

**“Go and Make Disciples”:  
Evangelization, Conversion Narratives, and Salvation in Puerto Rican Protestant Evangelical  
Salsa Music**

**By**

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**To My Family:  
Jely, Guito, and Bacan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **“Go and Make Disciples”: Evangelization, Conversion Narratives, and Salvation in Puerto Rican Protestant Evangelical Salsa Music**

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**Chair: Matthew J. Countryman**

Since the origin and development of salsa music in the 1960s, religious themes have been present in the discography of this music genre. One of the religions to have a major impact on Puerto Rican salsa music culture is Protestant evangelicalism. From the 1970s onward, numerous secular salsa artists have testified converting to this faith tradition. The conversions of these musicians have led to the development of the evangelical salsa movement. As a result, these musicians have created unique ways of merging musical practices with religious faith in their urban evangelical salsa music ministries. Yet, this musical and religious phenomenon has not been given ample scholarly treatment in academic circles.

*Go and Make Disciples* is an analysis of the Puerto Rican Protestant evangelical salsa movement. Through the use of an interdisciplinary methodology, I examine the major themes, artists, and practices of this musical

expression. My use of interviews examines the motives behind the conversion of evangelical salsa musicians to Protestant evangelicalism. I use musical analysis to understand the role of record covers, music arrangements, sound, and song texts in the evangelistic mission of evangelical salsa ministries. Supplementing these methods is my use of ethnography to study the act of evangelization as it takes place in live evangelical salsa events. As such, I analyze the role of the *sonero* (salsa singer) in the evangelization of the music audience.

*Go and Make Disciples* argues that Puerto Rican evangelical salsa music developed as music of evangelization as a result of the marginalization of salsa musicians from the Protestant evangelical community. Rather than abandon their faith, the musicians' response was the development of a salsa music expression that combined evangelical faith with the "heavy" salsa tradition of 1970s salsa music. As music of evangelization, evangelical salsa's primary audience is non-believers judged to be in need of eternal salvation. Evangelical salseros address their perceived need of redemption via songs of salvation and the transformation of salsa music practices into methods of evangelization.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION:

#### *The Study of Salsa and Puerto Rican Evangelical Salsa Music*

On a summer weekday in 2001, I was driving on the popular *carretera número dos* (highway number two) on my way to Moca, Puerto Rico, when I noticed a Christian bookstore in a nearby northwestern town of the island. I decided to park the car and go inside the store to see what pertinent information I could find for the preliminary research I was conducting on evangelical salsa music. Walking through the store I became aware that I was in a typical Protestant evangelical bookstore because of the presence and store configuration of numerous Protestant bibles, evangelical devotional literature, and evangelical music compact discs. As usual, I browsed quickly through the book section before turning my attention to the music section. Once I made my way to the music section behind the glass window compartment, my browsing became more analytical as I carefully read the record titles and artists' names on the compact disc jackets looking for any clues that might indicate that I had run into an evangelical salsa album. Given my limited knowledge of the evangelical salsa movement, I quickly incorporated myself into the group of people who were asking questions while they held CDs in their hands.

Getting a closer look at the compact discs, I began asking for certain salsa records by artists that were somewhat familiar. Given that the sales clerk took the time to talk with me, I was able to identify myself as a University of Michigan graduate student doing initial research on evangelical salsa music. The topic sparked her interest and led to a lengthy conversation about the local evangelical music industry. During the conversation, the sales clerk described her reasons for no longer listening to salsa music. When I asked her why she was no longer a *salsera*, the thirty-something convert replied, “porque me recuerda de mi pasado” (“because it reminds me of my past”).<sup>1</sup> As the clerk went on, it became clear that what she meant by her “past” were the experiences she had dancing, dating, and drinking at night clubs that offered live salsa music. Salsa music thus reminded her of her lifestyle prior to religious conversion, a moment in her life that she and other converts would describe as “living in sin.” For her, salsa music was problematic because it evoked memories of sin.

As she went into greater detail about her conversion experience, the sales clerk began comparing evangelical salsa to adoration music, the musical form she now listens to as a Protestant convert.<sup>2</sup> Glancing at the compact discs hanging on the wall, she argued that the adoration music of artists such as Marcos Witt and Samuel Hernández is superior to salsa because of its beautiful worship lyrics and for being “música que te invita a escuchar” (“music that invites you to listen”).<sup>3</sup> She followed up her observation by asking with a bewildered face, “How can salsa music compare to this (adoration) music?” Then she looked at me and asked, “And what do you prefer?” The question was posed to me not

so much for my opinion but rather so I could confirm what she had said. When I told her of my predilection for salsa music, she gave me a startled look. Toward the end of the conversation, the sales clerk encouraged me to buy a CD of adoration music, but instead I chose to purchase an *Ahicam* orchestra CD, an evangelical salsa band from Isabela, a town on the northwestern coast of Puerto Rico.

The sales clerk's remark about salsa music represents a perspective that is commonly found among Puerto Rican Protestant evangelicals. Protestant evangelicals tend to see salsa not only as evoking memories of a sinful past but as synonymous with sin itself. In this view, salsa music cannot be disentangled from the social sins of dancing and drinking. In presenting salsa as sin, this evangelical discourse portrays salsa music as incompatible with the Protestant evangelical lifestyle and imprints on salsa music the image of a destructive past. As a consequence, Protestant evangelicals often use a person's involvement in salsa music culture as the basis for questioning the authenticity of her or his conversion experience and commitment to Christianity.

In contrast to the dominant Protestant evangelical view of salsa music, evangelical salsa musicians continue to embrace salsa music as a central component of their Puerto Rican identity. Their conversion experience has inspired these converts to reconceptualize the purpose of salsa music performance in light of the Protestant evangelical tradition. Furthermore, their conversion has also forced these artists to reexamine their musical careers as they contemplate how to market music with religious messages within the secular

salsa music industry. In doing so, their novel evangelical salsa performance has stirred a debate among Protestant evangelicals about the proper relationship between religion and music. Among the issues sparking this debate are (1) the place of salsa music in Sunday worship services and (2) the role of evangelization within the salsa music scene.

In an effort to understand this relationship between evangelical salsa musicians and the Protestant evangelical church, my doctoral dissertation focuses on the origin and development of evangelical salsa music culture. In what follows, I first provide a brief literature review of salsa music scholarship. In doing so, I summarize the key themes and address a major issue in this scholarship. Following this section, I lay out the key research questions that guided my scholarly exploration of this musical expression. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of both the theoretical framework and the interdisciplinary methodology I employed during my research.

## **SALSA SCHOLARSHIP**

Central to any academic study of salsa music are issues of definitions. “What is salsa?” While all scholars of music must define the music they are researching, defining what one means by salsa music is extremely important given the persistence of popular and academic controversies over whether salsa can be seen as a distinct musical genre or whether it is simply the commercialized repackaging of older forms of Latin popular music. Was the term “salsa” just a new commercial label for the Afro-Cuban music that first enjoyed a popularity boom in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s? Or did salsa’s emergence during the late 1960s constitute an original New York-based Puerto Rican musical expression? It is this debate that has shaped the intellectual direction of salsa music scholarship since the 1970s.

One early important work in the academic study of salsa is ethnomusicologist Joseph Blum’s seminal essay “Problems of Salsa Research.” Published in 1978, Blum’s essay bemoans the lack of research on salsa music and urges ethnomusicologists to focus their attention on two related areas of concern: (1) the need for Spanish language ethnomusicologists to take interest in African-derived music, particularly salsa music; and (2) the need for ethnomusicologists to concern themselves with social as well as musical issues, including the politics of popular music. On the first issue, Blum blames the

omission of salsa research from Spanish language musicology on Puerto Rican musicologists Francisco López Cruz and María Luisa Muñoz, whose published works minimized the musical impact of African culture on Puerto Rican music. On the second issue, Blum analyzes the influential salsa magazine *Latin New York* to demonstrate the role that salsa music has played in the construction of Puerto Rican ethnic identity. Furthermore, he argues that ethnomusicologists' adherence to a narrow musicological framework that examines "music issues," while ignoring the influence of "non-musical issues" on music cultures, has limited their understanding of popular music forms.

Music historian César Miguel Rondón published the first major manuscript focusing on salsa music, *El libro de la salsa (The Book of Salsa)*, in 1980.<sup>4</sup> Although not an academic work, *El libro de la salsa* remains the most comprehensive work with its historical overview of the emergence and development of salsa music in New York and of its subsequent diffusion throughout Latin America. Rondón focused his research on the issue of whether salsa music evolved naturally from earlier forms of Caribbean popular music or was just a new marketing label designed to sell a musical product. To answer this question, Rondón interwove musical and lyrical analysis of salsa music productions and performances with interviews of salsa musicians. Guiding this methodological framework was his contention that "to understand salsa presupposes an understanding of the social and cultural context for which this music was created." To fail to do so, Rondón contended, leads to "a fragile examination of salsa music" (Rondón 1980: 31).

Rondón's study located salsa music at the heart of social and political developments within working-class Latino barrios in New York City during the late 1960s and 1970s. Centering his discussion on salsa discography, Rondón argues that salsa music originated in the Latino barrios of New York City in the late 1960s and developed with the establishment of the Fania Record Company. Furthermore, Rondón highlights three defining characteristics of the salsa music expression: "(1) the use of the Afro-Cuban son as the rhythmic base of salsa music; (2) the use of strident and aggressive but not ambitious musical arrangements; and (3) the centrality of the marginalized barrio as its source of inspiration" (Rondón 1980: 26). It is this last characteristic that Rondón elaborates on in order to illustrate both how salsa music sound and song texts were fundamentally distinct from 1950s Afro-Cuban big band music and were reflective of the sociopolitical climate of Latino barrios during the 1960s and 1970s.

Jorge Duany's essay "Popular Music in Puerto Rico: Toward an Anthropology of Salsa" (1984) takes a similar barrio-centered perspective on the development of salsa. Duany describes salsa as "a hybrid genre," "a mixture of mixtures," and "an amalgamation of Afro-Caribbean traditions centered around the Cuban son", while also maintaining that salsa music is barrio music (Duany 1984: 187). But whereas Rondón argues that salsa music emerges from the Latino barrio, Duany sees this barrio as distinctively Puerto Rican. Duany also understands the Puerto Rican barrio to be both diasporic and island-centered rather than NewYork-specific. In other words, salsa music emerged from the

constant back-and-forth transnational migration of Puerto Ricans between Puerto Rico and New York: “In these comings and goings [...] little by little a hybrid Afro-Antillean genre was forged—strongly influenced by Cuban music—the style that we now call salsa” (Duany 1984: 197). Like Rondón, Duany asserts that salsa articulated the concerns of the barrio and posits that “salsa is, in any case, the unmistakable voice of the Puerto Rican barrio” (Duany 1984: 198).

Contrary to this perspective, ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel subscribes to the view that salsa emerged as nothing more than a new commercial label for recycled Afro-Cuban music rhythms. In “Puerto Rican Music and Cultural Identity” (1994), Manuel regards the argument that “salsa is an internally diverse genre” to be the weakest of the arguments made by the exponents of salsa music. Rather, Manuel asserts that salsa music varies very slightly, if at all, in musical content from Afro-Cuban music genres such as the *son*. To prove his point, Manuel argues that Puerto Rican folkloric music forms such as *bomba* and *plena* “do not play significant roles in the music of El Gran Combo and the Sonora Ponceña, the two most popular salsa bands based in Puerto Rico—and the bands which are often celebrated as most distinctively Puerto Rican” (Manuel 1994: 265). Therefore, Manuel contends that salsa music is the latest example of the appropriation of Cuban music by Puerto Rican musicians rather than a new Nuyorican-Puerto Rican musical expression. However, Manuel does not provide an in-depth musical analysis of salsa musical arrangements or a textual analysis of salsa song lyrics to support his view.

A different approach to salsa music research is provided by sociologist Angel Quintero-Rivera and ethnomusicologist Luis Manuel Alvarez in their essay “La libre combinación de formas musicales en la salsa” (“The Free Combination of musical forms in Salsa”). Their research focuses on salsa musical arrangements in order to highlight the differences between salsa and pre-salsa Latin music. In their analysis of Puerto Rico- and New York-based salsa music, Quintero Rivera and Alvarez argue that salsa is “a way of making music.” In other words, salsa represents those musical practices that musicians employ in order to make a unique use of various genres and rhythms—identified with specific ethno-racial and national cultures—in each salsa composition. In contrast to other forms of Latin music, these scholars contend that salsa music embodies democratic values because of the freedom musicians enjoy in executing musical practices. In his later work *Salsa, sabor y control*, Quintero Rivera further argues that the democratic values of salsa music can be heard in three specific practices: the structure of salsa musical arrangements (as mentioned above), the use of vocal improvisations, and the frequency of *descargas* (jam sessions). For example, Quintero Rivera provides a description of salsa musical arrangements that illustrates the thought process behind the music making practices of salsa musicians:

[Salsa’s] composers and musicians move freely and spontaneously between diverse traditional genres according to the sonority that they want to produce for the feeling or message they intend to communicate. Every salsa composition can represent, therefore, an unprecedented composition, and every record, a reunion of diverse *salsas*. The richness of their combinations is based on, precisely, its indetermination, the openings to creative possibilities. It is, then, an open music; open to the expression of

freedom and spontaneity, through which heterogeneity is expressed (Quintero Rivera 1998: 314).

Ethnomusicologist Marisol Berríos-Miranda, in her essay “Is Salsa a Musical Genre?”, explores the question of the nature of salsa music via an analysis of music rhythmic structures, interviews with Venezuelan and Puerto Rican musicians, and an examination of the musical concepts of “genre” and “style.” Berríos-Miranda distinguishes between “genre,” which she argues is rooted in content, and “style,” by which she means execution. In her view, salsa’s musical content, particularly its use of rhythm, contains a distinctive musical sound and thus distinguishes it from Afro-Cuban music. Like Rondón, Berríos-Miranda situates the origins of salsa music in New York but also credits Puerto Rican musicians with the creation of the salsa music genre. Finally, Berríos-Miranda acknowledges the political dimensions of salsa’s significance to the Puerto Rican community. “Puerto Rican musical identity and salsa,” she writes, “are inseparable, because Puerto Ricans in New York made salsa a political movement in the 1970s” (Berríos-Miranda 2002: 23). Despite this claim, Berríos-Miranda’s essay fails to further explore the political meanings or impact of Puerto Rican salsa music.

The most recent book-length study on salsa music is ethnomusicologist Christopher Washburne’s *Sounding Salsa*, an ethnographic account of salsa music performances in New York City during the 1990s. Washburne’s participation as a trombonist in the salsa musical performances and band rehearsals that he documents enhances his observer participant role throughout

his fieldwork. His analysis of these performances leads him to conclude that 1990s salsa musical performances are grounded in the fundamental processes at work in 1960s and 1970s New York salsa music. Washburne's study contends that the barrio is not only the birthplace of salsa but remains a central influence and reference point for present-day New York salsa: "Indeed, the role of place is central in shaping performance practice and aesthetics [in salsa]. The everyday social issues faced by residents of El Barrio, and the barrios of the South Bronx and Brooklyn—such as violence, the illicit drug trade, and economic and political marginalization—remain significant factors in how salsa in New York sounds, how it is performed, and how it is produced" (Washburne 2008: 7).

Washburne's ethnography of salsa bands points to *pueblo* as a central component of the New York barrio.<sup>5</sup> The ethnomusicologist uses the term to refer simultaneously to people, working-class common folk, and family as well as to argue that salsa musicians have *pueblo* in mind when producing and performing salsa music: "Pueblo is a dominant force behind how salsa is staged, dictating not only performance practice, but informing much of the discourse around the music and the musicians who make it" (Washburne 2008: 39). Pueblo is a crucial concept because it is through this specific working-class identity that the barrio becomes actualized in salsa music performance. Washburne contends as well that the notion of *pueblo* is the key to understanding the difference between pre-salsa Latin music and salsa. He points out that while pre-salsa Latin music was geared toward non-Latino audiences, salsa music identifies working-class residents of the barrio as its audience and thus produces a music influenced by

the legacy of the Barrio sixties' sociopolitical context. Building on previous salsa scholarship, Washburne depicts salsa music performance as a reenactment of barrio social life, such as live salsa music practices that take their inspiration from urban life.

In sum, several key themes come to the forefront in salsa music scholarship. First, the prevailing view is that salsa music is a mixture of diverse musical rhythms centered on the Afro-Cuban son and whose origin can be traced back to the 1960s New York City barrios. Indirectly or directly, the majority of the authors recognize the role of Puerto Rican musicians in originating salsa musical expression. Second, the authors point out that salsa music is a significant cultural marker in the identity construction of its adherents. For example, a prominent theme in salsa discography is patriotism, evident in songs expressing love for Puerto Rico and pride in Puerto Rican identity. Third, crucial to salsa identity politics is sixties' political activism. Fourth, the scholarship on salsa highlights the centrality of the barrio in salsa music performance and production as scholars note that barrio aesthetics are most prominent in its lyrical content as well as in its accompanying scorching, aggressive, up tempo sound.

This last theme is worth reflecting on in greater detail. As much as the literature highlights the significance of the barrio, its barrio portrait is rather incomplete due to its narrow presentation of cultural traditions. Too many times the discussion of barrio culture becomes a discussion about music and language. Yet, an important aspect of barrio culture is left out: religion. For that reason, it is

worthwhile to take into account this religious dimension for a more in-depth portrait of barrio life and salsa music culture.

Paying attention to religiosity is necessary given the multifaceted religious dimension of Puerto Rican society. The issue of religion has been addressed by scholars working in other academic fields. Although few, the published book-length studies on Puerto Rican religion have addressed diverse scholarly issues. Sociologist Ana Díaz-Stevens (1993) explores the relationship of the Puerto Rican community to institutional Catholicism in the state of New York. Nélica Agosto-Cintrón (1996) provides an insightful analysis of the cultural consequences of popular Catholicism and Protestantism on early 20<sup>th</sup> century Puerto Rican society. Protestant theologian Samuel Silva Gotay (1997) examines the political dimensions of both Protestantism and Catholicism in Puerto Rican society. Sam Cruz's (2005) ethnographic work highlights similar spiritual and cultural traits in Pentecostal and Santería religious practices. Samiri Hidalgo Hernández's (2006) work examines the role of religion in the black identity of Catholic and Protestant residents of Loíza, Puerto Rico. This body of literature suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the relationship between popular culture and religion.

## EL BARRIO

The New York City barrios that gave birth to salsa are also *barrios of cultural tradition*. A walk through the New York City barrios of Spanish Harlem (NYC), the South Bronx, and Bushwick (Brooklyn) clearly illustrate how these once predominantly Puerto Rican barrios—now more pan-Latino in population—give evidence of a strong sense of cultural nationalism among its residents. This cultural nationalism is made visible via the public display of national flags, ethnic parades and festivals, mom and pop business stores selling Latino music, and the daily street conversations uttered in English or Spanish dialects, mostly of the Latino Caribbean variant. Enhancing this cultural nationalist scenario are the many barrio murals honoring important public figures such as salsa singer Héctor Lavoe and Puerto Rican independence activist Lolita Lebrón.

A key characteristic of this cultural portrait is the *popular religiosity* practiced in the barrio. This religiosity can be best described as a multi-religious spirituality in which Christian and Afro-Caribbean religious practices are its most salient religious elements. These religious practices are an essential component of the faith propagated by the diverse religious institutions established throughout these working-class neighborhoods. Among the key religious institutional sources for barrio religiosity are Catholic parishes, Protestant storefront churches, and the

numerous *botánicas*, small stores specializing in *Santería* and *Espiritismo* religious practices.

Due to this institutional presence, the barrio is a major *site* for religious missionary activity. This means that religion has a marked public dimension in barrio street culture. Public religiosity is a vital element of everyday barrio life. Over the course of a week, it is common for barrio residents to have daily public encounters with religious agents such as Protestant street preachers handing out salvation tracts, Jehovah Witnesses canvassers promoting their denomination's religious magazine, and Catholic evangelists handing out prayer booklets.

The barrio is also a *site* of popular religious devotion. Expressions of popular religiosity can be seen in the window displays of small businesses, homes, and also in outdoor religious activities. Public devotions include Catholic processions such as the Three Kings Festival, murals depicting religious art like that of *The Last Supper* and *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, and the various public spaces that become sites of mourning where people pay their respects by lighting candles, leaving flowers and pictures, and offering prayers for their recently departed loved ones.

Similarly, Puerto Rican rural and urban barrios are also known for having a strong religious, especially Christian, presence within their geographical boundaries. One obvious Christian presence is that of Catholic Christianity. The symbols, devotions, rituals, and worship of Catholic Christianity are markedly visible in Puerto Rican barrio religiosity. In addition to Catholic chapels, one may see Catholic Mass being celebrated on the front porch of a home or a family

praying the rosary during a novena for the eternal rest of a family member. The Puerto Rican barrio landscape is also adorned with locally made images of *santos* (wood carved images of Christian figures), including images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Three Kings and saints such as Saint Anthony of Padua. These images, which are an integral part of Puerto Rican folklore, decorate the walls and *marquesinas* (front porches) of numerous barrios homes. Specifically, barrio residents put religious images on public display to commemorate Catholic feasts such as Christmas, Epiphany, and particular saints' days. Catholic images are important to Catholic spirituality because they convey the message of the Gospel through the depiction of biblical figures and events as well as through the saints who throughout the course of history have embraced the Gospel message, lived it out, and proclaimed it to others.

One notable Catholic tradition that is regularly practiced by Catholic barrio residents is that of bringing a Marian image from one house to another home. Participating household members are often heard commenting, "Hoy me traen la Virgen" ("Today they are bringing me the Virgin"). Symbolically, the devotion recalls the Virgin Mary's own journey to the house of Zechariah in order to greet her older cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant with child (Luke 1:39-56).<sup>6</sup> The infant in the womb of Elizabeth leapt for joy upon his mother hearing the greeting of the pregnant Blessed Virgin Mary. The pre-natal encounter with the unborn Christ resulted in the sanctification of John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth. Similarly, the "visit" of Mary to the faithful partaking in this Marian devotion is interpreted as a special blessing because Mary "brings" Christ into the home. As

part of this devotion, Catholics pray the rosary to meditate upon the mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ while they venerate the Marian image in their household.

Another common feature of barrio religiosity is religious oriented Puerto Rican folkloric music. *Jibaro* music ensembles perform festive religious music primarily during the Christmas season. Normally, ensembles perform songs that proclaim the birth of Christ and celebrate the coming of the Three Kings to worship the Divine Child Jesus. These songs are part of the repertoires that musicians sing during the parrandas they bring to different homes. In addition, *Jibaro* music is a key fixture in the misas de *Aguinaldos* (Christmas Carol Masses) that are celebrated in Catholic parishes in preparation for the feast of Christmas.

An alternative Christian presence in the Puerto Rican barrios is Protestant evangelicalism. One palpable sign of this form of Protestantism are the numerous storefront churches that abound in the Puerto Rican barrio landscape. These storefront churches are scattered in between houses, businesses, and at times, near housing projects.<sup>7</sup> Another way Protestant evangelicals makes their presence known is through evangelical crusades that take place within these rural and urban barrios. Evangelicals make their presence felt in activities such as evangelization campaigns or crusades. A familiar site for these services is the housing projects. In fact, several housing projects are well known for attracting itinerant preachers. Essential to these events are worship music, prayer, and testimonies. A key feature of these events is the “altar call.” Similar to the services that take place within houses of worship, religious leaders invite

individuals to “surrender” their lives to Christ. This aspect is indispensable because conversion is the primary goal of the event. Evangelicals also use these evangelistic events to raise funds for their churches.

The same barrio environments that nurtured this type of religiosity nurtured the type of Latin music that came to be known as salsa. While scholars have ignored the religious environment of the barrios that gave birth to salsa, salsa musicians have not shied away from publicly expressing religious convictions or discussing religious issues. Such expressions of faith have come from musicians who are ardently orthodox in their religious practice, from nominal practitioners of different faith traditions, and even from “spiritual shoppers” who explore various religions without settling on any specific one. In the early history of salsa, a number of bands recorded religious-inspired songs. These songs give voice to the religious traditions associated with the musical forms that preceded and influenced salsa music: *Santería* and Catholicism. While the incorporation of *Santería* lyrical narratives came about mostly through the use of the Afro-Cuban *guaguancó* in salsa recordings, the singing of Catholic songs is linked to the Christmas tradition of Puerto Rican *jíbaro* music.

By the mid-1970s, a new religious movement was evident within salsa music: evangelical salsa. Evangelical salsa emerged in the secular scene with the 1976 album *Reconstrucción (Reconstruction)* by the duo of pianist Richie Ray and singer Bobby Cruz. Originally based in Brooklyn, New York, Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz were musical pioneers of Latin *bugalú* and salsa music, the two dominant forms of Nuyorican musical expressions. In *Reconstrucción*, Ray and

Cruz expressed their newfound Protestant religious convictions through a collection of songs whose central theme was the need to repent from sin and accept personal salvation in Jesus Christ.

It was not, however, until the 1990s before evangelical salsa songs would appear with any frequency in secular salsa music productions. Artists such as Domingo Quinones, Alex D' Castro, Tony Vega, Jerry Rivera, Lefty Perez, and Giro were among a handful of *salseros* recording Christian tunes within their secular albums. Like Ray and Cruz, many of these artists publicly confessed having undergone a religious conversion and their evangelical songs gave voice to their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. More importantly, these individual converts formed alliances with each other based on their newfound faith and built a movement of evangelization that would transform both salsa music and Protestant evangelicalism.

## RESEARCH CONCERN

As I have argued, salsa scholarship has not given sufficient attention to the topic of religion, especially in light of its barrio origins. Instead, scholars have tended to repeat two popular assumptions about the relationship between salsa and religion. The first of these assumptions is that salsa and Christianity are incompatible because of Christianity's missionary impulse. The second is that since salsa music has strong roots in Afro-Cuban music culture, religious expression in salsa necessarily implies a spiritual adherence to Santería.

Rondón relied on the first assumption when he derided the evangelical salsa music of Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz as "a simple proselytizing instrument" that failed to reach an audience because "popular music does not accept this type of proposition, worthy of Hallmark cards and of the Chrysler Corporation's Christmas messages" (Rondón 1980: 305). By equating evangelization with the commercialization of Christmas, Rondón failed to explain why evangelization would necessarily be in opposition to salsa music performance. Most importantly, Rondón's shallow analysis ignored that salsa music and Christianity share a common concern: social justice.

The second assumption is evident in ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel's argument that salsa music primarily invokes the Santería religion: "If any religion is invoked, it is generally the Cuban-derived Santería rather than Christianity or

Puerto Rican espiritismo” (Manuel 1994: 273). As evidence, Manuel points to Hector Lavoe’s “El Todopoderoso” (God Almighty) as the best-known exception to this rule. However, a thorough examination of salsa recordings reveals that Lavoe’s “El Todopoderoso” is part of an extensive salsa lyrical tradition that invokes various Christian traditions. Rather than provide a correct account of the interplay between salsa and religion, Manuel’s comments further contributes to the stereotype of the salsa musician as a practicing *santero*.

Due to the dearth of scholarly research on Puerto Rican popular religiosity and the growing popularity of Puerto Rican popular religious music, my dissertation focuses on evangelical salsa music culture. Specifically, I explore the historical and musical development of the evangelical salsa music expression. In doing so, I pay close attention to music performance and music production. Guiding my research are the following questions: First, what circumstances led salsa musicians to embrace Protestant evangelicalism? Second, why did these musicians decide to perform salsa music for evangelistic purposes? Third, how do evangelical salsa musicians create a music that is faithful to Protestant evangelicalism while continuing to be a musical expression that is representative of Puerto Rican salsa musical culture?

To answer the above questions, I employ a methodological framework that includes intensive interviews, textual and musical analysis, and ethnographic observations. In doing so, I approach the study of evangelical salsa music as a *lived religion*. By *lived religion* I mean the various ways that people put into practice their religious beliefs. This emphasis on lived religion is essential

because evangelical salsa is not simply a musical expression but also a *music ministry*. As a consequence, to fully understand the purpose of evangelical salsa, one must view it as a music that seeks to minister the Christian message to non-believers.

Rather than privilege practice over belief, this approach seeks to understand both how believers invest their practices with meanings rooted in their faith tradition and what people do as a *community of faith*. Historian Robert Orsi's *Madonna on 115<sup>th</sup> Street* provides valuable insights for the study of lived religion. Orsi suggests that one way to study this aspect of religion is to ask people questions about what they believe since "a careful examination of what people say in light of what they do, and particularly in light of how and whom they worship, can give a historian a fairly good idea of the foundation of their culture." At the same time, Orsi argues for an emphasis on what people do because "people reveal who they are and the qualities they value in religious celebrations" (Orsi 1985: xvii). Following these suggestions, my research accentuates the religiosity of the evangelical salsa community in a number of ways. First, my methodological approach gives ample space to the musicians' individual voices so that their story is told from both an individual and community perspective. Second, and perhaps more importantly, by observing these musical ministries, I provide an analytical sociocultural portrait of their faith-based musical community. As a result, I emphasize that these musicians are not only converts to Protestant evangelicalism but also that they are seeking to evangelize within the boundaries of salsa musical culture.

With this objective in mind, I chose Puerto Rico as the key field site for this research. There are several reasons for this choice. First, Puerto Rico is currently the permanent residence and musical base of the majority of evangelical salsa musicians. Second, Puerto Rico continues to be the center of evangelical and secular salsa music production for both musicians residing in the island as well as artists living in New York and Florida. Evidence for this can be found in the numerous salsa albums that continue to be produced in Puerto Rican recording studios under the supervision of the island's most influential salsa music producers. Recording studios are thus key musical sites for the ethnographic observation of music performance and production. And third, Puerto Rico is an important musical center for the Latin evangelical music industry. Given that the island is home to numerous evangelical radio stations, bookstores, and pop music concerts, the local evangelical music scene is an important source for historical information on Puerto Rican Protestant evangelical religiosity.

In this dissertation I argue that a key reason for the development of evangelical salsa as a ministry of evangelization is the musicians' marginalization from the Protestant evangelical community. This ecclesial marginalization is the result of an ideology that, in equating salsa with sin, has led to the exclusion of salsa music from church based ministries and the evangelical music industry. Rather than abandon their new found faith, I show that evangelical salsa musicians opted instead to find innovative ways to evangelize the non-believer while validating the use of salsa music in a religious context. The result is the transformation of evangelical salsa into a Protestant evangelical barrio

expression in which salsa music practices are transformed into evangelistic methods while the cultural nationalistic defense of salsa musical culture is recast within a theology of salvation that proclaims the universality of Christ's redemption to people of all culture.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As noted earlier, a key component of my research methodology is the intensive interview. My key interviewees are the salsa musicians who have undergone a religious conversion to Protestant evangelicalism. I organized the format of these interviews according to the pattern of religious conversion itself, from the pre-conversion experience (life of sin) and the moment of conversion (turning from sin to God) to the post-conversion experience (life in Christ). In Christianity, conversion implies a change of mind that results from a person's encounter with God. Therefore, these interviews illustrate how the converts' adoption of Christian values and practice of Christian virtues leads to the reconstruction of their identity. Furthermore, the interviews enabled me to investigate the transformation of the musician both from non-believer to believer and from convert to evangelist. I also examine these oral history interviews as a collective discourse in order to acquire an overall perspective of the evangelical salsa movement.

Supplementing these interviews are my conversations with other individuals who have taken part in either the salsa music industry or Protestant

evangelicalism. I sought interviews with them because of their vast musical and theological knowledge. These interviews address issues such as the impact of evangelical salsa on the Protestant evangelical community, the marginalization of salsa within the evangelical community and secular salsa music industry, the historical development of evangelical salsa, and theological perspectives about music. Taken together, these interviews helped me to understand the historical development of evangelical salsa music from both a theological and musical perspective.

I complement the above-mentioned interview sessions with an analysis of evangelical salsa discography. The main focus of this analysis are song texts. I examine individual evangelical salsa song texts and identify the key evangelical themes present in this discography. This song text analysis is enhanced by my discussion of record cover images, musical arrangements, musical sound, and musical performance. In doing so, I demonstrate the musician's use of the evangelical record album as a tool of evangelization.

I also employ ethnographic methodology to explore the process by which a *community of faith* communicates its faith to other people in the public square, especially to those persons who do not subscribe to their religious convictions. Given that a key form of Christian interaction is evangelization, I conducted an *ethnography of evangelization*. An essential objective of my "ethnography of evangelization" was to comprehend the musician's role as *evangelist*. First, I acknowledge that evangelical salsa bands must be understood primarily as musical ministries rather than as dance orchestras. At the same time, both the

music ministry and dance orchestra perform salsa, which is, after all, essentially *música pal' bailador* (music for the dancer). I will thus keep in mind the words of ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger: “The ethnography of music is writing about the ways people make music” (Seeger 1992: 89).

The best way to understand how an evangelical salsa band makes religious music is to study the two essential components of evangelization: content and method. Both the content and method of evangelization are inseparable given that both are necessary for a successful evangelization. Accordingly, I first turn my attention to an analysis of the content of evangelization. I use the term “content” to refer to the evangelistic message itself. To study the “content” of evangelization, I analyze several types of discourses—prayers, song texts, testimonies, and preaching. In doing so, I note the key characteristics of evangelical theology and spirituality that are present in these public discourses. In addition, I examine how the theological concepts of sin, repentance, conversion, and salvation along with cultural nationalism become embedded in these evangelical salsa performances.

At the same time, I explore the method of evangelization, the techniques used to reach people with the proclamation of the gospel. The “method” includes the sites of evangelization, the organization of the message, and the medium used to carry out the message. Specifically, I observe the performance of the evangelical salsa ministry. I analyze the purpose and structure of the musical repertoire, the verbal discourses in between songs, such as “short sermons” on biblical passages, and the prayers at these events, for example, “altar call”

prayers. Finally, I examine the specific use of music performance in carrying out the evangelistic message.

A particular focus of my research is the role of the *sonero* (salsa singer) in evangelization. To be precise, I concentrate on the salsa singer's use of the *soneo* as an evangelistic method for preaching and testifying. Due to the important status of musical improvisation in salsa, I argue that this musical technique provides salsa with a unique contribution to Christian music performance. Good *soneros* [use italics for *soneros* consistently] are not just good improvisers that can rhyme; good *soneros* are also good story tellers. That is, *soneros* are able to create a narrative based upon musical event, people, song text, and in the case of evangelical salsa, biblical knowledge and Christian life experience. In her dissertation, ethnomusicologist Roberta Singer comments that New York salsa musicians describe musical improvisation as involving everything one knows musically (Singer 1983). Applying this definition of improvisation to evangelical *soneros*, I would add that evangelical salsa vocal improvisation also includes everything that the singer knows and believes about their faith tradition. As I study the *soneo*, I evaluate the use of this musical practice as an evangelistic method, particularly for the way it reveals the transformation of religion in the public square as well as how the *sonero's* acquired musical and biblical knowledge resonates with the barrio experience.

Engaging in ethnographic work forces one to reflect on one's role as a participant observer. Several ethnographers have provided valuable insight into ethnographic positionality. In *Writing Fieldnotes* (1995), Emerson, Fretz, and

Shaw reflect on the consequential presence of the ethnographer: “Consequential presence,’ often linked to reactive effects (that is, the effects of the ethnographer’s participation on how members may talk and behave), should not be seen as ‘contaminating’ what is observed and learned... these effects are the very source of that learning and observation.” Furthermore, the authors add that “relationships between the field researcher and people in the setting do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place” (Emerson et al. 1995: 3). Insightful as well is religious historian Thomas Tweed’s proposition that the ethnographer always stands somewhere when conducting fieldwork because knowledge “is always a sighting from a particular location” (Tweed 1997: 9).

Equally instructive is ethnomusicologist Mellonee Burnim’s reflection on whether research can be objective when undertaken by a cultural insider. In her research on African-American Pentecostal gospel music, Burnim argues that “the assumption that as a cultural insider, the learning process or social constraints that guided my research were identical to those of my research population denies the multidimensional quality inherent in the terms ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’” (Burnim 1985: 444). Instead, Burnim illustrates that as a participant observer of African-American religious culture she is not only a cultural insider (Black, musician) but also a cultural outsider (Methodist, student researcher). Moreover, her work implies that researchers should reflect on their insider/outsider roles and discern how these roles are interrelated and also contribute to the direction of the research project.

Like Burnim, I came to this research as someone who can claim both an insider and outsider status with my research interviewees. In a general sense, both my Puerto Rican and Christian identities provide my participant observer role with an insider standing. As a Puerto Rican, salsa musical culture was an integral part of my family upbringing. Conversely, being a Christian means that praying, reading sacred scripture, and visiting a Church to worship God are not foreign to my personal makeup. Therefore, my ethnic and religious identities allowed me to establish a sense of familiarity, comfort, and trust with the musicians. My familiarity with the above-mentioned Puerto Rican and Christian traditions means as well that there are certain cultural and religious activities that as an ethnographer I was comfortable with.

However, in a more specific sense, my ethnic and religious identities mark me off as a cultural and religious outsider as well. For example, my specific Puerto Rican diasporic identity—I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York—means that I do not share a lived island experience with many of the musicians, some of whom might consider me a Nuyorican rather than a Puerto Rican. It also means that I speak Spanish with a different Puerto Rican accent and have a different view of what constitutes Puerto Rican culture. At the same time, while I am familiar with and actively participate in salsa music culture, I cannot say that the same holds true in regards to my involvement in the island-based salsa music scene. Yet, my cultural intimacy with the New York salsa scene and Puerto Rican diasporic culture provides me with a cultural backdrop to the events that I analyzed as a participant observant during my fieldwork in Puerto Rico.

Finally, while I am a Christian, I am a specific kind of Christian—a Catholic—, which marks me as an outsider to the Protestant evangelical community. As a result, there is much in Protestant evangelical worship, spirituality, and theology that is unfamiliar territory for me. And while there are some important overlaps between the two forms of Christianity, there are also significant theological differences. It is the latter that marked me off as a religious other, and in the eyes of some of the interviewees, as a non-Christian. And being marked as a non-Christian means I am seen as an unsaved soul in need of evangelization. Ultimately, some musicians attempted to “convert” me during my correspondence with them. Yet, rather than interpret their evangelization as an ethnographic distraction during my fieldwork, I saw these moments of interaction as providing further insight into the Protestant notion of evangelization, especially in light of Catholic-Protestant relations in Puerto Rico. It is precisely because of these possible scholarly insights that I welcome the opportunity to disclose and discuss my religious identity.

## **MY THESIS**

What follows is a brief outline of my dissertation. In the following chapter, “The History of Evangelical Salsa Music,” I explore the key historical events that led to the development of the Puerto Rican Protestant evangelical salsa movement. Chapter three, “‘Before I was... But Now That I Now Christ’: Conversion Narratives of Puerto Rican Protestant Evangelical Salsa Musicians,”

is an analysis of the major issues in the autobiographical conversion narratives of salsa musicians. My discussion of these issues is based on my intensive interviews with musicians. The next chapter, “For the Salvation of Souls’: Themes in Evangelical Salsa Discography,” is an examination of how evangelical salseros utilize the record album as a tool of evangelization. Particularly, my analysis focuses on evangelical salsa song texts. Chapter 5, “I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel’: The Evangelical *Sonero* as Evangelist,” explores the function of the *sonero* in evangelizing the audience during live evangelical salsa music events. In the concluding chapter, “Conclusion,” I conclude the dissertation with a brief discussion of the main findings of my dissertation and the contribution this research makes to various academic fields.

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<sup>1</sup> *Salsero/a* is a term used to refer to someone who is either an aficionado of salsa music or someone who is a musical performer of salsa music such as a musician or dancer.

<sup>2</sup> The term “adoration music” is used by Evangelicals to refer to music whose sole purpose is to praise God.

<sup>3</sup> Marcos Witt and Samuel Hernández are prominent evangelical artists in the Latin evangelical music scene. Marcos Witt, of Mexican descent, is a singer and pastor in the Protestant mega church led by popular televangelist Joel Olsteen. Samuel Hernández is a Puerto Rican evangelical singer based in Puerto Rico. The music of both artists can be best described as evangelical pop ballad.

<sup>4</sup> Rondón’s work has been recently translated into English by Frances Aparicio with Jackie White. This new edition includes a preface by Aparicio and a concluding chapter by the author. For the English translation, see *The Book of Salsa: A Chronicle of Urban Music From the Caribbean to New York City* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

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<sup>5</sup> Washburne borrows the term “pueblo” from Mayra Santos-Febles work on salsa music. See Mayra Santos-Febres (1997)

<sup>6</sup> This biblical event is recorded in Luke 1: 39-56. The Gospel of Luke is one of the four Gospels that are part of the New Testament of the Christian Bible. The other three Gospels are the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, and the Gospel of John. See *Catholic Scripture Study International Holy Bible Revised Standard Edition Catholic Version* (North Carolina: Saint Benedict Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> For a historical overview of the different Protestant denominations in Puerto Rico see Silva Gotay (1997).

## Chapter 2

### The History of Evangelical Salsa

I was in Vic “El Chevere” Rodriguez’ apartment in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. As I waited for him to get off the phone, I noticed he was in a heated conversation about the origins of salsa music with a fellow evangelical salsa musician. Vic was making his case about the Puerto Rican origins of salsa music. Upon getting off the phone, Vic passionately related to me how important it is to document the unique contributions Puerto Rican musicians have made to Latin music. During our ride to Viera Discos in Saturce, Vic continued to voice his frustration with the many people who are unaware of Puerto Rican musical contributions, thus not giving these musicians the proper credit they deserve for the historical development of Latin music. Specifically, Vic’s concern was about salsa and the music he had dedicated his life promoting: evangelical salsa music. It was important to document these musical achievements because their musical innovations led to new ways of making and conceptualizing Latin music.

Several questions guide my inquiry into the history of salsa. (1) How did salsa emerge and how did it relate to evangelical salsa music? (2) When did evangelical salsa music originate? (3) What are the key defining moments in the

development of evangelical salsa? Is salsa music a commercial label or a musical expression? (4) Who are the pioneers of this musical expression? For this chapter, I draw specifically on interviews with musicians Richie Ray, Bobby Cruz, Billy Rosado, and music promoters Richie Viera and Víctor Rodríguez.

Evangelical salsa movement originated in Puerto Rico during the mid-1970s. Its emergence coincided with the height of the “salsa boom” period.<sup>1</sup> But rather than a departure from barrio salsa, evangelical salsa represented a musical continuity with the urban barrio context from which the original salsa expression emerged. Evangelical salsa developed as a result of a series of significant historical events in the 1960s and 1970s: the religious conversion of popular salsa musicians Richie Ray & Bobby Cruz, the musical release of their record *Reconstrucción*, believed to be the first full-length evangelical salsa album, and the conversion of the relatively unknown salsa singer Elizer Espinosa. These events provide this musical expression with its “defining moments.” Evangelical salsa would eventually become a missionary movement of urban popular music whose field of evangelization constitutes the Puerto Rican barrio. What gave birth to these events was the musicians’ acceptance, assimilation, and application of one of Christianity’s central claims: that the most important historical world event is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

By “historical event,” I do not mean simply to suggest an incident that took place at a certain moment in the past. Rather, I am thinking of those particular moments that changed the course of history and continue to shape the historical memory and collective identity of a given community. Here I apply Protestant

theologian C. H. Dodd's definition: "An event is historical when it combines two elements: it 'happened' and, what's more, it took on such relevant significance for the people involved that it had to be told."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, I employ Church historian Raneiro Cantalamessa's notion of historical events. Preaching on the Paschal Mystery of Christ, Cantalamessa points out how this Christological event is "historicized" through faith:

When you really think of it, it is precisely this meaning of faith which somehow transforms the death and resurrection of Christ into "historical" events, if by "historical" fact we refer not merely to the plain event but to the fact and its meaning. There are countless facts which really took place, and yet are not "historical" because they left no trace in history and did not arouse any interest or give birth to anything new... In this sense, Christ's death is the most "historical" event in world history because it influenced humanity more than any other event" (Cantalamessa 2006: 13).<sup>3</sup>

In light of the above definition, a religious conversion to Christianity can become a historical event. Although there are numerous conversions to Christianity every year, not every conversion leaves behind a legacy with a public impact on religion and society. But among those Christian conversions that have become "historical events," the conversions of famous converts Saint Paul of Tarsus, Saint Augustine, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, William Wilberforce, and Nicky Cruz, among others, stand out exactly because of the legacy their religious experiences have left behind.<sup>4</sup> Among the "new births" resulting from these conversions have been spiritual movements, apostolates, religious orders, and ministries. In the case of Saint Paul, the Catholic Church considers his conversion of such great theological and historical importance that it annually celebrates a liturgical feast known as "The Conversion of Saint Paul"

on January 25. As to the evangelical salsa community, members often recall the conversions of those musicians who played a fundamental role in the formation of their musical movement, such as Richie Ray, Bobby Cruz, and Eliezer Espinosa.

Similarly, musical records can also become historical events. Not all recordings do so precisely because many of them have very limited musical appeal and are quickly forgotten by music aficionados, while other records never have the commercial opportunity to impact musical culture nor the public memory of the record consumer. Yet those recordings that do become “historical events” introduce new rhythms, musical styles, musical genres, artists, movements, and even fads. In other words, “historical” albums leave behind a musical legacy. Such is the case with the *Reconstrucción* album. Along with classic salsa albums such as *Siembra*, *Asalto navideño*, *Atrevido y diferente*, the *Reconstrucción* album has left an indelible mark on salsa music.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Salsa y control***

New York-based Fania Records is most often credited with the promulgation of salsa music. While Fania was instrumental in the worldwide diffusion of salsa music, the record label was also largely responsible for the confusion over the origins and nature of the genre. Selling a musical product with the salsa label became more important than defining salsa as a unique musical expression. Eventually, many different forms of “Latin music” and

orchestras became branded as salsa even when their music had pre-salsa origins. Rondón notes the confusion resulting from the commercialization of salsa music:

But let us focus on a very important detail: before the salsa boom, this music moved easily and freely within the barrio. The media did not pay much attention to it, the journalists and experts rejected it, and the rest of the population—that sector that never takes into consideration the concerns of the working class—totally ignored it. At this juncture, salsa was not subject to definitions or classifications: it was not trendy, and therefore it was worthy of being part of the cultural industry. Performers could sing just as easily a new son or an old bolero or move from one musical extreme to the other, without having to worry about the senseless restrictions that would be imposed later. Authenticity as the defining characteristic of this music, and the name salsa did not even exist. Once the boom arrived, it took that authenticity away. Singers became stars, and the music had to be marketed under particular trends or styles that were invented overnight. The industry, rather than taking care of salsa as an authentic expression, began to busy itself with dressing it up in the trendy forms of the moment. Thus, Tito Puente, Machito, and Celia Cruz became part of salsa, along with Billo, Los Melódicos, and Los Corraleros del Majagual. All Caribbean music was conflated as salsa, an obvious nonsense, such as “Pérez Prado is the old salsa” and “Daniel Santos is the prophet of salsa,” circulated. Eddie Palmieri and Oscar D’ León were thrown together with Damirón and Leo Marini. This created something like a flea market where, because everything was worth the same price, everything was a bargain. (Rondón 2008: 26).

Fania’s use of the term salsa has been linked with the Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz duo, a band originally based in Brooklyn, New York. The bandleader Ricardo Ray Martínez, artistically known as Richie Ray, was the band’s musical director, pianist, and musical arranger. Born in 1945 to Puerto Rican parents in Brooklyn, the second-generation Puerto Rican grew up speaking mostly English and very little Spanish in his Hoyt Street neighborhood. A self-described “Nuyorican,” Ray’s multicultural background exposed him to diverse musical

influences that he would incorporate into his unique style of piano playing and musical arrangements.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Ray's lead singer Bobby Cruz was a Puerto Rican migrant from Hormigueros, a town in southwestern Puerto Rico. Cruz and his family moved to Brooklyn during the 1950s. Although now widely known as a singer, Cruz began his professional career as a guitar player in the orchestra he helped form with Ray in 1963. His musical transition from guitar player to lead singer officially took place in the *Jala Jala Boogaloo* album.

Ray and Cruz's duo was one of the new groups to arrive on the New York Latin music scene in the 1960s. First, Ray and Cruz were an integral part of the early 1960s *Latin bugalú* era, along with Joe Cuba, Johnny Colón, Joe Batán, and others. *Latin bugalú* represented an important musical transition from the 1950s big band Afro-Cuban music to the salsa musical expression. Deemed a combination of African American popular music and Afro-Cuban dance music, *Latin bugalú* can be considered the first wave of musical expression of the Nuyorican community of the postwar period. Writing about the hit song "Bang Bang," performed by the Joe Cuba Sextet, Juan Flores (2000: 82) places *Latin bugalú* within its sociocultural context:

As "Bang Bang" illustrates, the defining theme and musical feature of boogaloo is precisely this intercultural togetherness, the solidarity engendered by living and loving in unison beyond obvious differences. Its emergence coincided with the historical moment of the Civil Rights movement and the coming-of-age of the first generation of Puerto Rican youth born and raised in New York City. Latin music expert and producer Rene Lopez calls boogaloo "the first Nuyorican music," and a consensus has gathered in concurrence with that description. It is the sound that accompanied the teenage years of the Young Lords and of the Nuyorican poets

in the later 1960s; Piri Thomas's groundbreaking novel *Down These Mean Streets* was published in 1967. Like those experiences, it attests to the guiding, exemplary role of African American culture and politics for that generation of Puerto Ricans growing up in New York. "Bang Bang" is an explosion of excitement arising from that cultural conjunction, the linking of Puerto Rican backgrounds with the African American influences so prevalent in all aspects of social life, including of course their music and dance.

Ray and Cruz can be considered the pioneers of the Latin *bugalú*. Ray, in fact, argues that he was the musician who created the genre. According to Flores (2000: 84), "discussions of origins always stir up debate and dissension, but if Richie Ray wasn't in fact the first he is certainly responsible for giving music called boogaloo a certain standard of fascination and quality, which little of what followed was able to live to." Despite Ray's innovation, he asserts that other musicians profited more from Latin *bugalú* than he did. In seeing their musical success, Ray turned his attention elsewhere: the *jala jala* rhythm. *Jala Jala* is a rhythm that *El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico* is credited for having created and popularized during the 1960s. Ray noticed *jala jala's* popular appeal and decided to jump on the bandwagon. The song proved a smashing success. "Richie's Jala Jala" continues to be one of the group's most popular tunes.

Ironically, "Richie's Jala Jala" led to a conversation about what to call their music. During a musical tour in Venezuela, Ray and Cruz were interviewed by a disc jockey. Ray recalls that a key question during the 1966 interview revolved around was about the nature of the group's music. The disc jockey asked this question because Ray's and Cruz' music represented a different and unique type of Latin dance music. During our interview session in the Avernia Hotel prior to

his concert at Madison Square Garden's Wa Mu Theatre, Ray remembered using the word "ketchup" to refer to his group's mixture of musical rhythms:

We had an interview, a radio interview with this guy in Venezuela and then, he was asking us, "Guys, what is it about your stuff, it's different, it's not the same as Benny Moré and this other stuff, that classical stuff, what is that, and I didn't speak good Spanish at the time and I said, "ketchup." *Como el ketchup* (like the ketchup). And then he asked Bobby, "What the hell is Richie talking about?" And then Bobby explained to him it's like *el sofrito* [chopped onion and garlic fried in oil], when you make *el sofrito*, you get all these spices and you mix it up and that is what it gives the food the flavor. Because you have different tastes combined together and that's why I said ketchup because ketchup is what you put on the hamburger that would be very bland without anything on it. The ketchup gives it *un sabor* (a flavor)... As we explain that to him..., he says, "Oh yeah, *la salsa como los condimentos, los sabores*" ("Oh yeah, salsa is like the spices and the flavors"), and the guy goes nuts and says, "¡¡¡La música de Richie Ray y Bobby Cruz es salsa!!!" (The music of Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz is salsa!!!) and he kept saying that for the rest of the day.

That the disc jockey labeled their music "salsa" was not lost on the artists. Cruz decided to use the word "salsa" in an album precisely to officially define his music. Looking closely at the 1969 album cover of *Los durísimos (The Strong Ones)*, one notices that the album contains another subtitle as well: *Salsa y control*. In the midst of our discussion on the genesis of salsa music, Cruz explained what he meant by the subtitle:

The next day, actually what brings the name across, and I would not have given it a second thought except that when we started to play in Venezuela, that was the interview, and the following day we were playing, the young people came in bunches and said, "Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz, salsa!!!" And that's when I said, "Oh my God, *esto se puede pegar*" (this could become a hit). We had already recorded *Los Durísimos*. OK. So I called, over here (New York), Pancho Crystal who was the record producer. And I told Pancho Crystal, "Listen, I don't want to call it *Los durísimos*, I want to call it *Salsa y control*." Let me tell you why we call it *salsa y control* because the Lebrón Brothers made a *disco después de*

*nosotros* (a record album after us), *Salsa y control*, but they don't know why, they don't know why it's called "salsa y control." See, the Venezuelans, the youth in Venezuela in '66 and '67, if they wanted us to play the fast music they scream "salsa" but if they wanted *un bolero* (a bolero) to dance, they would say "control." So that's why we called the *disco* (record album) *Salsa y control*.

The term "salsa y control" is most familiar to salsa fans as the title of the most popular song of the Lebrón Brothers, another Brooklyn-based Puerto Rican salsa band. Yet, Cruz's use of the term to define a musical expression is telling. According to Cruz, the album contains four dance tracks and four boleros. While "salsa" is used as a descriptive term for the dance tracks, the word "control" is used as a label for the boleros. Already implied in this phrase is that "salsa" is the opposite of "control"—free, loose, and spontaneous. That is, the term "salsa" suggests the freedom to combine diverse rhythms in a musical arrangement.

The use of the word "salsa" to define their music made sense to the artists. For one thing, their music was different from the Afro-Cuban music of the 1950s. While not denying the Afro-Cuban base of their music, Ray and Cruz are quick to point out that they do not play Afro-Cuban music. They acknowledge that salsa moves in a totally different musical direction than that of Afro-Cuban music. Furthermore, Ray argues that salsa music would not be possible without New York's Puerto Rican community. In making this argument, Ray recalled a gathering of Latin musicians in a New York musicians' union:

I'm gonna tell you why it wouldn't happen except for the Puerto Ricans. Cubans are legalistic. They are traditionalists. When we started doing our salsa, a Cuban magazine called *Farándula*, the editor's name was Bernardo Eldia, he made a report on us and he said, "These guys are adulterating and perverting our music. They should stop what they are doing because eventually our

music is going to disintegrate and disappear.” And we used to go to the musicians’ union—Local 802—where all the musicians used to meet—a lot of Cubans there and they would smoke cigars and what not and they would criticize us *porque cruzábamos la clave*, because we would fool around with *la clave* and turn it around and do things they would never do! Because they see music a certain way and we were like reformers. We said, “No, why does it have to be that way? Let’s turn the clave around, in the middle of the song, and they would go like “Ahhh!!! How could you do that??!!” And Jala Jala, when Bobby goes, “*Y te traigo pa’ tí, ta ta,*” *entra cruzao* (“*And what I bring you,*” the clave comes in crossed) but we did it in such a way that it doesn’t bother you, you know, it’s acceptable. But for years they were telling us, “*Jala Jala está cruzao. No, no uds. no saben de la clave, está cruzao* (“*Jala Jala is crossed. No, no you guys do not know of the clave, its crossed.*)” They’re traditionalists.

In recalling this incident, Ray makes a comparison between Puerto Rican and Cuban musicians, depicting the latter as “legalistic.” This term is not commonly used by musicians to describe music or musicians. The fact to keep in mind is that the Richie Ray who is recalling this incident is not the same person who was engaged in that conversation. That is, Ray is now an evangelical pastor whose remembrance of this musical incident is filtered through evangelical vocabulary. “Legalism” denotes the rigid attitude of the Jewish Pharisees, who were constantly opposed to the ministry of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Their rigidness consisted in a strict observance of the Mosaic Law so that when Christ was seen performing a healing miracle on the Sabbath, the Pharisees would denounce Jesus Christ for not keeping the Sabbath.

In musical terms, “legalism” refers to the attitude that restricts the musician from any innovative experiment that “violates” the “laws” of a musical genre. In this case, the Cuban musicians felt that Ray’s arrangements departed from an authentic interpretation of Afro-Cuban music. For his part, Ray’s argument was

precisely that he was not performing Afro-Cuban music. Rather, his goal was to produce a free-flowing music that used Afro-Cuban tradition as one of its key sources for his musical experimentation. A careful perusal of the Ray and Cruz's discography shows that the sources for their musical experiments included Afro-Cuban, Afro-American, Puerto Rican, classical as well as other traditions.

To be fair, this "legalistic" musical attitude is not unique to the Cuban musicians who opposed Ray and Cruz's fusion. A similar approach can be found among musical and cultural purists who see any mixture or amalgam as threatening the purity of a given tradition. Yet, the distinction helps us to see a difference between the philosophy of the older generation of Cuban musicians and the new generation of Puerto Rican musicians that crossed paths in 1960s New York City. Musical experimentation became one of the hallmarks of New York-Puerto Rican salsa music. The so-called "mongrel music," a derogatory term used for salsa music, would combine disparate sources, aggressive danceable arrangements, scorching brass sections, and song texts chronicling barrio life.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Conversion of Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz**

After Ray and Cruz moved to Puerto Rico, the duo participated in musical competitions as well as record albums. During their residence on the Island, the duo encountered Pentecostal Christianity. Having undergone personal problems, Ray would be the first to embrace the new faith. Crucial to his

conversion was the Nicky Cruz Crusade that came to Puerto Rico in the 1970s. During this crusade, Ray accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

The Nicky Cruz Crusade was a much anticipated event given the evangelist's popularity. Born in Puerto Rico, Cruz became a household name in Protestant evangelicalism following the publication of his autobiographical conversion narrative *Run Baby Run*. The book chronicles Cruz's journey from a Brooklyn Mau Mau gang member to his conversion during Assembly of God Pastor David Wilkerson's crusade. Cruz's religious experiences were praised as one of the most noteworthy conversions in the history of Christianity by evangelicals such as Billy Graham. *Run Baby Run* continues to be a popular autobiographical conversion narrative among Protestant evangelicals and is a key reason why Cruz is one of the most popular Puerto Rican evangelicals.

Ray's embrace of religion did not meet with the approval of his lead singer Bobby Cruz. First, Cruz himself was a self-proclaimed atheist. Second, Cruz felt that Ray's embracing of religion violated their pact of not promoting either religion or partisan politics. The musicians agreed to this pact because they felt that any public support of a particular religion or political party would greatly limit their fan base.

Cruz's disapproval eventually translated into Ray's dismissal from the group. The singer presented his pianist with a choice: religion or music. Although Ray explained to Cruz that his newfound faith was not about "religion," Cruz replaced Ray with another pianist. However, the new pianist did not meet

the musical standards set by Ray, whose absence was noted by the band's demanding fans. Eventually, Cruz would bring back Ray to the band.

Yet, the turning point in their relationship came about with Cruz's own conversion. As Cruz recalls his conversion experience, he asked himself what had happened to his musical partner. Ray's religiosity confused and disturbed him. Cruz could not understand how a man who once had sexual relationships with many women, would now want to spend any opportunity he had to preach to them about Jesus Christ. As he thought about it, Cruz recalls hearing the words, "Richie is OK, the one that needs to change is you." This experience was the beginning of many visions and dreams that would lead to Cruz's conversion to evangelical Christianity.

While few evangelical salsa musicians know the exact details of the conversions of Ray and Cruz, they are certainly unanimous in understanding its significance: their conversions opened the "doors" for further salsa musicians in evangelical circles. Once it became public knowledge that Ray and Cruz had converted, it inspired other artists to think of a possible future in Protestant Christianity. This was a common view among salsa musicians because these conversions signified that there could be a harmonious integration of evangelical Christianity with a career as a salsa musician.

Crucial to this "opening of the doors" was the 1976 release of the album *Reconstrucción*. Consisting of ten songs, *Reconstrucción* is an evangelical salsa album that reflects Ray's and Cruz's conversions. The most memorable hit of this album is "Juan en la ciudad" ("John in the City"), a song based on the Lukan

parable of the Prodigal Son. The merengue-type arrangement presents conversion to the Christian life as a joyful occasion. In general, the songs touch upon the themes of conversion, vanity, and the Christian life.

### ***La Orquesta del Caserío***

Another key historical event in the development of evangelical salsa music was the conversion of the signer Eliezer Espinosa. Espinosa was born in the town of Yabucoa and raised in the neighboring town of Bayamón, Puerto Rico. Espinosa had a number of relatives who were active in the Pentecostal Christian tradition. As for his musical interests, Espinosa showed an early affinity for both salsa and trio music. The inspiration to become a salsa singer came from established groups such as El Gran Combo, Cortijo y su Combo, and singer Chamaco Ramírez. Early on his life, Espinosa struggled with drug addiction. His battle with drug addiction reportedly spanned seven years from age 12 to 19.

Due to his drug addiction, Espinosa sought spiritual refuge in a Disciples of Christ Church. This religious conversion helped him break away from his drug habit. As a result, Espinosa would embark on a mission to save souls for Jesus Christ. Espinosa's evangelistic mission came via music. This missionary zeal inspired Espinosa to establish *la Orquesta Apocalipsis* (the Apocalypse Orchestra) in 1972. According to several sources, this orchestra became the first salsa band dedicated to performing evangelical salsa music. Although Espinosa planned to record a full-length evangelical salsa record album, *Orquesta*

*Apocalipsis* eventually only recorded a 45 single. The single entitled, “Cristo viene pronto” (“Christ Will Come Soon”), invites its listeners to move away from atheism to the acknowledgment in God the Creator. The call-and-response structure of the song focuses on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ:

*El hombre necio en su corazón dice que no hay un Dios  
Pues vive ciego en un error que lo lleva a la destrucción.*

*Estrillo:*

*Hombre necio abre tus ojos y mira las obras de mi Dios  
Hombre necio abre tus ojos y mira la grandeza de mi Salvador  
Cómo es que ignoramos la existencia del gran Rey  
Si por dondequiera vemos sus obras El hizo la luna y el sol*

*Estrillo:*

*Hombre necio abre tus ojos y mira las obras de mi Dios  
Hombre necio abre tus ojos y mira la grandeza de mi Salvador*

*Coro:*

*Cristo viene pronto, por segunda vez*

*Soneos:*

*Viene a buscar a los escogidos, aquellos todos que le fueron fiel.  
Cuando suene la trompeta y se abran los cielos, los muertos en  
Cristo resucitarán primeros.*

*Gloria a Dios que viene en las nubes, amigo no te vayas a perder.*

The ignorant man in his heart says there is no God  
Because he lives blindly in an error that leads him to destruction.

*Refrain:*

Ignorant man, open your eyes and see the works of my God  
Ignorant man, open your eyes and see the greatness of my Savior  
How can we ignore the existence of a King  
If everywhere we see his works, He made the moon and the sun.

*Refrain:*

Ignorant man, open your eyes and see the works of my God  
Ignorant man, open your eyes and see the greatness of my Savior

*Chorus:* Christ is coming soon, for the second time

*Soneos:*

He will come to get the chosen, those who were faithful.  
When the trumpet sounds and the heavens are opened, the dead in  
Christ will resurrect first.

Glory to God who comes in the clouds, friend do not get lost  
(perdition).

Despite the recording of this song, *Orquesta Apocalipsis's* existence was short lived in the evangelical music scene. The change in plans was directly influenced by the remarks made by a fellow Pentecostal believer. Told that God did not like this type of music (salsa), Espinosa at the time interpreted this comment as a prophetic statement from God. Thus, he dissolved his band and joined the orchestra of trumpet player Jorge Marcano.

However, Espinosa would shortly overhear the news that the man who uttered “the prophetic statement” was arrested for domestic violence. This incident led Espinosa to rethink his earlier decision to disband his evangelical salsa orchestra. After some reflection, Espinosa visited the man in prison, forgave him for his comments, and paid his bail. Sensing that the man was not speaking on behalf of God, Espinosa restarted his evangelical salsa orchestra.

Espinoza's new band was given the name *Orquesta Revelación* (The Revelation Orchestra). Yet, Espinosa would again be criticized by Protestant evangelicals. This time the criticism was that his band was “*una orquesta de caserío*” (“an orchestra from the housing projects”). Son-in-law Billy Rosado remembers that evangelicals would tell Espinosa, “Tú no vas para ningún lao' con esa banda. Porque la Orquesta tuya parece una orquesta de caserío” (“You're not going anywhere with that band. Because that orchestra is an orchestra from the housing projects.”) But rather than disband, Espinosa responded to the comment by turning his musical ministry's attention to the public housing projects. He understood that God was calling him to evangelize this sector of the population. Espinosa's evangelistic campaigns targeting public

housing communities became a hallmark of his evangelical salsa music ministry. Other evangelical salsa ministries followed Espinosa's example in ministering to housing projects throughout Puerto Rico.

## **Conclusion**

The conversions of Richie Ray, Bobby Cruz, and Elizer Espinosa along with the recording of the *Reconstrucción* album are among the key historical events that shaped the Puerto Rican Protestant evangelical salsa movement. The conversion of Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz paved the way for other secular salsa artists to convert as well. Although relatively unknown, Espinosa's story can serve as a window to understand another emerging pattern in the evangelical salsa movement: musicians who return to the religion of their parents after spending years away from this faith tradition. In addition, *Reconstrucción* would be the first of many evangelical salsa albums produced with the aim of saving souls for Jesus Christ. It is to the artists behind this music that I turn to in the next chapter. Before analyzing their music, it is imperative we understand the converts responsible for this distinct form of salsa music.

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<sup>1</sup> "Salsa boom" refers to the popular diffusion of commercial salsa music during the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> Dodd's definition of historical events takes place within his discussion of the historicity of the New Testament Gospels. His point is that the New Testament records historical truths about the person of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Cantalamessa makes this remark as part of his annual Lenten preaching to the papal household (at the time, the office of Peter was held by Pope John Paul II). As official preacher to the papal household, the Cappuchin friar chose to preach on the topic of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. One of his central arguments is that the death of Christ is the most historical event because it influenced the most people in history. Cantalamessa himself cites the work of C.H. Dodd in this second meditation.

<sup>4</sup> Nicky Cruz is the ex-gang member who became a Protestant evangelical minister after undergoing a profound moral conversion experience in Brooklyn. A native of Puerto Rico, Cruz' autobiographical narrative *Run Baby Run* has become a popular conversion story among Protestant evangelicals.

<sup>5</sup> These albums were important in defining future trends in salsa musical practice. For example, Eddie Santiago's *Atrevido y diferente* (Daring and Different) was instrumental in setting the trend for the romantic salsa movement of the mid-1980s. The success of this salsa album led to albums similar in music arrangements, production, record covers, and song texts.

<sup>6</sup> Nuyorican is a term used to describe Puerto Ricans born and/or raised in New York.

<sup>7</sup> According to musicians like Bobby Cruz, Richie Ray, and Willie Colón, the older generation musicians of Latin music, such as Tito Puente, used the term "mongrel music" to refer to their music.

### Chapter 3

#### **“Before I Was... But Now That I Know Christ”: Conversion Narratives of Puerto Rican Protestant Evangelical Salsa Musicians**

At a Baptist Church in Carolina, Puerto Rico, salsa singer Alex D' Castro is performing on stage as part of a Monday night religious service entitled “Para Haití con amor” (“For Haiti with Love”).<sup>1</sup> D' Castro is one of several artists performing at this event to support a future evangelization mission to Haiti. Unlike the previous salsa act, D' Castro performs without an orchestra. Instead, he sings to the accompaniment of pre-recorded songs from his latest evangelical salsa album *Tú sabes que te amo* (“You Know That I Love You”). D' Castro begins singing “No te dejes engañar” (“Don't Let Yourself Be Fooled”), the story of a peer-pressured converted ex-convict who ends up in jail again after reverting to criminal activities. The *salsero* follows the song with “Falsos profetas” (“False Prophets”), a song based on Matthew 7: 15-23, in which Jesus Christ alerts his disciples to be aware of false prophets who present false teachings as His Gospel. The singer-turned-pastor now interrupts his musical performance and begins to converse with the congregation. In this exchange with the public, D' Castro tells a humorous story in which he talks to his friends about his relationship with Jesus Christ:

When I converted, I became so happy, I was doing a lot of concerts and other things, and I remember that I had to play in the National Salsa Day [concert], and when I came to the [Hiram Bithorn] stadium, I ran into two friends and I gave them a hug and told them, "I have to tell you what happened in my life," and since some people like gossip, some people [the congregation laughs], I told them, "It's that I have a boyfriend [the congregation laughs again]. When I'm in my room with him I do not want my wife to come and interrupt us, my best moments I enjoy alone, and I feel good with Him that although people are looking at me, I, I talk with him and forget it, I feel happy." I told them, "this boyfriend of mine makes me happy and you need him." The Lord Jesus [the congregation strongly applauds]. Glory be to God! And I don't want to leave without first singing a song to my boyfriend with your permission. How many of you, how many of you are invited to the wedding? (The congregation responds in the affirmative and an old lady shouts the praise, "Glory be to God!"). You're looking at the girlfriend (the congregation laughs and so does D' Castro).

D' Castro's anecdote illustrates both his passion for evangelization and the personal relationship he enjoys with Jesus Christ in his prayer life.<sup>2</sup> The married singer's humorous description of Christ as "this boyfriend of mine" evokes laughter from the audience because the phrase can be misunderstood to signify that the singer is involved in a homosexual relationship. The story is also *chisme* (gossip) material precisely because homosexuality is judged as an abnormal and sinful lifestyle in both traditional Puerto Rican culture and Christianity. But more than humorous gossip, D' Castro's portrayal of his private prayer life with Christ as akin to the conversations enjoyed by unmarried heterosexual couples serves to draw attention to the intimate and joyful spiritual life experienced by a disciple of Christ.

Yet another important part of that story is the evangelical Christian practice of giving testimony of one's faith in Christ. D'Castro, like the rest of my

interviewees, was eager to share his testimony. All of the musicians I approached for an interview gladly agreed to sit down with me for an hour or so to discuss their conversion experience. Some musicians not only agreed to an interview but also referred me to other converts, strongly suggesting that I interview them as well. A typical musician's response was, "¿Has hablado con fulano? ¿No? Pues toma su número y trata de comunicarte con él" ("Have you talked with so and so? No? Well, here's his number and try to get in touch with him"). Like D'Castro that night in Carolina, these musicians were eager to share their story because they felt compelled to tell someone about an event that they felt had changed their life for the better. Telling their story meant that at times some interviews would go on for more than two hours.

Known as testimony, the musicians' recounting of their conversion experience is an important component of their work as evangelists. All Christians—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—value testimony as a primary method of evangelization. Testimonies are autobiographical accounts in which one person submits evidence of having been transformed through an encounter with God. Testimony is valuable as well in that it can serve as confirmation that the stories told in the Gospels—the miracles and conversions brought about by the person of Jesus Christ—continue to occur in contemporary society.

## **Research Questions and Methods**

This chapter explores the topic of religious conversion in the lives of evangelical salsa musicians. It is based on semi-structured and oral history interviews with these musicians. For these interview sessions, I came with a set of questions that focused on personal, religious, cultural, and musical issues. My inquiry was guided by the following questions: (1) What type of conversion did the musician experience? (2) How did his/her conversion take place? (3) What are some of the common characteristics that these converts share?

With these questions as my guides, my selection of potential interview subjects had to meet one of several conditions. The first one was that the musicians were Protestant evangelical converts. Although my main interest was in converts, I was open as well to interviewing musicians who had been raised in Protestant evangelicalism. This musician would also be a good interview subject because he might be a “revert,” that is, a person whose conversion experience led him back to the faith of his childhood.

The second condition was my interviewees include converts well known for having successful secular salsa music careers. It was this group of converts who first caught my attention when I was buying their CDs and wondering why these romantic salsa musicians included songs about Jesus Christ in their record albums. I was aware that among such interviewees I would come across

musicians who abandoned their secular salsa careers in favor of full-time evangelical ministry. Likewise, I knew that my interviews would also place me in contact with musicians involved in evangelical salsa ministry while simultaneously continuing to perform in the secular salsa music circuit.

The third condition was that interviewees had a significant role in the evangelical salsa movement. For this reason I sought to interview musicians who were lead singers, bandleaders, music arrangers, music producers, and music promoters. One particular group of musicians I was interested in contacting were the pioneers of evangelical salsa. If these musicians were deceased, I instead resolved to interview musicians who knew these evangelical salsa pioneers because they had at one moment in their careers performed with them. A case in point was my interview with Billy Rosado, bassist for *Orquesta Revelación*. The purpose for interviewing Rosado was to obtain information on the late evangelical *sonero* Elizer Espinosa. Rosado was the ideal interviewee because he is the bassist of Espinosa's band and also the late singer's son-in-law. The other group of musicians I paid paying attention to were the artists involved in the contemporary Puerto Rican evangelical salsa scene. Learning about these musicians' conversion experience was instrumental for understanding the development of the evangelical salsa movement as well as for comparing the conversion experience of older and newer converts.

I spent various summers doing ethnographic fieldwork in Puerto Rico. My search for interviewees meant that I had to spend considerable time travelling throughout the island. As a result, my interview sessions took place in such

towns as San Sebastián, Moca, Isabela, Guaynabo, Carolina, and San Juan. Traveling to these towns meant several hours of driving back and forth, which at times was very exhausting. My unfamiliarity with many of these towns also meant that I had to endure “adventurous” trips as I drove through them, including figuring out the differences between the directions I was given and the actual address of my destination. Since I am not a Protestant evangelical, I did not know where to begin my search for interviews, who to get in touch with, nor where I was supposed to go to come into contact with evangelical salsa musicians. Therefore, I decided to begin my research in San Sebastián, a town in northwestern Puerto Rico. Since I had family there and was familiar with its surroundings, San Sebastián became the ideal town for initiating my fieldwork.

One day, as I was walking through the town plaza I noticed an evangelical book and record store called *Música y Mensaje (Music and Message)*. I decided to go into the store and browse. Inside, I noticed that the store sold various types of Protestant Bibles, devotional books, and contemporary evangelical music.<sup>3</sup> After spending some time skimming through books and record albums, I introduced myself to the lady behind the desk. I explained that I was a University of Michigan doctoral student doing a research project on evangelical salsa music. In response, she told me that I could come in the following week and interview her husband. I agreed and set up an appointment with him. Thanks to this interview, I became aware of a newly published evangelical music magazine.<sup>4</sup> The publisher of this magazine became my next interviewee. Eventually this became the protocol for obtaining interviews: my wandering into a previously

unknown place would lead me to an interviewee who would then refer me to another potential interviewee. Ultimately, these contacts led me to decided to interview musicians exclusively.<sup>5</sup>

Another way I would contact musicians was by purchasing evangelical salsa records. Unlike secular salsa records, the contact information listed on the back jacket of the compact disc placed me in direct contact with the musician. Once I explained my dissertation project, I was generally able to obtain the interview.

I interviewed 24 musicians during interview sessions that averaged approximately from one hour and a half to over two hours. All of the musicians were male. This is not surprising given that salsa music is dominated by male musicians. The majority of the musicians were singers. Of these twelve singers, five of them are well known in the secular salsa music industry. The most prominent of these singers is Bobby Cruz, a pioneer of both secular and evangelical salsa music. The next numerous group were percussionists. Among the seven percussionists, three musicians (Charlie Sierra, Johnny “El Bravo” López, and Gabriel “Baby” Serrano) are well known and highly respected in the secular salsa industry. The least represented group was that of the brass section. All four horn players, three trombonists and one trumpet player, were originally involved in the secular music scene. Trombonists Carlos “Cuto” Soto, Gamaliel González, and James Hernández participated as studio musicians in several romantic salsa recordings. While Hernández also made several musical

arrangements, Soto was a pivotal musical arranger and producer in the rise and consolidation of the Puerto Rican romantic salsa movement during the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

To analyze their conversion experience, I divided my interview questions into three sections: “the pre-conversion life,” “the conversion experience,” and “the post-conversion discipleship.” In the “pre-conversion stage” section I asked about the musician’s family upbringing, religious background, and musical career. The “conversion experience” section focused exclusively on the musician’s religious conversion. Finally, the “post-conversion discipleship” section was a series of questions inquiring about the ways in which musicians were living out their faith.

In this chapter, I read these autobiographical conversion narratives as a vivid portrait of the evangelical salsa community. Three defining characteristics emerge from this portrait. First, nominal religiosity is a common pre-conversion background feature in the lives of evangelical salsa converts. Second, moral conversion is the dominant type of conversion among evangelical salsa musicians. Third, this grand testimonial puts on display as well the forging of an evangelical salsa community through the missionary work of *salsero* evangelists.

### **The Pre-Conversion Life**

The interviews collectively reveal that, prior to their conversions, evangelical salseros tended not to be unfamiliar with Christianity. Rather, a most were raised in a nominal Catholic household. The common narrative was that of

families with poor Church attendance and homes in which family prayers were not daily rituals. As is the case for the majority of Puerto Ricans, most of the musicians were baptized Catholics. Disc jockey Vic Rodríguez's description of his family's Catholic religiosity is an example of this narrative: "No, no [la practicábamos] sino que de mil en cien viernes santos podría ir a la iglesia, eso era lo más común, popular. Creo que llegué a hacer la primera comunión, no, ni me acuerdo" ("No, no [we didn't practice it], rather, in one out of a thousand Good Fridays we might go to church, that was the most common, popular. I think I got to do first communion, well no, I don't even remember").

Some musicians said their families combined Catholicism with *espiritismo*.<sup>7</sup> They typically identified their grandmothers as the primary promulgators of *espiritista* practices in the family. Despite religious syncretism, they acknowledged that *espiritismo* was the primary religious force in the home. For most, *espiritismo* was the religion they practiced on an everyday basis, while Catholicism was a religion they acknowledged from a distance. The Catholic component of their syncretic religiosity was limited to the devotion to the saints, as evidenced by the use of statues in homemade altars. Even then, their understanding of these Catholic saints was more informed by *espiritista* beliefs than by the Catholic doctrine of "the communion of saints."

Other musicians were Protestant evangelical reverts. Among them, salsa singer Wilfredo "Quintín" Santiago, an ex-vocalist of the Eddie Palmieri Orchestra, came from a Pentecostal family background. In the interview, he acknowledged that as he got older he became disinterested in religion and

stopped attending church. Eventually, Santiago, who had a conversion experience following the death of his wife that led him back to his Pentecostal roots.

There were some musicians who did recount some previous involvement with Catholicism. For instance, trombonist James Hernández described his early childhood as one in which the rosary was a daily staple of his family's Catholic practices. Hernández remembered with a sense of gratitude how his family would come together in the evening to pray the rosary. However, Hernández eventually drifted away from his family's religiosity, citing his father's extramarital affairs as one of the events that had a dramatic negative effect on his family and on his own relationship with his father. Ultimately, Hernández' conversion took place within a Protestant evangelical denomination.

### **The Conversion Experience**

The majority of the musicians I interviewed described a type of religious conversion that I classify as a "moral conversion." By moral conversion, I mean that musicians underwent a moral transformation resulting in the abandonment of what they now considered sinful lifestyles and an embrace of a Christian way of life. Moral conversion can be understood as the religious experience that results when a person turns to God during a personal moral crisis. During the interviews, the musicians who experienced a moral conversion identified adultery,

alcoholism, and drug addiction as some of the immoral acts that characterized their lives prior to accepting Jesus Christ as their “Lord and Savior.”

One of these musician, Pastor Ricky Morales of San Sebastián credits his conversion at an independent Evangelical Church in Pennsylvania in November 1991 iwth helping him overcome his drug and alcohol addiction and saving his marriage. Prior to his conversion, Morales was a member of a Sunday choir at a Catholic Church and also a singer in a salsa band from Pennsylvania. In the interview, Morales remembered how he routinely came home drunk from a dance to prepare for Sunday Mass:

I would come home at five in the morning, at six, drunk, I would get up at nine in the morning, still with the smell of alcohol, drunk, can you imagine?, and so we (his wife and he) could go to be there in the (Catholic) Church, to play there, sing with that smell of liquor, and once again leave the (Catholic) Church at eleven (a.m.), to once again drink two or three beers to straighten up and go that Sunday perhaps to play and sing again at night.

Another musician who experienced a moral conversion is Johnny López, artistically known as Johnny “El Bravo”. A veteran of the island salsa scene, López identified adultery as one of the key personal problems that his conversion helped him overcome. In discussing this issue, López (2001) notes that as a pre-convert he thought of women as nothing more than sexual objects:

I only looked at the face and if she was good-looking, well, after every dance, or whatever country I went to, I had to find a woman and sleep with her. And if I went to Peru, and if I went to Chile, and if I went to Venezuela, and if I went to Santo Domingo, and if I went to New York, anywhere, that’s the worst vice you could have, that of a woman.

However, not all of the converts underwent a moral conversion. Among the exceptions were percussionist Charlie Sierra and singer Alex D'Castro. A studio musician and a veteran of the island salsa music scene, Sierra became a convert as a result of his profound search for an intimate connection with God. Sierra indicated in the interview that although he always had a respect for God and lived an upright moral life, his conversion transformed him from a believer into a disciple of Jesus Christ. In contrast, D' Castro turned to God when he became depressed after having lost the use of his vocal chords. During his performance at the Baptist Church in Carolina, D' Castro gave his testimony of how Jesus Christ healed his depression:<sup>8</sup>

I want to tell you if today I can talk with you it's because of God's mercy. You know, I became speechless, and the world came to know me as "The Tenor of Salsa," and I graduated from the University of Puerto Rico, I didn't have any vices in my life, I didn't smoke marihuana, I didn't use drugs, I didn't drink rum (pause), and I give glory to God for that. I'm the son of an alcoholic man who died at 48 years old. This month we'll celebrate 24 years (pause) of him having left this land. We celebrate it even more. I'm healed from that but a lot was suffered in my home and having the voice I had, I became mute, I was left speechless. I was suffering from a tremendous depression. And I who didn't use anything, no stimulants, was smoking an illegal drug that I want you to know that your body doesn't know how to distinguish between a prescription and a drug brought by those who "fly" around here. For two years and a half I was taking anti-depressives, treating a depression, and I was grateful to God because there's a word of God that says, "If you come to me, I will take care of you..." Hallelujah. Glory be to God. The day Christ came into my heart isn't the day I entered religion because I still haven't that. But the day He entered my heart, that day I was healed from depression.

D' Castro begins his testimony by naming problems he did not personally experience. By pointing out that he did not use drugs and drink rum, D' Castro's

testimony challenges and refutes the popular stereotype of the working-class musician as a drug addict and alcoholic. D' Castro then proceeds to talk about how losing the use of his voice led him into a state of depression. His personal struggle with depression reaches its climax when the singer decides to convert to Jesus Christ. The singer acknowledges that it is precisely at the moment in which he accepts Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior that he is healed of depression. In this narrative, conversion is not only presented as a change from one lifestyle to another, but as a moment of divine healing.

Yet, there is another important element in D' Castro's testimonial. At the end of the testimony, D' Castro makes a clear distinction between religion and having a relationship with Jesus Christ. The latter is what the singer testifies to experiencing at the moment of his conversion. Thus, the word "religion" acquires a negative connotation in his testimonial. Within this discourse, religion signifies human traditions, doctrines that people create in order to reach out to God. Legalism, interpreted by many of the interviewees as a set of human laws prohibiting certain acts (dancing, wearing makeup, jewelry), was also seen as synonymous with religion. This usage of the word "religion" is not unique to D'Castro but rather has become the most common signifier of the term in everyday evangelical language.

Many evangelicals use the term religion to describe faith traditions other than their own. Faith traditions such as Catholicism, *Santería*, and Islam were frequently mentioned by the interviewees as examples of this type of religion. Among the reasons given were that these religions advocate "idolatry" and do not

teach their followers to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> Some musicians even regarded Pentecostalism as a “religion” in this negative sense, because of its legalistic views on dancing and dress codes. Protestant churches that define themselves as nondenominational do so to imply that their teaching is Bible-based and not influenced by human legalistic traditions.

Overall, these evangelical converts share common theological beliefs. First, they all accept the orthodox Christian concept of the triune God.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the converts expressed as well a belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In our conversations, these musicians constantly referred to Christ as their “Lord,” “Savior,” “best friend,” and “model of living.” Second, the converts embrace the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, that is, that the Bible alone is the sole source of religious doctrine. During the interview sessions, the musicians showed their love for and sole reliance on Sacred Scripture by regularly quoting the Bible verses that best helped them explain their journey of faith. Ironically, it is this very doctrine of *sola scriptura* that leads to doctrinal division among Protestants. The different Protestant denominations are based on different and contradictory interpretations of Sacred Scripture. Accordingly, Protestants hold different views about salvation, baptism, the Eucharist, the End Times, and other doctrinal issues. For example, while some denominations assert that a believer could forfeit his salvation through grave sin, other denominations teach the doctrine popularly known as “once saved, always saved,” that is, a believer can never lose his salvation regardless what he does after accepting Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Despite belonging to Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and other nondenominational evangelical churches, the musicians tend to identify themselves as “Christian” rather than with the name identifying their denomination and its particular theology. They use the word “Christian” as a synonym for Protestant Evangelical. At times, they would also use the term “Christian” to differentiate themselves from Catholics. When the musicians made this distinction it was to affirm that Catholics are not true Christians and thus are in need of evangelization.

At the same time, these musicians appealed to the labels “Pentecostals” and “Evangelicals” when offering a reason for what they believed to be wrong with Protestant evangelicalism.<sup>11</sup> Some Pentecostals argued that “Evangelicals” were responsible for creating “mega churches” offering a “lite form of Christianity” that seeks to attract a great number of people at the expense of authentic biblical doctrine. As a result, these Pentecostals felt that these denominations were to be blamed for preaching false doctrines and for allowing immoral behavior to become a part of Protestant evangelicalism. Furthermore, these Pentecostal musicians argued that when people abandoned Pentecostalism for one of these denominations it was because of their inability to live an authentic and demanding life of Christian discipleship.

For their part, “Evangelicals” criticized Pentecostalism for its legalism, suggesting that Pentecostals’ rejection of social activities such as dancing is irrelevant to whether a person is able to obtain salvation. Among this group of musicians, there were ex-Pentecostals who were now members of other

Protestant denominations. These musicians attributed their change in church membership to having acquired a better understanding of Sacred Scripture.

### **Post-Conversion Discipleship**

The activity of evangelization is a defining characteristic of the post-conversion discipleship of the evangelical salsa musician. In fact, many of the musicians said they were the recipients of a musician-led grassroots evangelization campaign. Other musicians mentioned how they were active evangelists in the salsa music scene. This evangelistic mission took place primarily in the music scene, either at a live concert performance or during a recording session in the recording studio. Trombonist Gamaliel González, a studio musician and member of Orquesta Querubín, had one such experience. During our interview at Borders Café in Plaza Las Américas, González (2003) recalled that his conversion took place during the recording session of a 1995 Luis Enrique album:

I converted in a recording studio here in Puerto Rico on September 10, 1995. We were making a record for Luis Enrique [a Nicaraguan salsa singer and composer]. I don't remember which record it was, but we were working for Luis Enrique. And then it pleases the Lord to reveal Himself that day to me. From there on, my life changed completely, and till today He continues to take me by His hand. It's been a gratifying experience, unique, unique, I never thought that, that, that, I could have the privilege of knowing God in that way and what He has done has been to bless me, in a very big way, in a very big way.

After hearing this information, I asked Gamaliel to give me a more in-depth description of his conversion experience at Cuto Soto's recording studio in Puerto Nuevo. Gamaliel did not hesitate to give me a detailed account of his conversion. The evangelization efforts of fellow salsa trombonists Danny Fuentes and Carlos "Cuto" Soto played a significant role in Gamaliel's conversion:

At that moment the maestro "Cuto" Soto was very worried about, about José Febles and then, well, we began talking about that. The people around me were Christians, and I was the only non-convert and I remember that among the things that we were talking about, well, Danny Fuentes, the trombonist, we began talking about God and those things, and he says, "Listen, I have seen pastors fall into temptation, I have seen many things and to the point that," and then I very, very ignorantly, well, I tried to put in doubt what he was telling me and I told him, "Come over here, God forgives that, we're talking about pastors, right, in other words, how is that." And he didn't make any comment, obviously we were outside, in the outer part of the studio. And at that moment I go inside the studio to work with my instrument and I began to feel a strange presence at that moment, I really felt bad and began to feel very bad, as if I was an insect, as if I was a cockroach, and it pleases the Lord at that moment, before my eyes, open up before like a giant screen and show me everything, like if he was putting me a video, the Lord shows me everything He had done to call me, and I was awake, and it was 3:15 in the afternoon of that Tuesday. I remember the day and the hour because it was so, so specific and so emotional what the Lord let me see that it's impossible for me to forget it. Obviously He had to do something like that because I was very stubborn. But I was alone in that section, inside the studio. Moments later, when I finally see what the Lord is doing with me, that I say well, definitely, I, you know, I can't take this anymore, in other words, the Lord is calling me, Cuto Soto comes in and the Lord utilizes him to ask the question if I wanted to accept the Lord, and right there I said yes, that I wanted to accept the Lord and from there on, well, we made the prayer and I accepted the Lord as my Savior and it was a great blessing. And that's how I converted.

González's account mentions two key components of Christian evangelization: the discourse of sin and the discourse of salvation. The first is employed by fellow trombonist Fuentes when he engages Gamaliel in a dialogue about God and falling into temptation. This discourse of sin is indispensable to evangelization because it can lead non-converts into a self-examination of how sin manifests itself in their lives. The second discourse, after Gamaliel's spiritual experience, is initiated by music producer and trombonist Soto when he approaches Gamaliel with the question, "Do you accept the Lord?" The question is an invitation to make the decision to become a Christian disciple. Once Gamaliel accepts, Soto leads him into reciting the sinner's prayer, the concluding ritual to this second discourse and the evangelization itself. The sinner's prayer itself is a two-part prayer in which the person acknowledges his sins and professes his faith in Christ. Gamaliel's account gives a good description of how Fuentes's and Soto's evangelization unfolds in the recording studio through the use of these discourses.

Another account of an in-studio conversion experience was given to me by trombonist James Hernández, a member of Centro Cristo Hosanna in the town of Isabela. Hernández's many credits include playing with the orchestras of Luis "Perico" Ortiz and Nino Segarra, as well as providing musical arrangements and compositions for the debut album of the evangelical salsa orchestra *Ahícam*. In our weekday morning interview session at Centro Cristo Hosanna, Hernández told me how as an evangelist he played an important role in the conversion experience of popular Panamanian composer Omar Alfanno in 1998. Hernández

was invited to Miami to work in the songwriter's new project, *Prepárense* (Prepare Yourself), the debut album of a group of four young Puerto Rican singers that eventually became known as *Son By Four*. Alfanno, the songwriter of salsa songs such as "El gran varón" ("The Great Male"), "Conciencia" ("Conscience"), and "A puro dolor" ("The Purest of Pain"), at the time was a practitioner of *palo mayombe*, an African-diasporic religion.<sup>12</sup> Hernández (2003), who himself was witnessed to while performing at a Bobby Cruz concert, recalls Alfanno's conversion experience during a group prayer in the songwriter's recording studio:

In one of the recording sessions I tell the Lord, "You brought me here for a reason, I want to see it." So then they ordered Kentucky (Fried Chicken), food, we were going to take a break. Omar Alfanno and Willie Sotelo, we want to take a break. So when we took a break, we are like that and I said before the food came, let's pray. Omar Alfanno, in a form of joke, joked of how Jesus was as if, "No, that's my skinny guy and I know Him." And I was like, I was a bit uncomfortable. Then we went to pray, we grabbed our hands, and we began to pray. Omar Alfanno was there and to the other side, Gustavo López, trumpet player, Willie Sotelo was there, bass player Javier Ocasio was in the recording, we began to pray and as I pray I mentioned, "Lord and your blood cleanses us" and at that moment Omar Alfanno begins to shake, begins to shake. To the point where he fell on his knees, and the Bible says that every knee will bend and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord. And at that moment I see him, you know that the floors in the studios are usually made of wood. So literally my eyes saw a puddle of tears that that man left there. And I took him to Christ's feet and I took three of the singers [from Son By Four] to the Lord's feet. And that day Omar Alfanno made a profession of faith confessing Jesus Christ in his heart as his Lord and Savior.

This account of Alfanno's conversion contains references to two prayers. In the first one, Hernández petitions God to reveal His purpose in the recording studio that day. The prayer articulates both the trombonist's awareness of himself

as a representative of God as well as his belief that God has given him a divine mission in the Miami recording studio. Also evident in this prayer is the evangelist's deep desire to see God's plan materialize. That desire is confounded by his uncertainty as to what exactly the mission entails. Nonetheless, the prayer reveals that Hernández is vigilantly looking for a divine sign that allows him to make sense of the situation.

The second prayer is an intercessory group prayer initiated by Hernández before the musicians' food was to arrive. This second prayer begins with Hernández affirming his belief in the cleansing, redemptive power of the blood of Jesus Christ. Shortly after Hernández begins his prayer, the trombonist notes that Alfanno begins to shake and have a dramatic bodily experience. Hernández makes a theological interpretation of Alfanno's subsequent fall to his knees as a divine sign of the songwriter's eventual profession of faith in Christ. This theological interpretation, in which Hernández paraphrases the New Testament verse Philippians 2: 10-11, also provides him with the reason for his mission to Miami: to lead Alfanno and various members of the *Son By Four* group to a conversion. Hernández goes on to interpret Alfanno's conversion as a healing and release from the religious system of *palo mayombe*.<sup>13</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, these conversion narratives reveal how religious conversion transformed these salsa musicians from people disinterested in

religion into evangelists active in public evangelization. The personal moral transformation of these individual lives led to the renovation of the salsa community. These narratives also show how salsa musician converts transform the recording studio into a sacred contact zone. Not only is the studio a place for making music, but it is also a place for the religious practices of prayer, preaching, and the sharing of testimonies in which musicians communicate with each other. Through these religious acts, the recording studio becomes consecrated as a space for evangelization and worship. These conversion narratives also point to the transformation of these musicians as public individuals. Their public profession of faith includes the production of an evangelical salsa record meant for public consumption. It is to this production of evangelical salsa music that I turn to in the next chapter, to assess how the transformation of the musicians translates into the transformation of his music.

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<sup>1</sup> This event took place during the summer of 2001.

<sup>2</sup> *Día Nacional de la Salsa* concerts are yearly salsa events in Puerto Rico sponsored and organized by Z-93, the most important salsa radio station in Puerto Rico.

<sup>3</sup> Protestant Bibles contain 66 books, 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books. In contrast, the Catholic Bible consists of 73 books, 46 books from the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup> According to several interviewees, the magazine *Christian Zone* is no longer in circulation.

<sup>5</sup> This technique, which can be likened to the “snowballing technique”, does not necessarily lead to a random sample but rather is restricted to the social networks of the interviewees.

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<sup>6</sup> Among Soto's credits are musical productions for Jerry Rivera, Luis Enrique, and Domingo Quinones. He also wrote musical arrangements for several other artists, including Eddie Santiago and Frankie Ruiz. Along with trumpeter Tommy Villarini and pianist Ramon Sánchez, Soto is regarded as one of the top musical arrangers of contemporary salsa music.

<sup>7</sup> For more on *espiritismo*, see Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2003).

<sup>8</sup> This is the same evangelical event that I described in the beginning of the chapter.

<sup>9</sup> The musicians were suggesting that these religions taught belief in more than one God. For example, they mistakenly taught that when Catholics asked the Blessed Virgin Mary and saints, Catholics did so because they believed the saints were gods. In reality, the Catholic practice of praying to saints involves asking the saints to pray to God for the Church on earth. Also, both Catholic Christianity and Islam are monotheistic religions.

<sup>10</sup> Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christianity all teach the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. This doctrine professes that God consists of three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in one divine being. Although they are three distinct divine persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the same divine nature.

<sup>11</sup> The term "evangelical" was used in several ways by the musicians. At times, Pentecostals would refer to themselves as evangelical. Yet, they would also use the term to refer to those denominations that went by this term.

<sup>12</sup> Omar Alfanno is a well-known and respected songwriter in the secular salsa music scene. During the the 1990s, Alfanno was the most important and sought out songwriter for romantic salsa music productions.

<sup>13</sup> While the lead singer of *Son By Four* left the group to pursue a solo career in the secular pop scene, the remaining three singers continue to perform together. However, *Son By Four* is now a Catholic music ministry.

## Chapter 4

### “For The Salvation of Souls”: Themes in Evangelical Salsa Discography

Once again I found myself in the town of Isabela. I had already done several interviews with a couple of musicians from this town. Now I found myself in the law office of Eggy Medina, a lawyer who had just released his first record album *Rumba Pal' Cielo (A Party for Heaven)*. By the time of my interview session, the album had already received good reviews from both the press and music community. The favorable reviews was due to *Rumba Pal' Cielo's* swinging and creative musical arrangements. The album was also helped by Medina's relentless promotion of the album. The several times I drove by Isabela on Route No. 2, I noticed posters of the record album placed in public spots along the road. These same posters were on the wall as I entered Medina's office in Isabela.

During the interview session, Medina declared that there was no place that was off limits for evangelization. He was willing to go anywhere to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. His desire to proclaim the Gospel also meant finding innovative ways to promote it via salsa music. As he told me in the interview, one such creative way was through the record cover. In contrast to other evangelical salsa record albums, the *Rumba Pal' Cielo* record cover stand outs for its lively image of percussion instruments decorated with the symbol of

the Puerto Rican flag within a tropical beach scenario. The record cover is Medina's way of evangelizing. Medina wanted to capture the attention of the non-believer who is a consumer of secular salsa music. He reasoned that if the record cover highlights the obvious religious theme, the non-believer will not buy the album. The salsa fan will consider purchasing the record, however, if the cover, with its images of the Puerto Rican flag and percussion instruments, indicates that the record album is a swinging, heavy salsa CD.

The interview session gave me an important insight into the significance of evangelization for the evangelical salsa musician. For Medina and other evangelical *salseros*, the record album can be a great tool for evangelization. The present chapter explores the relationship between evangelization and evangelical salsa recordings through the following questions: (1) How do salsa musicians define evangelization? (2) What are the ways in which evangelical *salseros* use the record album to evangelize? (3) What are some of the main musical and religious influences of evangelical salsa and how does it aid this music in its mission of evangelization? (4) What are some of the themes in evangelical salsa discography? (5) Does evangelical salsa represent a continuation or departure from traditional salsa culture?

Records are an important primary source for the study of any musical form, whether that music is classified under the traditional Western categories of folk, popular, or classical. Through recorded music, the scholar can study musical styles, sounds, periods, and genres. Practicing musicians also deem records important. In the case of the musician, records serve as "una carta de

presentación” (“a letter of presentation”) that can open many doors for their musical careers. For example, a club manager can hire a band to play in a nightclub based on the appeal of a record or a band may be able to land a recording contract because their demo meets the aesthetic demands of a particular record label.

The value of the record album is understood as well by the evangelical salsa musician. Since evangelical *sa/seros* emphasize the crucial evangelistic role of their recordings, these musicians place high emphasis on the “how” and “where” of their distribution. The recordings’ significance within this musical community can be seen during evangelical musical events. Before, during, and after performances, evangelical artists will often announce to the audience that they are selling their records. Oftentimes, these records are stacked up on a table with a person standing nearby ready to sell them. It was during some of these presentations that I was able to obtain recordings of artists that I would otherwise not have known about.

Despite the merit of the evangelical salsa record, the record collecting process was a very difficult and daunting part of my doctoral research in Puerto Rico. First, evangelical record stations for the most part do not program evangelical salsa as part of their daily music play lists. Instead, much of evangelical radio programming favors contemporary pop evangelical music, such as pop ballads and soft rock. Second, evangelical record stores have a very small salsa section. Unfortunately, my trips to evangelical record stores often meant running into the same records I had already purchased, adding to the

frustrated realization that these stores were not the ideal places for finding evangelical salsa music. Third, several evangelical salsa ministries opted not to have their record albums sold in a store. Fourth, the few existing evangelical salsa radio shows are not necessarily indicative of the evangelical salsa scene. The problem with the programming of radio shows is that it can reflect the particular vision of its program director. For instance, while one evangelical program may include religious songs by non-evangelicals, another radio show may exclude from its programming any song not performed by an evangelical salsa ministry.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the above difficulties, I set out to collect as many evangelical salsa records as I could for my doctoral research. This collection is by no means a complete representation of the genre since I was not able to acquire every single album recorded by a particular artist. Yet the collection does provide a sampling of what a person can expect to hear when listening to recordings from the evangelical salsa movement and thus can serve as a window into a particular evangelical salsa perspective. The records that I include in my analysis came into my possession in several ways. While some musicians gave me free copies of their compact discs, other musicians sold me copies of their records and even one interviewee gave me free CDs of other artists from his personal collection. On other occasions, I purchased records in record stores or at evangelical musical events.

My analysis of evangelical salsa discography is based on a compilation of over 25 compact discs. Represented in this discography is the musical ministry of

solo artists and groups.<sup>2</sup> While I have several records of some artists, I have only one album of other artists. Also, this collection contains records that span a 10-15 year period. Thus, the discography represents the music of evangelical salsa artists involved in the Puerto Rican evangelical salsa movement since the 1990s. Some artists in this collection traded in their secular salsa careers in favor of a full-time evangelical salsa ministry. Yet, other artists continue to perform in both the secular and evangelical salsa music circuits, as they see no contradiction in being active members of both music scenes. Furthermore, this collection contains a small group of musicians who have never performed outside an evangelical context.

Evangelical salsa represents an evangelical form of the original 1970s barrio salsa. Rather than spreading what music journalist Rondón refers to as “Hallmark Cards,” sentimental-type messages, evangelical salsa music communicates a religious message of salvation that combines the social lyrical narrative tradition of secular salsa with Protestant evangelical preaching. Evangelical salsa messages are transmitted via a “*salsa gorda*” (“heavy salsa”) musical base, that is, salsa music with aggressive, swinging musical arrangements that stimulate people to dance and musicians to take instrumental solos. Given this musical base, the evangelical salsa expression is more in conformity with, rather than diverging from, secular salsa culture.

## Record Covers as Evangelistic Images

One of the first things that one sees when looking at an evangelical salsa compact disc is the name of the orchestra. In the secular salsa scene, the name of salsa orchestras can and often do reflect the band's musical philosophy. But evangelical salsa orchestras consider and present themselves before the public as ministries. Due to their evangelical vision, the band's name tends to indicate the purpose of their musical ministry. Often, the names of these musical ministries are named after a specific attribute of God, a biblical character, or a particular book in sacred scripture. Among such musical ministries are *Orquesta Revelación* (The Revelation Orchestra), *Orquesta Querubín* (The Cherubim Orchestra), and *Orquesta Ahicam* (My Brother Has Risen).<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, evangelistic themes are also present in the record covers of compact discs. These evangelistic themes are palpable in both the record titles and images of record albums. One recurrent topic is the light/darkness motif. This is one of several central themes throughout the Gospel of John.<sup>4</sup> "The Fourth Gospel"—as the Gospel of John is often called—records Jesus Christ declaring, "I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)." Within this light/darkness discourse, John presents individuals who accept Jesus Christ as believers who embrace the light, while persons who deny or reject Christ are depicted as those who instead opt for darkness.

This light/darkness discourse is also helpful as an apt description for the religious transformation of the salsa musician. In these record covers, the salsa musician symbolizes the individual who has accepted the “light” (Jesus Christ) after turning away from “darkness” (sin). Accordingly, this light/darkness image helps the ministry convey the central purpose of its evangelistic mission: to guide individuals out of the darkness of sin into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, “the Light of the World.”

A prime example of this type of record cover can be seen in Alex D’ Castro’s ...*Tú sabes que te amo* record album.<sup>5</sup> The front cover shows D’Castro in what appears to be an abandoned house or building. D’Castro, dressed in a dark short sleeve buttoned-shirt and slacks, stands by an open space looking upward. The upward glance suggests D’Castro might be praying. The view from the open space is that of green grass surrounded by complete darkness. In contrast, the back cover pictures a smiling D’Castro looking in the direction of the viewer. However, this time the context is a beach on a bright, sunny day, presumably at dawn or early in the morning. Taken together, these images articulate the light/darkness motif prevalent in evangelical salsa record covers.

The front cover represents D’ Castro’s interior conversation with God as focused on the issue of love. This reading is hinted at from the title ...*Tú sabes que te amo* (...*You Know that I Love You*). The record title is taken from a biblical episode recorded in the Gospel of John.<sup>6</sup> The phrase is uttered by Peter in his conversation with the Risen Jesus Christ. In John 21: 15-19, Christ asks Peter three times if he loves Him. Christ seems to ask these questions to give Peter the

opportunity to repent for having denied Him three times during His Passion.<sup>7</sup> All three times, Peter's response is "you know that I love you." After Peter's affirmation, Christ commands His apostle to feed his sheep. To "feed the sheep" means to teach the doctrines of Christ to believers.

The image of shepherding appears in the inner record jacket. The music credits and record dedication appear over a background of a forest, an ocean, and three sheep with a headshot of D' Castro superimposed over it. The image portrays D' Castro as a pastor. Following the biblical narrative, the sheep symbolizes the people D'Castro is called to pastor. This portrayal of D' Castro as pastor is reinforced in the singer's dedication, in which he expresses gratitude to God for "El compromiso de pastorear la Iglesia Nuevo Testamento de Hill Brothers, Río Piedras" ("The task of shepherding the New Testament Church of Hill Brothers, Río Piedras").

### **Musical Sound and Musical Arrangements**

Another key component of evangelical salsa production is the musical sound. In the secular scene, the musical sound is a key reason for the popularity and respect that a salsa band enjoys among musicians and aficionados. The innovative sound a band is able to produce allows it to establish itself as a unique orchestra, distinct from its musical competition. Musical sound is so significant to the musical identity of a group that it is usually one of the factors cited by music lovers to explain their preference for one artist over another. For example, the

absence or presence of trombones in a band greatly influences the type of sound that a salsa orchestra will produce.

Contributing to the uniqueness of the musical sound is the band's configuration. The band design for an evangelical salsa ministry is similar to a secular salsa orchestra. Typically, salsa bands employ anywhere from twelve to fifteen musicians. Essential to a salsa orchestra are the percussion instruments that make up what is known as the rhythm section. These instruments are vital for salsa to truly function as dance music. A typical salsa band includes piano, bass, timbales, congas, and bongos as part of its percussion instruments. Maracas, a *güiro* (a small scrape or gourd), and claves, referred to as minor percussion instruments, may be used as well. When these minor percussion instruments are incorporated, either the lead singer or one of the chorus singers commonly plays them. Also, some bands employ string instruments such as the guitar, the Puerto Rican *cuatro*, and the Cuban *tres* in their groups. Still, some groups will limit their use of the *cuatro* or *tres* for specific songs in their musical repertoire.<sup>8</sup>

Central as well to a salsa orchestra is its brass section. Most salsa bands have a brass section consisting of trumpets and trombones. Some orchestras have solely one type of brass instrument. In salsa music, it is common to hear salsa bands that rely exclusively on the trombone for its brass section.<sup>9</sup> It is also frequent to encounter trumpet-only salsa orchestras. Yet, other orchestras also make use of the tenor, alto, and/or baritone saxophone, in addition to a trumpet-and-trombone brass section. In the evangelical salsa scene, the typical

evangelical salsa orchestra has a brass section combining trumpets and trombones.

Crucial to the creation of the musical sound is the musical arrangement. Since salsa is an amalgam of diverse rhythms, a musical arranger is expected to know diverse musical traditions, such as Afro-Caribbean and jibaro musical expressions. Washburne (2008: 49) notes that “one aim of the arranger is to provide a product that will achieve commercial success. It must be in line with consumer expectations, but also stand out in some way.” Since they usually write arrangements for several artists, arrangers are very knowledgeable of the music scene and can therefore provide expert commentary on what the band needs. This musical knowledge also helps create a musical arrangement that meets the artist’s aesthetic demands.

Evangelical salsa band leaders seek out the best musical arrangers on the island, including secular musicians. Evangelicals do not see any contradiction with this hiring practice. After all, evangelicals want the musical arranger to provide them with the same type of salsa performed by their secular counterparts. A native of the Puerto Rican western town of Moca, musical arranger Ceferino Cabán, confirms that this is the case as he notes that evangelical *salseros* also ask him to write aggressive, danceable, swinging salsa musical arrangements.<sup>10</sup> Evangelical *salseros*’ preference for this kind of arrangement is not only for aesthetic reasons but also for evangelistic purposes: the hard-core *salsero* aficionado—the evangelical’s target audience— gravitates to and enjoys dancing to this brand of salsa music.

## Themes in Evangelical Salsa Discography

Evangelical *salseros* continue the storytelling tradition of secular salsa music. In following this tradition, evangelical *salseros* have been influenced by 1970s *salsa gorda*. Thus, they continue to create salsa from the margins of the Puerto Rican barrio. Yet, the evangelical dimension of their songs suggests the need to redeem the barrio. Evangelical salsa discography contains recurring as well as emerging themes. Faith, moral issues, marriage, the end times, testimony, and evangelization are among the themes that evangelical *salseros* love to sing to the barrio residents they seek to evangelize.

Percussionist Charlie Vega, the musical director of the *Orquesta Ahicam*, gave an interesting description of evangelical salsa during our interview session at his home in the town of Isabela. The musical philosophy of evangelical salsa musicians is evident in the distinction Vega (2001) drew between evangelical salsa and what he called “adoration music”:

Our message is primarily for the people of the street. It's that we want the message to get across because many people do not know, do not know how the environment is, to what thing they are not being exposed to. These songs have an evangelistic message. An evangelistic message is a message directed to those who do not know. Those who are inside, are inside. And there is music for the church which they call adoration music. A music in which they are singing out of gratitude towards God. But this music, even though it is for God, has an evangelistic message that many people from the street will identify with situations from over here.

In Vega's comparison, the key element differentiating these two forms of evangelical music is the song text itself. Evangelical Salsa musicians perform song texts that convey an evangelistic message of repentance and conversion to Jesus Christ. Since the purpose of their music is to lead others to Christ, evangelical salsa musicians are primarily interested in performing their music for a non-Christian audience in a secular context. La gente de la calle ("street people"), to whom Vega's evangelistic message is directed, are those individuals who live in sin by committing crime, giving into vices, and engaging in sexual immorality. The word "street" here signifies the barrio, the housing projects, and the prison system that houses people with a street-oriented mentality. Consequently, evangelical salsa is best understood as a *música de evangelización* (evangelization music).

On the other hand, a suitable description for adoration music might be "musicalized prayer." In this form of music, Christians address God by praising Him for His divine characteristics and offering thanksgiving for what God has done for them throughout salvation history. As Vega rightly notes, the performance of adoration music takes place primarily within the context of an ecclesiastical institution. The church is the ideal context for this music because it is the place where believers unite for the sole purpose of worshipping the Holy Trinity, the God of the Christian faith. Within a Christian service, music ministries invite fellow believers to join them in worshipping God. Vega and other interviewees cited the Bible's book of Psalms and the music of evangelical musicians Samuel Hernández and Marcos Witt as examples of adoration music.

## Barrio Characters: Don Tomás

One way evangelical salsa musicians convey their evangelistic message is through the theme of faith. An example is *Orquesta Ahicam's* "Don Tomás." The song is based on John 20:19-29, which records the event in which the Apostle Thomas tells the other disciples that he will not believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ until he has seen Him and placed his hands in His wounds. Although the encounter with the Risen Christ makes a believer out of the Apostle Thomas, Christ reminds his disciple that the blessed are those who believe but have not seen. In other words, it is people of faith who are blessed because they learn to live according to their trust in God. Written by bandleader Charlie Vega, "Don Tomás" personifies the person who is skeptical about the claims made by Christianity:

### ***Don Tomas***

*Yo conozco un personaje  
Que se llama Don Tomás  
Que cuando le hablan de Cristo*

*Se despide y se va  
No, no quiere saber de nadie*

*Mucho menos del Señor  
Dice que es cosa de loco  
Ay yo no creo en la religión  
Dice que tiene que verle  
Y tocarle si es preciso  
Que le diga "Yo soy Cristo"  
Que le repita "Soy yo Cristo"*

### **Sir Thomas**

I know an individual  
Whose name is Sir Thomas  
When they talk to him about  
Christ  
He says goodbye and leaves  
No, no he doesn't want to know  
anyone  
Much less the Lord  
He says this is crazy stuff  
I do not believe in religión  
He says he has to see Him  
And touch Him if necessary  
That He tells him "I'm Christ"  
That He should repeat "It's me  
Christ"

*Que le asegure “Soy yo Cristo”*

*“Don Tomás te necesito”*

*Coro:*

*No es por vista, que es por fe*

*Que tú tienes que creer*

That He should assure him “It is me Christ”

“Sir Thomas I need you.”

Chorus:

It is not by sight, it is by faith

That you need to believe

Through the character of Don Tomás, Vega critiques an individualistic and cynical society that divorces faith from reason and demands empirical evidence in order to believe in the theological proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The verse “yo no creo en la religión” (“I do not believe in religion”) points as well to a society that is indifferent to religion, both because of atheism and a secularist perspective that seeks to restrict religion to the private sphere. The verse “es cosa de loco” (“this is crazy stuff”) suggests how nonbelievers interpret religion as an irrational belief system. In doing so, believers are branded “fanatics” (“locos”) because they are judged to act without the use of reason. Enshrined in the chorus is the evangelistic message reminding non-Christians that to know Jesus Christ requires an act of faith.

### **Sodom and Gomorrah**

Another prevalent theme in this discography is that of moral issues, which tend to reflect upon the current political concerns of Puerto Rican society. Such an example is the song “Sodoma y Gomorra” (“Sodom and Gomorrah”). A remake of an older evangelical salsa song, “Sodoma y Gomorra” denounces homosexuality as a sinful lifestyle. The song warns society that engaging in

homosexual acts will lead to destruction, similar to that of the Old Testament cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The song repeats this warning through the choral refrain, “Como Sodoma y Gomorra, la tierra se quemará” (“Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the land will be destroyed”):

### **Sodoma y Gomorra**

*Hay hombres que no son hombres,  
Hum  
No tienen fuerza moral  
Se hacen operaciones  
Para su cuerpo cambiar*

*Bien claro dice la biblia  
Que así dice Jehovah  
Como Sodoma y Gomorra  
La tierra se quemará*

### **Sodom and Gomorrah**

There are men that are not men,  
*Hum*  
They have no moral strength  
They have operations  
In order to change their bodies

The Bible says it very clear  
That Jehovah says  
Like Sodom and Gomorrah  
The land will burn

“Sodoma y Gomorra” is based on a biblical narrative found in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. In Genesis 19, the story of Lot is the context for understanding the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. A nephew of Abraham, Lot is visited by men demanding to have sex with the angels who are staying with Lot. Such acts became part of the social fabric of Sodom and Gomorrah. The traditional interpretation of the story is that God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as the result of His disapproval of immoral acts such as homosexuality. Only Lot and his family are spared in the destruction of the cities.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation seems to find further confirmation in the New Testament writings of the Second Letter of Peter and the Letter of Jude. Both of these books make explicit mention of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah..

In this new rendition of “Sodoma y Gomorra,” Orquesta Revelación addresses an issue not mentioned in the original version: same-sex marriage. Orquesta Revelación’s version makes reference to the issue in one of the *soneos*. After the song goes through the mambo section, the *sonero* improvises, “Aunque quieran redefinir el código civil” (“Although they want to redefine the civil code”). The term “código civil” refers to the recent legal battle in the Puerto Rico in which proponents of same-sex marriage sought to redefine the institution of marriage. The *sonero* further underscores the immorality of same-sex marriage by following this *soneo* with, “Ese pecado no va, porque no agrada a Jehova” (“That sin will not be accepted, because it does not please Jehova”).

### **Marital Songs**

Although *salsa gorda* is the prime influence on evangelical salsa, romantic salsa songs are also included in the repertoire of evangelical salsa ministries. This is a theme that evangelical *salseros* share with their colleagues in the romantic salsa movement. But here I am not referring to love songs about God, but to songs expressing romantic love between man and woman. Yet, there is a subtle difference between the love songs of evangelical *salseros* and romantic salsa crooners: evangelical salsa love songs are about *married couples*. This is a significant distinction given that secular romantic salsa songs tend to be ambiguous about the legal status of heterosexual relationships. This distinction becomes more noticeable when these romantic songs describe sexual acts with

a significant other. While sex outside marriage might be deemed acceptable in a secular context, it is considered a serious sin in Christianity. Understandably, the listener of secular salsa music can adapt the song to his/her own personal situation, whether that situation is that of married or single life.

Yet the overriding concern in these evangelical salsa romantic songs is the married couple's ability to work out its problems in order to stay faithful to its marriage vows. One such song is singer Ezequiel Colón's "¿Qué nos pasó?" ("What Happened to Us?"). Composed by Colón, the song is a dialogue in which the husband and wife discuss their marital problems in an attempt to reconcile their differences. Far from being a peaceful discussion, the married couple's conversation begins as an argument. When the bewildered husband asks what why she asked him to leave the house, the wife expresses her concern that their argument will be noticed by the children:

<i>Esposo:</i> <i>Qué nos pasó, no es posible que me pidas</i> <i>Que me vaya, que todo terminó,</i>	Husband: What happened to us, it is not possible that I leave  That everything is finished
<i>Esposa:</i> <i>Déjame, ya no me grites que los niños</i> <i>Duermen en su habitación<sup>12</sup></i>	Wife: Leave me alone, stop yelling The children are sleeping in their room

As the dialogue unfolds, the husband brings God into the conversation by asking her how she can be willing to terminate a marriage begun by God. The wife responds by accusing her spouse of being responsible for the possible

separation. This view is reinforced when she tells him that she can not even look at him:

*Esposo: Mírame*

Husband: Look at me

*Esposa: no puedo*

Wife: I can't

However, the spouses conclude that they must make their marriage work. The desire to reconcile their differences is expressed in the last section of the song which, with the exception of one verse, is sung together. Their intention to reconcile is expressed in their petition, “nuestra historia merece un mejor final” (“our story deserves a better ending”). In the midst of their reconciliation, the spouses remind each other that they need to be faithful to the vows made before God. The song's second reference to God shows that the spouses hold each other accountable before Him. This sense of accountability seems to inspire the husband to recognize that he is the primary guilty party as he alone sings for the need to be given the opportunity to be trusted again. Thus, the song highlights the centrality of God in the life of a married couple, which goes hand in hand with the need for repentance and reconciliation. Reconciliation is not necessarily a hallmark of secular romantic salsa songs, which is why evangelical marital song texts are unique:

*Juntos:*

*Hoy olvidemos, te pido perdón*

*Los errores cometidos*

*No volvamos a repetirlos*

*Recordemos que, un día prometimos*

*Ante Dios seguir unidos, hasta la muerte*

*Que en las buenas y en las malas prometimos cuidarnos por siempre*

*Dejemos todo atrás, te pido perdón, por favor brindémonos otra  
oportunidad  
Que puedas confiar en mí una vez más (Ezequiel Colón only)  
Digamos la verdad, que nuestra historia se escriba con un mejor final.*

Together:  
Today let us forget, I ask for forgiveness  
The errors committed  
Let us not repeat them  
Let's remember that one day we promised  
Before God that we would remain united till death  
That in the good and the bad we promised to take care of each other  
forever  
Let's leave everything behind, I apologize, please let us give each other  
another opportunity  
That you can trust me once more (Ezequiel Colón only)  
Let us say the truth, so that our history is written with a better ending.

## **The End Times**

A favorite theme in evangelical salsa discography is the end times. It is also a controversial theme that causes division among evangelical *salseros*. This is because Protestant denominations disagree over the doctrine about the end times, as in many other important issues of faith and morals.<sup>13</sup> While some ministries preach the end time doctrine of rapture, others do not agree with such a scenario. If these other ministries sing about the end times it will be songs about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The rapture doctrine seems to be pushed primarily by *salseros* who attend Pentecostal denominations.

The rapture is the theme of *Orquesta Revelación's* "Acontecimientos" ("Happenings"). Written by bandleader and bassist Billy Rosado, "Acontecimientos" warns that Jesus Christ is coming. Yet, the song does not refer to the Second Coming of Christ but rather to His secret return prior to His

Second Coming. Rapture believers teach that Jesus Christ will snatch away His faithful believers during this secret return. In contrast, unbelievers will be left on earth to undergo tribulation.

In the video version of “Acontecimientos,” a man falls asleep and notices his family is gone. In the dream he understands that because his family is faithful the Lord has snatched them away during the rapture. He comes to understand that he was left behind because of his infidelity. The song warns about false prophets who deceive the people. These false prophets are identified as preachers who present false teachings about the Gospel of Christ. The video identifies Puerto Rican Protestant pastors Rodolfo Font and José Luis Miranda as the false prophets of contemporary Puerto Rican society.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the man in the video wakes up to realize his family has not been raptured. The dream serves as a warning that he needs to repent in order to be among the raptured.

### ***Estoy como nunca: Evangelical Salsa “Covers”***

The influence of *salsa gorda* on the evangelical *salsero* manifests itself yet in another way: “evangelical covers” of salsa classics. It is common to hear evangelical salsa ministries perform Christian songs originally performed by secular *salseros*. Songs such as “El Todopoderoso” (“The Almighty”), “Juan en la ciudad” (“John in the City”), “El Nazareno” (“The Nazarene”), and “Libro de amor” (“Book of Love”), have become essential in the live repertoires of evangelical salsa ministries. Previous to its first album recording, *Orquesta Nueva Cosecha’s*

repertoire was mainly made up of these types of songs.<sup>15</sup> Yet, other ministries go a step forward by remaking secular tunes into evangelical songs.<sup>16</sup> That is, evangelical artists take a song with no religious meaning at all and invest the tune with an evangelistic meaning.

The latter example has become the trademark of the *Caribbean Salsa Praise* ministry. Created by music promoter Vic “El Chévere” Rodríguez, Caribbean Salsa Praise brings together artists from several ministries to perform as one ministry.<sup>17</sup> To a certain degree, one can discern the influence of secular Latin bands such as the *Fania-All Stars* in the concept behind the *Caribbean Salsa Praise*.<sup>18</sup> One of Rodríguez’ intentions in forming this ministry was to promote and honor Afro-Caribbean musical culture through his commitment of evangelizing via salsa music. To accomplish his goal, Rodríguez chose to honor several Latin music artists from Puerto Rico, New York, and Cuba by recording an evangelical version of their secular songs.<sup>19</sup> What makes this version “evangelical” is that when the song reaches the call-and-response structure, the *soneos* and the chorus refrain become evangelistic.

A clear demonstration of this evangelical interpretation is *Caribbean Salsa Praise’s* remake of “Estoy como nunca” (“I’m Like Never Before”). Rodríguez recorded the song in honor of Manny Oquendo and *Conjunto Libre*, the New York-based salsa orchestra.<sup>20</sup> According to Rodríguez, Libre’s version of “Estoy como nunca” is about a man from the barrio who tells his enemies that he will beat all odds and be victorious in the end. In contrast, the *Caribbean Salsa Praise* version focuses on the new life that a person begins as a result of

becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. Voiced by *Orquesta Jahaziel's* Raymundo Márquez, the first set of *soneos* draw attention to the believer's exulting of joy for having been redeemed by Jesus Christ. In the *soneos*, the theme of testimony is present:

### **Soneos**

*Porque fui lavado por la sangre de Cristo  
Y ahora soy nueva criatura  
Renovado como el águila  
Que volando se remonta a las alturas*

*Triunfante (4x) y victorioso  
Porque siento el gozo de la salvación*

*Y es que fueron rotas las cadenas  
que me arrastraban rumbo a la perdición  
Aunque un ejército acampe contra mí  
Mi alma no temerá  
Porque el rey de reyes y Señor de Señores  
A mi lado peleará  
Ahora yo estoy como nunca  
Todo lo puedo en Cristo que me fortalece  
¡Amén!*

Because I was washed by the blood of Christ  
And now I am a new creature  
Renovated like the eagle  
Who flying is able to leap heights  
Triumphant (4x) and victorious  
Because I feel the joy of salvation  
And it's that the chains that carried me  
Toward perdition have been broken  
Although an army encamps against me  
My soul will not fear  
Because the King of Kings and Lord of Lords  
Will fight on my side  
Now I am like never before  
I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me  
Amen!

After this first series of *soneos*, the song introduces a second choral refrain that alters the original Libre version. Instead of “Lo que sea, mujer, lo que sea” (“Whatever you want, woman, whatever you want”), the chorus sings “Lo que sea, mi Dios, lo que sea” (“Whatever you want, my God, whatever you want”). The *soneos* alternating with this second choral refrain express a commitment to evangelization. Through this specific call-and-response, the band tells God to use them as He sees fit. The singer makes known his desire to obey God’s command of evangelization by declaring that he is willing to travel throughout Latin America to proclaim His word. Incidentally, the *soneos* mention Latin American nations that make up the Spanish-speaking Caribbean—Cuba, Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela:

*Segundo Coro: Lo que sea, mi Dios, lo que sea*

*Soneo:*

*Delante de ti Señor, traigo mis talentos, úsame como Tú quieras*

*A tierras lejanas llegaré,*

*Y les llevaré las Buenas Nuevas*

*A Cuba, Santo Domingo y Panamá,*

*a Colombia y Venezuela*

*Para que conozcan de tu amor,*

*de tu gloria, y tu grandeza*

Second Chorus: Whatever you want, my God, whatever you want

Soneos:

Before you, my Lord, I bring my talents, use them as You please

To far lands I will go,

And I will bring them the Good News

To Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Panama,

To Colombia and Venezuela

So they can know your love,

Of your glory and your greatness.

## Conclusion: Evangelical Salsa Is Barrio Salsa

This survey of recurring themes in its discography illustrates that evangelical salsa music is deeply rooted in 1970s barrio salsa. By invoking the *salsa gorda* tradition, evangelical *salseros* attempt to continue to speak from the margins of urban life. But rather than simply creating salsa that reflects their society, evangelical *salseros* seek to redeem the Puerto Rican barrio. Their music can be read more as an evaluation than a reflection of society. Instead of touching upon themes that depart from the barrio lived experience, these artists interpret everyday barrio experiences from a biblical standpoint. With their message of salvation, evangelicals bring to salsa a perspective already embraced by and familiar to many residents in a barrio, where salsa is acknowledged as a legitimate national identity marker for Puerto Ricans. It remains imperative to see how evangelization takes place during a live evangelical salsa performance.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Hector Lavoe's "El Todopoderoso" (The Almighty) would not get any airplay because he was a secular salsa artist. However, the radio show would program an evangelical salsa ministry's version of the Lavoe salsa classic.

<sup>2</sup> Normally, a solo artist is a singer who leads his own band while a group is led by another musician and has several singers.

<sup>3</sup> According to Charlie Vega, *ahicam* is a word of Hebrew origin.

<sup>4</sup> Other key themes in the Gospel of John are testimony and believing.

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<sup>5</sup> The album does not indicate the year it was published by the record company.

<sup>6</sup> While some episodes from Jesus Christ's ministry appear in several Gospels, only the Gospel of John records his post-resurrection with Peter, the head of the apostles.

<sup>7</sup> The Passion refers to the persecution Jesus Christ must undergo as part of his redemptive mission to redeem humanity.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, some bands may include the *cuatro* because they have recorded a Christmas salsa album.

<sup>9</sup> The trombone has played an important role in the formation of the salsa music sound.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Communication. Interview with Ceferino Caban in Moca, Puerto Rico (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Lot's wife does not survive because she looks back. Previous to the story of Lot, Genesis records the conversation between Abraham and God. Abraham is begging God to spare the destruction of the cities.

<sup>12</sup> This part of the song is repeated twice.

<sup>13</sup> For example, some Protestant denominations believe in infant baptism, while others believe only in adult baptism.

<sup>14</sup> Pastor Rodolfo Font is the head of Fuente de Agua Viva ("Fountain of the Living Water"), an evangelical denomination headquartered in Carolina, Puerto Rico. José Luis Miranda is an evangelical who claims to be "Jesucristo Hombre," based in Miami, Florida.

<sup>15</sup> Band leader Emil Alvarado told me that his band would perform Christian salsa songs popularized by secular salsa artists such as Hector Lavoe, Bobby Valentín, and Raphy Leavitt and his Selecta Orchestra.

<sup>16</sup> Vic "El Chévere" Rodríguez mentioned another band with a similar practice, which he finds deplorable. He mentioned that the band changed the lyrics of the classic secular salsa tune "Plante bandera".

<sup>17</sup> For example, singer Raymundo Márquez is a member of Orquesta Jahaziel.

<sup>18</sup> The Fania-All Stars were a constellation of artists signed to the Fania Record label. These artists had their own musical orchestras and musical recordings. Yet, Fania Records would take the best of their solo singing acts along with musicians to form an all-star salsa orchestra.

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<sup>19</sup> Among the artists honored in Caribbean Salsa Praise's debut cd are Grupo Mezcla de Cuba, Manny Oquendo y Conjunto Libre (New York), Ray Barretto, Louis Ramírez, Cheo Feliciano (Puerto Rico), Gonzalo Rubalcaba y su Conjunto (Cuba), and Los Afro Cuban All Stars.

<sup>20</sup> Manny Oquendo was a Puerto Rican percussionist and one of the original members of Eddie Palmieri's La Perfecta Orchestra. One of the key musicians in the New York Latin music scene, Oquendo founded Conjunto Libre, a salsa orchestra that went on to become one of the key New York-based salsa institutions.

## Chapter 5

### **“I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel”: The Evangelical *Sonero* as Evangelist**

After a long two-hour drive, I arrived at the southeastern town of Guayama. The purpose of my visit was to interview Emil Alvarado, a local evangelical salsa musician and bandleader. Shortly after meeting him at the local McDonald's, Emil reminded me, as he had done on the phone, that he agreed to the interview because “Esto es importante y te quiero ayudar” (“This is important and I want to help you”). Alvarado felt it was important that I be given information that would help me in my study of the evangelical salsa movement. As I interviewed him in the popular fast food restaurant, Alvarado handed me his business card. On the business card, Alvarado is identified as the director of *Orquesta Nueva Cosecha* (New Harvest Orchestra). The clue that the band is identified as a ministry is that the contact information is given underneath the words *PARA MINISTRACION* (FOR MINISTRY PURPOSES). Furthermore, beneath the picture of the band—13 musicians dressed in business suits—is a phrase that reads *Sanando el Espíritu Quebrantado* (Healing the Broken Spirit). The phrase is indicative of the band's understanding of its evangelical ministry: to

repair what is broken in humanity by bringing restoration through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Alvarado's description of his orchestra as a ministry was a recurrent theme in my interviews with musicians. In our conversations, musicians made sure that I knew that when they were performing music, they were actually ministering to people. The phrase "para la salvación de las almas" ("for the salvation of souls") that I constantly heard from the lips of musicians was meant as a confirmation of this musical intention. *Orquesta Nueva Cosecha's* self-description, aptly described in the business card, is representative of the movement as a whole: musical works exist to be performed in order to save souls.<sup>1</sup>

The key to understanding the sociocultural significance of evangelical salsa is musical performance. Christopher Small's dictum that "performance does not exist to perform works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform" provides a useful way to think about the musical philosophy behind the performance of evangelical salsa music (Small 1998: 8). After all, musical performance allows us to see a musician's philosophy in how to execute a particular musical work in a specific musical context. Following Small's assertion, I now focus on live musical performance as a key method of evangelization in the evangelical salsa music scene. I give attention to this aspect of evangelical salsa because its primary goal is not to entertain but to evangelize. This is important to point out given that social dancing and musical improvisations are two key integral aspects of salsa musical events. Keeping this

in mind helps us appreciate how evangelical salsa music diverges from its secular counterpart while retaining many of the salient aspects of secular salsa music.

Guiding my inquiry into evangelical salsa music performance are the following questions: (1) What makes evangelical salsa performance “evangelical”? (2) Is this music evangelical simply because artists sing songs proclaiming the evangelical faith or is there something musically unique to this particular genre of salsa? (3) Does evangelical salsa music performance differ from its secular counterpart? If so, where does this musical difference manifest itself during a performance? (4) And if this music is truly different precisely because it is “evangelical,” then what does evangelical salsa disclose about evangelization?

I answer the above questions by analyzing live evangelical salsa performances. First, I briefly discuss four crucial components of evangelical salsa performances: the live performances of salsa recordings, the *sonéo*, preaching, and testimony. It is imperative to do so to understand how salsa musicians’ combination of musical and religious elements makes their performance an evangelical event. Next, I analyze recordings of live evangelical salsa events. The recordings I examine are performances by Alex D’Castro and Domingo Quiñones, two well-known converts from the secular salsa music scene. Finally, I provide an ethnographic account of an evangelization event that took place in Puerto Rico during the summer of 2001. This account focuses on the live performance of *Orquesta Querubín (The Cherubim Orchestra)*, an evangelical

salsa orchestra considered a musical institution within the evangelical salsa community.

My analysis of these evangelical salsa performances focuses in particular on the *soneo*, that is, salsa vocal improvisation. I emphasize the *soneo* because this musical practice becomes the principal method of evangelization during a live salsa performance. As part of my analysis, I examine these live performances in light of the songs' original recordings in order to better comprehend what the salsa vocalist is attempting to achieve as an evangelist. In doing so, I demonstrate that the *sonero* engages in the evangelistic discourses of preaching and testimony. As a result, the *soneo* is transformed into an evangelistic discourse during live performances. In this way, evangelization takes place through a well-known and respected voice of the barrio community: the voice of the *sonero*.

### **Live Salsa Performance: The Extension of a Recording**

Live performance is one of the most exciting and fundamental aspects of salsa music culture. One can perceive this from the number of live recordings that have become part of the canon of the historical and influential salsa recordings. Musicians and aficionados alike enjoy listening to these recordings in order to grasp the essence of the salsa musical expression. Yet, the excitement of live salsa music is not limited to what is captured and preserved as part of salsa material culture, but can be more fully experienced by actual participation

in one of those many salsa events that take place in nightclubs, concert halls, or outdoor parks.

One key difference that quickly arises when listening to live salsa music is how the live performance lasts longer, and at times, departs from the original recording.<sup>2</sup> A key reason motivating this distinctive live rendition of a recording is salsa dancing. The live extension of a salsa song translates into more time for dancing and, as such, more time for people to socialize with each other. Christopher Washburne (2008: 67) notes that the intention to allow dancers to have enough time to dance motivates the orchestra's decision to extend the duration of songs during a live performance:

Dancers briefly listen to a song before venturing to locate a prospective partner. Once obtained, they make their way to the dance floor. By the time they reach the dance floor, the band will have been playing for two to three minutes. If the band plays the number exactly as it appears on its recording, the couple will have only one to three minutes to dance. By adding solos, extra *soneos*, instrumental mambos, and *monas*, the musicians provide sufficient dance time. During live performance the bandleader or musical director will make decisions concerning the length and repetition of each section. These decisions are made by surveying the reactions of audience members and are then communicated to the other group members by a set of cues. The loud volumes of performances makes vocal cueing difficult, though, at times, singers will incorporate directions to the band in their *soneos*, such as "Vámonos al mambo" ("Let's go to the mambo").

Yet, social dancing is not a primary concern for evangelical salsa musicians. "¡Salsa p'al bailador!" ("Salsa for the dancer!"), as the popular expression goes, is not the reason why evangelical salsa musicians produce and perform evangelical salsa music. The goal is not to get the people to dance, but to make them listen and convert. *Orquesta Ahicam* musical director Charlie Vega

(2001) illustrates this musical philosophy in an anecdote he told during the first interview session I had with him in his home in Isabela, Puerto Rico:

I played in another Christian group, and we once got invited to a wedding in which they began to dance and take out beer and then the [musical] director said, "Look, we cannot continue [playing]." And then we played I think one song or two more and we left because the person supposedly told him that there was not going to be any liquor and all that, and the thing got distorted because really when a person is drinking they are not going to listen to anything, he is not going to [listen], he is going to hang out.<sup>3</sup>

An interesting point in Vega's anecdote is the description of the circumstances that led to the band's eventual departure from the wedding gig. The circumstances described are typical of what a person can expect to see at a normal salsa music event, whether the event takes place at a nightclub or an outdoor beach festival. The association between drinking, hanging out, and salsa music suggests that for many aficionados, salsa music represents, among other things, "party music." Salsa is a music that warrants celebration. Hence, the context of Vega's story is one of these joyful occasions: a wedding reception. Although an example of a joyful occasion, the wedding reception differs from the aforementioned salsa music scenes because it happens to be a "private party." César Miguel Rondón points out that there are two types of social sites for dancing: public spaces and private parties. In this public/private binary conception of the salsa music scene, Rondón argues (1980: 63), the performance site influences the type of repertoire that a band performs at a particular venue:

These dancing venues were divided into specific types: public spaces and private parties. In the former, people paid up

front and went from club to club depending on the attraction that a particular orchestra offered. In the latter, those two circumstances did not exist. The dancers went to a party for friendship or simple celebration and not for the music per se. The musicians were only a secondary consideration. When musicians have to depend on performing for private parties to make a living, they tend to produce a safer, more neutral sound, a sort of complacent amalgam of all the trends of the moment. There is no innovation. Conversely, a city with a sufficient number of clubs can support a great variety of orchestras, each able to create its own style and sound. When music comes from public spaces, orchestras enter a genuine professional competition, since a venue will only fill up if the orchestra represents a specific attraction for the dancing public. And, obviously, an orchestra that does not pack the house is condemned to failure.

The distinction Rondón draws between public spaces and private parties, while helpful for understanding the secular salsa scene, remains inadequate to assess the evangelical salsa movement. The reason is that here the venue does not influence the performance as much as the *audience* does. For instance, even if the ministry performed primarily within a private function, this occasion could evoke a creative repertoire to evangelize a particular segment of society. It is not so much the public/private binary as it is the believer/nonbeliever audience dichotomy that guides the musician's performance and repertoire decisions. Hence, the unique role that the *sonero* plays in evangelical salsa performance.

### ***El Soneo: Salsa Vocal Improvisation***

As I stated earlier, musical improvisation is a key characteristic of live salsa music, usually from the orchestra's lead singer. On some occasions, the singer is the only musician who improvises in every song. While some songs

allow or call for percussion and/or brass solos, almost every song gives the lead singer the opportunity to improvise during the song's call-and-response section.<sup>4</sup> In the course of this musical segment, the *sonero* improvises verses in between a choral refrain sung by the chorus singers. Frances Aparicio (1997: 84) accentuates the musical significance of the call-and-response structure in her description of the *soneo*:

The *soneo*, the long section of improvisation in any salsa song, also exemplifies "liberty and spontaneity." The *soneo* is characterized by a call-and-response structure between singer and chorus (the instrumentalists), and as such it is a trait that represents continuity with older forms of Afro-Caribbean musical folklore and with West African music. It allows salsa music to articulate a collective voice in its chorus section and to establish a dialogic texture in its montuno section. When the singer improvises on the main theme of the song (the art of the *soneo*) he or she creates new utterances and also rearticulates or culls phrases from other songs of various traditions. The singer opens up a sonorous space of freedom, improvisation, and innovation, clinging simultaneously to musical tradition and reaffirming collective memory. This structure, perhaps the most creative aspect of salsa music, also allows the lead singer, or *sonero*, to intersperse political commentary or social criticism in a less blatant mode.

Aparicio's commentary on the *soneo* merits further reflection. As she notes, "the art of the *soneo*" includes the ability to improvise as well as the capacity to perform musical innovations based on the main theme of the song. In this "art of the *soneo*," good *soneros* are generally able to create an "improvised unwritten text," based on, but not limited to, the song text. One way to grasp the value of "the art of the *soneo*" is to listen to the *soneo* as an audio confirmation of the *sonero*'s musical knowledge, that is, as evidence of the *sonero*'s mastery of "the curriculum of salsa."<sup>5</sup> This "curriculum" will include the *sonero*'s mastery of

*montuno*, *clave*, *jibaro* and Afro-Caribbean musical traditions, in addition to their familiarization with salsa discography.

The *soneo* as “improvised text” also allows us to hear how well a *sonero* can tell a story. A good *sonero* is usually a good storyteller. As such, the *sonero* will develop his story not only from the song text itself but also from such sources as the audience, musical event, event location, politics, and cultural traditions. In pulling together these sources, the *sonero* might also create “characters” from among the members of his audience.

As far as the message itself, the *sonero* can take the *soneo* in many different directions. *Soneros* can use the *soneo* to provide, as indicated by Aparicio, political commentary or social criticism. Oftentimes these *soneos* are voiced from a culturally and politically nationalist perspective. Other messages developed through the *soneo* include boasting of *sonero* skills and expressing patriotic pride.

*Soneros* who are known for their storytelling are often called *soneros del pueblo* (salsa singers of the people). A *sonero del pueblo* is a singer who comes from the *barrio* and was therefore brought up in the cultural traditions of that community. When the *sonero* sings about relevant social topics, the community can sense that he has street credibility because he happens to be one of them. The *sonero* can sing about street topics because oftentimes the life experiences he sings about he can claim as his own. As a result, the *sonero del pueblo* is a witness to street culture. The late Puerto Rican salsa singer Ismael “Maelo”

Rivera, considered the greatest *sonero*, gives a solid description of the requirements for being a good *sonero*:

The *sonero* is like a poet of the common people/masses. A *sonero* must make a history of the chorus presented, without losing the theme. You must know the language of the populace, because you have to interweave things from our daily life. You have to be part of the common people, so that you may reach the common people. You have to use the words that are being used in street corners” (Flores 1997:9).

An excellent example of the storytelling capacity of the *sonero* can be heard in the song “La boda de ella” (“Her Wedding”), recorded by the Bobby Valentín Orchestra in 1978. The Roberto Angleró composition is about a man who laments he will not be able to attend his ex-girlfriend’s wedding:

*A la boda de ella  
Yo no voy a poder ir  
Porque ella fue mi querer  
Y me lo tiene prohibido.*

To her wedding  
I will not be able to go  
Because she was my girlfriend  
And she prohibits me from going.

Yet, Angleró’s song does not tell us the reason why the future bride prohibits her ex-boyfriend from attending her wedding. Because the text of “La boda de ella” is only a few stanzas long, its *soneos* become the “place” where the listener learns why the ex-boyfriend was forbidden to attend the wedding. Lead vocalist Carlos “Cano” Estremera develops an “improvised text” disclosing that the ex-boyfriend’s exclusion from the wedding stems from his former girlfriend’s desire

to hide her sexually sinful past. Delivered in a humorous tone, Estremera's *soneos* illustrate the storytelling creativity of the *sonero*:

*Si el cura sabe lo que tú y yo fuimos  
No bendecirá esa union*

If the priest knew what you and I were  
He would not bless that union (marriage)

Estremera's live performance at the Copacabana Night Club in New York City, which took place sometime in the 1990s, is an example of the ways that *soneros* use the *soneo* to transmit a particular message.<sup>6</sup> During his rendition of "Muñeco de la ciudad" ("The Doll of the City"), Estremera's *soneos* criticize Puerto Rican musicians who perform Dominican merengues. Estremera depicts these musicians as traitors to the nation as he compares them with Puerto Ricans who abandon the Spanish language in favor of English:

*Ay el que canta merengue no es boricua no, no, no  
Aunque venga del campo ese a nosotros nos traicionó  
Es como el que habla inglés y se olvida su español  
Hay que decir la verdad aunque nos cause dolor*

The one who sings merengue is not Puerto Rican, no, no, no  
Even if he comes from the mountains, he has betrayed us  
It's like the one who speaks English and forgets his Spanish  
One must say the truth even if it causes us pain.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the evangelical *sonero* gives the *soneo* a different role: the function of the *soneo* is to evangelize. Since evangelical orchestras operate as musical ministries, the *sonero* relates to the audience primarily as a minister of the word of God. This becomes apparent during the song's call-and-response section, when the evangelical *sonero* transforms the *soneo* into the evangelistic

discourses of preaching and testimony. This musical transformation—the soneo as evangelistic discourse—is significant because both preaching and testimony are fundamental *methods* of evangelization.

## **Preaching**

Preaching—the verbal proclamation of the Christian faith—has always had a pivotal role in the transmission of Christianity. In the Christian Bible, preaching was first exercised by the Old Testament prophets, who were responsible for communicating the word of God to the Israelites. In the New Testament, preaching became associated with Jesus Christ and the early Christian Church. All four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) of the New Testament reveal that preaching, along with miracles and exorcisms, was an essential characteristic of the ministry of Jesus Christ. During one of his resurrection appearances, Jesus Christ commands his apostles to make disciples of all nations by teaching them everything he has taught. After the Ascension of Christ, the New Testament book *The Acts of the Apostles* records how the Christian mandate of preaching became a central missionary activity of the Apostles.<sup>8</sup> The crucial significance of preaching is captured by the Apostle Paul, a convert from Judaism and former persecutor of the Early Christian Church. In one of the New Testament Epistles attributed to his authorship, *The Letter to the Romans*, the apostle Paul makes a correlation between faith and preaching: “But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they

to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? [...] So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10: 14, 17). Paul clearly taught that in order for faith to be aroused in a person, the person needs to hear a proclamation of that message. That is, the person needs to come in contact with a preacher. Paul's teaching implied that the absence of such an encounter would make it impossible for the transmission of the Christian faith. Several of my interviewees quoted these New Testament Pauline passages to emphasize the correlation between preaching and conversion.<sup>9</sup>

The vital missionary task of preaching is also essential to Protestantism. Speaking of this tradition, Alister McGrath notes that Protestants have always understood that "the sermon was the means by which God spoke to his people" (2007: 291). The Protestant perspective of the sermon explains its central place in Protestant evangelical Sunday services. A typical Sunday sermon can last anywhere from forty-five minutes to one hour. Since many of these services usually last two hours, the duration of the sermon indicates that the Sunday sermon is the heart of the Protestant evangelical service. It is as if the singing and praying reach their climax when the preacher approaches the pulpit to preach the sermon. In many Protestant congregations, preaching is considered so important that sermons are recorded and sold as audio compact discs. The purpose of recording the sermon is for congregants to study the sermon's teaching and apply its life-giving principles. Since these sermons also contain important statements of Protestant doctrine, they are seen as invaluable

resources that help promote the numerical growth of the congregation. For this reason, the preacher is revered in Protestant circles: “Preachers are the ‘guardians’ of the various Protestant traditions, acting as centers of nucleation, purification, and growth for what is perceived to be reliable, relevant, persuasive, and powerful statements of their positions” (2007: 295).

## **Testimony**

Equally important to evangelical salsa is the evangelistic method of testimony or *witness of life*. In Chapter Two, I pointed out that testimony is an evangelistic tool in which the Christian faith rests on the believer’s claim of having a personal transformative encounter with Jesus Christ. The opportunity to give testimony is one reason evangelical salsa musicians were eager to sit down with me for an interview session. By giving testimony, the believer hopes to come across as a credible witness to the Christian faith. Many people who accept a particular religious tradition do so because they find a certain testimony to be a very moving, reliable, and compelling autobiographical religious narrative.

Being a credible witness of the Gospel can also determine your membership in an evangelical salsa music ministry. Several musical directors confided to me that Christian witness is just an important requirement as musical skill for band membership. Emil Alvarado explained that in order to recruit musicians who fulfilled this requirement, he would interview both musicians and

their pastor. The interview with the pastor would include questions to find out if the musician was in fact living a responsible Christian life:

First of all, we look for his testimony... We call the pastor. Is that musician firm in the [Christian] path? Does this musician have a good testimony? Do you trust this musician? Is this musician meeting his financial responsibilities? Is this musician doing everything right with his wife and family?<sup>10</sup>

Alvarado's perspective illustrates how Church membership and participation are important signs of Christian credibility. But in all likelihood, on a musical stage only one of these musicians will make this apparent: the *sonero*. In a salsa performance it is common for salsa musicians to interact with the audience, especially between songs. Usually this interaction is initiated by the lead singer, chorus singers, or musical director. The musicians can take advantage of this time period between songs and give testimony of their faith in Christ. However, it is the *sonero* who in a unique way *musicalizes* his autobiographical spiritual experience through the art of the *soneo*. The personal information that musicians like Alvarado may know privately, the *soneo* converts into public knowledge.

### **The Evangelical *Soneo***

An excellent example of live evangelical salsa can be heard on Alex D'Castro's *Live 2000* record album. The basis for this album is an evangelical musical event that took place in the southwestern town of Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, on Good Friday 2000. Good Friday is part of Holy Week, the most solemn

Christian week because it commemorates the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Good Friday is the day when Christians remember the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. However, many people in Puerto Rico have begun to observe Good Friday as a day of recreation rather than as a solemn Christian holiday. It is this group of people that made the beach a popular recreation site on Good Friday. In response to this situation, D' Castro gathered several evangelical musicians to perform in a musical event held at Boquerón, Cabo Rojo's popular beach resort.

*Live 2000* contains ten tracks, seven of which are performances from the Good Friday evangelical musical event (the three remaining songs on the album are previously recorded material from D' Castro). For this event, D' Castro performed songs from his own record albums, in addition to his rendition of 1970's salsa classic anthems "El Todopoderoso" ("The Almighty") and "Juan en la ciudad" ("John in the City").<sup>12</sup> The *soneos* express the artists' evangelical zeal as they profess their faith in Christ and invite others to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Yet, it is D' Castro's "Si no fuera por Ti" ("Had It Not Been For You") that truly captures the essence of the evangelical *soneo* performance.

"Si no fuera por Ti" is one of the hit songs from D' Castro's debut solo album, appropriately entitled, *Solo* (1991). Originally a ballad, the song is about a man who recognizes that without the presence of his lover his life would be hopeless. D' Castro confided to me that although he would sing this song to his wife, she would sing the song to God while washing the dishes. This incident left an impression on D'Castro, who reinterpreted the song as a Christian believer's

expression of love toward the God who has blessed him. D'Castro's reinterpretation of the song becomes evident in the *soneos*.

In the Good Friday event, D'Castro's "Si no fuera por Ti" live performance lasts approximately nine minutes, that is, more than four minutes longer than the original recording (in *Solo*).<sup>13</sup> The key factor contributing to the longer live version is D'Castro's extended vocal improvisation. During the call-and-response section, D' Castro's *soneos* respond to the song's theme of the grace of God, a theme implied in the catchy chorus "Si no fuera por ti, qué sería de mí" ("Had it not been for you, what would become of me"). After the song goes through the mambo section of the musical arrangement, the chorus stops and D' Castro improvises a long *soneo* which lasts over four minutes.<sup>14</sup> This is a remarkable feat in itself, given that, generally, contemporary commercial salsa songs are four to five minutes long. Yet, what makes D' Castro's long *soneo* even more remarkable is that it operates as a *musical sermon*:

*Esta noche caballero  
Para mí es un privilegio  
Y a decirte aquí quiero,  
Que no me avergüenzo  
Del Evangelio  
Para todo aquel que cree,  
Y eso es también para ustedes  
Que no es porque dividir  
Un solo pueblo tenemos que unir  
Y hoy soy sonero lindo  
Porque por mí murió Cristo  
Y esta noche aquí te canto,  
Noche que llamamos  
Viernes Santo  
Un pueblo que aquí se ha unido  
Para alabar el nombre de Cristo*

This night gentleman  
For me it is a privilege  
And I want to tell you  
I am not ashamed  
Of the Gospel  
It's for everyone who believes  
And it is also for you  
There is no reason to divide  
We need to unite one people  
And today I am a good *sonero*  
Because Christ died for me  
And tonight I sing to you  
A night we call  
Good Friday  
The people has gathered  
To praise the name of Christ

*El Salvador de Borinquen  
Para que gocen y brinquen  
Y esta noche frente al Balneario*

*Montamos este escenario  
Para que todos conozcan  
Aquí lo que hoy te digo  
Que creemos y adoramos  
A un Cristo vivo  
Aquel que murió en la cruz  
Aquel que tanto nos ama  
Y yo no sé a quién le pesa  
Pero aquí no se bebe ron  
Ni cerveza  
Y lo bien que lo pasamos  
Y lo que a Cristo adoramos  
De esta manera sencilla  
Para mí es una maravilla  
Venir esta noche a Boquerón  
Y que aquí nadie se vaya  
Sin Cristo en su corazón...  
Y yo quiero que en ti viva  
Y te lleves el regalo  
Ese que pagó por ti  
En una cruz clavado  
Murió por ti  
Y también por mí*

The Savior of Puerto Rico  
So celebrate and jump  
And this night front of El  
Balneario  
We constructed this stage  
So everyone would know  
What I say today  
Is that we relieve and adore  
A Christ who is alive  
The one who died on the cross  
The one who loves us so much  
And I don't know who it bothers  
But we don't drink rum or beer  
Over here  
And what a good time we have  
And those who worship Christ  
In this simple manner  
For me it is marvelous  
To come tonight to Boquerón  
And nobody leaves  
Without Christ in his heart...  
And I want him to live in you  
And for you to receive the gift  
He who paid for you  
Nailed on a cross  
Died for you  
And also for me

That D'Castro's *soneo* performance operates as a sermon can be deduced from his self-presentation as a preacher of the Word of God. This self-presentation is implied in the verse "Que no me avergüenzo del evangelio" ("I am not ashamed of the Gospel"), a clear reference to Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jews first and also to the Greek." Furthermore, Romans 1:15-16 makes evident that eagerness, boldness, and conviction characterize St. Paul as a preacher. D' Castro's evangelistic mission to the town of Cabo Rojo and his

passionate delivery of his *soneo* shows his desire to imitate Paul as a bold preacher of the Word of God.

Functioning as a sermon, D' Castro's *soneo* is a message of conversion to Jesus Christ. D' Castro preaches conversion when he exhorts the audience, "Y que aquí nadie se vaya sin Cristo en su corazón" ("And that no one leaves without Christ in their heart"). To exhort an individual to have Christ "in their heart" is another way of saying that the person should repent from sin and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Although the word sin does not appear in the *soneo*, repentance is implied in the following verse, "Yo quiero que viva en ti..." ("And I want him to live in you..."). But implied as well is a yearning to see the Christian transformation of his audience. In Christian spirituality, this transformation occurs when the person is blessed by the grace of God and lives for the sake of Christ and His gospel. Interestingly enough, the subject matter of D' Castro's *soneo* resonates with the major theme dominating the first section (Rom. 1:16-8:39) of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans: salvation in Christ.

D' Castro's sermonistic *soneo* also points to the need to transform salsa music culture. This becomes apparent in the verse "aquí no se bebe ron ni cerveza" ("we don't drink rum or beer over here"). The singer is referring to the absence of liquor from the evangelical salsa music scene. Usually, liquor companies such as Bacardí Rum, Budweiser, and the local beer company Medalla sponsor local salsa music concerts. In nightclubs, it is common to see men and women drinking and dancing to salsa music as they socialize near the bar or dance floor. By rejecting liquor as an essential element of the salsa music

scene, D' Castro gives evidence of the musicians' own transformation in Christ. As evangelical salsa artists, these musicians perform a cultural identity that is promoted as the polar opposite of the common negative stereotype of the salsa musician as an alcoholic, drug-using womanizer from the working-class barrio.

### **Soneo as Testimony**

Another example of a religious narrative performed as a *soneo* can be heard in the taped live performance of *Orquesta Querubín* with invited guests Alex D' Castro and Domingo Quiñones at Old San Juan's Ballajá Museum in 1997. Vic Rodríguez, an evangelical salsa promoter, gave me a copy of this recorded performance because he felt that it was "one of the best classes" available about "the Christian *sonero*." In our interview session, Rodríguez described the performance by making a distinction between the secular *sonero* and evangelical *sonero*:

Look, I have over there [pointing towards his record collection], this, one of the best classes that I can give you about the Christian *sonero*, which is totally different from the *sonero* of the world, and it is live with the Querubín Orchestra, Alex D' Castro, and Domingo Quiñones. Ah! A song that lasts half an hour! Ah! Tasty! And you can see how, if you're going to study el *soneo*, the Christian element, study him [Domingo Quiñones] so you can see how it is, how they take, what they call "the space of taking a thought with meaning," they do not loose that space with garbage, saying "la, la, la, la, and everybody sings," no, they take it with a message, and Alex D' Castro improvising to the point, that they drop the chorus and they stay their improvising. I always teach the study of el *soneo* through the example of Alex D' Castro and Domingo [Quiñones].<sup>15</sup>

Notice how in Rodríguez' comparison of the two types of *soneros*, the key difference lies in what he refers to as “the space of taking a thought with meaning.” His use of the word “garbage” to describe *soneos* that lack a coherent message—“saying la, la, la, la, and everybody sings”—suggests that secular *soneros* will at times have nothing to say in their *soneos* and, therefore, will feel obliged to at least say something during the call-and-response structure of the song. In contrast, Rodríguez views evangelical *soneros* as always having something important to say during their improvisations. Rodríguez insinuates this view when mentioning “the Christian element” that can be heard in the evangelical *sonero's* improvisations. Yet, what is significant about this performance, more than providing an ambiguous “Christian element” in the commentary of the *soneo*, is that the performance contains an example of how the *soneo* is performed as another type of religious narrative: the testimony.

The song Quiñones and D' Castro perform together is “Hacia el paraíso” (“Toward Paradise”), in which a believer speaks about how, after his death, Heaven awaits him so he can worship Christ. The live rendition of this song, a powerful performance with swinging brass solos and very imaginative *soneos*, begins with lead singer and bandleader Miguel Cruz singing the text and providing several *soneos* during the initial call-and-response exchanges with the chorus. Following the mambo section, Quiñones and D' Castro join Orquesta Querubín to provide their own *soneos*. During their cameo appearance, Quiñones and D' Castro provide long *soneos* as they alternate with each other in a friendly musical conversation. In the course of these exchanges, D' Castro

states that he has been a witness to Quiñones's conversion to Jesus Christ. Following this *soneo*, Domingo responds with a *soneo* in which he reveals that at one moment in his life he was a drug addict:

*Coro:* Después que termine el tiempo me espera el paraíso

*Soneo:* Como dijo Alex D'Castro

Desde que conozco a Dios

Yo no he vuelto a ser el mismo

Pues ya yo no me meto drogas

Ay mi alma a El lo adora

Jesucristo me levanta

Cuando yo estoy en la lona

Por eso yo te digo ahora

Óigame la juventud

Jesucristo es la luz

Jesucristo está de moda

*Chorus:* After my time is up, paradise awaits me

*Soneo:* Like Alex D' Castro said

I now confirm it

Ever since I know God

I haven't been the same

I no longer do drugs

Oh my soul adores Him

Jesus Christ wakes me up

When I'm down

That's why I now say

Listen up youth

Jesus Christ is the light

Jesus Christ is in style

This musical presentation is an example of how Quiñones's *soneo* operates as a *testimonio* (testimony). Quiñones begins his *soneo testimonial* by confirming D' Castro's previous *soneo* about his conversion. D' Castro's "endorsement" means that a member of the evangelical salsa community can

corroborate that Quiñones' testimony is trustworthy. In this brief testimony, Quiñones affirms that his conversion to Christ has enabled him to abandon his addiction to drugs. Like a spoken testimony, this *soneo testimonial* aims to show that when a person surrenders their will to Christ and acknowledges Him as Lord and Savior, the person can expect to be transformed by Jesus Christ. Imperative to Quiñones's testimony is his description of Jesus Christ. The *soneo testimonial* presents Christ as a God ("my soul adores Him") who transforms humanity through His mercy ("Jesus Christ picks me up when I'm down").<sup>16</sup> Quiñones's additional description of Christ as the "light" demonstrates his familiarity with Sacred Scripture.<sup>17</sup> In depicting Christ as the light, Quiñones continues the light/darkness motif common to both evangelical salsa recordings and evangelical testimonies. Given Protestant evangelicalism's emphasis on the reading of Sacred Scripture, demonstrating familiarity with the Bible is one way an evangelical Christian provides credible evidence of devotion to Jesus Christ.

### **Evangelizing the Baptized**

But the question that now arises is whether evangelical salsa ceases to be a *música de evangelización* (music of evangelization) when performed within a Protestant evangelical context? The answer is no. When the context happens to be a church, evangelical *salseros* can also focus their message on a different aspect of the faith. For instance, the preaching of evangelical *salseros* is also concerned with demonstrating the compatibility of the evangelical faith with

Puerto Rican culture. In this way, evangelical *sa/seros* seek to remind the Protestant evangelical that conversion to Christ does not necessitate renouncing one's ethnic cultural heritage.

I witnessed an example of this evangelism at the grand opening of a Pentecostal Church in the barrio Toa Alta Heights of Toa Alta. The event included many musical ministries performing musical expressions such as *plena*, *musica de trío* (trio music), and of course salsa. The musical stage was set on the roof of the church where some of the members of Orquesta Querubín were rehearsing for their musical performance. Near the stage was a sign in red lettering with white background that read, "A La Reconquista de Toa Alta Heights" ("Toward A Reconquest of Toa Alta Heights"), a clear reference to the church's evangelistic mission. The event areas also included a food section where church members were serving Puerto Rican food such as *arroz con gandules* (rice with pigeon peas) to the people attending the grand opening.

Accompanied by disc jockey Vic Rodríguez and his family, we went toward the front of the church and sat down in one of several empty brown folding chairs. Shortly after a woman delivered an opening prayer asking for God's blessing, Orquesta Querubín began performing. During their first song, the lead singer along with the choir began dancing in unison by employing salsa side-step dance patterns as part of their onstage choreography. Their choreographed dance steps accompanied the song's mambo and *monja* sections as trombonists Carlos "Cuto" Soto and Gamaliel González executed scorching solos. As they continued to perform the song's *montuno* section, Vic Rodríguez

leaned over to where I was sitting and told me that Orquesta Querubín was “la única banda de salsa cristiana que tiene coreografía” (“the only Christian salsa band that has choreography”). On completing the presentation of this song, it was precisely the issue of dancing that Querubin band leader and lead singer Miguel Cruz turned to as he addressed the audience:

I want to tell you that we are a musical ministry that proclaims the word of God through the use of tropical music. That is why we, well, also enjoy the music because let me tell you something, do you know what this is, this “terrible” rhythm and that one is left, you know, with only able to move the elbow [a lady laughs]. Do you know what I am saying? [A lady says, “Yes, I understand you”]. Hallelujah! You know, David danced the danza, in other words, David danced. Amen. David danced because I was studying this and the thing is that the danza is for Christianity, for Christianity is the danza and that dancing is supposedly for the secular world, but notice something I want to tell you, I want to explain something to you. As a result of this study, I was able to visualize something, that the danza is practiced. That’s why when the people went before the king to practice a danza, they would practice and practice, till they did everything perfect. What we are doing here is a danza, we practice this [Vic Rodríguez screams, “In clave!”]. Yes, exactly. Imagine for yourself David in the past [the pianist plays a melody evoking the danza]. Right? But can you imagine David as a Boricua [Puerto Rican]? [The pianist and the percussionist play rhythms utilized in salsa while the public cheers].

Cruz raised the issue of salsa dancing because he was aware that his band’s choreography can be viewed negatively by culturally conservative Protestant evangelicals who associate salsa dancing with lust and sexual immodesty. Also, his performance took place precisely in a denomination (the Pentecostal church) that is generally regarded as legalistic and not open to the idea of social dancing. The tone of this discourse is evangelistic as evidenced by the singer’s use of a biblical story to justify the incorporation of dancing in his Christian musical performance. The Old Testament example of King David

dancing before the Ark of the Covenant serves to solidify Cruz's contention that salsa dancing is an appropriate act to perform when in the presence of God. In this sense, Cruz is exhorting fellow Protestants to recognize salsa dancing as a viable act for Christian worship. Within this context, dancing becomes a medium through which the believer offers God adoration.

This discourse was then followed by the singer's anecdote about a radio announcer who, when asked about his opinion of Orquesta Querubín, replied, "¿Querubín?! ¡¡¡Querubín del diablo!!!" ("Querubín?! Querubín is from the devil!!!"). Laughing as he related the story, Cruz told the anecdote to prepare the crowd for the message implied in the song "Tienes que renacer" ("You have to be born again"). The song finds its inspiration in John 3:1-19, in which Jesus Christ tells Nicodemus that in order to be born again, a person must be born from above, that is, that the person must undergo a spiritual rebirth. However, Cruz's song is here reinterpreted to urge Protestant Evangelicals to renew their way of thinking about salsa dancing and not equate salsa with sin as is done by culturally conservative media. That said, none of the people witnessing the Querubín performance began dancing salsa. Either the congregants did not know how to dance salsa or their refusal to dance was a sign of being uncomfortable with the idea of dancing in a religious public space.

After performing "Tienes que renacer," Cruz reaffirmed his previous message by reminding the crowd, "Dice la Biblia, que al griego se le habló en griego, ¿verdad?, y al judío se le habló en forma judía, pero al boricua, hay que hablarle con la salsa." ("The Bible says that the Greek were spoken to in Greek,

right?, and that the Jew was spoken to in a Jewish form, but as for the Boricua [Puerto Rican], you have to talk to him in salsa”). Cruz implies that salsa is the cultural language that God uses to communicate with Puerto Ricans. Thus, in Cruz’s discourse salsa is depicted as the marker of Puerto Ricanness. But more importantly, Cruz’s discourse calls for an end to the salsero/Christian dichotomy by affirming that Christian and salsero are complimentary rather than oppositional identities. His discourse is also a denunciation of salsa’s marginalization within the mainstream Evangelical community and, at the same time, a call to embrace salsa music as a legitimate and effective medium through which the Gospel can be proclaimed.

Cruz then proceeds to end his musical performance with the song “Esperaré” (“I Will Wait”). In this song, Cruz redirects his attention to non-Christians. The song’s evangelistic message reminds people that those who seek God for prayer petitions must develop the virtue of patience and learn to accept that God responds to prayers in his time. Toward the end of the song, Cruz engages in a sermonic *soneo*, interlaced between the refrain, calling non-Christians to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior:

*Coro: Hay que aprender a esperar*  
*Soneo: Y escucha bien lo que voy a decir en este momento*  
*Si tú todavía no lo conoces éste es el momento preciso*  
*Dale hoy, dale hoy a Cristo la oportunidad*  
*Para que puedas ver lo que te estoy diciendo*  
*Si tú no lo tienes a El no lo puedes apreciar*  
*Lo que yo te estoy diciendo es que Jesucristo murió por ti*  
*En aquella cruz del calvario por salvarte a ti y a mí*  
*Dale hoy, dale hoy la oportunidad*  
*Entonces vas a gozar como me estoy gozando yo*

*Porque vas a sentir esos ríos de agua viva  
Vas a sentir ese gozo que...  
Que mira te estremece, estremece a cualquiera  
Por eso mira te estoy invitando ahora  
Ven que Jesucristo te llama  
Dale la oportunidad y vas a ver la verdad  
Te vas a dirigir a ese camino de verdad  
Ese reino de los cielos purifica, es verdad  
Por eso hubo un sacrificio en la cruz del Calvario  
Esta tarde yo te estoy invitando  
Que le des tu corazón a Jesucristo el Señor*

Chorus: You have to learn to wait  
Soneo: And listen closely to what I have to say at this moment  
If you still don't know Him, this is the precise moment  
Give Him today, give Christ today the opportunity  
So you can see what I'm saying  
If you don't have Him, you won't be able to appreciate Him  
What I'm telling you is that Jesus Christ died for you  
In that cross from Calvary so He could save you and me  
Give Him today, give Him today, give Him today, the opportunity  
Then you will have joy like the joy that I'm experiencing  
Because you'll feel those rivers of living water  
You'll feel that joy that...  
Look, it will make you tremble, it makes anyone tremble  
That's why I'm inviting you now  
Come, Jesus Christ is calling you  
Give Him the opportunity and you'll see the truth  
He'll guide you to that path of truth  
That Kingdom of Heaven purifies, it's true  
That's why there was a sacrifice in the cross of a Calvary  
This evening I'm inviting you  
To give your heart to Jesus Christ the Lord

Although not a polished *sonero* with the rhyming capability of Quiñones or D' Castro, Cruz is able to turn his *soneo* into a sermon by delivering a coherent message centered on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. His sermon focuses on the

cross of Calvary as a basic call to conversion. Preaching Christ crucified, Cruz's sermonic *soneo* operates in between the choral refrain "hay que aprender a esperar" ("You have to learn to wait"). Acquiring patience can be read here as a virtue one learns to develop precisely after undergoing a conversion experience. Just as important, Cruz's sermonic *soneo* highlights an important aspect of Christian missionary activity: genuine evangelization is always a gospel message of invitation. Cruz repeatedly uses the phrase "te estoy invitando" ("I'm inviting you") to suggest this gesture. Given the use of coercion in religious conversion throughout the history of Christianity, Cruz reminds the listener that conversion is a response of free will.

The song then proceeds to the final section. But before leaving the stage, Cruz does an altar call. The singer asks the audience, "¿Habr  alg n amigo que no ha conocido al Se or?" ("Is there a friend who has yet to know the Lord?"). Cruz calls out three times for non-Christians to come for the altar call. However, no one moves forward and Cruz proceeds to end his presentation by saying farewell to the audience. That no one responded to the altar call can signify two things. First, since this was a church-sponsored event, most likely all of the people present were already baptized Christians. Second, if there were nonbelievers present, either they were not ready to make a religious commitment or perhaps they came to the event not for religious purposes but to enjoy the music simply as entertainment. Regardless, the significance of this performance is that Cruz's extended *soneo* became a sermon in order to invite the crowd for the altar call that would follow the conclusion of the song.

## **Conclusion: The Evangelical *Soneo* as a Singer of the People**

The evangelical salsa performances of Alex D'Castro, Domingo Quiñones, and Orquesta Querubín demonstrate that the *soneo* is the principal method of evangelization in evangelical salsa music. During these performances, the *soneo* is transformed into sermons and testimonies that serve to communicate the Gospel to the musical audience. A common theme in these *soneos* is its Christology. These *soneo* performances all stress a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This emphasis highlights the traditional Christian belief (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) that a prayerful relationship with Christ leads to the moral and spiritual transformation of the believer. This belief is central to Protestant preaching, whether that preaching comes from the pulpit on a Sunday morning, a street corner on a weekday, or, as in this case, during the *soneos* of an evangelical salsa performance.

In addition, the *soneo*'s important role in evangelical salsa performance vindicates evangelical salsa as an "authentic" brand of barrio salsa. This is important when one considers the negative evaluation made of another subgenre of salsa music: romantic salsa. Oftentimes, contemporary salsa is dismissed because of its lack of musical improvisation, swinging arrangements, and overly commercialized music. Specifically, contemporary romantic salsa singers are branded as inauthentic performers of salsa music. One often-heard criticism of these singers is that they are not authentic salseros because of their lack of

*sonero* skills. Yet, it is precisely “the art of the *soneo*” that is not only rediscovered but also elevated to a more prominent position in evangelical salsa ministry. The use of *soneos* as sermons and testimonials further grounds this musical expression in the cultural language of the people.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal Interview with Emil Alvarado on July 3, 2009, in Guayama, Puerto Rico.

<sup>2</sup> One key difference is the addition of different choral refrains to a song. While the original version might contain one choral refrain, a live performance can have several choral refrains.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with Charlie Vega on June 9, 2001, in Isabela, Puerto Rico.

<sup>4</sup> Although not a common practice, some salsa musical arrangements omit the call and response section. Among the most notable exceptions are the salsa hits “El incomprendido” (“The Misunderstood”) sung by the late *sonero* Ismael Rivera and “Solo” performed by Alex D’ Castro.

<sup>5</sup> Salsa singer Cano Estremera uses the phrase “the curriculum of salsa” to refer to the music that a salsa singer should study in order to become a good *sonero*. For Estremera, “the curriculum of salsa” includes the study of the prominent 1970s classic salsa *soneros* such as Ismael Rivera and Hector Lavoe. For more on Estremera’s philosophy of *soneo* see Benjamin Lapidus’s article “Yo tengo sentido, tengo rima’: Cano Estremera and the Art of the *Soneo*” (2004).

<sup>6</sup> The exact date of the recording is unknown. Yet, the performance took place sometime in the late 1990s when romantic salsa music enjoyed immense popularity.

<sup>7</sup> Estremera originally recorded this song with the Bobby Valentín Orchestra. The album also included “La boda de ella.” In this live rendition, Estremera’s critique of Puerto Rican merengue artists departs from the actual theme of the song. However, it is Estremera’s philosophy that a *sonero* should not be limited to improvising on the theme of the song but rather have the freedom to introduce different unrelated to topics during the performance of the song.

<sup>8</sup> The Ascension of Christ refers to the Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ ascended to Heaven forty days after his resurrection.

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<sup>9</sup> This verse is the basis of a reflection in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*.

<sup>10</sup> Personal interview with Emil Alvarado on July 3, 2009, in Guayama, Puerto Rico.

<sup>11</sup> The Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ refers to the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, all four Gospel record the events of the last days of Jesus Christ.

<sup>12</sup> Both of these songs are 1970s classic salsa songs but were originally performed by two of the key groups that helped pioneer the salsa musical expression: the Willie Colón & Hector Lavoe and Richie Ray & Bobby Cruz orchestras. "El Todopoderoso" is a Willie Colón/Hector Lavoe composition recorded in *Comedia*, one of the solo albums of Hector Lavoe; "Juan en la ciudad" is the most popular song in the Richie Ray & Bobby Cruz evangelical salsa album *Reconstrucción*.

<sup>13</sup> The version recorded in the *Solo* album is 4:56 minutes long; the *Live 2000* version is approximately 9:08 minutes. "Si no fuera por Ti" is a composition by Paz Martínez and its musical arrangement was done by Ramón Sánchez (Th-Rodven 2883, 1991). The producer of the *Solo* album, Carlos "Cuto" Soto, is also a convert to Protestant evangelicalism.

<sup>14</sup> By the term "long *soneo*" I mean a *soneo* that is continuous and not interrupted by the chorus. These types of *soneos* are seldom part of recordings and are more likely to be performed during living performances by salsa singers known for their mastery of the *soneo*.

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with Vic Rodríguez on June 13, 2001, in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico.

<sup>16</sup> In Christian theology, the word "adore" is reserved for God alone. Thus, when Quiñones adores Christ he is affirming his faith in the divinity of Christ.

<sup>17</sup> The New Testament depicts Jesus Christ as the "light." In the Gospel of John—commonly referred to as the Fourth Gospel—Christ himself is recorded as saying "I am the Light."

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

I had just rapped up my interview session with Luis Alicea (nicknamed “Papo *Inspiracion*”) and Gilberto Muniz, respectively, musical director and vocalist of *Orquesta Inspiracion* (The Inspiration Orchestra). I thanked them for the interview and told them that I might contact them for follow-up interview sessions. Both of the musicians said they were more than willing to do so. As I was packing my interview materials (recorder, pad, and pen), Papo expressed his desire to pray for me before I departed to my temporary residence in the town of Moca. Following Papo’s suggestion, the three of us stood up and gathered together for group prayer. In a loud voice, Papo uttered a long extemporaneous prayer.

Papo’s prayer begins by expressing gratitude for God’s blessings and praising Him for his goodness. The prayer also petitions God for the success of my academic work, a safe trip back to the town of Moca, blessings for my interview the following day with trumpet player Emil Alvarado in the town of Guayama, and for God’s protection over my life. Papo’s petitions on my behalf were based on our dinner and interview conversations, demonstrating that he was keenly attentive to our discussions. Furthermore, Papo’s petitioning of God to guide me in this mission illustrates his belief that God guides the believer

throughout the course of his life. Since Papo's petition identifies my dissertation project as a God given mission, he asks God that this project serves to glorify Him. Throughout the prayer, Papo shouts "Alleluya" after several petitions. It is normal to hear evangelicals shout alleluia during prayer and sermons. It is interesting to note that Papo's prayer petition does not conclude with a formulaic prayer such as the Our Father or Lord's Prayer. Some evangelicals do not believe in formulaic prayer because they interpret it as a violation of Matthew 6:7: "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for there many words".<sup>1</sup> While he also ends his prayer by saying "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," it is different from Catholics who say those very same words while tracing the Sign of the Cross on their bodies.

After the end of the group prayer, I continued a brief conversation with both Papo and Gilberto. From our brief discussion, it was obvious that Papo and Gilberto both assumed that I too was a Protestant evangelical. These musicians came to this conclusion because of the nature of my dissertation topic. In fact, Gilberto gave me advice on how to go about promoting evangelical salsa music in New York. This was an interesting short dialogue that stemmed from the prayer itself. In retrospect, I would say that the interview session's culmination in prayer is indicative of the importance and the meaning of faith in the lives of these musicians. The group prayer became another occasion for me to see how these musicians live out their faith.

*Go and Make Disciples* has been precisely about that: listening to people talk about their faith and seeing how those very same people live out that faith. It just happens that the people discussing their faith are evangelical *salseros* who use music to communicate that faith to other people. As a qualitative study, *Go and Make Disciples* has shown that Puerto Rican Protestant evangelical salsa music is an evangelical proclamation of the Gospel set in a barrio centered, heavy salsa format. Marginalized from Protestant evangelical circles, evangelical *salseros* fashioned evangelical salsa as music of evangelization meant to be performed primarily outside the ecclesial walls of Protestantism evangelicalism. Equipped with life histories of moral conversion, evangelical *salseros* target non-believers with salsa songs about salvation in Christ with the hope that their audience will also surrender their lives to Jesus Christ. It is in the live performances of these songs that the evangelical *sonero* assumes the lead role of evangelist. By turning *soneros* into sermons and testimonies, the evangelical *sonero* shows how vocal improvisatory performance becomes a method of evangelization.

*Go and Make Disciples* presents this argument through a qualitative interdisciplinary methodology combining interviews, music analysis, and ethnographic accounts.. The testimonies of evangelical salsa musicians are primarily narratives of moral conversion. As moral converts, evangelical *salseros* turned away from drug, alcoholic, sexual addictions and embraced a life of Christian discipleship. Yet, these narratives revealed as well that after their initial moral conversion, some musicians also experienced a theological conversion that led them to seek membership in a different evangelical denomination. At the

same time, my musical analysis of the evangelical salsa discography divulged a portrait of evangelical salsa as music of evangelization. Testimony, conversion, and the end times were some of the recurrent themes in musical productions with the purpose of “saving souls for Christ.”

This dissertation makes contributions to several academic fields. Studies of Protestant evangelicalism in Puerto Rico and its diaspora have emerged as an important part of Puerto Rican Studies. My dissertation contributes to this emerging subfield by demonstrating that Puerto Rican Protestant evangelicals turn to popular music not only to worship, but also as a mechanism for evangelizing Puerto Rican society.

This dissertation also makes a significant contribution to scholarly research on Puerto Rican popular music and in particular salsa music. The focus of previous salsa scholarship has been on secular salsa music production and performance. As such, this literature has addressed such issues as cultural nationalism, gender, and violence. Supplementing this body of literature, my study draws attention to the issue of religious themes within salsa music performance and production. Specifically, I show that adherence to a particular faith tradition can lead musicians to re-configure their musical identity so that it is aligned to, subsumed under, and a reflection of their religious identity.

Second, this dissertation makes a contribution to the field of ethnomusicology. My focus on salsa vocal improvisation draws attention to the way that evangelical salsa singers use salsa vocal improvisation or *el soneo* to preach and testify about their religious beliefs and values. As such, improvisation becomes an

important cultural tool for the transmission of ideas. My research proposes that future research should explore the multiple functions of vocal improvisation. Similar to song texts and musical arrangements, vocal and all forms of musical improvisation provides indispensable insight into the values of a given musical culture.

The final scholarly area that this dissertation contributes to is religious studies. My project's focus on evangelization shows that the arena of popular culture is a viable gate through which religion enters the public space. One way popular music such as salsa does this is as a vehicle through which religious expressions and discourses become grounded in public spaces traditionally not known for religious worship and evangelization. In the case of evangelical salsa music, public spaces such as beach resorts, sports bars, and public housing projects have been sites of evangelization. In doing so, this dissertation demonstrates that the study of popular music is essential for understanding the public role of religion in contemporary society. As my research has shown, qualitative methodology is valuable for understanding evangelization because it inserts the participant observer into the unfolding action of evangelization.

Another key religious issue my dissertation sheds light on is religious conversion. During my dissertation research, I interviewed a number of salsa musicians who came to Protestant evangelicalism from a Catholic background. As the study has shown, these converts were once nominal Catholics with very little knowledge of the Catholic faith. As these Protestant converts discussed the Catholic faith of their childhood it would become evident how they misunderstood

and misrepresented Catholic doctrine.. In this study, it was not the practicing, knowledgeable Catholic who were leaving the Catholic Church to become Protestant evangelical.

On the other hand, the conversion narratives of Catholic converts from Protestantism reveals a different type of convert. Contrary to popular opinion, Protestants do convert to Catholicism. Protestants who convert to Catholicism generally tend to be theological converts, that is, believers whose conversion experience leads them to abandon their faith tradition in favor of another religion as a result of a transformation in their theological convictions. Unlike Protestant converts from Catholicism, these ex-Protestants demonstrate not only deep theological knowledge of Protestant doctrines and practices, but they also come to Catholicism with a spiritual resume filled with many years of experience in various types of ministries. As theological converts, ex-Protestants become Catholics in order to embrace what they argue is the fullness of the Christian faith that can only be found in Catholicism. As a result, a common theme in their conversion narratives is the search for truth.<sup>2</sup>

Theological conversion is also a fitting description for the conversions within Protestant evangelicalism experienced by some of the evangelical salsa musicians in my study. During my interview sessions, several musicians revealed that they had switched church membership after their initial moral conversion at another denomination. Among these conversions, a common trend was that of salsa musicians abandoning Pentecostal churches they viewed as too legalistic and biblically unsound. Instead, they joined evangelical and other denominations

with theological views favorable to salsa music and dancing. That these musicians gave theological reasons for abandoning one religious community in favor of another Protestant evangelical denomination demonstrate that there exist significant and profound theological differences among the many denominations that fall under the umbrella term of “evangelical”.

These different types of religious conversion deserve further academic attention. Qualitative approach to the study of religious conversion enable the scholar in grasping the complex and diverse experiences of religious converts. Incorporating oral history and semi-structural interviewing into the research provides the interviewer with the necessary tools to evaluate and distinguish between the diverse categories of conversions. Unlike questionnaires, this type of interviewing allows for the type of open-ending questioning that is necessary to probe into the life history and religious biography of the religious convert. For example, follow-up questions about religious doctrine and practice were indispensable in helping me to judge the religious literacy of the convert prior to and after his conversion.

Towards the end of the first book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus Christ tells his disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations by teaching what he himself has taught them (Mt 28: 16-20). *Go and Makes Disciples* has shown that evangelical salsa musicians have understood their music ministry as a response to Jesus Christ’s great commission. These converts see their relationship with God as a call to a

missionary role in which the Gospel is replanted in the public square and the Christian community is created through evangelization campaigns.

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<sup>1</sup> Some versions of the bible translate “empty phrases” as “vain repetition.” Many evangelicals interpret this verse to mean that the believer should not recite prayers but instead offer extemporaneous prayers to God. However, evangelicals do often recite prayers even if not admitting to the practice. One obvious example are the praise songs that are offered to God as prayer. Another example is when a pastor has a person recite “the sinner’s prayer” in order to be saved. In contrast, Catholics are well known for the recitation of formulaic prayers such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be. In addition, Catholic bookstore sell Catholic prayer books containing may well known formulaic prayers. Reciting prayers is also part of the Jewish tradition as it was also for the early Christian Church. As a Jew, Jesus Christ would also have made a regular practice of reciting formulaic prayers. In Matthew 6: 7, Jesus seems to be concerned with the intention behind praying rather than the type of prayer.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most famous of these converts is Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman, who converted to Catholicism from Anglicanism. Newman is well known for his phrase, “To go deep into history, is to cease to be Protestant.” Newman’s phrase has become sort of a mantra among other Catholics, especially converts from Protestantism. For more about Catholics who converted from Protestantism, see Hahn (1993) and Jones (2006).

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