

“El Manisero” (“The Peanut Vendor”)--Rita Montaner, vocal with orchestra (1927)

“El Manisero” (“The Peanut Vendor”)--Don Azpiazu and His Havana Casino Orchestra (1930)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Carol Hess (guest post)*



Rita Montaner



Don Azpiazu

It is Saturday, 26 April 1930. Herbert Hoover is President of the United States. Over four million people are out of work and the homeless population rises by the day. Yet despite--or perhaps because of--the ravages of the Great Depression, Americans crave entertainment, perhaps through splashy movie musicals or the moribund genre of vaudeville. But that spring night, something new is afoot. The featured act at the Palace Theater on Broadway is Don Azpiazu's Havana Casino Orchestra. Its black, white, and mixed-race members play trumpets, saxophones, and Afro-Cuban instruments largely unfamiliar to the US public, such as maracas, claves, güiros, bongos, congas, and timbales. To the surprise of many, the lead singer, a Cuban black named Antonio Machín, pushes a peanut cart onstage. Over the course of the opening song, he tosses bags of peanuts to members of the audience, who react with delight.

Why the peanut motif? The song in question was “El manisero” (“The Peanut Vendor”). With its catchy tune, picturesque subject matter, and fascinating percussion, “El manisero” effectively launched the so-called rhumba craze in the United States. A popular 1930s dance loosely based on rhythms from Latin America, the rhumba enjoyed fame both in the ballroom and on the silver screen. In 1941 alone, two movies paid it homage: “Weekend in Havana” (20th Century-Fox), in which Alice Faye and Cesar Romero sing “Romance and Rhumba” and “You’ll Never Get Rich” (Columbia), featuring Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth dancing what one scholar calls “the most

elegant rhumba captured on film.” Clearly the rhumba, along with Latin American music in general, influenced US composers seeking inspiration beyond the European tradition.

Incidentally, an orthographical note is in order: the US music industry blithely--albeit inconsistently--added the “h” to the Spanish term, *rumba*, which originally denoted a music-dance ritual that offered catharsis to enslaved blacks in 19th century Cuba. In other words, it has little to do with the sophisticated nightclubs in which the rhumba was danced in the United States.

In fact, “El manisero” is not a rhumba at all but a *son*, a rural Afro-Cuban genre that dates from the 19th century and was played on African percussion instruments and stringed instruments of European origin. The urban incarnation of the *son*, which involved bongos, maracas, string bass, and trumpets, arose in the 1920s. Typically, the melody of a *son* was lilting and attention-grabbing, a feature that transferred nicely to the commercial rhumba in the United States. Its suave melodies could also be offset by a prominent percussion section, like that in Don Azpiazu’s ensemble. In “El manisero,” the singer traverses a simple yet infectious tune, often in dialogue with the trumpet. Perhaps what most catches our ear in “El manisero” is the street cry, or *pregón*, shouted to attract buyers, here a two-note melodic fragment on the third and fifth notes of the scale (“mi” and “sol”). The *pregón*, gently repeated, beckons anyone on the lookout for a quick snack to “amuse the mouth” (*divertir el pico*). Finally, the peanut vendor announces his exit with the two-note *pregón*: “Me voy . . . me voy . . . me voy” (I’m leaving) as he ambles along at a relaxed tempo to market his tasty product elsewhere.

The composer of “El manisero” was Moisés Simón Rodríguez, a classically trained composer born in Havana when Cuba was still a Spanish colony. Simón (or Simon, as he was known in the United States) is also credited with the lyrics, despite some debate on this point, including the contention of the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz that a real peanut vendor wrote them. Lyrics often helped determine the status of Latin American music in the United States. To be successful, a tune had to have English words, although these sometimes sabotaged the original meaning. For example, the famous tango “Adios Muchachos,” a bleak and fatalistic tale of loss, became the flirtatious “I Get Ideas,” made famous by Louis Armstrong. In the case of “El manisero,” the English lyrics, by L. Wolfe Gilbert and Azpiazu’s sister-in-law Marion Sunshine, hew more closely to the original. The exotic, convivial setting is clear (“In Cuba each merry maid wakes up with this serenade”) as is the sensual pleasure of eating peanuts, which give no one “a tummy ache.” These lyrics appeared in 1931, when E.B. Marks, published the song, now being marketed as a rumba-fox trot. Interested in music of the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world, Marks was also known for piracy: among the victims of the company’s predatory practices was the Spanish classical composer Manuel de Falla, who discovered late in life that Marks had been selling one of his early piano pieces. Simón, on the other hand, was a good businessman and profited handsomely from the more than one million copies of “El manisero” that E.B. Marks sold. Part of Marks’s success with “El Manisero” drew on an idea compelling to the US audience--that Latin American music invariably involves complex rhythms. This is often true. Yet it made little sense to hawk a “simplified version in 4/4 time” of “El Manisero,” given that virtually all Cuban

popular music marketed in the United States was in 4/4 time. Marks also published arrangements of “El manisero” for band and piano.

Nearly 200 recordings of “El manisero” have seen the light. The Cuban singer Rita Montaner made the first, on the Columbia label in the late 1920s. Don Azpiazu (his real name was Justo Ángel Azpiazu), recorded the song for RCA Victor in May 1930 along with Machín, trumpeter Julio Cueva, and composer-saxophonist Mario Bauza. Recordings by bandleader-movie idol Xavier Cugat put a glitzier sheen on the humble peanut vendor and Dámaso Pérez Prado, known as the “Mambo King,” recorded several versions of “El manisero” in the 1940s, showcasing the strident brass characteristic of the genre he did so much to popularize. In 1947, Stan Kenton ventured down this path more boldly, inserting a blazing five-trumpet interlude replete with shrieking dissonances, all foreign to the rumba scene of the 1930s. Likewise, mainstream bandleaders like Lawrence Welk and Guy Lombardo performed “El manisero.”

The song also made it to the movies. In “Cuban Love Song” (1931), Lupe Vélez, playing a peanut vendor, sings it to Lawrence Tibbett, fancifully claiming that it was a “very, very old song.” Groucho and Harpo Marx mangle “El manisero” in various ways in “Duck Soup” (1933), a spoof of government, militarism, and the pretensions of high society. In “Only Angels Have Wings” (1939), a high-spirited Jean Arthur plays it on the piano to attract Cary Grant. The *pregón* even surfaces (in English) in an animated television commercial for Golden Wonder peanuts, advertised as “jungle fresh.”

The trajectory of “El manisero” teaches us much about the Latino presence in the United States today, projected to comprise 29 percent of the total population by 2050. Amid political wrangling over immigration and race, we do well to remember that Azpiazu mixed black and white Cuban musicians in his ensemble at no small risk, consistently ignoring club managers who ordered him and his band to use the service elevator. More recently, the journalist Ray Suarez has argued that “Latino history is our [US] history.” “El manisero,” completely new in 1930 but absorbed over the decades by the music publishing industry, Hollywood, and a wide variety of bandleaders, eloquently makes the same point.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.