico: Fania Records, Latin Music, and Salsa's Nuyorican Meanings* (Duke University Press, 2024) in earnest this summer, as Bad Bunny's "NUEVAYol" flooded New York City streets. Whole generations of people had never heard El Gran Combo's "Un Verano en Nueva York" (1975), perhaps not-coincidentally celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year. The song is a staple in this city, particularly in the weeks leading up to the National Puerto Rican Day Parade. Instagram and TikTok were inundated with videos of Bad Bunny fans, many of whom were millennials and Gen Z, dancing with their grandparents to "NUEVAYoL" and "BAILE INoLVIDABLE." Bad Bunny had successfully ushered in a resurgence of interest in salsa, a genre that has remained vibrant since its founding. The archipelago's superstar celebrated the city that was, beginning in the early 1890s, a major site of Puerto Rican migration for decades; in several of the videos for songs from *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS* (2025), he honored the Nuyorican community and all they had contributed to the culture.



https://youtu.be/a1Femq4NPxs

In that vein, Negrón has written a book that is, shockingly to me, one of the very few books that center salsa in general and the role of New York in its creation specifically. In this, she joins Juan Flores, Frances Aparicio, and Christopher Washburne to produce book-length studies that examine this genre. She also depends on the magazine articles of long-gone local publications such as *Latin N.Y.*, which ran from 1973-1985, and journalists such as Aurora Flores, Adela López, and Nayda Román, women who recorded what at times feels like an incredibly-male environment. Here, she is focusing on the record label that is synonymous with salsa, Fania Records, which, at one point had signed such singers and musicians as Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, La Lupe, Hector Lavoe, Ruben Blades, Ray Baretto, and Eddie Palmieri, whose passing this summer marked the end of an era, in many ways. Founded by Johnny Pacheco and Jerry Masucci in 1964, Fania reached its heights in the 1970s, securing a distribution center in Panama in 1974, establishing its own recording studio in 1976 – the first "Latin" label to do so – and purchasing a manufacturing plant in 1977. Yet by the end of the decade, many of the original artists had moved on, as had Masucci, who sold the catalog and created several other businesses that continued to do business using the name "Fania" (20). Nevertheless, the music that emerged from that critical historical moment in New York City continues to impact subsequent generations.



Citing Caridad de la Luz, La Bruja, a Nuyorican legend of the spoken word scene who currently serves as the executive director of Nuyorican Poets Café, Negrón defines NuYoRico as "that place somewhere between the Empire State and El Morro" (9), the latter being the fortress originally built in the sixteenth century that is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. *Made in NuYoRico* is divided into two parts featuring three chapters each; the first part, "Anatomy of a Salsa Boom, 1964-1979" marks the cultural history of salsa for those fifteen years, while the second part, "After the Boom Is Gone, 1980s-2000s," charts a fascinating examination of the salsa boom in various contexts, including a futile attempt by insular government officials to attract foreign investment by citing salsa as an impactful cultural artifact. In doing so, they offended a faction of the archipelago's elites who distanced themselves due to the genre being created in the diaspora.

Negrón reviews the 1972 documentary classic *Our Latin Thing (Nuestra Cosa Latina)* in her first chapter. This movie served for many as the introduction to the Fania All-Stars. Featuring footage from a 1971 concert at New York's Cheetah Lounge, it features Barretto, Larry Harlow, Willie Colón, Ismael Miranda, "Cheo" Feliciano, Pete "El Conde" Rodríguez, and LaVoe (whose name appears in this way throughout the book recalling his nickname as "La Voz"). In chapter two, "'Los Malotes de la Salsa': Salsa Dons and the Performance of Subjecthood," Negrón looks at the imagery Colón and LaVoe create in their lyrics and the cover art of their albums, while the following chapter, "Salsa's Dirty Secret: Liberated Women, Hairy Hippies, and the End of the World," focuses on their performance, together and individually, of a virile masculinity dependent as much on the portraits of insubordinate women, unruly yearnings, and queerness. It is this chapter that speaks fleetingly of Celia Cruz and La Lupe, the two Afro-Cuban women who were the only women signed to Fania. In a study that examines how very much a masculinist world this was, I was looking for the counterpoint that both Cruz and La Lupe offered, only to be met with two pages of reference to them. A deeper discussion centering these women remains opportune.



Fania All-Stars, 1972. Celia Cruz at the center of the image.

The fourth chapter "Puerto Rico's (Un)Freedom: The Soundscape of Nation Branding," charts the moment in 1992 when, ahead of the celebrations within the Spanish-speaking world of Columbus's voyage, Puerto Rican governor Rafael Hernández Colón sought to brand Puerto Rico using salsa as the premier Puerto Rican cultural export, only to be met with opposition from elites on the island. With the last two chapters, "Entre la Letra y la Nota: Becoming 'El Cantante de los Cantantes,'" and "(Copy)Rights and Wrongs: 'El Cantante' and the Legislation of Creative Labor," Negrón examines the last years of LaVoe, his improvisational contributions to what many consider to be his signature song, "El Cantante," and the legal struggle between Rubén Blades, the writer of the song, and Masucci, for recognition of Blades as sole author of the song.



https://youtu.be/_w5_nBYEWC4

Made in NuYoRico is a fascinating book, one that encourages the reader to have their streaming service within reach. With the conversation of every album, one can pause and listen to the songs accompanying the album and the art under discussion. In this she joins countless scholars of music, but I was especially reminded of Mark Anthony Neal's most recent book, *Black Ephemera: The Crisis and Challenge of the Musical Archive* (NYU, 2022), which was fundamentally dependent on the reader listen to the songs he was referencing in real time. It is a theoretical book published by an academic press, and so discussions about abjection and subjecthood may not reach the general reader; nevertheless it is a worthwhile addition to the library of any salsa aficionado, who will undoubtedly learn something new while revisiting the past.

On August 23, 1973, only two years after their sets at the Cheetah Lounge, the Fania All-Stars played Yankee Stadium. Having attained a certain level of success with the release of *Our Latin Thing*, the concert at the celebrated ballpark secured legendary status for these singers as they played before more than 40,000 spectators. Four months later they reprised the concert in San Juan's newly-built Coliseo Roberto Clemente. In September 1974 they played in the Zaire 74 music festival in Kinshasa, Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the country's premier stadium, the Stade du 20 Mai: the Fania All-Stars were global.



https://youtu.be/LFgB1Y-ZwyY

Fifty-one years later, in September 2025, the National Football League announced its selection of Bad Bunny as the performer of the Super Bowl LX halftime show, taking place in February 2026. The championship game is set to air exactly a week after the Grammy Awards, where Bad Bunny is nominated in six categories, including Best Record, Best Song, and Best Album of the Year for *Debí Tirar Más Fotos*. With an expected viewership of more than one hundred million people, he and his repertoire of reggaetón, dembow, Latin trap, boleros, and yes, decidedly Puerto Rican bomba, plena, and salsa, will be at the center of yet another international cultural moment. Debemos tirar más fotos.

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Featured Image" "Jibaros Con Salsa" by Flickr User Lorenzo, Taken on July 27, 2011, **CC BY-NC 2.0**

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Vanessa K. Valdés *is a writer and an independent scholar whose work focuses on the literatures, visual arts, and histories of Black peoples throughout the Western hemisphere. She is the author of three books,* Oshun's Daughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas *(SUNY Press, 2014)*; Diasporic Blackness: The Life and Times of Arturo Schomburg (*SUNY Press, 2017); and with David Pullins,* Juan de Pareja, Afro-Hispanic Painter in the Age of Velázquez *(Yale UP, 2024). You can learn more about her at https://drvkv23.com/*.

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