

## Rafael Cortijo's Space Music: Sounds of Caribbean Blackness.

—*I like the sounds that upset people [...]*  
Sun Ra<sup>1</sup>

### I. Rafael Cortijo: Blackening Puerto Rican Sound

Black Puerto Rican musician Rafael Cortijo (1928-1982) is a key feature in Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and Latin American music. He is one of the few musicians celebrated internationally for his skills as a percussionist, orchestra leader, and composer. Despite this, his music is often described as as 'noise', or at least that was my memory growing up in a predominantly white community in Puerto Rico<sup>2</sup>. The notion of Black noise and its different vibration recalls the unwanted sound produced by anything or anybody which disturbs the norms of everyday life<sup>3</sup>(Rose 1994, 1). To be noisy implies that there are differences that make us - Black people and Afrodescendants - 'unintegrated entities that exist beyond culture'<sup>4</sup>(Novak 2015, 125). Black noise also refers to the existence of different temporalities, volumes, and vibrations. This notion of Black noise refers to the Science of Sound developed by African American musician Sun Ra (1914-1993), pioneer of the Afrofuturism movement, a science that nurtures the subgenre known as Space Music linked Afrofuturism.

This article proposes and theorizes the existence of a Hispanic Caribbean Space Music emerging at the same time of the Afrofuturist movement and to which Rafael Cortijo makes a great

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the chapter "Space Music." *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* by Paul Youngquist.

<sup>2</sup> I remember my neighbor, every Saturday complaining about the noise coming from our home. Now I understand that the reasons go much further than that the music was loud, it was *salsa* music. I understood that what was entertainment / joy for me and my family, was noise for other people.

<sup>3</sup> In her seminal work *Black Noises* (1994), scholar Tricia Rose examines the circumstances rap music, and any Black musical production is considered a "confusing and noisy element" by non-Black people. Rose, *Black Noise*, pg. 1

<sup>4</sup> In the book *Keywords in Sound*, David Novak defines noise as "a context of sensory experience, but also a moving subject of circulation, of sound and listening, that emerges in the process of navigating the world and its differences". He further continues stating that "Noise, then, is not really a kind of sound but a metadiscourse of sound and its social interpretation". (125).

contribution. By doing this, I seek to decentralize African-American cultural production within Afrofuturism by expanding the discussion to Hispanic Afro Caribbean cultural, social, and political venues, centering on Puerto Rico. I explore how the Puerto Rican musical scene and sounds can be inserted into the discussion of other, better worlds for Black and Afrodescendants. To achieve this, I retheorize the designations of Blackness, Afrodescendent, and African Diaspora that are used to characterize the traditional stories conceived by these communities by expanding the limits of their definition beyond that of the Black Atlantic.

As a movement, Afrofuturism emerged around the late 1950s and early 1960s among Black communities in the United States. Although it was not until 1994, thanks to critic Mark Dery (1993), that the term began to be used as a way of defining the cultural production conceived by the Afro-descendant population in the United States or defined as a:

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future (180)

After Dery's definition, the term has been reappropriated by Black and Afrodescendant to recreate their past, transform their present, and project a new future through their perspective. Some scholars such as Ytasha L. Womack (2013) define Afrofuturism as ‘the intersection of imagination, technology, future, and liberation’(9). Womack also adds that Afrofuturism redefines culture and notions of Blackness within an Afrocentric framework. In 2013, the *Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* was published as a way of rejecting - among many things - the idea of outer space or cyberspace as inclusive places. Furthermore, after the box office success of the movie *Black Panther* in 2018, Afrofuturism made a comeback reaching other places of the vast Black African Diaspora to develop their understanding of Afrofuturism. For example, the Brazilian writer Fabio Kabral (2019) developed his own definition stating: ‘Eu, pessoalmente, também gosto de definir

o afrofuturismo como um resgate natural do passado africano de pioneirismo na ciência, arte, tecnologia, espiritualidade e literature' [Personally, I like to define Afrofuturism as a natural rescue of the African past by thinking about us as pioneers in science, art, technology, spirituality, and literature]. While it is almost impossible to think of Afrofuturism outside the context of Black and African American cultural and intellectual production, it is imperative to understand it as an Inter Black Afro-diasporic context in which Black Noises are instances of countercultures to dominant white standards<sup>5</sup>.

Although Afrofuturism is more likely to be associated with literature and the visual arts, it is music that resides at the basis of this movement. Sun Ra, known as the Man from Saturn, developed a musical subgenre known as Space Music. This genre is now considered the beginning of Afrofuturism<sup>6</sup>. As defined by Sun Ra himself and quoted by Youngquist (2016), this subgenre can interrupt schemes, make people uncomfortable, and invite reflection. Sun Ra's musical proposal is a type of music that 'aspires to nothing less than transforming reality' (Ibid). Sun Ra's scheme for change through sounds led the members of his Arkestra - an all-black men group - to identify themselves not as musicians but as sound scientists. Like scientists, they were seeking a cure, 'positive vibrations [...]an utopian feature' that [would] make [them] stand out from other jazz musicians. Despite being considered as mere 'noises', something is soothing in Space Music that transports us, Black and Afrodescendant people, to another world; this is Space Music's main objective. While it is true that Afrofuturism is about Black people in the future — or the rethinking of a better one —, the term encompasses much more. Above all, Afrofuturism - as a

---

<sup>5</sup> By Inter Black Afro diasporic I refer to the overlapping process, conditions, spaces, and discourses of a Black African Diaspora.

<sup>6</sup> Despite Sun Ra's contribution, it has been pointed out by scholars such as Ytasha Womack that the movement existed

multidisciplinary cultural, political, and social movement - highlights the reality of Black and Afrodescendant communities' circumstances.

Rafael Cortijo, the leader, represents the struggle of Black Puerto Ricans to have representation in the archipelago's imaginary, and his music is a turning point that forces us to reflect on racism in Puerto Rico<sup>7</sup>. Cortijo's most outstanding contribution was to bring Black Puerto Rican sound and *noise* to centre stage. He started his 'Combo' [band] in 1954 and stayed active for almost 30 years<sup>8</sup>. Like Sun Ra's Arkestra, El Combo was an all-Black performative presence on the cultural stage that had the effect of challenging many of the normalized prejudices of its time (Flores 2009, 191).<sup>9</sup> Not only were they Black, but they also adapted other Caribbean musical styles into the *combo*, reconciling its African heritage with the sense of community of popular music of the Afro Circum Caribbean. Like Sun Ra, Cortijo directed his orchestras to play music spontaneously and to avoid the inflexible routines of large orchestras that left musicians on stage behind their written musical arrangements<sup>10</sup>.

It has been stressed that the most critical element about Cortijo's music is that he took the *bomba* and the *plena* out of working-class barrios and – through the use of his combo - introduced these genres at all levels of Puerto Rican society and abroad<sup>11</sup>. He pushed the modes of expression of Black and poor people to center stage. Cortijo brought trumpets and saxophones to the orchestra

---

<sup>7</sup> Another Cortijo greatest achievement was to leap in time and conceive music that set the precedent, or one of them, for future generations of musicians such as X Alfonso (Cuba), Luis "El Terror" Dias (Dominican Republic), William Cepeda (Puerto Rico), and Systema Solar (Colombia), and Ifé (Puerto Rico) among others.

<sup>8</sup> Despite Rafael Cortijo's long career and contribution to music, his work is ignored. There are few studies on his music and his life. Ironically, to track his career and life one needs to review the many studies about Ismael Rivera, to whom Cortijo opened the doors.

<sup>9</sup> According to Juan Flores, Ismael Rivera associated the Combo with the revolution of the Black people in Puerto Rico. (2009), 191

<sup>10</sup> In the case of Sun Ra's Arkestra, musical arrangements were minimal and were used as the basis for the improvisations of the musicians

<sup>11</sup> The *bomba* and the *plena* are Afro-Puerto Rican music genres with stories, roots and community practices intertwined that played an important role in the fallacy of racial democracy in Puerto Rico.

but retained the traditional *plena* and *bomba* rhythmic base. His music is in constant conversation between other Black and African Diaspora in the Caribbean and the Atlantic producing an Intra-Afrodiasporic sound. Proof of this is the 'Calypso, Bomba y Plena' included in his first album *Cortijo invites you to dance...* (1958). Likewise, Cortijo boosted the music with the inclusion of improvised singing, or *sonéo*, by Ismael Rivera and with the addition of Roberto Roena, as a dancer and choreographer, and 'los bailadores, esos intérpretes gestuales del sabrosón tumbao plenero [the dancers, those corporeal interpreters of the flow *plenero*]' (Rodríguez Julia 2006, 31). Including the swagger from *la calle* [the street], distinguished him and the Combo on an aesthetic level as part of that sound and Black presence.

## II. Black African Diaspora and Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism as a movement 'represent[s] new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities...' (Nelson 2002, 9). Nonetheless, this definition overlooks other communities as part of the Black African Diaspora by stating that 'Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as "African American voices" with "other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come"' (Tinyambe Zela 2005). The understanding of African Diaspora is still limited either to the Atlantic or to the Anglophone context (Tinyambe Zela 2005, 36). Likewise, many definitions of Afrofuturism tend to homogenize every diasporic subjectivity by ignoring the particularity of the different conditions and diverse experiences of diasporic communities. Therefore, I propose that to understand Afrofuturism as a movement of the Black Afro Diaspora experience that can 'accommodate the reality of multiple identities and phases', it is necessary to reconsider our understanding of African Diaspora as an Inter Black Diasporic Dialogue and Exchange. There are other Afrofuturistic expressions in places where there is a Black Afro Diasporic community.

My definition of Inter Black Diasporic is informed by the essay titled ‘Globalization and Diaspora’, by Maryse Condé (2014). In that essay, Condé problematizes Africanism and authenticity in a globalized world, stating that ‘the notion of diaspora implies new hybrid and syncretic identities as well as new multicultural spaces (Condé 2014, 149)’. In her essay, Condé also asks to consider *negritude* (blackness) in the context of constant movement. Similarly, she invites us to think about the diaspora as a cluster of identities that produce and reproduce themselves relentlessly. The shared history of displacement, enslavement, and racism promotes the social and cultural interchange throughout the Black and Afrodescendant communities. The concept of Inter Black Diasporic allows us to think of and explore a collectivity between Black and Afrodescendant communities without homogenizing the diversity of experiences within them. It acknowledges the existence of Black and Afro-descendant communities in the Atlantic, as well as in the Pacific or the Mediterranean. But most importantly, this Inter Afrodiasporic approach recognizes the dialogue and cultural exchange between these communities, moving us from an essentialist notion of Black Diaspora.

To think the African Diaspora beyond the idea of Black Atlantic allows examining similar experiences between Black communities. To a certain extent, Afrofuturism maps out the multiple histories, identities, cultural-intellectual currents, and political projects that make up the Black African Diaspora, the Caribbean, and the Black Atlantic, among other places. This, in turn, suggests a more nuanced way of perceiving the Caribbean as an Inter and Intra Black and Afro Diasporic Community. Thus, to expand the context of Afrofuturism, it is to acknowledge a context that has been historically denied to us in our whitewashed countries and that connects Black and Afrodescendant communities in the world. Consequently, Afrofuturism can be thought of as an intra product of this interchange that focuses on the ‘here’ of each Black and Afrodescendant

community from which Space Music would be the best example of this exchange. Space Music breaks with the melodic hegemony-imposed sounds. It is an expression of time and multiple vital tones. Musicians shifted musical notes for electronic sounds that, according to them, should produce an effect in the body through vibrations. This is also known as tone science. Space Music uses sounds as vibrations as these have a greater power to either construct or destroy. It is a disrupted time where diachrony is expressed in diverse forms mainly through improvisation, which leads to asynchrony of combined rhythms in various tones/vibrations. As an African Diaspora, the Caribbean must not be understood just as a geographical space but a notion of continuous overlapping of boundaries, languages, and societies. That was exactly what Cortijo's musical proposal was about: A constant exchange that strengthened 'diasporic connection between diverse black communities in the Caribbean and Latin America...'. He proposes a diasporic connection through another Afro-Caribbean rhythm. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, there was intra-Caribbean migration of people, including musicians, who transited between the Antilles; this migration is connected to the history of San Mateo de Cangrejos, nowadays known as Santurce. Cortijo y Su Combo was part of that exchange, playing in carnivals and other music festivals from 1958 onward, and his musical proposal also reflects those historical migrations.

### **III. Space Music and Time Traveling with Cortijo**

If the insertion of a group of Black musicians in prime time was world-shattering, Rafael Cortijo transgressed the norms one more time with his production *Cortijo and His Time Machine* (1972), an album ahead of his time which brought other forms of sounds while Salsa music was at its peak worldly. With his distinctive 'mulataje inquieto' [restless mulatto], Cortijo reinvented his style by successfully fusing Puerto Rican popular music with other popular music forms from the Antilles, Black American music, among others, and with electronic sound (Novak 2013, 127). A

visionary himself, Cortijo, expands in this album the possibilities of creating a Caribbean sound 'far beyond the conventions of our time and the horizons of expectation...' a trait of an Afrofuturist creator. Even Roberto Roena told Cortijo in that moment 'Rafa, esto está treinta años adelanta' o. Te jodiste. Esto nadie lo va a entender' [Rafa, this is thirty years ahead. You're screwed up. No one will understand it] sentencing Cortijo and the production to oblivion. Unlike Cortijo's other albums, *Cortijo and His Time Machine* did not receive the same reception, not even by musicians that once praised him for his innovation (Cartagena 2005). There was a collective social inability to appreciate alternative musical expressions: 'Era otra cabeza en Puerto Rico y aquí también con los puertorriqueños aquí. No era fácil...' [It was another mentality in Puerto Rico and here too with Puerto Rican here. It wasn't wast] Cartagena 2005, 4)

*Cortijo and His Time Machine* is his most inter-diasporic production. Additionally, the *bomba* and *plena* rhythms are less distinct in the songs. This album, in which young North American jazz musicians and Latin talent, mainly Puerto Ricans, includes seven tracks labeled as "dulce" as they fused Bomba, Plena, Bolero, Funk Jazz Bossa Nova, Salsa, and many other rhythms. This fusion of rhythms highlights certain identity elements of Black culture's daily life to produce a kind of resistance to the dominant culture. Sound triggers many of these deep-seated feelings about race and class, and the way we think about race and class influences what we hear. What we listen to, and the way we listen, is something personal, hence political. By bringing in all those diverse elements and creating these new sounds, Cortijo imagined a new community.

On the album's title, Cortijo already warns us that he is coming to propose a change. The album's front cover (see figure 1) is the picture of a time machine made from an old clock<sup>12</sup>. Oddly, there is the head of a white doll connected through its ears to the machine. The front cover warns

---

<sup>12</sup> The artist who designed and photographed for the album is Ely Besalel



the listeners that listening to this LP will transport them across their own time stream. It seems that Cortijo proposes an ethics of listening: to abandon exclusion and prejudice in sound and adopt a model of inclusion in sound. Cortijo invites us to amplify the noises we hear. The more we listen to certain sounds, the more we notice and tune them in. If we can really break with our default assumptions on sound, a lot can change for the better. Furthermore, this cover has an old clock wide open that does not mark the time, as if it is showing the listener a conjure of separation of time and space from current reality as a declaration of other ways of life<sup>13</sup>.

*Figure 1 Front cover Cortijo's album Cortijo and His Time Machine*

One of the characteristics of Space Music is its power of ‘transporting people to a better world’ (Youngquist 2016, 175-176). A distinctive feature, stresses Youngquist, about Space Music: it conjures a separation of time and space from our current reality as a declaration of other ways of life. I would add that Space Music, while it serves to connect communities, does so by allowing individuals to have their journey. That is to say that each of us listeners experience a song in different ways. Some of us will hear a particular sound of the song that will prompt in us a memory or aspiration of a better place. To achieve the connection of communities and/or their well-being, space, and time traveling are essential. In that sense, Space Music works as a time machine that allows the listeners to transport themselves both individually and collectively. In this sense it enables them to take and share aspects about their subjectivity and common histories to a place where they feel safe and happy.

---

<sup>13</sup> Sun Ra strongly believed that music – and specifically, Space Music - could create better world. He became a kind of visionary of a better world, and music was his instrument of change. Sun Ra proposed the power of sounds, all kinds of sounds, to give people a wake-up call. According to the musician, the right music incites people to move by the influence of sound. For more work on Sun Ra see Väättänen, Päivi. “Sun Ra: Myth, Science, and Science Fiction.” *Fafni-Nordic Journal of Scinece Fiction and Fantasy Research* 1, no. 4 (January 2, 2015): 39–46.

In general, time travel stories focus on the consequences of traveling to the past or future. Rafael Cortijo starts this journey with the song ‘Carnaval’. For example, this song is a time loop where, as listeners, we experience the repetition of time periods expecting the moment there is a rupture of the repeating cycle. This effect is generated by the insertion of a bass and brass instruments. When the listener pays attention, he or she notices that there is a predilection for the multiplicity of rhythms and tones. The tones fluctuate between the sounds of the instruments and voices. In this song, Cortijo joins the past and the present to create a future. Openness is the Space Music feature that stands out the most as a musical technique in the song ‘Carnaval’, and it is evident as pauses or an expansion of time<sup>14</sup>. According to Youngquist (2016), openness is a metaphor for ‘suspension of traditional convention, in particular those regarding time’(183)<sup>15</sup>. The intention is that, by pausing certain musical tones, an open space that welcomes other musical and non-musical tones is created. The song ‘Carnaval’ is a medley of popular jingles of humorous rhymes in the form of call-and-response that everybody on the island knows. Like the following lines by way of example: lead singer: ‘Toco, toco, toco, toco’ and the chorus reply ‘Vejigante come coco’. The call-and-response technique is a pillar in Afrocentric cultures that acknowledges a continuation of traditions and fosters inclusion. It corresponds to a pattern of democratic participation. What makes this song even more incredible is the integration of *bomba* and *plena* rhythms with the addition of instruments more related to *jazz*. The song ‘Carnaval’ begins with a male voice inviting a woman to the carnival. The theme of the carnival, rather participating in a carnival, can be a radical means of resistance. This invitation of the male voice to the female voice is interesting because according to David Novak (2015) ‘[n]oise is associated with public sociality

---

<sup>14</sup> In Space Music there are three common features: 1) improvisation, 2) multiplicity, and 3) openness. These three characteristics are not necessarily requirements for a song to be considered space music, but they are present in most of the songs.

<sup>15</sup> Youngquist, “Space Music”, 183.

and carnivalesque performances [...] that playfully disturb the norms of everyday life'. Black people have been denied the right to gather, the freedom of assembly, throughout history in the Americas, therefore, an invitation to meet to play music, for pleasure –dancing, drinking, flirting– is a way of identifying each other as belonging to a community of resistance, a community in which one of its foundations is to bend rules to survive, to be. Additionally, the carnival is one of the tropes that repeats itself across the region, which makes it a recurrent topic in Caribbean Music<sup>16</sup>.

Another characteristic of Space Music is its multiplicity, or what Sun Ra calls 'a multi-dimension of different things'. In this sense, multiplicity must be understood as the result of the openness (Youngquist 2016, 184). Once there is no static order, anything can fit in. Something that strikes about *Cortijo and His Time Machine* is that it expressly breaks with the false idea that the drum culture is the only important musical form among Black and Afrodescendants in the Caribbean. There is a noticeable highlight of brass instruments in his album. Also, it includes musical traditions based on string instruments. As scholar Kofi Agawu (1995) has stressed in his seminal essay titled 'The Invention of "African Rhythm"': there is a simplistic idea that Africans—and by extension Black and Afrodescendants— are exclusively more skilled at drumming rhythms. The idea of one 'African rhythm' is just a lie, a construction (Agawu 1995, 337). Cortijo proves that Black Puerto Rican music is not a homogeneous body of music by merging a variety of musical styles, which are evident in this album. Agawu (1995) argues that 'rhythms are not a single, unified, or coherent field, but rather one that is widely and asymmetrically distributed, permanently entangled, if you like, with other dimensions' (338). Cortijo, as well as Sun Ra,

---

<sup>16</sup> Cities like Barranquilla in Colombia, and many islands of the Lesser Antilles, are renowned by their carnivals. Also, musicians and composers such as the Dominican Lus Dias and the Cuban group Irakere have songs that refer to the carnival.

assumed this multiple and irregular options of making sounds in their respective musical practice. Both artists bundle rhythms, noises, and styles to create that multiplicity that characterized Space Music. The song ‘La verdad’ [The Truth], for example, shuffles between jazz, *música jíbara*, and Cuban son<sup>17</sup>. In addition to the diverse musical time periods in the song, the voices also add to the variety. Correspondingly, the song ‘La tercera guerra mundial’ [The Third World War] is a fusion of Puerto Rican *danza* and *rumba* with some jazz chords showing the rhythmic complications of the album compositions.<sup>18</sup> These Afrofuturist musical proposals, through their polyrhythmic form—a characteristic feature of Space Music—, the whole body is invited to move. In this way, it could be said that it breaks with certain hegemonizing cultural aspects, making it more democratic.

To revisit history, not to change it but to clarify the story told or to leave a record of certain events is another characteristic of Afrofuturism, thus Space Music. The songs ‘La verdad’ and ‘La tercera guerra mundial’ are two tunes which address these issues within a variety of rhythms. Cortijo incorporates it in the LP by including a wide range of topics in the songs. In Juan Flores words ‘[I]as innovaciones estilísticas de Cortijo enlazan generaciones, tienden puentes sobre regiones culturales y sacan a relieve punzantes contradicciones sociales’ (Flores 2009, 186). *Cortijo and His Time Machine* explores the colonial contexts of the Caribbean, but mainly in Puerto Rico. He not only addresses the current colonial and imperial domination that the United States has exercised over Puerto Rico since 1989 and over the region, but also the colonial history of the island’s previous Spanish domination. This is an important aspect of this album. The song

---

<sup>17</sup> *Música jíbara* is Puerto Rican countryside/rural music style. There is a wide variety of musical styles that unfold in the countryside, but the *Seises* and *Aguinaldos*, are the main styles of “jíbaro” music. The essential instruments in these musical genres are the *cuatro*, the guitar, the güiro among others, and the troubadour is also an important element. For more information about *música jíbara* consult the works of Jaime Bofill Calero (2013) on *Música jíbara. Son* is one of the central genres of Cuban popular music, and it is also one of the fundamental genres in the formation of salsa as diasporic and migrant music.

<sup>18</sup> Puerto Rican *Danza* is probably the genre with the greatest European influence. However, there is a clear influence of music from Africa in the modification of the rhythms of *Danza*.

'La verdad' exposes the problem of food sovereignty in Puerto Rico by showing how Puerto Ricans are somehow encouraged and forced to consume foreign goods as well as foreign cultural productions. In the song, a chorus challenges the listener and the status quo even if that will get it in trouble: 'el que me quiera escuchar, que escuche / el que se quiera tapar que se tape/ voy a decir la verdad caballero aunque me parta un rayo' [Whoever wants to listen to me, listen / Whoever wants to cover (their ears), cover them / I'll tell the truth, sir, even if I am struck by lightning]. The following phrases are sung by the lead singer intoning the quintessentially *jíbaro* expression 'le lo lai' as a battle cry of cultural affirmation that simultaneously celebrates the utopia of Puerto Rican political sovereignty and the anti-colonial struggle. Similarly, the song 'La tercera guerra mundial' is a warning of the hostile environment in the 'vecindad' [neighborhood]. It is not clear to what conflict the song refers to<sup>19</sup>. The song has spaces where new sounds can enter and can be layered one on top of the other to create a fuller and more complex overall sound. The beginning of the song is very slow and relaxing, typical of a *danza*, which resembles the image of the Caribbean as a paradise to relax. However, the tone suddenly turns hectic, thus creating a feeling of a somewhat anxious existence supported by the repetition of the phrase 'alma terrenal / alma terrenal/ hay gritos de guerra en la vecindad' [earthly soul / earthly soul / there are war cries in the neighborhood]. This frenetic tone changes to an even higher and faster pace, and that creates a general confusion about the course of the song, and the fate of the Puerto Ricans, Caribbean peoples, and Latin Americans in general. The melody is a set of tensions, of endless rhythms that interact and separate to create a multi-sphere of sound.

---

<sup>19</sup> The colonial relationship of Puerto Rico and the United States made mandatory the Universal Military Draft, which included Puerto Ricans. It will make sense that the song is echoing the concerns of many male Puerto Ricans then. During those years, 1973-74, the US was key in several *coup d'état* in some Latin American countries. Latin America is known as the US backyard, perhaps that is the "vecindad" to which the song refers to. Also, we cannot forget that everything is happening during the context of The Cold War.

Openness and Multiplicity serve as entry for the third feature: improvisation. Space Music opens space to all members in a group to improvise, and this improvisation often happens simultaneously (Youngquist 2016, 184). Improvisation in Space Music does not happen individually, but as a collective. One of Sun Ra's arguments is that life is chaotic, and everything happens at the same time always. Improvisation is part of the universe. Under these circumstances, he will compose chaotic music through improvisation; in that sense the improvisation is written and not spontaneous<sup>20</sup>. In other words, the improvisation in Space Music does not just happen, it is purposely included in the composition by having different instruments, including voices, each one proposing a different rhythm playing at the same time at their own pace, but in conversation. The best example of adaptation of improvisation in Rafael Cortijo's music is through the figure of Ismael Rivera, better known as Maelo, el Sonero Mayor, [the Greatest Sonero] as Maelo proclaimed himself.<sup>21</sup> Concisely, in salsa music, the art of improvising is called *sonear*, and vocal improvisations are called *soneos*. Nonetheless, using techniques such as fragmentation, repetition, and rhymes, Cortijo created melodic and rhythmic alterations that allow musicians to improvise. A great example of this is the song 'De coco y anís' [Made of Coconut and Anise]. Most of the elements previously mentioned are in this song. Like the other ones, 'De coco y anís' shuffles between several styles and rhythms from *música jíbara*, jazz, and some sounds of soul. The song starts with the roll of timbales followed by the chorus shouting 'Hey!'. Immediately, there is a small pause that allows the entrance of the other instruments –electric guitar, piano, trumpets, among others– and a change of cadence. Likewise, the lyrics, very simply, entail a call-and-

---

<sup>20</sup> In his book Youngquist explains the process of composing a song. According to the text, Sun Ra will play something and expect the other musicians to play following him. He then will write if he liked what he heard. It was a holistic form of composing.

<sup>21</sup> For a depth study on the figure of Ismael Rivera look at the work of César Colón Montijo (2017). Also read Quintero-Rivera (2015).

response format with repetition of the phrases 'yo tengo algo aquí / para dártelo a ti / te traigo un caramelo / de coco y anís' [I have something here / to give it to you / I'll bring you a candy / Made of coconut and anise]. The song seems to have seven different musical parts. It is interesting how voices interact with the guitar and trumpets by overlapping one over the other. There is a playful dialogue between them evident in the minute 3:44 forward, which invites the listener into participation. From there on, the song has several false endings, but it keeps going, accelerating the pace. The song appeals to the audience's sense of joy.

Black joy and pleasure are expressed through dancing, which is to me the fourth feature of Space Music. As Anibal Quijano stresses, rhythm became the messenger of happiness and melancholy (Quintero 2009). As a result, dancing is seen as a mode of resistance, and the use of the body an affirmation of identity. The body becomes a stage, exposing the spectacle of colonial violence<sup>22</sup>. In that sense, it is suitable to say Space Music focuses on the body as a visible manifestation of self-government and liberation. Dancing against suffering is the biggest weapon used by Black people. Black people and Afrodescendants have recovered their body that has been hostage of norms and hierarchies that seek to standardise Black behaviour in public and private spaces. I have said that Space Music breaks with norms.

I argue that movement is one of the qualities that greatly features in the Caribbean identity as a whole, partly because everything is connected by the sea. The body evokes those *vaivenes* [fluctuations] whether they are past, present, or future time. It is as if there is always an inner movement (a beat, a rhythm) occurring among people and communities. To move constantly establishes a mode of living, resisting, and surviving in the Caribbean. That body movement is suggested in Cortijo's album. Like the call-and-response technique, dancing is also an expression

---

<sup>22</sup> By spectacle of colonial violence, I mean that the Black body is exploited and consumed by work. It is the one that shows how poorly nourished they are, the tortures suffered by their bodies.

of democratic equity, since every part of the body participates in this action. Additionally, this movement is at the same visual and resonant. It is important to remember that the constant communication between music and dance are very specific to Latinx and Caribbean music. For example, that connection gave birth to several rhythms, such as the *bugalú* ‘Bang Bang’. Also, in *bomba* dance, which is one of the foundations of Cortijo’s music, it is the *primo* (cousin) drummer who follows the dancer. As Quintero-Rivera (2014) reminds us: in *bomba* the drums and the dancing body are fundamental in the music making. This equality between music and dancer explains, as mentioned at the beginning, the incorporation of Roberto Roena in the group as dancer, choreographer, and musician. Rafael Cortijo understood the relationship of sound, movement, and life by creating healing sound to be heard and danced with.

#### IV. More Gumbo Than Ajiaco

As Juan Flores highlights, Cortijo’s revenge to make Puerto Ricans acknowledge African and Black identity. The defining theme of Space Music in the album *Cortijo and His Time Machine* is ‘Gumbo’, which precisely portrays the cultural kinship among Caribbean people. Gumbo is a traditional stew of New Orleans, which makes the selection of this dish very interesting. Since I was not able to find any connection of Cortijo with New Orleans, and because it is Space Music, and it is all about personal experience, I will speculate that in, this selection, the production could have referred the Puerto Rican dish *funche*<sup>23</sup>, but decided to appeal to the *creole gumbo*. The metaphor of food is very common in the Latinx music, especially in Salsa. An explanation could be that, according to Ochoa Gautier, food and sound are both means of direct socialization for human beings (Ochoa Gautier 2019). The scholar also states that music and food are two entities of easy transformation. In the same fashion, the idea of soup or stew has been used to describe the

---

<sup>23</sup> *Funche* is Puerto Rico polenta. It is basically cornmeal mixed with a coarse chopped sofrito. Its origin is Angolan, and it was cooked by enslaved and poor people. It is also known as *funge*.



process of hybridization in the Caribbean. I refer to Fernando Ortiz and his metaphor of *ajiaco* as an analytical concept and vehicle to give a different approach to his theorizations about transculturation, identity, and music

in Cuba (Ortiz 1939)<sup>24</sup>. That idea has been adapted by different scholars, artists to understand similar processes in the Caribbean, especially in the Spanish speaking islands. I see Cortijo's song as a response to Fernando Ortiz. While it has been broadly accepted, the metaphor of *ajiaco* is problematic because it accepts a certain degree of cultural homogeneity, which results in a cultural and social whitening process. After that metaphor, there is suddenly the idea that Puerto Rican, Cuban and Dominican are the fusion of three races. This misconception is aggravated by the superficial declaration that all Caribbean people are black on one side or the other, which has operated to silence, veil and marginalize Black and Afrodescendants. In that sense, *gumbo* as metaphor gathers the racial subordination of the colonial and neocolonial legacy in the Caribbean. It is a cultural conjunction of the influence of African American culture which includes music and food. As described by Howard Mitcham in his book *Creole Gumbo and All That Jazz*, this stew has 'a diverse roots and many ancestors'(Mitchman 1978, 39). Gumbo - Quingombó - Okra is not a unique stew with a distinctive flavor. The gumbo is described more like many stews, sometimes surprisingly different, due to the fact that it is difficult to always cook it the same way. Like Space Music and the Black Afro Inter Diasporic exchange, the ingredients can be combined freely, or not combined at all. Likewise, it is 'an improvisational thing, like jazz' and the result is always pleasing.

Cortijo's *Gumbo* reconstructs the fragmented characteristics of the Caribbean, while at the same time it sketches an idea of the cultural experiences across the region. It shows that the notion

---

<sup>24</sup> Fernando Ortiz developed this concept in 1939 in his seminal essay "Los factores de la cubanidad". In that essay he states that Cuba is an *ajiaco*.

of Caribbeanness is shaped in relation to other members of the community, and it can be found in many spaces and languages. In this song, which is the one of longest duration, eight minutes long, Cortijo considers each experience of Black and Afrodescendant people in the US, Caribbean, and Latin America intertwined in the concept of Space Music and Afrofuturism. The texture of the song is that of a stew of *noises*. With a similar melody to the other songs, but less chaotic, Cortijo pleads for a cultural unity that expands its borders beyond the archipelago. In this song, Cortijo evokes the rhythms and flavors of the Caribbean and New Orleans. Of all the songs included in the album, ‘Gumbo’ is the most diverse in terms of time and, to me, the most representative of Space Music. At first, it sounds like an afrobeat but as it progresses it turns jazzier. The number of pauses in the song allows the rushed change of time and rhythms, making it more diverse and fragmentary. Of all the songs, it is the theme that leans the most towards African American culture, hence the title. The song echoes a history of Caribbean exchange through musical styles as diverse as *música jíbara*, but mainly jazz. Jazz is the reflection of the American paradox of inclusion and exclusion for reasons of race and class (Ochoa Gautier 2019, 66). However, Jazz is also a music style where improvisation allows many types of sounds to be incorporated into a creative platform, and its basic structure is to negotiate different ways of being in and through music.

This song can also be understood to be a dialogue with his fellow Black musicians, a dialogue with the root of the Afrofuturistic movement. It is not a coincidence that Rafael Cortijo chose a representative dish from the ‘cradle of jazz’ or ‘musical gumbo’ as New Orleans is known. According to scholar Ana María Ochoa-Gautier (2019), New Orleans is also the most African of the American cities. While New Orleans has the same amount of disruptions and dislocations as its insular Caribbean counterparts, Cortijo may have seen the city as a place of opportunities, the happy place imagined in Space Music, at least in terms of musical venues. Also, because of its

location, and similar to Puerto Rico, New Orleans has been a cultural and economic crossroads, as it served the role of bridge to the imperialist politics of the US over the Caribbean and Latin America. Furthermore, since its foundation, NOLA has been known for the enthusiasm of its people 'to earthly pleasure, especially dancing and music' (Lichtenstein and Danker 1993)<sup>25</sup>. Above all, the song could suggest that historical experience shows that these relationships and disparities are continuous despite the apparent affinities.

I am aware that there are many meanings, ideological implications, and political undertones within the Black and Afrodescendant culture and music. Rafael Cortijo, a man who understood his place within a racialized group, gave to the Black and Afrodescendant Caribbean and Latin American communities a *noise* 'increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security' (Attali and McClary 1985, 3). When talking about Afrofuturism, two keywords that always appear in the discussion are 'community' and 'resistance'. Cortijo's was born as a resistance. His musical proposal serves a triple goal; first, it is a bridge that gives continuity to the cultural and musical exchanges among Caribbean people; secondly, it is a split because it significantly stands apart from the dominant configurations of music; and lastly Rafael Cortijo opened the doors to future generations of Black and Afrodescendant musicians.

#### References:

Agawu, Kofi. 1995. "The Invention of African Rhythm." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 (3): 380–95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3519832>.

---

<sup>25</sup> Grace Lichtenstein and Laura Danker, since the eighteenth century, music, dancing and parades, became an institution of the city of New Orleans and a way of life. See *Musical Gumbo. The Music of New Orleans* (1993)

- Attali, Jacques. 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Theory and History of Literature, v. 16. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Berríos-Miranda, Marisol, and Shannon Dudley. 2008. "El Gran Combo, Cortijo, and the Musical Geography of Cangrejos/Santurce, Puerto Rico." *Caribbean Studies* 36 (2): 121–51. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crb.0.0065>.
- Cartagena, Juan. 2006. "When Bomba Becomes The National Music of the Puerto Rico Nation..." *Centro Journal* XVI: 14–35.
- Colón Montijo, César, ed. 2015. *Cocinando Suave: Ensayos de Salsa En Puerto Rico*. Colección Alfredo Maneiro. Serie Pensamiento Social. Caracas, Venezuela: Fundación Editorial El perro y la rana.
- Condé, Maryse. 2014. "Globalization and Diaspora." In *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*, translated by Richard Philcox. Africa List. London New York Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Dery, Mark, ed. 1994. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Flores, Juan. 2009. *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning*. Cultural Spaces Series. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gonçalves, João Felipe. 2014. "The Ajiaco in Cuba and beyond: Preface to 'The Human Factors of Cubanidad' by Fernando Ortiz." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (3): 445–54. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.3.031a>.
- Kabral, Fábio. 2019. *O que é afrofuturismo?* TEDxMauá: YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmiYQfhlsUE>.
- Lichtenstein, Grace, and Laura Dankner. 1993. *Musical Gumbo: The Music of New Orleans*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Mitcham, Howard. 1992. *Creole, Gumbo and All That Jazz: A New Orleans Seafood Cookbook*. Pelican ed. Gretna, La: Pelican Pub. Co.
- Montes Pizarro, Errol. 2012. "Viajes de la música afrodescendiente." *80Grados*. <https://www.80grados.net/viajes-de-la-musica-afrodescendiente/>.
- Nelson, Alondra. 2002. "Introduction." *Social Text* 20 (2): 1–15. [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2\\_71-1](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-1).
- Novak, David, and Matt Sakakeeny, eds. 2015. *Keywords in Sound*. Durham ; London: Duke University Press.
- Ochoa Gautier, Ana M. 2019. "Política Alimentaria, Ecología de La Sonoridad y Diseño de Políticas de Vida: Una Reflexión a Partir de Lévi-Strauss." *MUSIKÉ. Revista Del Conservatorio de Música de Puerto Rico* 7 (1).
- Päivi Väättänen. 2015. "Sun Ra: Myth, Science, and Science Fiction." *Fafnir* 1 (4): 39–46.
- Quintero Rivera, A. G. 1999. *Salsa, Sabor y Control! Sociología de La Música "Tropical."* 2. ed. Sociología y Política. México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores.
- . 2009. *Cuerpo y Cultura: Las Músicas Mulatas y La Subversión Del Baile*. Colección Nexos y Diferencias 24. Madrid: Iberoamericana.
- Quintero Rivera, Angel. 2014. *Cuerpo y Cultura: Las Músicas "Mulatas" y La Subversión Del Baile (Nexos y Diferencias)*. Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert.
- Rodríguez Juliá, Edgardo. 2006. *Cortijo's Wake: El Entierro de Cortijo*. Rio Piedras: Ediciones Huracán.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Music/Culture. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

- Womack, Ytasha. 2013. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. First edition. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Youngquist, Paul. 2016. *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism*. First edition. Discovering America. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Zezeza, Paul Tiyambe. 2005. "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic." *Afr Aff (Lond)* 104 (414): 35–68. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adi001>.