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Renato Sets It Straight: An Interview on the Diffuse Roots of Reggaeton

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Introduction

An intense debate has arisen over the last decade regarding the origins and the development of reggaeton. As Wayne Marshall notes in a recent publication, the discussion has often taken on a heated and "linear" quality, with participants linking the genre's spectacular emergence to pre-existing, nationalist narratives, while ignoring its global and fluid character, the "migration" of its artists, and the "reach of the media" which impacts its subjects simultaneously in various regions (Marshall 22). Puerto Ricans have most successfully produced this dance music which draws heavily on aspects of commercialized African diasporic culture and which is now heard and performed across Latin America, the United States, Europe, and many other parts of the world. As a result, they and others tend to present the rhythm as having come "straight outta Puerto Rico," as implied in a 2008 documentary which ties reggaeton's rise to the island's youth and popular culture (Savidge and Chankin). However, Panamanian musicians are equally adamant that the musical form is essentially their creation and that its roots lie firmly in the traditions of the isthmus' Afro-Antillean population. "We invented it in Panama," insisted *salsero* Rubén Blades, during a press conference in Puerto Rico, while serving as his country's Minister of Tourism. Speaking in what might be regarded as enemy territory, Blades identified reggaeton as

part of his republic's patrimony, and he called on Panamanians to abandon any prejudices and to recognize its importance in their society ("Rubén Blades" s.p.).

In a 2008 interview in Panama City, *reggaesero* Renato (Leonardo Renato Aulder) did not dispute Blades' interpretation. As a "founding father" of the *reggae en español* movement, he explained his contributions to its evolution, while insisting that the Puerto Ricans had appropriated what was basically a Panamanian innovation.[1] Nevertheless, his story, his appearance, and even his accent reveal a much more intricate trajectory for reggaeton's explosion onto the entertainment scene. Dressed in the attire of an African-American hip-hop artist and speaking with intonations of distant Brooklyn, where many of his relatives and acquaintances have reestablished themselves, Renato described his comfortable "American childhood," growing up in the U.S. Canal Zone[2] (Aulder 91).[3] He noted his family's affection for soul and R&B singers and his early participation in a rock 'n' roll band which performed in youth centers in the North American colony.[4] If Renato's life is a reflection of reggaeton's formation, it would seem that the music has some connections to Barry White, the Jackson 5, and even the Steve Miller Band, as well as to Bob Marley, Gregory Isaacs, and Yellow Man (for references to some of these musicians, see interview below and Aulder 91-92). Through his teen years, Renato thought of himself as a typical American. He played football and baseball and only spoke English; however, he did not have U.S. citizenship, and his life was firmly hitched to both Panama and the Caribbean.

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[1] Panamanians prefer to use the term "reggae in Spanish" to distinguish their music from reggaeton and to highlight its traditional tendency to rely more faithfully on dancehall and reggae rhythms. Renato and many others insist, however, that the two genres belong to the same general family. For a good discussion of these complexities, see Marshall 29-34; Aulder 89.

[2] The U.S. Canal Zone was established in 1903 and extended along both sides of the waterway. It encompassed some 550 square miles and numerous towns and military installations.

[3] Brooklyn is a traditional colony for Afro-Panamanians of West Indian descent. They began emigrating there in the 1950s. The community grew significantly following the Torrijos-Carter Treaties (1977), which ceded the Canal Zone to Panamanian control and which encouraged many Afro-Antilleans to leave the country (Conniff 37, 153).

[4] As in many parts of Latin America, with large diasporic populations, soul music and other aspects of African-American commercial culture were very popular on the isthmus and came to be associated with the country's black civic organizations. Interestingly, Panama's first black beauty pageant , organized in the early 1970s, was initially called the "Miss Soul" competition (Priestley 61; Andrews 171-190; Conniff 165-168).

Renato's grandparents had come from Barbados and Jamaica at the beginning of the twentieth century, as part of an enormous influx from the West Indies, encouraged by the U.S. demand for inexpensive labor. As many as 200,000 people traveled from both the French and English Caribbean to work on construction of the Panama Canal and to pursue a myriad of other economic opportunities. Over 50,000 of them remained after the waterway's completion, most of whom took up residence in the republic, with a small minority remaining in the U.S colony. The West Indians and their descendents became a critical part of the Canal Zone's long-term work force; however, they faced unequal pay scales and systematic segregation well into the 1970s. Even if born and raised in the Zone, they were not entitled to U.S. citizenship, and they suffered similar discriminatory practices and hostility within Panama (Conniff 29, 66, 151-162).[5] The young Renato became most aware of these difficulties, upon the ratification of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, the dissolution of the Canal Zone and his family's resettlement in Río Abajo, one of Panama City's traditional West Indian neighborhoods.[6] The process, which he describes as extraordinarily difficult, effectively converted him into a Panamanian, but it also tied him more closely to his Caribbean heritage to which he increasingly turned to produce his music.

The late George Priestley (1940-2009), a prominent Afro-Antillean academic and persuasive defender of Panama's black population, used the term "transnational" to help describe his community, with its long-standing connections to the Caribbean, to the isthmus, and to New York and other North American cities.[7] Renato might be described as a prime example. He has drawn easily on all these places to help fashion his identity and to contribute to a musical genre which is supremely hybrid in its nature. In a separate interview with Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo, he

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[5] Renato attests that he was born in Panama's Santo Tomás Hospital and later transferred to a facility in the Canal Zone (see Aulder 91).

[6] Panamanian voters ratified the treaties in 1977. The U.S. Senate followed in 1978. The Canal Zone was eliminated in 1979; however, U.S. troops remained in Panama until the end of the century.

[7] Priestley was raised in Marañón, a working-class neighborhood in Panama City, and was a long-time resident of New York and a political science professor at Queens College. Despite his time in the United States, he remained deeply involved in the isthmus' public life and played an especially active role in the Canal Treaty debates and in discussions surrounding ethnicity in Panama. Before his death, he was working on a project on the transnational identities of Panama's Afro-Antillean population. Priestley had presented this topic at numerous conferences (see Herrera Barsallo).

even acknowledged the productive interactions between the Puerto Ricans and Panamanians in helping to secure reggaeton's advance (see Aulder 95-97). Renato began to record songs in the late 1970s, with a tendency to focus on romantic and erotic themes. His international hits include "La Chica de los Ojos Café," which has been covered by other prominent musicians.[8] In 1985, he produced "El D.E.N.I.," which was considered to be an important expression of dissent against Panama's then military government.[9] Renato, who also works as a DJ, is now collaborating on a new album and planning concert appearances in North America.

Interview

Peter Szok: Renato, to begin, why don't you tell us a bit about your background. Where were you born and raised?

Leonardo Renato Aulder: All right, I was born in 1961 and raised in the Canal Zone, in Pedro Miguel. That's a town on the Pacific side after Clayton. I grew up with my mom and dad there. My mother used to work in army restaurants. My dad worked in the Canal Company's Dredging Division. My granddad was a guard in the Gamboa Penitentiary.[10]

PS: Interesting. Many folks who worked and lived in the Canal Zone came from families which had migrated from the Caribbean. Was this the case with your family?

LRA: Yeah, my father's side is from Barbados, but my mother's family is different. Their background was from Jamaica and England. They were a sort of mixture.

PS: How was your childhood? Where did you study?

LRA: Basically I grew up like an American kid. I watched NFL football and became a Yankees' fan. I attended St. Mary's Catholic School in the Canal Zone.

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[8] Covers include versions by the Argentine ska-rock band Los Fabulosos Cadillacs and Dominican merengue star Wilfrido Vargas ("Fabulosos Cadillacs"; Vargas).

[9] The title refers to the *Departamento Nacional de Investigaciones* which operated as a domestic security agency during this period.

[10] Fort Clayton was an important U.S. Army base in the Canal Zone and, for many years, the headquarters of the Southern Command. Gamboa is located roughly in the center of the isthmus, along the banks of the Chagres River. Today, the penitentiary serves as Panama's *Renacer* or "Rebirth" Prison.

PS: What was Pedro Miguel like at that time? Was it still a segregated community?[11]

LRA: No, not really. Pedro Miguel had both whites and blacks. It was mostly blacks, but there were a lot of white people too. St. Mary's also had black kids. In Pedro Miguel, I don't think that discrimination hit us in a big way. At least, I didn't think that "ah, these are white kids, and they're different." It could be that they saw me as a black guy, but I didn't have time to think about that. What was happening in the States wasn't happening to me. I didn't have problems with the cops and the beatings.

Leonardo Renato Aulder

[11] The United States segregated Canal Zone housing, education, and other facilities through most of the twentieth century. Initially, this was done through the creation of two pay scales. The majority of the "gold roll" workers were white North Americans, while those on the "silver roll" were largely Afro-Antilleans. While the gold and silver terms were dropped in the late 1940s, many institutions of racial segregation remained in place through the mid-1970s, including housing and public schools where the majority of Afro-Antillean children studied (see Conniff 156-162).

PS: What about music? Did you start your music at this time?

LRA: Yeah, I was a DJ and band member when I was a teenager. We used to sing in youth centers in Clayton and in other parts of the Canal Zone.

PS: What kind of music?

LRA: Rock 'n' roll. I used to like rock 'n' roll, and I used to like R&B soul. But it was easier to sing rock 'n' roll than R&B. And the group that I was with … Well, we were five people. There were four white guys, and I was the singer, the black guy. So they liked rock 'n' roll, so what am I going to sing? You know like Lenny, Lenny Kravitz. You know that he sings rock 'n' roll. So we used to have these shows, and the kids would be like, "Damn why's this black guy singing rock and roll?"

PS: What kind of music did your family play? What did you listen to at home?

LRA: Barry White. My grandmother loved Barry White. My father was a soul fan. He used to like *The Manhattans*. My mother, *Earth, Wind, & Fire*.

PS: What about calypso or the *combos nacionales*?[12]

LRA: Yes, yes but not so much. They got into that later on. When I grew up in the Zone, I didn't know about the *combos nacionales*. I heard about that when I came to Panama.

PS: So how did you become integrated into Panama? When did you first become familiar with the republic?

LRA: In 1978, I was sent to Panama to learn Spanish. After the Canal Treaty, all the Panamanians who were residents in the Canal Zone, started to look for housing out of the Canal Zone, because we didn't know what was going to happen. At this point, I was living with my grandmother, and after we moved to Panama, they took me to a school called the *Escuela Venezuela*. But when I came to the school, I didn't know Spanish.

PS: But weren't they teaching Spanish in the Canal Zone?

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[12] Calypso was widely popular among Panamanians, with the Afro-Antillean community producing many local stars. The *combos nacionales* were small bands which combined elements of funk, soul, jazz, and Afro-Cuban rhythms and which dominated Panamanian dance halls through much of the 1960s and 70s (see Buckley "Bush" 33-35, 63-65).

LRA: Yeah, but not very much and not very well. What I knew was "Buenos días," "Hola," and "¿Cómo estás?" So I had a lot of problems. Since I came from the Canal Zone, the kids jumped on me and called me the *americano*. Once I took an apple to the teacher. That was something they taught us in the Zone, and they went after me for being a brown-nose. So you know, from those experiences, I had a lot of fights. They didn't like me, because I came from the Canal Zone. The whole experience was a bit confusing. When we moved to Panama, my grandmother told me, "Son, I have to tell you something important. You're Panamanian. We never told you before, because we thought that you knew." I initially had a hard time believing. But she explained that we were Panamanians, but grew up American-style, because we lived in the Canal Zone. That's why we knew the National Anthem of the United States and not the Panamanian song. And that was another problem. When I was at school, I had to sing the Panamanian anthem, and I didn't know it. This also created a lot of problems. Because you're Panamanian, and people think that you don't love your country. But it's not that. I grew up in a country that was in another country.

PS: Were there a lot of young people in this situation?

LRA: There were a lot of young guys, a lot of young guys who had that problem any time we came to Panama. We had a lot of problems, a lot of problems, because we were raised in one form, and then it changed dramatically. It's like I never saw a criminal act, and when I came to Panama, I saw a guy rob a lady. It was a shock to me. I saw another guy stab a man. You know, it's not the same. You grow up in a peaceful place. You play football. Tomorrow you play baseball. The day after, you play basketball. It was a nice environment, and then you go into a hostile environment. We moved to 13th Street Río Abajo. 13th Street was a ghetto. So we came from this nice place to a ghetto. So it was difficult, and I tried to blend in.

PS: How did you try to blend in?

LRA: The people thought that I was nice, because I used to dance and was a singer. And we made this group. We used to do some songs on tape. Like any other singer, we'd do demos and stuff. But it was in English, English stuff.

PS: What style of music were you doing at that point?

LRA: R&B, *KC & the Sunshine Band*, stuff like that. Then after, we started getting these versions from Jamaica, these songs from Jamaica.[13] But the records came with an instrumental part on it. So we started singing on top of it. Most people didn't understand me, just like the records from Bob Marley and Yellowman and stuff. So I decided with this guy called Wassanga to do something about it. Wassanga was showing me how to use the mike and talk to the people. He showed me how to tell them to lift up their hands and move their bodies. Meanwhile, I'd come to the bars at 3 am and finish his jobs. You know, he was the top DJ. I was like his left hand, not a right. When he'd go mix with the girls, I used to put on the music.

PS: What was Wassanga's background?

LRA: He lived in Río Abajo. I think he was from the Canal Zone too. But he was the top notch DJ and died in 2002. So, after that we started making tapes. I'm learning now how to speak in Spanish and sing in Spanish, and so we start doing tapes with the reggae instrumental versions. The guys from the *diablos rojos* were a big deal for us.[14] The bus drivers would tell us, "Hey I want you to do a song, saying that I'm the number one driver in this sector. I'm the best conductor. I've got the girls." So I'd do something like, "Yeah, this is the number one conductor. Yeah, he's got the number one structure. Girls like him, so get on the bus." And we would do it in Spanish and put it on a tape, and he would play it on his bus. Remember that Panamanians had music on their buses. Panamanian buses were like radio stations. What you heard on the buses, was what was hitting. So after we started getting this popularity in Spanish, we began to write our own songs.[15]

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[13] Professor Gerardo Maloney, a sociologist at the Universidad de Panamá and leader in the Afro-Panamanian community, seems to have played a key role in the diffusion of Jamaican music. Edgardo Franco (El General), another important reggae artist, recalls going to Maloney's house to "get records" ("Muévelo" 99, 107).

[14] The *diablos rojos* (red devils) are Panama City's famous painted buses. The buses provide public transportation in the capital and are owned by dozens of small businessmen. Traditionally, they have used music and extravagant decorations to compete against one another for their customers. Authorities prohibited the music in the early 1990s, although many drivers continue to play their stereos when they are outside the earshot of the traffic police (see Szok 148-178).

[15] Renato's explanation of the rise of *reggae en español* is confirmed by Edgardo Franco's description of these same years. Like Renato, Franco underlines the versioning of Jamaican dancehall, Wassanga's role, and the function of the buses as one of reggae's first important markets. Franco also emphasizes the significance of "mobile discotheques"

PS: It seems as though reggae and dancehall were a big influence on you, but what about rap? Was rap a big deal in Panama, as you were getting started?

LRA: Oh yea, sure. Rap started in Panama with "Rapper's Delight." It was a big hit, *The Sugar Hill Gang* was really popular. Then came *Run-DMC*. They brought in the breakdancing. I used to breakdance. Remember that I came from the Canal Zone, and so everything from the United States was my style. And so while I was in Panama and trying to do Panamanian stuff, it was still my style. I used to try to go every day to Balboa, because I was so accustomed to my style of living that I couldn't stand being here in Panama.[16] I used to go every day and spend all my money on bus fairs and taxis, just to be in Balboa, just to be in Pedro Miguel with my people, my friends. You know it was hard for me to leave my friends and to live in a place where I didn't know anyone. Then everyone started to leave for New York. Almost everyone who grew up with me now lives in the States. But when they were giving everyone who used to live in the Canal Zone a chance to go to the United States, we never took it.[17] One of the motives was that my grandmother, who was raising us, was alone. That was a big one. You know … if I leave, who is going to help my grandma?

PS: How many other reggae artists in Panama have similar background?

LRA: From the Canal Zone, not many. I might say one or two, but a lot more have West Indian connections, because their grandma was Jamaican or their grandpa was Jamaican.

PS: Panamanians describe what you sing as "reggae in Spanish." How is reggae in Spanish different from reggaeton? What is the basic difference?

LRA: I think that it's the way we sing it. It's not the music. The music is almost the same. Look, you hear Panamanian reggae, and you say that it seems like the same thing. You got some

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and how they popularized the music at a variety of events, ranging from weddings, *quinceañeras*, and tame school dances to Río Abajo's more edgy parties ("Interview"; "Muévelo").

[16] Located at the Pacific end of the waterway, Balboa was a Canal Zone town close to Panama City and served as the administrative center of the Panama Canal Company. Today, it remains the seat of the Panama Canal Authority, the organization which replaced the U.S. entity.

[17] The Panama Canal Act of 1979 offered many Afro-Antillean employees the option of early retirement from positions in the Canal Zone, as well as the right to residence in the United States (Conniff 153).

artists that sound the same. But if you hear the music and the way we sing, then you'll understand that it's different from the Puerto Ricans. It's a little more *suave*, and you can understand the Spanish more. Puerto Ricans like to invent a lot of words that most people don't understand. In Panama, we have a different type of reggae. We have the most romantic reggae, because we are a romantic country. We don't have so much gangster music. I can tell you how many gangster rappers we have. It's like six or seven. But we have so many romantic singers, almost six or seven hundred singers who don't sing about gangster stuff. Because we are not a violent country.

PS: Do you think of reggae as a marker of black identity in Panama?

LRA: Yes, because we took it from Jamaica, and it has a black culture. And remember something. The majority of Panamanian reggae singers are black. In Puerto Rico, they're white. The Puerto Rican reggae singers are white. Over here, they're black. Why? To them, it was like

something new, these new moves that they wanted to do. But for us, it was something from our families, something we loved.[18]

PS: Renato, thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

LRA: No problem, no problem. Take care Peter.

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[18] Franco's reflections on this topic are also insightful. According to him, early *reggaeseros* often wore dreadlocks as a means to assert their identity in a society hostile to the conception of blackness. Traditionally, Panamanian leaders hid their country's considerable African heritage and associated national identity with the conception of *mestizaje*, even while appropriating and lightening elements of Afro-Panamanian culture. In Panama and elsewhere in Latin America, black activists have responded to the situation by selectively using foreign black elements to forge their ethnicity. Franco notes that the young reggae performers faced hostility from the police who occasionally detained them and forcibly cut their hair ("Muévelo" 102-103; Andrews 171-190).

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