

NONSTOP METROPOLIS:

A NEW YORK CITY ATLAS

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the generous contribution to this book provided by Furthermore: a program of the J. M. Kaplan Fund.

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Oakland, California

Illustrations on half title and title page by Alison Pebworth

© 2016 by Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-0-520-28594-1

Designer and compositor: Lia Tjandra
Cartographer: Molly Roy
Text: Garamond Premier Pro
Display: Garamond Premier Pro, Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk
Printer and binder: QuaLibre

Manufactured in China
2524 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



14 OUR LATIN THING

New York is the great Latin American city. From El Berrrio to Loisaida, Corona to Castle Hill, Los Sures to Sunset Park, Jackson Heights to Washington Heights—nowhere in the Americas, not in Mexico City or Caracas or even in Los Angeles, do so many people from all the regions of Latin America—from the Caribbean to Central and South America—come together to interact and live with such variety and force. Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, Colombians and Ecuadorans and Argentines, Salvadorans and Hondurans and Mexicans—nearly one in four New Yorkers call Spanish their first language. And perhaps nowhere else do these people *together* exert such an outsize cultural influence on the rest of the world. This Latin-tinged influence isn't new for a city whose first permanent resident was a “mulatto trader” from Hispaniola named Rodrigues (he began peddling his wares by the Battery in 1614). In the late 1800s José Martí, the great Cuban writer and patriot, spent years here organizing and funding his nation's liberation—hardly the first or last Latin American revolutionary to do so. In 1917 the passage of the Jones Act allowed Puerto Ricans to come here without either a passport or a visa. This established “Nuyoricans” as a prominent part of New York's ethnic mix—and turned them into central players in the birth of what remains New York's most famed contribution to “Latin music” worldwide: salsa. In 1972 the owners and musicians of Fania Records, borrowing from old Cuban rhythms but giving them a whole new feel, invented this new genre of music and, in a classic concert film, dubbed it “Our Latin Thing.” But salsa is hardly the limit of Latino New Yorkers' influence on modern music—they've been central to the evolution of everything from mambo to jazz to hip-hop to reggaeton to rock 'n' roll to bachata (arguably, the most listened-to music in the city today—and, no, not only by Dominicans). Many gringo New Yorkers may be unaware of these stories and sounds—or think they are. But the airwaves don't lie. By far the most listened-to radio stations in the city today broadcast in Spanish. A crucial aspect of this city's public sphere, whether you know it or not, unfolds *en español*. CARTOGRAPHY: MOLLY ROY  MAP APPEARS ON PAGES 112–113.

THE MEGA MEZCLAPOLIS BY ALEXANDRA T. VAZQUEZ

The Bogotá-born, New York–raised and –based DJ Alex Sensation is one of the city's great infrastructural planners. From Monday to Friday between 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., the city moves to his mega mezclas, or mega mixes (or even better, mega mixxxxxes), which thunderbolt out from 97.9 FM's transmitter at the top of the Empire State Building. The mezcla involves a layering of songs, a mixing together that does not demand unity but an



Radio Corporation of America (RCA) building at the 1939–40 world's fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens. Courtesy New York Public Library.

assembly that feels new. Sensation puts together sounds from across genres into a singular horizon and makes much of the intervals that connect them. These intervals are lush gathering spots for the party-life traditions necessary when making New York home. Listening to and becoming part of these radio waves swerves us away from the Landmarks of Hispanic History and toward a more permeating sense of what the village elders and their inter-American progeny have made possible for the New York commons. Alex Sensation is a reviving conduit for all this activity that has molded the city over the centuries. Buoyed by the signature backbeat he plays behind his banter with on-air callers, we hear accents that signal a dizzying range of Spanish-speaking locations in the Americas alongside the resolute imprint of Nuyorican and Dominicanish. DJ Sensation makes music of and with them. And though some might not tune in to his show, all are implicated.

His workaday set will pipe out from a half-open door of a delivery truck, from behind-the-counter speakers at the corner deli, from a tollbooth operator's choked-up radio. In the space of any mega mezcla, Sensation reminds the city of how it functions. He also gives its workers a place to keep functioning. He will tenderly and exuberantly shout out carpenters and bodegueros, day care workers, housekeepers, home health aides, sec-

retaries and bakery employees, body shop garages and car washes; it is a daily education in the various Latino/a populations that make New York possible. He insists upon their various cumbias, multiple independence days, just-yesterday migrations, and the chords they strike, as the city. The mega mezcla testifies to the ordinary and dramatic and forced and chosen ways by which many have come to New York to make it swing. That New York is now Puebla North and that bachata has taken gentle hold of just about everything are not anomalies that can be isolated from the collective grid. They are joyful and difficult materials that mess with anyone who tries hard to lament the city's long-gone unassimilatable energies. This radio show signals New York's real bohemia.

DJ Sensation shapes the week so that we may survive it, while so much of living in the city depends upon the real possibility that we won't. Mondays are a space for "recuperación total," total recuperation from what just went down. Fridays are Viernes Social, social Fridays, a kind of practice cotillion for the weekend, where you can and will encounter him, in a mischievous mood, on Saturday night from 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. In the midst of all this—the baroque impossibility of *all this*—Sensation will take phone requests for free concert tickets and give married mothers erotic attention. His curiosity about her ("¿qué tú haces, mami?"), his concern for where she is ("¿de dónde me estás llamando, amor?"), the sustained attention he implies by slow-rolling her consonants ("¡Yollllannnda!"), and his insta-diminutive ("mi Yolita"), all give her a place in and on everyone's time. These consensual flirtations are at once charged and safe, and suggest that feeling of dancing with someone who asked your partner's permission before holding you tight on the dance floor. He takes you through bad-weather days, urges you to be careful, be warm, take an umbrella. Through his capacious and round-edged Spanish, Sensation affirms that someone out there cares about how you will get from point A to point B. Sensation inscribes

on the radio waves the places of dreamers, the undocumented, and the party supply stores that will be open to them or opened by them on Sunday. He honors all the years you've been alive by making available a birthday mix downloadable direct from his website and depositable straight into your party. His plans reveal a visionary platform that prioritizes Latina health above everything else. This swinging platform untethers health from uplift. It embraces the bad diagnosis and finds in immigrant brokenness, in this music, the beauty of rebellions from several antiquities and continents against undifferentiated masters. DJ Sensation makes a dance floor of their graves.

The mega mezcla is in the bones of New York radio. All of it. Even in its most blatantly infrastructural bones, if we recall that Diego Rivera's 1934 mural *Man at the Crossroads* once stuck hard to the lobby of the Radio Corporation of America building in New York's Rockefeller Center. The mural featured a swirl of bodies operating machines next to a portrait of Vladimir Lenin, a figure snuck into the scene only after Rivera's initial sketches were approved. Because of this—because of the piece's proposal of the brown proletariat and their aesthetics as infrastructural—Rivera's patrons deemed it unfit for this threshold of sonic capital. And so his mural was first draped over, then painted over, and as part of its guaranteed removal, Rivera and all that he brought with him were barred from the site. That work's hidden presence, then as now, models how the radio waves emitting from above carry unruly signals. It suggests how the stations' own pasts are like in-air versions of those creeks that lie buried beneath the city but bubble up now and again to remind us of the dynamic before.

DJ Sensation's show rides the same airwaves that once channeled WEVD-FM, which began its life as the socialist radio station WEVD-AM in 1927. Its call letters were meant to honor the memory of Eugene Victor Debs, and its first studios were built in a space donated by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The station was a place for broadcasting New York's immigrant blues by featuring news and performances from the recently arrived, whether in Yiddish, Italian, or Japanese. Billed as "the station that speaks your language," its move to the FM dial found WEVD featuring the revelatory shows of two of Latin music's non-Latin DJs, "Symphony Sid" Torin and Dick "Ricardo" Sugar.¹ Later, after being sold again, its waves were used to broadcast Christian meditations and then sports news. In 1989 the frequency was occupied by the Spanish Broadcasting System (SBS) and given the new name WSKQ-FM La Mega 94.9. That its current owner Raúl Alarcón comes from a family prominent in Cuban radio before the revolution of 1959 signals not merely a change in ownership, but the assumption of another island's broadcast history. Despite being created to make market sense, La Mega never conducts itself as "Spanish language radio" among the English-dominant airwaves. It does not ask permission. Because of the radio modulations it rides with—and all the immigrant blues it inherits—it loudly pronounces its fact of brownness ad infinitum: La Mega Se Pega. La Mega Sticks to You.

The study of radio history can offer another kind of training in how to listen closer to music and to the city. Even a rudimentary tracing of moves in occupation of a station's frequencies expands influence to the unexpected. Such training makes banal fact, and not anomaly, of such collaborations as the one between the Trio Los Panchos and Eydie Gorme in the 1960s. Radio study also helps us to find yet another way, in our interactions with music, of taking in the old and the new at once. It encourages the acceptance of and a reckoning with impossible-to-track audiences and blasts open any demographic sense-making of the city. As one detail in radio's repertoire, the mega mezcla's method of delivery for sounding out Latina/o living and loving in New York far predates Alex Sensation. It has its own well-established history on the radio, including the half century of pioneering work by the

Ponceño DJ Polito Vega that began early on WEVD-AM, and all those greatest hits he worked so hard to make a case for. Those hits, which are stopgaps for a lava flow of non-hit wonders, signaled the many entrances into and exits out of the city, and the fresh sounds that New York's migrants have always made up, and made beautiful, while there.

Hear the wonder of one of those hits made between Mongo Santamaría and La Lupe, one of Cuba's great musical collectives, on their version of Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" recorded for Battle Records and released in 1963. Learn from what they did to the jazz of that moment by reminding us, in that Cuban way of not asking first, that you could dance to it too. It is a hit that retained La Lupe's laugh from the track's outset—a laugh that betrays something that might or might not be funny—and positions her musicianship and her Santiago de Cuba in New York's recorded history. The Queen of Latin Soul continues to have a place in and on everyone's time. The song is often recalled as the record with which Santamaría firmly wedged the tumbadora (the Cuban conga drum) into the top of the American pop charts. But by taking into account the New York airwaves, actual and ephemeral, we can go back, even further, to hear where and how the tumbadora appears—and how so much depended on women musicians as its conduit.

Hear Olga Guillot's work with Machito on José Antonio Mendez's classic "La Gloria Eres Tú," recorded from the Nola Penthouse Studios on 57th Street in 1947. The lineup was a fantasyland of mid-century New York sound artists, including Mario Bauzá on trumpet, Fred Skerritt on clarinet, José "Pin" Madera on sax, and the pianist René Hernández. Tucked inside of this piece is the tumbadora played by Chano Pozo. The recording marks some of his earliest musical establishments in the New York scene, just before his famed encounter with Dizzy Gillespie. The cues call us even further back to how the tumbadora takes shape in the earliest New York recordings by the "first lady of Cuban song," María Teresa Vera. Vera's first imprints on the city were made while performing at the Apollo Theater in 1918, which eventually led to recording contracts with Victor and Columbia. Her troubadouring tested and anticipated New York's capacity for the folk singers packing guitars who would arrive on the scene roughly five decades later. Although Vera's work is described as *trova* in form, the tumbadoras were deep in her musical substance, including the way she sang into those early raspy microphones and the stories she brought inside of them. Hear her sing Ignacio Piñero's anticolonial "Los Cantares de Abacúa," which she recorded for the Columbia label in 1923.

The suggestiveness of hearing the tumbadoras tucked into the New York airwaves does more to quantify how instruments or populations formally register for the U.S. scene. It enables us to tune in across the eras, to get a sense of what's inside the music people bring with them, and to imagine how it emanates out in immeasurable ways. These greatest hits—and all that is at play inside of them—are laboratories that laid the groundwork for DJ Sensation's show. Listening to them helps us to imagine that the mega *mezcla* has as much to do with a technical dexterity with mixing as it has to do with a willingness to "go there."

. . .

It was just after 2:00 p.m. and in the front seat of a livery cab, Angel García couldn't find the words to describe the collective draw to Sensation's show. "No se, he just . . ." García scrambled with the words and the way until he took his hands off the wheel and used them to create a pulsating oval. He made a gesture of a gathering together with ample room to breathe. Taking its cue from the mega *mezcla*, García's gesture does much to intervene in the ways that the city's "Latin Thing" was concretized into a market category in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The story of "salsa," as commonly told, makes a static origin of the Fania Records label founded in 1964 by the Dominican flautist and bandleader Johnny Pacheco and the Italian American Jerry Masucci. Most studies of contemporary Latino/a



Richard Renaldi, 2:16

music in the city look to Fania to shorthand a dynamic repertoire of musical play into a singular sieve through which all must pass. Perhaps with reason: the label produced and distributed some of New York's most legible hit makers, from Willie Colón to Héctor Lavoe to Celia Cruz. Among the consequences of Fania's success was the actual and discursive blockade of Cuban musicians and their historical networks of production and distribution in the city. Another was (and, given the ample re-releases of the Fania catalog, is) the stamping over of the label's human precedents that helped make but were denied entry in Fania's success—especially the many women musicians made superfluous to the only one it let take the stage. Even if that only one was the almighty Celia Cruz, she deserves to be heard as part of a more resonant cohort.

But the thing about the mega *mezcla*, as many of its involved already know, is that it has a way of subverting narrow tales of genres—of creating the new sounds it needs for itself and for us. The trajectory of the mega *mezcla* may be impossible to comprehend; it includes not only the mixing of different recorded objects but all those musicians, those proto-DJs over the centuries, who have made musical spaces that admit all that's not fit to print. Because of this, it has long been useful to making new idioms like house music. Emerging from disco worlds that encouraged connectivity between *all* of the city's parts, the house style gave New York a home for other ways of moving. If disco needed to give people some time—via those long intros and outros—to get on and off the dance floor, house music determined to grow in the soil of those intervals. House had and has a way of spanning the capitals. Its geography takes in Barranquilla and all the Santiagos, San Juan and Quito, Caracas and Havana, and also Detroit, Chicago, Miami, and L.A. You will hear these places in the house sounds often played under and alongside merengue, reggaeton, and salsa on DJ Sensation's show. And you will hear how one of house's greatest hits, beloved to Sensation, comprises a verdant offshoot from one of Fania's wonderfully flawed representatives, Héctor Lavoe. Not the papi-fied version given to us by Marc Anthony, but the beautiful gnarled-up nerd version of Lavoe, the voice, our voice, who we once saw in high-waisted red pants jump into the Kinshasa crowd singing "Mi Gente." He comes to us through Lavoe's nephew, Little

Louie Vega. Vega, the great feminist, music producer, and early house music practitioner, created a new home for his uncle and for a larger return of Fania's repressed.

Vega's work is not the legacy of "salsa" as Fania tried to define it; it instead makes expansive what influenced and was influenced by it. Vega's music takes in all the neighbors and neighboring sounds that have long given mega *mezclas* vitalizing materials. It is a musical ethos that gives primary space to women's voices and not in the ornamental, tacked-on mode pervading dance music's production protocols. House (especially after Vega) gave us a place to dance, in the bountiful returns of women's full registers, to the airwaves, to records, and to summer block parties infringing on the end time stated on their permits. All this was made especially concrete in 1994, when, under the name "River Ocean," Louie Vega released the exuberant classic "Love and Happiness (Yemaya y Ochun)," co-written with and featuring the heart-expanding vocal by Nuyorico's own La India, aka "Princess of Salsa."

In the "12-inch club mix" version of the song (how many different options of a singular thing house gives us!), the track begins with a jungle-sound sample that once set the mood for Héctor Lavoe and Willie Colón's 1972 hit "Aguanile." You're prepared to move to them as you've been taught to do, but they recede into the triangle thump of house's beat. Out burrows La India's vocal, carrying an oxygenated confidence that refuses the elders' symptoms. Through India's invocations, Yemaya, the mother of the seas, and Ochun, the young orisha of love, gave clubs in New York and across the world new structures of pleasure and pain in the immediate aftermath of the first devastating losses of the AIDS epidemic. Too many of our uncles were taken from us that way, even Lavoe himself, even as he was known as "El Todopoderoso." Later in the track, La India sings a circular sampling of Al Green's anthem that gives this song's love and happiness to those that were left behind. When played on DJ Sensation's show, we are given yet another occasion to let our Latin souls dance with our beloved dead.

. . .

What the call to map the mega *mezcla* prompts is an exercise thriving in abstraction, a resisting of the singular story. A chart not of the Latina/o, New York, or music, but a sensing out of a collaborative sense of safety and trust and love at their intersection that refuses to stay put. The mega *mezcla* accompanies us on that daily part of city life—the commute—reminding us of how the human and the humane can be accessed in the Latina/o metropolis. Commuters—those who refuse to work and live in the same place, even if they must—need to keep work and life separate, even if they can't. And that impossible separation offers a space for fantasy and for play—for listening to DJ Sensation's show and to the material histories of Latin music and all it involves in New York. We can see how the collaborative project extends back through the centuries and resounds as we turn some dial or just leave our ears open when walking in this city. 

1. For this radio history, see Bill Jaker, Frank Sulek, and Peter Kanze, *The Airwaves of New York: Illustrated Histories of 156 AM Stations in the Metropolitan Area, 1921–1996* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 64–67. Many thanks to Bill Jaker for further clarification (personal communication with the author, February 15, 2016).

