

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

La Hora de la Salsa: Nicolás Maduro and the Political Dimensions of Salsa in Venezuela

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Abstract

In this article I examine how, during a period of extreme social unrest, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro took up the role of a salsa radio deejay as a show of confidence in his hold on political power and of his solidarity with ordinary Venezuelans. I argue that this all but unprecedented and, for many, controversial course of action by a sitting president provides us with an unusual opportunity to analyse Venezuela's long-standing political crisis. In particular, I highlight how Maduro harnessed salsa's long association with poor Latin Americans, its connection to Venezuela and its pleasurable character to bolster his socialist credentials, and I show how this strategy unleashed a public exchange of criticisms with one legendary *salsero* (salsa musician), Rubén Blades. By exploring the way music intersects with politics, I show how popular culture is neither ancillary to nor derivative of the country's ever-deepening strife but, rather, constitutive of it.

Keywords: Nicolás Maduro; salsa; Venezuela; politics; music; ethnomusicology

Vignette: 1 November 2016

Seated at the microphone in what was the broadcast studio of Venezuela's newest radio station, Radio Miraflores, La Voz de la Verdad (95.5 FM), Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro appeared totally at ease and enthusiastic in his role of radio host. It is impressive that he could strike such a cordial and relaxed note as he addressed his radio and television audience given that it had been almost a year since his party had lost control of the legislature and only a few weeks earlier he had been the target of some of the largest protests in Venezuela's history with more than one million demonstrators taking part. As the successor to the immensely popular and charismatic Hugo Chávez Frías, in this period Maduro faced the daunting task of turning the post-Chávez conjuncture that found him seated in the presidential palace into a long-term and stable regime in which he might consolidate his rule as the legitimate embodiment of and heir to Chávez's socialist project, the 'Bolivarian Revolution'.

The date was 1 November 2016 and it seemed as if all Venezuela had tuned in to hear the first episode of *La Hora de la Salsa* (the salsa hour, hereafter referred to as *La*

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Hora), a programme that mixed music and politics and, from time to time, featured the nation's president as its host. As it turned out, however, an 'hour' proved to be an approximative concept, as Maduro's programme simply went on for as long as its host thought to continue offering his own musings and musical selections, a fundamentally unpredictable programming model that no doubt created havoc in the production rooms of the state-run radio and television stations around the country where broadcast teams necessarily suspended their regular programming to carry this salsa show.

Well into the programme, Maduro showed no sign of winding down. He had already provided his listeners with a potpourri of content that included recordings of salsa classics from the 1960s and 1970s, extended descriptions of and justifications for all sorts of public-works programmes currently underway, a selection of Facebook messages from well-wishers and various personal anecdotes, several of which had Maduro in one or another barrio of Caracas taking in salsa performances or stopping by the home of a famous Venezuelan salsa personality. And even so, he remained reluctant to let go of the moment. 'Let's keep on going!' Maduro declared with evident relish as he turned to his sidekick, the *salsólogo* (salsologist) and radio host Javier Key, asking: 'What say you, Javier?' Seizing upon this invitation to chime in, Key took the opportunity to offer a '*bienvenida*' ('welcome') to Maduro's wife, Cilia Flores, who, evidently, had been sitting quietly on a couch in the corner of the studio. '*¡Un aplauso!*' ('A round of applause!') Maduro cried out and then announced: '*¡Ahora vamos a bailar!*' ('Now let's dance!')¹

As onlookers in the studio applauded, Key announced that Roberto Roena would be the musician featured on the next track and then offered Maduro the honour of announcing the title of the track. Smiling broadly, Maduro began by dedicating the next song to someone he claimed he could not name. Right hand placed above his heart, Maduro stated with feigned seriousness: 'I am presently in a spirit of national dialogue [so] I have to behave.' Light-hearted as the mood he attempted to produce may have been, Maduro was using this moment to deliberately undermine a Vatican-sponsored 'peace process' that two days earlier had actually involved sitting down with leaders of the opposition in what some held out hope could be a serious effort to address the political and economic crises that continued to rock the country.

Clearly, Maduro's injection of this moment of apparent levity in his radio programme was no more than a thinly disguised effort to criticise a political opponent and thereby undermine the peace process itself. His intentions in this regard became all too clear when Maduro announced the title of the upcoming track as '*Tu loco loco y yo tranquilo*' ('You're Crazy, Crazy and I'm Chilled').

As the opening bars of Roena's 1969 salsa hit filled the studio, Maduro took his wife by the hand, led her into the middle of the room and danced enthusiastically as, all the while, an aide filmed the proceedings on a mobile phone for the benefit of the president's Facebook followers.

In the event that any listener had missed the point, Maduro would eventually name the person to whom he had 'dedicated' this song. It was, of course, Henry Ramos Allup, a principal leader of the opposition to Maduro and one of the president's most outspoken critics. It is worth noting that the intended slight was immediately

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

picked up and discussed by news organisations on both sides of Venezuela's sharply divided political spectrum. However, in a surprising turn of events, the attention this political taunt (read by some as an outright threat) was accorded was eclipsed by an aspect of the bizarre tableau that garnered far more attention. In the end, it was the video of Maduro and Flores dancing that generated the most chatter among political pundits and ordinary Venezuelans who post their views on social media. As it turned out, opinions differed widely in this respect. For some, Maduro's display of prowess on the dancefloor communicated that he was happy, comfortable and, most significantly, in control. For others, the picture of the president dancing about with his wife was yet another indication that Maduro was dangerously out of touch with the harsh realities lived by Venezuelans of all social backgrounds. And, as often happens, the video clip of the first couple showing off their salsa moves quickly generated a profusion of unflattering memes, several of which were eagerly retweeted by prominent members of the opposition.

Introduction

In this article I propose to examine why, during a period of extreme social and political instability, a sitting president chose to launch a salsa radio show as a counter-punch to mounting challenges to his hold on power. What were the political motives that led Maduro to launch *La Hora*? Similarly, what were the symbolic and practical benefits that Maduro hoped to derive from promoting this music to a national radio and, very often, television and social media audience? Grounded as these questions are in the specific context of post-Chávez Venezuela, addressing them through a close reading of Maduro's own words and musical selections and omissions provides students of Venezuelan popular culture with a valuable opportunity to consider the range of meaning and symbolic resonance that Maduro believed salsa had for the people of Venezuela who tuned into his radio show and likely for salsa fans outside of the country as well.²

My analysis of this development in post-Chávez Venezuela is based on an examination of available recordings of the radio programme, supplemented by

²This research has its origins in casual conversations with other ethnomusicologists in which we grappled with the question of how any of us could continue our study of the music of Venezuela in a context in which a stretch of on-the-ground fieldwork that might include individual interviews, archival research and participant observation, had become increasingly impossible to project. This is because at the time of discussing our common dilemma, Venezuela continued to experience bouts of widespread civil unrest prompting repressive responses from the state, very high levels of crime, rampant inflation, widespread food insecurity and lethal shortages of medicine and hospital care, to list only the most discouraging disincentives to a researcher considering Venezuela as a fieldwork site. Sadly, the relevance of this internet-based research to ethnographers has only increased with the devastation and uncertainty wrought by the coronavirus pandemic around the world. Some sense of the severe risks to personal safety faced by Venezuelans of all social classes can be obtained from the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Peace Index report, which rates Venezuela 20th among the world's most dangerous countries, making it, by this metric, the most dangerous country in the western hemisphere. See Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Peace Index 2019: Measuring Peace in a Complex World' (Sydney: IEP, June 2019), p. 9, available at <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>, last access 15 Jan. 2021. For the specific limitations on free movement about Caracas that I encountered in 2015 and 2016, see Sean Bellaviti 'In Search of the Organization of American States 1970s Field Recording Collection in Caracas, Venezuela', in *Sound*

newspaper and magazine articles and social media commentary posted by public intellectuals and opinion leaders.³ In considering these resources, my principal focus is on Maduro's account of himself and the music and musicians he chose to endorse over the course of the 13 episodes of *La Hora* that I could find online. Each of these had been uploaded in part or in whole to Facebook, Twitter, Periscope and/or YouTube and, together, comprised more than 20 hours of audio-visual material, spanning a period from November 2016 to December 2017, at which point, and for reasons that can only be speculated about, Maduro no longer appeared on the programme.⁴ When taken together, these recordings offer a detailed and very compelling portrait of the importance that Maduro accorded to this music at an unstable and critical juncture in his presidency. Researching this project required careful auditing and, in every case, viewing of each of these sources, all of which I have listed by date and URL in the online Appendix.⁵ In presenting my argument here I have necessarily been selective in the examples I chose to cite, and, in every case, I indicate the date the particular episode of *La Hora* aired so that the readers can, should they wish to, locate the source URL(s) provided in the online Appendix.

Thus, this article begins with a general overview of the political context in which the radio programme was launched wherein I argue that *La Hora* offered Maduro two key benefits: (i) it allowed him to present himself as a president in control and at his ease, and (ii) it opened a new line of communication through which Maduro was able to present and promote his political goals and attack his opponents. I then proceed to analyse Maduro's presentation of salsa, focusing on how he framed the music in relation to himself and his political ambitions. This analysis highlights three techniques Maduro employed that enabled him to use salsa as a tool in the service of a political project. The first technique was to deploy his professed love of 1970s '*salsa brava*' – that is, the hard-hitting salsa that came out of New York's inner-city Puerto Rican neighbourhoods – in order to cast himself as a man of the people and a champion of the country's working classes. Maduro's second technique was to frame salsa as a Venezuelan national music in order to underscore his profound commitment to the country. The third technique was to present salsa as a pleasurable and joyful activity, a position that allowed Maduro to underscore his claim that he was totally committed to the wellbeing of all Venezuelans whom, as I will show, he argued had a 'right to happiness', and salsa was a key component in guaranteeing that right.

In the final part of this article I show how Maduro's overtures to the salsa musicians he most admired were roundly rejected. Focusing, as a key example, on the

Matters: The SEM Blog (available at <https://soundmattersthesemblog.wordpress.com/>, last access 15 Jan. 2021).

³In this respect, my own study follows the model employed by Eduardo Frajman that offers an analysis of Hugo Chávez's weekly television show *Aló Presidente*, based on transcriptions widely available on the internet. See Eduardo Frajman, 'Broadcasting Populist Leadership: Hugo Chávez and *Aló Presidente*', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 46: 3 (2014), pp. 501–26.

⁴At the time of writing, *La Hora de la Salsa* (hereafter *La Hora*) continues to be aired with Javier Key in the role of emcee.

⁵The online Appendix is available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X21000237> under the 'Supplementary materials' tab.

critique put forward by singer-songwriter Rubén Blades, I show how this debate, acrimonious as it became, in the end helps us to assess Maduro's own claim to salsa, which, from the very beginning, centred on and was sustained by his assertion that he had the right and duty to speak for the poor.

Overview of *La Hora de la Salsa*

When *La Hora* first aired, it was a cultural moment anticipated with keen attention precisely because Maduro, Venezuela's embattled president, would be at the microphone assuming the role of emcee and deejay. Almost every Venezuelan news outlet as well as prominent international news sources covered the story while many of Venezuela's radio and television stations brought their listeners and viewers a live feed of the inaugural programme. Surprising though it may seem that a head of state would, during a period of intense political instability, choose to host a salsa radio programme, in fact Maduro's decision to do so made a lot of sense. Given the huge success Chávez had with his weekly call-in television show, *Aló Presidente* (1999–2012), which featured a friendly and chatty host who presented music, often singing along, and bantered with ordinary citizens, it is not surprising that Maduro would draw inspiration from his mentor in formulating the idea of reaching out to Venezuelans through the use of this format.⁶ For his part, like Chávez, Maduro cultivated friendships with leading salsa musicians and was given to breaking into song and dance at the slightest provocation.⁷ As Maduro is, himself, an amateur percussionist, he rarely misses an opportunity to showcase his skills whether by sitting in on congas during an Andy Montañez concert in Caracas,⁸ or spontaneously joining a group of street musicians on timbales while visiting Panama City's impoverished El Chorrillo to pay his respects to the victims of the 1989 US invasion of Panama.⁹ To understand why Maduro would turn to music as a vehicle to shore up support for his political projects, the better to consolidate power, it is necessary to view *La Hora* in the context of a long history of performance practices enacted on the stage of Venezuelan national politics.

The performative nature of Venezuelan political presentation as a means of governing an increasingly ungovernable constituency has, as Rafael Sánchez shows, its roots in nineteenth-century political life. These performances, Sánchez observes, could be anything from a 'series of winks, identifying moves, outrageous asides, unexpected outbursts' to Simón Bolívar's demonstrated willingness to dance, not

⁶The PBS documentary *Frontline: The Hugo Chávez Show* (2008) provides a succinct and informative snapshot of the tone, content and political dimensions of *Aló Presidente*. See also Dominic Smith, 'A Corpus-Driven Discourse Analysis of Transcripts of Hugo Chávez's Television Programme "Aló Presidente"', unpubl. PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2010.

⁷For a thorough and, to be sure, highly critical examination of Chávez's support for the country's internationally renowned nation-wide classical music programme, Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (National Network of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela), more colloquially referred to as 'El Sistema', see Geoffrey Baker, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸See 'Maduro tocando las congas en el concierto de Andy Montañez', YouTube, 23 Nov. 2014, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eg4nkN8QIA, last access 8 Jan. 2021.

⁹See 'Maduro llega al barrio de El Chorrillo', YouTube, 10 April 2015, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFSBun8s918, last access 8 Jan. 2021.

to mention Bolívar's self-proclaimed successor Hugo Chávez's readiness to burst into song.¹⁰ This penchant for spectacle would only increase as Venezuela was transformed into a petrostate reliant on black gold, where, to quote Fernando Coronil: 'State representatives, the visible embodiments of the invisible powers of oil money, appear on the state's stage as powerful magicians who pull social reality, from public institutions to cosmogonies, out of a hat'¹¹ – perhaps nowhere more spectacularly, albeit unsuccessfully, as when, in the 1950s, the autocratic leader General Marcos Pérez Jiménez instrumentalised the popular cult of the ancient indigenous goddess María Lionza to bolster his own populist credentials by building, among other things, a massive statue in her honour.¹² Remarkable though it may seem to outsiders, Maduro's own exhibition of musical and choreographic prowess must be viewed in light of this tradition of exuberant display in the arena of national politics. In this exceedingly tense political conjuncture, it made sense for Maduro to launch his radio programme precisely because it suggested he was completely at ease and entirely in control.

At the time of *La Hora's* launch, Maduro's government was seriously under threat from a politically empowered opposition and a population that had increasingly taken to expressing its frustration and grievances by means of large demonstrations, which, in turn, encouraged further civil unrest. The crisis was one that had been years in the making and only intensified after the death of Chávez in March 2013, at which point Maduro, then vice president, assumed the interim presidency and was elected president the following month. In the period that followed, Venezuelans experienced increasingly widespread shortages of basic goods and severe economic recession. Under these circumstances, in February 2014, the first of the large opposition-led marches, that would become the dominant feature of Maduro's presidency, filled the streets of the nation's capital and other major cities. Dubbed 'La Salida' (The Exit) by members of the opposition who called for Maduro's ousting, these protests were initially a means to vent popular frustration with runaway inflation, prolonged shortage of basic goods, and widespread criminal violence.¹³ But by early 2017, the protests reached fever pitch as anger over the ever-increasing scarcity of food and medicine was compounded when Maduro instituted what can only be regarded as anti-democratic measures, including the arrest and incarceration of political opponents and, perhaps most significantly, changes to the very structure of the legislature.¹⁴ Specifically, faced with a legislature (the Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly)) that was hostile to him, Maduro

¹⁰Rafael Sánchez, *Dancing Jacobins: A Venezuelan Genealogy of Latin American Populism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 7.

¹¹Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 2.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 168–72.

¹³The North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) offers substantial in-depth coverage of La Salida and the protests that followed, including, for example, Alejandro Velasco's excellent interview with María Pilar García-Guadilla. See Alejandro Velasco, 'Venezuela Before and After the Protests (An Interview with María Pilar García-Guadilla)', 28 Sept. 2014, available at <https://nacla.org/article/venezuela-and-after-protests-interview-mar%C3%ADa-pilar-garc%C3%ADa-guadilla>, last access 15 Jan. 2021.

¹⁴See 'Venezuela's President Maduro Calls for New Constituent Body', *BBC*, 2 May 2017, available at www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-39775092, last access 15 Jan. 2021.

created a competing legislature, the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (Constituent National Assembly), composed almost entirely of pro-Maduro representatives. The two legislative bodies now coexist, with the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente being the dominant institution.

With social unrest on the rise, the creation of *La Hora* allowed Maduro to accomplish two important objectives. First, the image of the country's president at his ease, indulging his palpable passion for salsa music and dance, was meant to communicate to Venezuelans that notwithstanding the tensions characterising the political moment, their president was still a leader fully in control. This effort was not lost on observers at the time, one of whom explained the rationale for the salsa show in the starkest of terms, stating: '[Maduro] wants to show himself to be confident and relaxed, not as though his government is about to fall.'¹⁵ And, indeed, when Maduro opened the show, the message that his presidency was stable and, to be sure, 'indestructible' was explicitly made when he chose to kick off the programme with the Ray Barretto 1973 classic of the same name, which Maduro continued to play as background music throughout the show and in all the episodes that followed.

Another advantage provided by *La Hora* was that it opened a new channel for Maduro to communicate his message directly to Venezuelans. As noted above, Maduro's salsa show was part of a larger initiative that saw the creation of the brand-new state-run radio station Radio Miraflores, which had been launched just a month before *La Hora*'s inaugural broadcast. The imperative for Maduro to establish a direct channel of communication with all Venezuelans during a period of civil unrest has clear historical precedent. As a presidential hopeful, Chávez had enjoyed strong support from Venezuela's overwhelmingly privately owned media outlets. However, once elected, these companies came to view Chávez as a threat and, as Naomi Schiller explains, they 'emerged as the most organized sector of the political opposition to the Chávez government'.¹⁶ Nowhere was this antagonism more evident, and its impact on democratic rule more acutely felt, than when, at the critical moment in the short-lived coup by anti-Chávez forces in 2002, Chávez followers found themselves temporarily in a media blackout. No wonder then that, in response to a hostile private media, Chávez's government lost little time in launching 'ambitious new state-run media outlets that greatly expanded its communication capacity'.¹⁷

The fact that Maduro had inherited this robust and expansive media infrastructure that he could employ when needed necessarily raises the question of what, exactly, was the purpose of creating one more government-controlled media outlet. To hear Maduro tell it, his latest initiative in expanding the state-run media network was of critical importance. Named after Palacio de Miraflores, the Venezuelan presidential palace, Radio Miraflores functioned as a both direct and official mouthpiece for the government, bringing, as Maduro explained in the

¹⁵María Isabel Sánchez, 'Dancing Through Scandal: Venezuela's President Hosts a Salsa Show while His Country Churns in Crisis', *Business Insider*, 24 Nov. 2016, available at www.businessinsider.com/afp-president-dances-salsa-while-venezuela-churns-2016-11, last access 11 Jan. 2021.

¹⁶Naomi Schiller, *Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 58.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

first episode of *La Hora*, ‘the voice of truth to all of Venezuela in this battle for the truth, for consciousness, for life’.¹⁸ And, as in the ‘fake news’ discourse that has become so central to populist leaders elsewhere in the world, Maduro framed this radio network as a weapon to be deployed in a media war, as a struggle which, as he explained during the first episode of *La Hora*, was nothing short of ‘A battle for the truth. A battle for the revolution.’¹⁹

Schiller’s study of the development of the community-run television station Catia TVE suggests an additional if not alternative explanation to the one offered by Maduro. Catia TVE grew out of barrio activism in the poor Caracas neighbourhood of Catia, where it rose to relative prominence during the Chávez years as an example of how ordinary Venezuelans could, in their capacity as producers, reporters and commentators, actually participate in the creation of television media. Schiller notes that one of the more unexpected findings of her research ‘was that the practice of media production [...] was much more vital to [the] political activism’ of state-aligned community members than the actual number of viewers who tuned into their shows,²⁰ which was, in fact, quite low. This is because the sheer act, as Schiller explains, of ‘seizing the tools of media production and demanding institutional legal recognition allowed Catia TVE’s founders to gain a foothold in an arena – “the press” – that many people across social sectors see as highly influential’.²¹ Thus, by creating a parallel media outlet – the better, it would seem, to communicate his political message to Venezuelans – Maduro was likely taking a page from Chávez’s own playbook by expanding his media infrastructure as a show of force and control in and of itself.

The fact that *La Hora* had an explicitly political function is clear from its content which, when hosted by Maduro, devoted less time to music and more time to a discussion of social programmes and public policies and denunciations of political enemies. This development is unsurprising given that Chávez’s own flagship television programme *Aló Presidente* included music,²² storytelling and dance even as it focused on a discussion of pressing social and political issues and, in this respect, in all likelihood provided a model for *La Hora*. To be sure, Maduro opted to build his own radio equivalent of *Aló Presidente* around a programming model that foregrounded music by explicitly billing itself as a salsa programme. And thus, those sections of the broadcast that departed from music altogether are noteworthy

¹⁸*La Hora*, 1 Nov. 2016. *La Hora*’s capacity to reach an ever-broader sector of the Venezuelan population was enhanced because the show was broadcast on a nation-wide network of radio stations, or ‘*cadenas radiales*’, which Maduro boasted would allow him to ‘speak directly to the regions [...] to announce [public] works’ (*La Hora*, 11 Nov. 2016).

¹⁹*La Hora*, 11 Nov. 2016.

²⁰Schiller, *Channeling the State*, p. 10.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²For some excellent examples of Chávez’s use of music in *Aló Presidente*, see Hazel Marsh, *Hugo Chávez, Alí Primera and Venezuela: The Politics of Music in Latin America* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 126. The use of music to sway the course of national politics was not solely a tactic employed by the political Left. In 2011, for example, the US-based National Endowment for Democracy ‘funded rock groups in Venezuela to record songs promoting democracy’ in an effort to ‘undermine the rule of Hugo Chávez’. See Joe Parkin Daniels, ‘Sing a Song of Subversion: US funded Venezuela rock bands to dent Chávez’, *The Guardian*, 27 May 2020, available at www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/27/venezuela-us-funded-rock-bands-hugo-chavez, last access 11 Jan. 2021.

because at the end of these stretches of straight political commentary, Maduro always made an effort to tie the discourse to the narrative thread, indeed, the signature element of his programme, which was salsa.

Thus, while *La Hora* provided its listeners with a great deal of non-music-related content, this does not mean that music merely offered a pretext for Maduro to comment on pressing political issues or was simply an occasion for him to make a show of being cool and in control. As we will see in the pages that follow, when Maduro did set aside political commentary to focus squarely on music, this shift in emphasis proved to be an integral part of a broader political strategy that was formulated to present the Venezuelan president as, above all else, a man of the people and a champion of the country's poor and working classes.

Maduro's Use of Salsa: Key Themes and Strategies

In addition to the material advantages resulting from the creation of a brand-new radio programme, Maduro's use of salsa as the linchpin of his show proved to be a useful strategy to communicate his own political goals. Salsa turned out to be a very rich symbolic resource that Maduro employed to promote himself and his political ambitions. In order to appreciate salsa's symbolic potential, it is important to briefly outline the social and political circumstances that led to its rise in the 1960s and rapid spread in the 1970s.

Almost every history of salsa locates the origins of this music in New York City's predominantly Puerto Rican East Harlem – otherwise known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio – during the groundswell of Puerto Rican pride and political mobilisation that intensified through the 1960s as part of the broader civil rights and anti-war movements. Drawing principally on Cuban popular music, Nuyoricans (Puerto Rican New Yorkers) developed not only an exciting form of dance music, but also a means to give musical and lyrical expression to the experiences of barrio life. 'The best salsa songs', Jorge Duany writes, 'voice the problems of this disadvantaged class. Scarcity, violence, inequality, marginality, and desperation are translated into the words and music of the popular singers and performers from the barrio'²³ – a position widely shared by scholars.

Salsa's arrival in Caracas during the 1960s followed a path of expansion that would be replicated in other places in the Spanish-speaking Americas, where it took hold first in the city's barrios and then spread to other parts of the country and sectors of the population. That salsa would first find appeal in the desperately poor and underserved Latin American barrios is unsurprising given that, as Peter Manuel explains, 'the modern urban alienation it described was common to so many other Latin American cities' and, for this reason, 'salsa soon became an international phenomenon, a chronicle of the urban Hispanic Caribbean'.²⁴ And as the music reached an ever-broader audience, its symbolic and representational power broadened as well. Arriving as it often did in the rucksacks of sailors from distant

²³Jorge Duany, 'Popular Music in Puerto Rico: Toward an Anthropology of Salsa', *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, 5: 2 (1984), p. 206.

²⁴Peter Manuel with Kenneth Bilby and Michael Large, *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 78.

ports and, in due course, over radio broadcasts and through live performances by touring bands, salsa enjoyed huge appeal among working-class *caraqueños* (people of Caracas) thanks to what Lise Waxer describes as its perceived ‘worldliness’ and capacity to give expression to an ‘urban working-class identity, a sensibility that was simultaneously local but also connected to the larger world’.²⁵

Salsa’s barrio roots, perceived cosmopolitanism and expansion throughout Latin America would also hold special appeal to Venezuelan leftist intellectuals, who regarded it as an authentic musical expression of *el pueblo* (the people) and a basis for pan-Latino identity and solidarity. Scholars credit these individuals with the genre’s embrace by Venezuela’s predominantly white middle class in the 1970s – the sector that had previously rejected salsa as ‘*música de monos*’ (‘monkey music’).²⁶ Thus, as the 1970s transitioned to the 1980s, in Venezuela, as in other parts of Latin America, salsa was transformed, Waxer writes, ‘from an expression of the barrio population to a widespread urban musical form’.²⁷

As an exciting dance music that gave expression to the voice of marginalised Nuyoricans, and then, and for similar reasons, was embraced by poor people living in some of Latin America’s largest barrios, salsa has rightly been celebrated by aficionados as the music of ‘the people’ and ‘the street’, and overwhelmingly analysed by scholars as an organic social movement that arose from ‘below’. So strong are the associations of this music with the experiences and voice of the poor that when, in the 1980s, politically themed ‘*salsa dura*’ or ‘*salsa brava*’ gave way to the more staid, commercialised and pop-friendly ‘*salsa romántica*’, many salsa fans – scholars among them – refused to let go of the conviction that ‘authentic’ salsa should and always will be the music of *el pueblo*.²⁸ By looking at the ways in which a head of state, in the interest of furthering his political project, appropriated many of the discourses that salsa fans hold dear, this article offers an examination in which the bottom-up paradigm of salsa is turned on its head. This consideration of salsa as a political resource for Maduro is the focus of the following three subsections.

Maduro Proposes Salsa as the Music of Chavismo and the Venezuelan Working Class

That salsa is broadly embraced in Venezuela means that its fans come from every social background. In fact, salsa’s seemingly universal appeal to a nation otherwise fractured along sharp socio-political lines goes a long way to explain why some Venezuelans saw *La Hora* as Maduro’s effort to build bridges or as one Venezuelan truck driver interviewed by *Business Insider* put it: ‘Little by little, he is reaching out to each and every Venezuelan to transmit his message.’²⁹

²⁵Lise Waxer, ‘Llegó la salsa: The Rise of Salsa in Venezuela and Colombia’, in Lise Waxer (ed.), *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meaning in Latin Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 223.

²⁶Manuel *et al.*, *Caribbean Currents*, p. 79.

²⁷Waxer, ‘Llegó la salsa’, p. 226. See also César Miguel Rondón, *El libro de la salsa: Crónica de la música del Caribe urbano* (Caracas: Ediciones B, 2015), p. 43.

²⁸See Christopher Washburne, *Sounding Salsa: Performing Latin Music in New York City* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), p. 31.

²⁹María Isabel Sánchez, ‘Dancing Through Scandal’.

However, the notion that salsa belongs to Venezuelans of all social classes was certainly not explicitly expressed by Maduro himself, who cast salsa as the music of the country's poor and working classes.³⁰ Framing salsa in these terms allowed Maduro to show that his own love of the music was wrapped up in his rejection of what he often referred to as the country's 'oligarchy' and his solidarity with and commitment to serving the country's poor. The story, as Maduro tells it in the course of his radio shows, is an intensely personal one that began with his own musical formation and the role it played in his political transformation from an insensitive middle-class 'ignoramus' to a socially aware person deeply attuned to the day-to-day reality of ordinary Venezuelans.

Over the course of several shows, we learn that the 1970s was a musically formative decade for Maduro, who, beginning as an avid fan of British and US rock, developed a lifelong passion for salsa just as the music was experiencing its second 'peak'. This, he asserted, was due largely to his and other Venezuelans' growing passion for songs that took up pressing social and political themes – a trend which songwriter Catalino 'Tite' Curet Alonso famously called '*salsa con una conciencia*', or 'salsa with a conscience', and which Maduro calls '*salsa brava*'.³¹ Encountering salsa first on a local radio programme and then, as his interest grew, attending live concerts featuring Venezuelan musicians such as Watussi (Orlando José Castillo) and the band Dimensión Latina, Maduro makes plain in the first episode of *La Hora* that these experiences were key to his evolution from a *rockero* into a *salsero*, a transformation that led to not only a musical awakening, but a political one as well. Maduro explains: 'When I encountered salsa, I encountered *el pueblo*, I encountered the barrios, I encountered the struggle, because they always went together – salsa and struggle, struggle and salsa. Hope. The struggle to overcome suffering – to transform suffering into hope.'³²

When highlighting the revolutionary aspects of 1970s *salsa brava* as a means to explain the link between his passion for the music and his commitment to the social goals of Chavismo, Maduro rarely misses an opportunity to show how the actual process of becoming a salsa fan and musician was key to his development as a man of the people, totally in touch with the life and struggles of ordinary Venezuelans. As a lifelong *caraqueño*, Maduro regularly interwove his musical experiences with vivid descriptions of the city's byways and neighbourhoods. For

³⁰Establishing connections between social class and political affiliation/movements in twenty-first-century Venezuela is exceedingly difficult due to the heterogeneous make-up of both the supporters of Chavismo and those who oppose it. Thus, while Maduro overwhelmingly directs his message to '*el pueblo*' and '*trabajadores*' (workers), and he denounces those he styles as '*ricos*', '*elites*' and especially the '*oligarquía*', the political reality of Chavismo is not simply one of haves and have-nots. This is because the social programmes enacted under Chávez's rule improved the lives of many desperately poor Venezuelans while simultaneously provoking a mass exodus of Venezuelans of means, even as Chavista social programmes created their own economic elites, the '*boligarquía*' and '*boliburguesía*', terms that reflect new alliances on both sides of Venezuela's political divide. See Steve Ellner, 'Social and Political Diversity and the Democratic Road to Change in Venezuela', *Latin American Perspectives*, 40: 3 (2013), pp. 63–82.

³¹It is noteworthy that while salsa songs with political themes became especially popular in the 1970s, the practice of writing these songs began earlier, in the 1960s, with musicians like Eddie Palmieri and Ray Barretto. For more information on this history, see Juan Flores, *Salsa Rising: New York Latin Music of the Sixties Generation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³²*La Hora*, 1 Nov. 2016.

example, in one instance Maduro described how, at the close of the 1970s, he had taken his first lessons in Afro-Cuban and Afro-Venezuelan percussion with the Venezuelan drummer Felipe ‘Mandingo’ Rengifo. The venue in which these lessons took place, Maduro noted, was Mandingo’s ‘*rancho de latón*’ (brass or tin shed), that is to say, his home in Barrio Marín, which any informed listener would know is one of Caracas’ desperately poor, densely populated shantytowns. Maduro explained that, like every other house in the barrio, Mandingo constructed his initially makeshift dwelling bit by bit, slowly building it up as he managed to assemble the requisite scrap building materials. The lessons took place on the patio in front of the house. ‘That’s where I learned how to play *qui-ti-plás*’, Maduro said excitedly before demonstrating this onomatopoeic Afro-Venezuelan drumming pattern by furiously tapping triplets on his desk as he explained the transformative social significance of his lessons with Mandingo: ‘I learned the first rhythms [...] I’m telling you, [I was] *totally* ignorant; an apartment boy I was, a product of the middle class. [I was] absolutely ignorant of our *Barloventeño* [of Barlovento] rhythms and our Afro-Venezuelan rhythms. All those things I learned with Mandingo.’³³

When addressing his radio audience, Maduro was especially fond of clever wordplay that, in a jovial, matter-of-fact and subtle way, also reinforced the connections between salsa, the barrio and his own political project. The ability to string together a series of mutually reinforcing and compelling ideas, observations and generally newsworthy items in a free-flowing manner is a skill that is prized by Latin American *locutores* (emcees),³⁴ an oratorical technique that Maduro has acquired. The following introduction to one of his early shows is typical insofar as it expresses, through alliteration and syllabic rhyme, links between salsa and a general sense of social wellbeing, offered here in the original Spanish: ‘*Radio Miraflores, la voz de la verdad. La hora de la salsa. La hora de la descarga, del sabor, de la felicidad y de la verdad*’ (‘Radio Miraflores, the voice of truth. The salsa hour. The hour of *descarga, sabor,*³⁵ happiness and truth’).³⁶ One especially memorable string of phrases of this sort came on the heels of an impressive document-signing session where, after declaring that he had committed 400 million bolívares (equivalent to US\$40 million at current rates) to provide air conditioning for the Basilica de Nuestra Señora del Rosario de Chiquinquirá (Maracaibo), and still millions more to covering the salaries of public-sector workers, Maduro offered the following remark as he passed the freshly signed documents to an aide: ‘*Cayendo y corriendo. Bailando y firmando. Ah? ¡Salsiando y gobernando! ¡Con alegría, aquí está, aprobado!*’ (‘Falling and running. Dancing and signing. Eh? Salsa-ing and governing! With joy, here it is, approved!’)³⁷ Whether expressing a sense of hope and wellbeing or literally performing his presidential duties live, on air, Maduro drew on his elocutionary skills to interweave the salsa theme of

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴For a description of a ‘*locutor*’ in the Panamanian context, see Sean Bellaviti, *Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 191–3.

³⁵The words *descarga* and *sabor* are terms used in salsa to mean a jam (as in ‘jamming’) and flavour (as in tasty or delicious).

³⁶*La Hora*, 5 Nov. 2016.

³⁷*La Hora*, 15 Nov. 2016.

his show while conveying his political message in a lively, frequently humorous, and compelling way.

Irony, too, formed part of Maduro's emcee toolkit, which he deployed to great effect either when excoriating a political rival or offering politically inspired banter. As we have already seen in the case of Maduro's sarcastic 'dedication' of the Roena classic 'Tu loco loco y yo tranquilo' to the leader of the opposition, the lyrics of salsa songs – so often organised around a pithy, aphoristic or witty refrain called a *coro* – lend themselves to clever twists of meaning that can work as *indirectas*, that is, thinly veiled insults or, in Maduro's hands, threats. In such a context, these ironic dedications required only the scantiest of associations drawn either from the lyrics of a *coro* or the title of the song. For example, in another attack he launched against Ramos Allup, Maduro chose as yet another 'dedication' the 1973 song made famous by the immensely popular Puerto Rican band Gran Combo, titled 'Eliminación de los feos' ('Elimination of the Ugly Folks'), which is a self-referential farcical song in which the so-called 'feos' are, in fact, a great many of the brightest and best-known stars of Latin popular music of the time.³⁸ That the actual song Maduro selected had nothing to do with denouncing ne'er-do-wells – but rather, in a witty, backhanded sort of way offered a tribute to an honour roll of luminaries – apparently mattered little to Maduro, who used the title of the song to strike out at a political enemy, thinking to humiliate him. In this respect, Maduro's seeming disregard for the intended 'message' of this and other songs, as we will see, reaffirms what is by now a view held by many popular music theorists, which is that when the lyrics of a song appear to offer a message, there is little-to-no guarantee that this is the message that will be received by the listener.³⁹ In his effort to shape the discourse of what he believes salsa *should* mean to patriotic Venezuelans, Maduro appears to bank on the fact that his listeners will be positively disposed to overlook whatever contradictions might emerge between the message of the song lyrics and the *new* interpretive twist Maduro has given it – assuming, of course, that any listener actually recalls the original song lyrics.

Of course, rich as it is in socio-political themes, *salsa brava* of the 1970s offered plenty of pertinent material for the battle-hardened strongman spoiling for a fight. In her succinct and informative description of *La Hora*, Sydney Hutchinson pointedly observes that 'the old-school salsa tunes [Maduro] played on the show were aimed more at ridiculing critics and promoting himself than just having fun'.⁴⁰ And, indeed, Maduro was unsparing in his use of *salsa brava* to promote his political agenda even as he reserved some of his most virulent music-themed vitriol for Henrique Capriles, the social media-savvy then-governor of the State of Miranda,

³⁸See *La Hora*, 11 Nov. 2016.

³⁹Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks characterise the tendency on the part of some people – popular music scholars among them – to prioritise song lyrics as the source of musical meaning as 'the absurdity of the L = ARM (lyrics equal audience received message) equation', adding: 'Artistic transmission is very complex, drawing from a wide range of factors. Lyrics are only one part of the content transmitted, and content isn't necessarily synonymous with a performer's intended message – assuming she even has a message she wishes to convey.' See Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011), p. 66.

⁴⁰Sydney Hutchinson, *Focus: Music of the Caribbean* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 238.

who, in the early days of *La Hora*, was also a leading contender for the presidency and a serious threat to Maduro's rule. In one particularly chilling episode, Maduro, as was his custom, refused to refer to the object of his derision by name, saying: 'The improviser that those of you in Miranda know today as the *majunche del Periscope* [...] You all know that he spends his time on Periscope – always on Periscope – what a *majunche*!'⁴¹ More epithet than nickname, '*majunche del Periscope*' combined '*majunche*' – a *venezolanismo* (Venezuelan word) meaning 'crappy' or 'slipshod' – with the social media platform (Periscope) preferred by the young presidential hopeful. Maduro pressed forward with his denunciation, perusing yet again the Gran Combo catalogue and settling on the 1975 classic 'Vagabundo' (1975), apparently chosen on the strength of its ability to cast the governor as a good-for-nothing '*vago*' ('slacker') who 'doesn't work'. It is ironic that 'Vagabundo' is, in fact, a song that features a father's cautionary advice to his son to stay the path and avoid the iniquitous ways of the drifter. In this case, however, the 'fit' between the song's lyrics and its intended political slight was imperfect because when the song ended, to be followed immediately by the incessant airing of 'Indestructible', Maduro exhibited decidedly unfatherly behaviour. Even as 'Vagabundo' was replaced by 'Indestructible', Maduro accused the governor of embezzling public funds and then, in one of his strongest on-air threats yet, proclaimed: 'He's out of there. He's out of the governorship. He'd better be careful if he doesn't want to end up in a jail cell.'⁴² While generally delivered in a light-hearted manner, the denunciatory nature of these song dedications nonetheless carried real consequences, as Capriles would learn when, in April of the following year, he received a 15-year ban from holding public office.⁴³

Like the song dedications, ironic wordplay on more general and, indeed, well-known salsa themes allowed Maduro to establish connections between salsa and his political goals. Such was the case when Maduro, reading aloud a Facebook post from a Colombian fan of the show, quoted his correspondent as crying out '*¡Que viva la FARC!*'⁴⁴ Then, feigning self-deprecation, he admitted that he had misread the phrase and that the post actually concluded with the well-known tribute: '*¡Que viva la salsa!*'⁴⁵ 'Jokes' such as this one underscored Maduro's identification of militant Latin American left-wing movements of every sort with what he posed as salsa's expression of a leftist position.

It is noteworthy that for all of Maduro's desire to connect salsa with left-wing class struggle, salsa has long ceased to be exclusively associated with the political Left or urban poor. To be sure, salsa's emergence as an expression of urban working-class identity is a historical reality that has its roots in New York City's Spanish Harlem. However, in Venezuela today salsa is certainly not the exclusive domain of a single social class. Venezuelans of high social status listen to salsa,

⁴¹*La Hora*, 11 Nov. 2016.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³At the time of writing, Venezuela's Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (Supreme Court of Justice) ordered that Ramos Allup and six other members of the Asamblea Nacional be prosecuted for their role in the failed uprisings that took place in April 2019.

⁴⁴FARC stands for Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), a left-wing Colombian guerrilla force.

⁴⁵*La Hora*, 16 Nov. 2016.

patronise salsa concerts and clubs, and hire salsa musicians to perform for their private events. So, too, do members of the Venezuelan working class. By the same token, while some salsa musicians may be thought to have a class-based following in Venezuela,⁴⁶ it is less the case that entire subgenres of salsa, such as *salsa brava* and *salsa romántica*, are favoured by any one particular social class. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that Maduro's consistent framing of salsa as the music of 'el pueblo' and the 'barrio' is a deliberate ploy on his part. It is a strategy that links salsa with the historical egalitarian and anti-oligarchical position of Venezuelan socialist movements of the past and more recently with Chavismo. Maintaining the conceit that salsa is inherently a working-class music is, of course, more convincingly accomplished by narrowing the definition of what constitutes authentic salsa. And this is precisely what Maduro does.

Every so often during the course of a show, Maduro likes to remind his listeners that when it comes to salsa, he remains in the thrall of the 'años 70' (1970s), the period of 'salsa brava', 'la salsa de verdad verdad' ('true, true salsa').⁴⁷ Given that during the 1960s and 1970s, working-class Latin Americans were, indeed, the principal consumers of salsa, Maduro's proposition that 'salsa', narrowly defined, is at its core the music of ordinary Latin Americans does not seem exaggerated. To hear Maduro tell it, salsa is at heart a 'beautiful mixture of rhythm, poetry, [and] songs that express the depth of a people's soul, that the oligarchy could never interpret or understand'.⁴⁸ This idea that salsa is a mixture of so many forms of Caribbean popular music and is, in this way, the source of a broader sense of pan-Caribbean solidarity reaches its fullest expression in roots salsa of the 1970s, as Maduro argues with great earnestness in his on-air remarks, as when he asserts: 'Salsa, you see, captures all our spirituality. He who has not discovered salsa, should do so. Especially *salsa brava*; the type of salsa that originates in *son montuno*, *guaguancó*, *rumba*, *guaracha*, *bachata*, *plena*, *bomba*, *merengue* [...] All of it combined into a fusion.'⁴⁹

Maduro's fascination with salsa's barrio roots is also expressed in his effusive praise for many of his original salsa heroes, that is, the stars of the 1970s like the late Puerto Rican singer Héctor Juan Pérez Martínez, better known as Héctor Lavoe. For example, in an on-air conversation with Lavoe's sister, Priscila Vega, Maduro offered the following assessment of the singer's legacy: 'Every one of Héctor Lavoe's songs is a history that inspires in us recollections of [life] in the barrios [and] in the streets. [They relate a] history of our common spirituality.'⁵⁰ While Vega seemed delighted with this tribute to her brother, expressed with apparent sincerity by no less a figure than the president of Venezuela, as we will see below, salsa musicians who are still alive today and whose careers were launched during the *salsa brava* heyday of the 1970s often take exception to Maduro's endorsement of their music as an expression of his own political project, seeing it as undisguised political opportunism designed to prop up a regime that has lost its legitimacy.

⁴⁶For example, the late Ismael Rivera and Tito Rojas both cultivated very strong followings among working-class Venezuelans while, in contrast, Oscar D'León is a great favourite of members of the country's upper-middle classes.

⁴⁷*La Hora*, 1 Nov. 2016.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*La Hora*, 11 Nov. 2016.

⁵⁰*La Hora*, 15 Nov. 2016.

Musical Nationalism (Pros and Cons)

Notwithstanding its left-wing credibility and its association with pan-Latin American solidarity, salsa is not necessarily the most logical choice of music for a sitting Venezuelan president to celebrate or endorse.⁵¹ This is particularly so in the case of an embattled populist strongman like Maduro. For all its popularity in Venezuela, salsa clearly has its roots in other countries, which means that any programme of salsa would inevitably draw celebratory attention to the achievements of artists who not only are not Venezuelan, but who have little or no historical connection to Venezuela. Under the circumstances, Maduro makes it a point to highlight the triumphs of Venezuelan musicians whenever he can, a strategy that, in effect, allows him to portray salsa as a Venezuelan musical achievement and a source of national pride.

This tactic was on full display in Maduro's very first show when he called upon listeners to cogitate on the origins of salsa, saying: 'What is the meaning of salsa? True, true salsa, where does the word come from?'⁵² With this opening, Maduro then offered a breathless account of the standard narrative of salsa's musical origins in Cuba and Puerto Rico, all of which contributed to 'the rise of this powerful musical and cultural movement, which is [...] salsa'.⁵³ Displaying a pattern that would become a feature of his monologues, Maduro moved from a discussion of salsa as a pan-Caribbean genre, to something that had special significance for Venezuelans: '[...] many people don't know that it was a Venezuelan who created the term "salsa"'.⁵⁴ At this point, he turned the microphone over to his assistant, Key, whose responsibilities included keeping track of Maduro's meandering and, seemingly, off-the-cuff musings in order to be able to step in and fill in the historical details when prompted by the host to do so. Here Key explained how in the 1960s, a Venezuelan radio disc-jockey, Phidias Danilo Escalona, launched a radio programme he called *La Hora del Sabor, la Salsa, y el Bombé*. The name of Escalona's radio programme is arguably one of the first instances of the use of the term 'salsa' as applied to popular Caribbean music,⁵⁵ and, as any reasonably attentive listener would deduce, the source of the name Maduro selected for his own radio programme.

Throughout the shows, Maduro exhibited determination and skill in drawing links between salsa and Venezuela. In many respects, this task was made easier by the fact that while nearly all salsa histories locate the genre's birthplace in

⁵¹More than the music championed by Hugo Chávez – especially during episodes of *Aló Presidente*, most notably *zoropo* from the *llanos* or plains of Venezuela – Alejandro Velasco suggested that it was the former president's love and politicisation of baseball that most resembled Maduro's own turn to salsa as a means to give expression to his political views and aspirations. The parallels between the two are indeed compelling: like salsa, baseball is a form of popular culture that traces its roots outside of the country (namely, the United States) and has been enthusiastically embraced by Venezuelans of all social classes and political leanings. That Maduro would follow in the footsteps of his mentor and choose a politically contradictory and certainly fraught, albeit symbolically rich and widely loved, cultural artefact as his principal performative vehicle suggests an intentionality that, as Velasco pointed out, lies at the heart of Chavismo's claims to popular culture.

⁵²*La Hora*, 1 Nov. 2016

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵See Rondón, *El libro de la salsa*, p. 49.

New York City,⁵⁶ Venezuelans can make serious claims to having played a significant *early* role in the genre's development given that Caracas became a salsa hub and centre of production well before other Latin American cities.⁵⁷ Federico Betancourt and Oscar D'León, for example, are just a few of the Venezuelan musicians who became integrated in international salsa circuits. Maduro highlighted this phenomenon by drawing on his own early encounters with salsa in Caracas in the 1970s. In the first episode of *La Hora*, for example, Maduro noted that it was Venezuela's salsa musicians who opened his eyes to the international salsa scene, recalling, 'The first musicians we listened to in that period were Watussi, a Venezuelan who triumphed out there in the world – in New York! – and then came Dimensión Latina. I also remember around '73 or '74 [there was] Oscar D'León', before going on to list other Venezuelan salsa trailblazers.⁵⁸

And just as salsa's 50-plus-year history in Venezuela offered Maduro ample opportunities to cast himself and the music he loves as Venezuelan through and through, Maduro also found a way to pose himself as an 'advocate' for his people when he insisted that salsa was more than an enjoyable pastime; it was a *fundamental right* of all Venezuelans.

Alegría and the Politics of Pleasure

When Maduro, in a seemingly spontaneous act, took his wife by the hand and proceeded to dance her around the studio, he was engaging in what for Venezuelans is a common and pleasurable leisure activity. And it was precisely this show of pleasurable indulgence that disaffected Venezuelans found so off-putting to the extent that, by the following day, this display had generated international headlines as well as a host of embarrassing internet memes.⁵⁹ For those whose dislike of the Venezuelan strongman president had reached a boiling point, the sight of the president *festejando* (partying), which is to say, dancing with his wife, was further evidence that he was totally out of touch with the desperate condition in which most Venezuelans found themselves.

The backlash produced by Maduro's antics, however, did not outstrip the expected political benefits that surely motivated Maduro not only to take up dancing in front of a camera, but to pose himself as a part-time salsa disc-jockey and radio talk-show host. Launching a programme that showed, among other things, the nation's president dancing, reminiscing and reflecting on his favourite musicians,

⁵⁶See Sean Bellaviti, 'Salsa', *Oxford Bibliographies in Music*, 25 March 2020, online only, available at www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199757824/obo-9780199757824-0274.xml, last access 28 Jan. 2021.

⁵⁷See Waxer, 'Llegó la salsa'.

⁵⁸*La Hora*, 1 Nov. 2016.

⁵⁹These unflattering memes typically included a photoshopped image of Maduro dancing against a background scene of everyday misery in Venezuela, including people standing in long queues to obtain basic goods or sifting through rubbish heaps to find something to eat. See, for example, the following tweet and meme that was posted by Henrique Capriles' twitter account: https://twitter.com/hcapriles/status/799580178259263488?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E799580178259263488%7Ctwgr%5Eshare_38&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Felcooperante.com%2Fel-meme-de-maduro-bailando-que-compartio-henrique-capriles-2%2F, last access 28 Jan. 2021. For additional memes, see www.tucucu.com/2016/11/07/asi-reaccionaron-los-venezolanos-ante-programa-salsero-maduro/, last access 11 Jan. 2021.

songs and great salsa moments of the past offered what Maduro regarded as a political boost. The advantage it gave him was explicitly articulated by Maduro himself when, while sharing with his audience yet another Facebook post from a supporter who cited the ongoing Vatican-led talks⁶⁰ and implored Maduro not bend to the demands of ‘terrorists’, Maduro was able to assure his listeners that he was in full control, adding for emphasis: ‘[...] if I weren’t, I wouldn’t be here listening to salsa’.⁶¹

By listening and dancing to salsa, Maduro hoped to project an image of self-confidence that would be evident to anyone who took the time to tune into the programme or, for that matter, read the coverage it generated in the press. And clearly Maduro thought this was a winning strategy because despite the backlash – in which Maduro’s merrymaking was taken as evidence of his cluelessness with respect to the nation’s suffering – he and his wife continued their routine of dancing during subsequent radio shows, always in full view of smartphone cameras or national television crews.⁶² By the same token, dancing became a political tool for both Maduro and his opponents principally because it was positioned as a pleasurable and less-than-serious activity – an assertion that is further supported by the fact that, to my knowledge, how well or how poorly Maduro danced never became a subject of public debate and in my view Maduro’s performance as a dancer is at the very least ‘regular’, which is to say, decent enough.

In the context of this programme, however, salsa’s strong association with pleasure offered additional advantages apart from its capacity to allow Maduro to project an air of self-assuredness in the face of a serious political threat to his regime. From the very first radio show and in many that followed, Maduro maintained that ‘alegría’ (joy) and ‘felicidad’ (happiness) were, in fact, fundamental rights of the Venezuelan people – rights that his revolutionary government would fight to protect.⁶³ On one memorable occasion, employing militaristic language, Maduro made his case by asserting, ‘We’re in a battle. A battle for the happiness of the people [...] Because our people have a right to happiness, a right to joy.’⁶⁴ In the hands of

⁶⁰Beginning in late 2016, the Vatican took a decisive lead in trying to negotiate a diplomatic solution to bring an end to the growing political tensions and violent protests that had given rise to a severe humanitarian crisis. However, with the opposition insisting on nothing less than a referendum on the presidency and the release of political prisoners, few held out hope that Maduro would capitulate to such demands. And even so, on 30 Oct. 2016, both sides agreed to a fragile truce. Yet by 6 Nov. 2016, a clearly dejected papal envoy, Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, warned ominously that if the talks failed, Venezuela could well be on a path to ‘bloodshed’ (see ‘Venezuela podría seguir un camino de sangre, dice un enviado papal’, *Reuters*, 6 Nov. 2016, available at www.reuters.com/article/politica-venezuela-mediacion-ideskbn1310D5, last access 11 Jan. 2021). And, indeed, by 17 Jan. 2017 the Vatican initiative had come to nothing, with each side casting blame on the other for the failure.

⁶¹*La Hora*, 16 Nov. 2016.

⁶²See Hutchinson, *Focus*, p. 239.

⁶³Maduro’s claim that Venezuelans had a right to happiness finds many parallels in Latin American socialism. For an example of the practice of Cuban ministry officials ‘to reward those who support revolutionary ideals and endeavours’ by organising neighbourhood dances, see Robin Moore, ‘¿Revolución con Pachanga? Dance Music in Socialist Cuba’, *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revue canadienne des études latino-américaines et caraïbes*, 26: 52 (2001), pp. 151–77. Similarly, the willingness of Panamanian left-leaning strongman president Omar Torrijos to helicopter in popular conjuntos (dance bands) to the remote *asentamientos campesinos* (cooperative farms) that were one of the hallmarks of his revolutionary programme is discussed in Bellaviti, *Música Típica*, pp. 87–9.

⁶⁴*La Hora*, 11 Nov. 2016.

Venezuela's loquacious strongman president, salsa was elevated from the pursuit of pleasure to a fundamental social right, even as Maduro's political opponents continued to underscore the inappropriate nature of what they regarded as a profoundly frivolous display at a time of national political, social and economic crisis.⁶⁵

As a 'right' posited by Maduro as one that only *his* government could assure, Maduro's involvement with salsa also became a manipulative instrument of social and political control. This power to use music as a tool to exercise control was evident in the lead-up to the 2017 carnival celebrations when Maduro devoted an entire episode of *La Hora* to the topic. As was his custom, Maduro wasted little time in announcing that he was personally going to 'approve' funds to ensure that this year the carnival festivities would not only take place but would be bigger and brighter than ever. For Maduro, the 2017 dose of carnival fun was framed as a matter of his own claim to the legacy of Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution. Turning to his helper, Maduro declared: 'Look, Javier, this is the thirteenth celebration of [...] the Bolivarian Revolution. Thirteen years of supporting Venezuelan youth and families [through] carnival. Supporting happiness!'⁶⁶

For this episode, Maduro invited the mayor of Caracas, his friend and political ally Jorge Rodríguez, to join him on the show to discuss what Maduro dubbed the city's 'international carnival', which he was able to frame as such, thanks to the participation of international salsa stars such as Tito Rojas and Jerry Rivera. For his part, Rodríguez seemed especially keen to give full credit to the Venezuelan president rather than giving emphasis to the mammoth preparations underway under his own direction, stating: 'Well, as you ordered us to do [...] we have organised an international carnival that is going to be first-rate.'⁶⁷ Rodríguez had only just begun to share a detailed account of the roster of musicians and the many activities soon to come when Maduro cut him short and, regaining control of the microphone, promised his listeners continued coverage that would include the celebratory plans for all parts of the country, that is, as he put it: '*¡Venezuela entera, patria de la alegría!*' ('All Venezuela, country of joy!')⁶⁸

It is perhaps through his discourse of communal pleasure, happiness and *alegría* – both framed in the discursive strategies Maduro adopted in order to present salsa as first and foremost the music of the people *and* embodied in his dance-floor routines – that we see some of the most defining characteristics of the Venezuelan state at work. By promising to take an active hand in guaranteeing pleasure and happiness for all Venezuelans – delectations that he vividly illustrated on air and on the improvised studio dancefloor – Maduro seemed bent on joining the ranks of Venezuelan leaders who, through their 'extraordinary personalization of state power', as Coronil argues, have made the petrostate seem omniscient, even magical in its exercise of power.⁶⁹ Maduro's claim to benevolence is also one

⁶⁵For an example of the simultaneous expressions of support and accusations of dereliction of presidential duties elicited by Maduro and Flores' dance routine, see Catherine E. Shoichet, 'Venezuela's President Slammed for Salsa Dancing as Country Faces Crisis', *CNN*, 3 Nov. 2016, available at www.cnn.com/2016/11/03/americas/venezuela-nicolas-maduro-salsa-show/index.html, last access 11 Jan. 2021.

⁶⁶*La Hora*, 21 Feb. 2017.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Coronil, *The Magical State*, p. 3.

striking example of the exuberant, sometimes frenetic, performativity that Sánchez argues has long been an essential feature of Venezuelan (republican) government. Here, in the relatively sterile confines of a radio studio, Maduro shows himself to be the most recent incarnation of a long line of what Sánchez terms ‘dancing Jacobins’: a Venezuelan notable who, when charged with the task of governing an historically ungovernable land, increasingly resorts to ever more ‘manic performances’ in order to communicate his mindfulness of the distinct wants and desires of an exceedingly heterogeneous population.⁷⁰

In this article, I have argued that through his performances as a salsa deejay – and, when seemingly the spirit moved him, salsa dancer – Maduro strove to present himself as a leader, fearless in the face of an emboldened opposition *and* as a man of the people and an advocate for the poor. In this respect, Maduro’s performative moves were directed toward at least two groups of listeners: his political enemies in the opposition, on the one hand, and his supporters, on the other. Given the focus of this article, it seems fitting that in one of his many descriptions of the flirtatious, winking and dancing half of the otherwise monumentalised and larger-than-life personas of Venezuelan dignitaries (Bolívar and Chávez come immediately to mind among the panoply of the country’s ‘great men’), Sánchez should turn to salsa to illustrate his point. Referencing the broad appeal salsa has for Venezuelans, he writes: ‘One can easily envisage any one of Venezuela’s present-day notables abandoning his pomposity, if hesitantly at first, for the first steps of what eventually becomes an all-out salsa performance – a scene that does in fact take place quite often.’⁷¹ Like Sánchez’s figurative salsa dancer – who, Sánchez observes, manages to cut ‘a contained figure that nevertheless intimates a world of untold sensuous possibilities’⁷² – Venezuela’s real-life *salsero* president seemed no less intent on taking full advantage of the ways in which salsa dancing (and deejaying) might allow him to address the specific concerns and political ambitions of an intensely divided and highly diverse audience. And yet, as enthusiastically as Maduro’s passion for salsa and his largess may have been received by his immediate subordinates and conceivably by the *caraqueño* carnival-goers of 2017, the same could not be said of some of the recipients of his overtures outside of the country.

The Backlash

For all of Maduro’s expressed love for the *salsa brava* heroes of his youth, his love remained unrequited as key figures among his heroes quite clearly did not love him back. Among the most outspoken was Rubén Blades,⁷³ who, it may be remembered, ran unsuccessfully for the Panamanian presidency in 1994 and was appointed as minister of tourism in the Martín Torrijos administration (2005–9). Blades had frequently expressed his disdain for Maduro on social media and in interviews, and had, in turn, been the target of the Venezuelan strongman’s diatribes. The ferocity

⁷⁰Sánchez, *Dancing Jacobins*, pp. 7, 148–66.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³At the time of writing, Willie Colón, Willie González and Jerry Rivera are among a small albeit growing group of salsa musicians who have also taken to criticising the Maduro regime on their social media platforms.

of the enmity between Maduro and this performer offers yet another example of a long-standing, often bitter, discussion that draws on salsa's historical connection to Latin America's working classes and focuses on the question of who, exactly, has the right to speak for the poor. To be sure, asserting authority to represent poor people, whether in Venezuela or anywhere else, is something of a hike through quicksand. Every step taken to show how one's life experiences match those one wishes to represent is as likely to draw attention to disparities as similarities. And this was never more obvious than in the controversy that arose when Maduro took to calling himself 'Pablo Pueblo'.

When, during the course of speeches at rallies and in television presentations, Maduro referred to himself as 'Pablo Pueblo' or described his political vision as '*la revolución de Pablo Pueblo*' (the Pablo Pueblo revolution), he was once more using salsa references to bolster his claim that he was the representative of working-class Venezuelans. This is because, as every Venezuelan would know, Pablo Pueblo is the titular protagonist of Blades' 1977 song that relates the story, as Duany frames it, of 'a humble worker and a family man [whose] life is a collection of broken dreams'.⁷⁴ The sympathetic tone with which Blades treats his subject – sympathy and identification that is epitomised by a *coro* that goes '*Pablo Pueblo, Pablo hermano*' ('Pablo Pueblo, Pablo my brother') – makes it a representative example of the kind of socially conscious salsa song that flourished during the *salsa brava* heyday of the 1970s, in which Blades offers 'an unequivocal statement of social solidarity with the urban poor whom Pablo represents'.⁷⁵ Under the circumstances, Maduro's desire to present himself as the modern-day embodiment of the Pablo Pueblo figure and, by extension, to associate himself with Blades' own socialist vision, was a position that outraged the composer of what Waxer has described as 'salsa's most socially conscious repertoire'.⁷⁶

Indeed, possibly the most eloquent censure of Maduro's decision to take up salsa as the musical banner of his own political project can be found in a 359-word Spanish-language Facebook post penned by Blades and posted on 17 May 2017.⁷⁷ In this 'open letter' to Maduro, Blades singles out the Pablo Pueblo incident and, in the process, offers an unambiguous condemnation of what he perceives as Maduro's dishonest attempt to associate the Venezuelan regime with the social and political goals of *salseros* like himself. 'You appropriate the title of my song and call yourself Pablo Pueblo', he writes, and then, in poetic fashion, adds the sentence that the news outlets immediately seized upon to publish: 'Let me correct you: Pablo Pueblo would never repress his people; Pablo Pueblo does not divide his people; Pablo Pueblo handles with responsibility what little he has; Pablo Pueblo does not steal the future of his own people, ignoring the mandate of his Constitution'.⁷⁸

⁷⁴Duany, 'Popular Music in Puerto Rico', p. 204.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁷⁶Lise Waxer. 'Memoirs of a Life in Salsa: Catalino "Tite" Curet Alonso', in Waxer (ed.), *Situating Salsa*, p. 198.

⁷⁷Blades' Facebook post is available at www.facebook.com/27079109778/posts/presidente-maduroel-imperialismo-como-el-totalitarismo-posee-muchas-manifestacio/10154701460989779/, last access 28 Jan. 2021. See also "'Pablo Pueblo jamás reprimiría a su gente": Rubén Blades en una carta a Maduro', *El País*, 19 May 2017, accessed online at www.elpais.com.co/mundo/pablo-pueblo-jamas-reprimiria-a-su-gente-ruben-blades-en-una-carta-a-maduro.html, last access 11 Jan. 2021.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

Adding to his central critique that Maduro presides over a failed democracy, Blades took a page from the Maduro playbook. Where only days earlier, Maduro had referred to Blades as ‘Pablo Rico’,⁷⁹ a variant of a critique that the president had levied time and again against well-to-do performers who were critical of his government, Blades calls into question Maduro’s own ability to represent the poor from the comfort and luxury of the presidential palace, writing: ‘Pablo Pueblo never lived in the palace in which you dwell, nor did he live surrounded by luxury, nor did he behave like an emperor, as you do.’⁸⁰

Blades’ characterisation of Maduro as a tyrant out of touch with ‘*el pueblo*’ is a familiar criticism that, we recall, echoes the frustrations expressed by some Venezuelans at the sight of the president dancing during the first episode of *La Hora*. Yet, in this case, the underlying argument is substantially different. While disaffected Venezuelans interpreted Maduro’s dancing as proof of both dereliction of his presidential duties and utter insensitivity to the very real sufferings of a majority of Venezuelans, here Blades makes it clear that it is Maduro’s totalitarian tendencies and policies – epitomised in the poetic image of an ‘emperor’ set up in his ‘palace’ – that disqualify him from making any claim to being a true ‘representative of the Left’. It is not hard to understand why someone like Blades, who identifies as a socialist, would find Maduro’s assertions that he represents the poor of Venezuela as the unkindest cut of all, a point he makes quite clear when he writes: ‘You are not a leftist and your actions have done a great deal of harm to the very concept of the Left. You have stripped it of its noble ideology and have turned it into a parody, a circus of buffoonery, a horrendous example of how not to speak and much less to govern.’⁸¹

When it comes to understanding the widespread notion that salsa should speak for the poor, the Maduro–Blades stand-off provides telling insights. It underscores the significance that Blades, one of salsa’s best-known exponents, accords to a genuinely democratic process in a socialist society and the corresponding disdain he feels for Maduro’s increasingly authoritarian practices. Moreover, this exchange reaffirms the widely held conviction that salsa is the music of Latin America’s urban poor and that it gives expression to their struggles against oppression. In this respect, ironically, both parties appear to be in substantial agreement, a fact that becomes especially clear when Blades hurls at Maduro the exact same criticism that Maduro launched at him only a few days earlier, namely, that rich people (be they ‘Pablo Ricos’ or ‘emperors’ in ‘palaces’) cannot speak for those who are destitute. Clearly, in formulating their attacks on one another, both Blades and Maduro drew on the widespread conviction that salsa represents the voice of the poor.

Conclusion

La Hora presents a compelling example of how a politically left-leaning strongman president used salsa to reinforce his grip on power. In the face of a politically empowered opposition that controlled the legislature and a politically mobilised citizenry in the streets, Maduro sought to solidify his political position by drawing

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*

on notions about salsa widely shared by Venezuelans as well as salsa musicians, aficionados and scholars around the world. These notions include the idea that salsa (i) is the music of poor and working-class Latin Americans, (ii) has a special connection to Venezuela and (iii) is capable of offering people a form of escape from the rigours and hardships of their everyday life. As demonstrated by Maduro's forceful, at times vicious, exchange with one of salsa's foremost exponents, Rubén Blades, the discourse and symbolic value of salsa provides a clear example of the way that music can become politically charged and deployed as a weapon to attack political opponents and shore up one's own political support.

And so, while Maduro may be many things, he was certainly nobody's fool when it came to seizing on salsa and using it to serve his political ends. Under the circumstances, the possessive claims that Maduro made with respect to salsa could be seen as a stunning act of appropriation of a popular musical genre for personal political gain, specifically to sustain himself in power in the face of discontent with his regime that, in Venezuela, had increasingly come to cross social-class lines. This situation, in turn, offers an example of how popular culture is not simply a by-product of Venezuela's ever-worsening internal conflict, but part of the process that brought it about.⁸²

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X21000237>

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Spanish abstract

En este artículo examino cómo, durante un periodo de malestar social extremo, el presidente venezolano Nicolás Maduro asumió el papel de locutor de salsa en la radio como una muestra de confianza sobre su control del poder político y su solidaridad con los venezolanos comunes. Argumento que este curso de acción casi sin precedentes – y, para muchos, controversial – de un presidente en el poder nos ofrece una oportunidad única para analizar la crisis política venezolana de largo plazo. En particular, subrayo cómo Maduro aprovechó la tradicional asociación de la salsa con los pobres latinoamericanos, su conexión con Venezuela y su carácter placentero para reforzar sus credenciales socialistas, y muestro cómo esta estrategia desencadenó una ola pública de críticas con un salsero legendario, Rubén Blades. Al explorar la forma en la que la música se entrecruza con la política, muestro cómo la cultura popular no es ni auxiliar ni derivativa de los problemas cada vez más profundos del país, sino más bien, los constituye.

Spanish keywords: Nicolás Maduro; salsa; Venezuela; política; música; etnomusicología

⁸²Here and throughout this article I am again indebted to Alejandro Velasco for encouraging me to think of salsa – and popular culture more generally – as more than a response to or expression of Venezuelan politics, but as constitutive to its development.

Portuguese abstract

Neste artigo examino como, durante um período de extrema agitação social, o presidente venezuelano Nicolás Maduro assumiu o papel de DJ de salsa no rádio como uma demonstração de sua confiança em seu domínio do poder político e sua solidariedade para com os venezuelanos comuns. Afirmando que este curso de ação quase sem precedentes – e, para muitos, controverso – por um presidente em exercício nos oferece uma oportunidade incomum de analisar a crise política venezuelana de longo prazo. Destaco, em particular, como Maduro aproveitou a associação tradicional da salsa com as classes populares latino-americanas, sua conexão com a Venezuela e seu caráter agradável para reforçar suas credenciais socialistas, e mostro como essa estratégia desencadeou uma troca pública de críticas com um lendário *salsero* (músico de salsa), Rubén Blades. Ao explorar a forma como a música se cruza com a política, mostro como a cultura popular não é auxiliar nem derivada das lutas cada vez mais profundas do país, mas sim constitutiva delas.

Portuguese keywords: Nicolás Maduro; salsa; Venezuela; política; música; etnomusicologia