

“Rhythm Is Gonna Get You”-- Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine (1987)

Added to the National Registry: 2017

Essay by Ilan Stavans (guest post)*



“Let It Loose” album cover



45rpm single



Enrique Garcia

Gloria Estefan’s “Rhythm Is Gonna Get You,” which represents the apex of Cuban influence on American R&B, also serves as a thermometer for Latino assimilation to the United States, especially in Miami, which was always Estefan’s base. The song came about shortly before her bus accident in 1990, as she was touring, an event that marked her profoundly, physically and creatively. As such, it represents her “early” style and approach, in comparison with a later period in which Estefan would invoke her Cuban roots and upbringing in more concrete fashion.

Along with “Conga,” “Bad Boy,” “Get on Your Feet,” “Party Time,” and about half a dozen more, the song made Estefan internationally known. Performed together with Estefan’s group, Miami Sound Machine, founded by her husband Emilio Estefan, it is part of the immensely successful album “Let It Loose” (1987), which went multi-platinum. The song itself was Top 5 on the US Billboard Top 100. It came to define R&B and become a staple of the post-disco disco era because of its eminently danceable qualities. Indeed, most people associate it with an Americanized version of Latin twirl.

Estefan is originally from Havana (she was born in 1957). She and her family—her father was a motor escort for dictator Fulgencio Batista’s wife—were part of a massive wave of mostly upper- and middle-class Cubans who moved to the United States in the 1960s, absconding Fidel Castro’s Communist regime. They settled in Miami, which soon became a bastion of Cuban resistance against the Havana regime, which was an ally of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

A large number of exiles believed Castro would last only a few years, after which they would go back home. But as years turned into decades, they remained stations in Florida (as well as in other northeast bastions, like New Jersey), splashing their concerns into their host country’s

national canvas. By the 1980s, the Cuban community had utterly redefined what it meant to be an American.

Thoroughly influenced by Cuban music (salsa, son, rhumba, and timba), especially by its Afro-Cuban elements, Estefan, as a young Floridian, openly embraced R&B as her true musical outfit. Early on, she found herself at the crossroads between the music she heard in the Cuban community and the American scene she hoped to be a member of.

This is clear in her first hit single “Conga,” which became the Miami Sound Machine’s signature song. It is a prime example of what ethnographer Fernando Ortiz, author of “Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar” (1940), called “transculturation,” the juxtaposition of cultural elements by a generation eager to connect with its past without sacrificing its place in the future. The lyrics, in English, invite the listener to: “*shake your body baby/Do the conga/I know you can’t control yourself any longer.*”

As the command makes it clear, the Cuban vibe (Conga is a tall, barrel-like drum from Cuba) is so infectious, audiences must surrender to their spell. “Rhythm Is Gonna Get You” uses the same strategy, taking them one step further. Estefan’s signature expression “Oye,” which, depending on the occasion, might be translated as “Hey,” “Listen,” or “Pay attention,” and is typical of Caribbean Spanish, is first associated with it. (She later on turned the expression into a hit of its own in the single “Oye!” from 1998.)

The language is an idiosyncratic version of Cubonics, as the jargon of Cuban Spanglish is known, indulging in contractions, onomatopoeias, and syntactical reconfigurations. (Notice the absence of a definite article at the beginning.) The relatively short lyrics, co-written by Estefan with Enrique “Kiki” García, start in a series of syncopated monosyllables: “*Oh eh oh eh oh eh... Yah ya goh.*” After that, they assertively describe a frantic, haunting rhythm that is impossible to control. The overall message is one of submission:

*At night when you turn off all the lights
There's no place that you can hide
Oh no, the rhythm is gonna get'cha*

*In bed, throw the covers on your head
You pretend like you are dead
But I know it
The rhythm is gonna get'cha*

Interestingly, Estefan’s title is “Rhythm Is Gonna Get You,” not “Get’cha.” This might be seen as a concession away from slang in favor of a more standardized English. The expression isn’t quite Spanglish; it is more like “gotcha,” which “Merriam-Webster” defines as “an unexpected usually disconcerting challenge, revelation, or catch,” as well as “an attempt to embarrass, expose, or disgrace someone (such as a politician) with a ‘gotcha.’”

“Rhythm” was Estefan’s fourth Top Ten on the US Billboard Hot 100. Rereleased in 1988 and remixed a year later, the original version was selected for preservation in the National Recording Registry by the Library of Congress in 2017. Aside from its ubiquity in concerts, on radio, and in music halls, it has been used in a number of pop-culture outlets, from ads for the TV game show “Wheel of Fortune” (1975-) to the movie “Stakeout” (1987), with Richard Dreyfus and Emilio Estevez, to the Bollywood movie “Tridev” (1989).

Like other famous singles from Estefan’s albums, “Rhythm Is Gonna Get You” might be read as a metaphor. The force portrayed is the emergent Latino community--of which Cubans are of course part--that in the 1980s were, while perceived as a threat by some, the vast majority already recognized as a major force in American culture. The tension between acceptance and rejection is emblematic. There is an ominous sense in the lyrics that a new tempo is magically being imbued into the nation’s mainstream, with the capacity to overtake its audience no matter how much it resists to it. As such, it erases ethnic differences.

In that sense, Estefan is an invaluable path-finder.

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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.