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## Musicians in Transit

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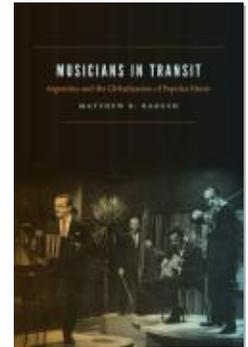
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**BLACK IN BUENOS AIRES**Oscar Alemán and the Transnational History of Swing

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In 1973, the African American magazine *Ebony* sent its international editor, Era Bell Thompson, to Buenos Aires to do a feature on Argentina's tiny black community. Although Afro-Argentines represented nearly one-third of the population of colonial Buenos Aires, they had since virtually disappeared from official records. Miscegenation, war, and disease contributed to this demographic decline, but as historian George Reid Andrews showed many years ago, the invisibility of Afro-Argentines was at least as much the product of racism and of the hegemonic idea of Argentina as a white nation.<sup>1</sup> For the *Ebony* article, "Argentina: Land of the Vanishing Blacks," Thompson interviewed every self-identifying Afro-Argentine she could find. Among them was Oscar Marcelo Alemán, a jazz guitarist who had enjoyed substantial fame and commercial success in Paris in the 1930s and in Buenos Aires during the 1940s and 1950s. By the time Thompson met him, Alemán had recently been rediscovered by Argentine jazz aficionados after a decade in obscurity, during which he had supported himself by giving guitar lessons in his home. Although he

told Thompson that he was the son of a Spanish father and an Indian mother, Alemán insisted on his blackness: “‘Some of my six brothers are even darker than I,’ he smiled, ‘we think there was a black man somewhere.’”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his long career, audiences both at home and abroad perceived Alemán as a black man, a perception that was made possible by his dark complexion and his own avowal of a black identity, but also by his association with jazz music. Nevertheless, the precise meanings that attached to his blackness changed over the years. This chapter will trace the vicissitudes of his career while reconstructing the shifting discursive landscape within which that career developed. Alemán was a talented musician who played the music he loved, but as with any artist, both his musical creations and the popular reception of those creations were shaped by the world in which he lived. Alemán responded creatively to his audiences’ varied racial expectations, performing multiple black identities over the years. In the Parisian nightclubs of the 1930s, being black gave him a certain cachet. Similarly, once he returned to Buenos Aires in 1940, his racial identity strengthened his claim to being Argentina’s most authentic jazz musician. Yet as a black jazz musician, he challenged ideas about Argentine national identity in ways that ultimately limited his career horizons.

Alemán’s artistic production as well as his commercial successes and failures illuminate the transnational construction of blackness in the middle decades of the twentieth century and complicate our understanding of race in Argentina. Scholars have generally interpreted Argentine racism as a by-product of the desire to join the modern, civilized world.<sup>3</sup> Yet Alemán’s career demonstrates that other transnational forces were also at work. Under the influence of North American jazz and French “negrophilia,” Argentines were powerfully drawn to blackness as an emblem of modernity. Alemán’s reception in his own country was shaped by local appropriations and reworkings of these transnational discourses as well as by Argentine attitudes toward Brazil, where the guitarist had spent many of his formative years. Anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio has argued convincingly that Argentina’s self-image as a white nation is premised on the active denial of phenotypic evidence of African ancestry and the firm association of blackness with foreignness. In this way, Afro-Argentines are located in the nation’s past and rendered invisible in the present.<sup>4</sup> Yet at the same time, the ambiguous status of blackness in Argentina created space for Alemán to reinvent himself as an attractive exotic in his own country. By developing an exciting and entertaining musical style and by navigating these complex racial discourses, Alemán became a star for two decades in a country thought to be averse to any reminders of its own blackness.

### *Beginnings: Criollismo and Exoticism*

Oscar Alemán was born in 1909 in the remote province of Chaco in northeastern Argentina. As a child, he performed alongside his father and siblings in the so-called Moreira Sextet, a music and dance troupe that specialized in the traditions known collectively as *criollismo*.<sup>5</sup> The dominant trend in Argentine popular culture during the first two decades of the twentieth century, criollismo involved the celebration of the nation's rural traditions. During this period of massive immigration and rapid modernization, native Argentines looked back nostalgically to the culture of the legendary *gauchos*, brave and violent cowboy figures who roamed the vast *pampas*, or plains, outside Buenos Aires. At the same time, many foreign-born newcomers also embraced these cultural practices as a means to assimilate. Both groups were likely to read the pulp fiction that narrated the heroics of gaucho rebels, to join criollista clubs, and to attend the criollo circus, where gauchos performed equestrian feats. Although Alemán never explained why his father, the Uruguayan-born Jorge Alemán Moreira, used his maternal surname for the family group, it was likely a strategic choice. While "Alemán" sounded foreign, "Moreira" would have reminded audiences of the most popular literary gaucho of the period, Juan Moreira, whose exploits were first described by Eduardo Gutiérrez in a pulp serial published between 1878 and 1880 before becoming a staple of criollista literature and theater.<sup>6</sup> Alemán's father chose the group's name, its costumes, and its repertoire with an eye toward cashing in on the popular craze for gaucho traditionalism.

At the age of five or six, Oscar accompanied his family to Buenos Aires, where they performed at two well-known venues, the Teatro Nuevo in Luna Park and the Parque Japonés. Oscar specialized in dancing the *malambo*, a stiff-backed, stamping dance performed by gauchos in head-to-head competitions. A 1917 photograph shows him dressed in elaborate gaucho costume, dancing with his sister while his father sits behind them strumming a guitar. The photograph leaves little doubt that audiences would have seen the two children as Argentines of African descent. With his dark complexion and traditional costume, Oscar embodied a well-known criollo type: the black gaucho. Blacks were quite visible in the culture of criollismo, particularly as competitors in *payadas*, the improvisatory rhyming duels waged by gaucho guitarists. Criollista literature, such as José Hernández's celebrated epic, *Martín Fierro*, had prominently featured black gauchos, and many of the most famous real-life *payadores* were Afro-Argentine. Despite the endemic racism of the period, blacks were recognized as authentic participants in the native, rural culture of Argentina.<sup>7</sup> Within the racial codes of criollismo, then, Alemán's blackness served



FIGURE 1.1 • Oscar Alemán in 1917 dancing as a gaucho in the family troupe. *Crisis* (January 1975), 30.

the Moreira Sextet's effort to depict itself as an authentic gaucho troupe. For very pragmatic reasons, Oscar Alemán began his performing career with an unequivocally racialized persona.

From Buenos Aires, the Alemáns took their act to Brazil, where Jorge also hoped to make money in the cotton trade. Business did not go well, and when word came of the death of Oscar's mother, who had stayed behind in Buenos Aires, the family fell apart. After his father's suicide, the ten-year-old Oscar found himself alone in the port city of Santos in southern Brazil. While making a living opening car doors for tips, he taught himself how to play the *cavaquinho*, the small, four-string guitar used in Brazilian *samba* and *choro*. By 1924, Alemán was performing on *cavaquinho* at a Santos hotel when he was discovered by a Brazilian guitarist named Gastão Bueno Lobo. Lobo and Alemán formed a duo called *Les Loups*, a name created by translating Lobo's last name into French. Although the duo's repertoire was varied, *Les Loups* specialized in what was known as Hawaiian guitar. In other words, they offered popular songs from a range of different genres, in instrumental versions that featured a guitar played flat on the performer's lap and fretted with a metal slide. Although Alemán later claimed that he and his partner traded roles, Lobo, who had apparently visited Hawaii years earlier, was the Hawaiian guitar specialist, while Alemán

typically accompanied him on *guitarra criolla*—“native” or Spanish-style guitar. The duo performed on the radio and on stage in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere in Brazil before traveling to Buenos Aires in 1927 as part of a variety troupe led by the Argentine comedian Pablo Palitos.<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of a decade in Brazil, Oscar Alemán had become a professional guitarist, specializing in music that was quite different from the criollismo of his childhood. In the process, he shed one racial persona in favor of another. In Argentina, Les Loups were marketed as an exotic import. The duo was a big enough hit to receive a contract from Victor, the North American multinational record company whose Argentine branch specialized in recording local tango bands.<sup>9</sup> In Les Loups’ official photograph for Victor, Alemán and Lobo appear seated, dressed in white suits with neckties and fancy shoes. Alemán fingers a chord on his guitar, while Lobo holds his flat on his lap, Hawaiian-style. To signal the duo’s musical identity, each of the two musicians has a lei around his neck. The popular music magazine *La Canción Moderna* printed the photo under the headline “Bewitching Guitars [*Guitarras brujas*]” along with a notice describing Les Loups as a “notable duo of Hawaiian guitar soloists, marvelous interpreters of popular regional music.”<sup>10</sup> The magazine did not mention the musicians’ racial or national origins, and there was no hint that Alemán was a native son. On the contrary, the leis, combined with the group’s French name and Alemán’s dark skin (in the photo, he appears much darker than Lobo) suggested a vague exoticism. In 1917, Alemán’s blackness had reinforced the Moreira Sextet’s claims to Argentine authenticity within the criollista idiom. A decade later, he might still be read as black, but instead of dressing as a gaucho and dancing the malambo, he wore a lei and performed in a Hawaiian guitar duo. In this context, his phenotype now accentuated his exoticism.

The music of Les Loups was part of an international fad. Sparked by the hit Broadway musical *Bird of Paradise* (1911) as well as the appearance of Hawaiian musicians at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915, a Hawaiian music craze swept the United States. Tin Pan Alley publishers produced hundreds of songs with Hawaiian themes, while companies like Edison, Columbia, and Victor rushed to record Hawaiian musicians playing ukuleles and lap steel guitar for the mainland market.<sup>11</sup> Although the Hawaiian music fad waned in the 1920s, some Hawaiian artists continued to record and perform throughout Europe and the United States, and the lap steel guitar was widely adopted by North American musicians specializing in blues and country music.<sup>12</sup>

Les Loups’ records represented the application of a recognizably exotic sound (slide guitar) and look (white suits, leis) to familiar musical genres. Between



FIGURE 1.2 • Les Loups publicity photo. Alemán is on the left.  
*Primera Plana* (December 15, 1970), 8.

December 1927 and December 1928, Les Loups recorded nine two-sided records for Victor. The following year, the record company added the tango violinist Elvino Vardaro, named the group the Trio Victor, and cut six more sides. Taken together, these records feature ten tangos, ten waltzes, and four fox-trots.<sup>13</sup> All of the records are built around Lobo's Hawaiian-style slide guitar or Vardaro's violin, relegating Alemán to the role of accompanist. In the absence of any other instruments, the job of maintaining rhythmic propulsion falls to Alemán, and he responds with regular, somewhat stiffly strummed chords. At the end of each phrase, however, Alemán typically plays a single note run that intertwines with Lobo's melody.

Alemán's own accounts of his musical development during this period are vague, but close listening reveals several possible sources of influence. On the waltz "La criollita," Alemán plays improvised bass lines that are reminiscent of the approach of the Brazilian string ensembles that specialized in choro music.<sup>14</sup> Another possible indication of Brazilian influence is the fact that unlike most North American jazz guitarists, Alemán played without a plectrum,

or pick. As a result, he could maintain a simple bass line with his right thumb while using his other fingers to pick out single notes. But even if Alemán's playing on these early records shows signs of Brazilian influence, his approach is also comparable to that of tango guitarists like the Afro-Argentine José Ricardo, Carlos Gardel's longtime accompanist, or even that of the jazz guitar pioneer Eddie Lang, whom Alemán would later cite as an influence. These stylistic similarities reveal the broad overlap among choro, tango, and jazz, musical genres that are too often seen as discrete, unrelated traditions.

Thanks to the development of the radio and to the worldwide reach of multinational recording companies like Victor, the globalization of popular music was well under way in the 1920s. In this early period, genre boundaries were less tightly policed than they would be later. Argentine tango bands played fox-trots and "shimmies" in order to please audiences who wanted to dance to the latest North American rhythms, and visiting jazz bands often repaid the favor by playing tangos.<sup>15</sup> South American and North American genres constituted themselves in just this sort of give and take before audiences throughout the Atlantic World. This transnational cross-pollination is evident in Les Loups' varied repertoire. In 1927, the Paul Whiteman jazz orchestra's recording of "In a Little Spanish Town," composed by pop songwriter, Mabel Wayne, spent fifteen weeks at number one on the North American Billboard chart and was number twenty-one in Brazil.<sup>16</sup> The following May, Les Loups recorded it as the b-side to a tango composed by Lobo. Thus a North American pop tune meant to evoke a quaint Spanish village gained a South American audience and was rerecorded by an Argentine/Brazilian duo featuring Hawaiian slide guitar. Although Lobo and Alemán were marketed as exotics, their music was not, in fact, pure, authentic, or traditional. On the contrary, they were professional musicians who tried to sell records by offering a distinctive, self-consciously hybridized version of the global pop music of the day.

Alemán became a professional musician at a moment when much, if not most, of the popular music that circulated transnationally was associated with blackness. Although many of the leading jazz musicians of the day, including Paul Whiteman and Eddie Lang, were white, the genre attracted attention in Paris, Buenos Aires, and elsewhere precisely because it was seen as an African American creation. Likewise, even though some white Brazilians were embarrassed by the mixed-race bands who made choro music popular abroad, blackness was a selling point in Europe.<sup>17</sup> Even tango, whose famous practitioners were almost all white, had well-known Afro-Argentine roots.<sup>18</sup> Alemán's racial appearance, so useful as an indicator of his exoticism, made a certain sense in musical terms as well.

*Black Guitarist: Jazz Stardom in Paris*

In late 1928, Harry Flemming, a black tap dancer from the Danish Virgin Islands then on a South American tour, heard Les Loups in a Buenos Aires nightclub and asked the duo to join his show. Lobo and Alemán accepted the invitation, performing their Hawaiian guitar repertoire as part of Flemming's *Hello Jazz* revue at Montevideo's Teatro 18 de Julio in January 1929. The next month, Flemming and his troupe left for an extensive tour of Europe, and with them was Les Loups. Although the duo split up after two years, Alemán would remain in Europe for more than a decade. Based primarily in Paris, he worked regularly in the touring and recording band of the legendary African American performer Josephine Baker, played alongside dozens of other well-known North American and European jazz musicians, and honed his guitar technique. By the end of the 1930s, he was an accomplished player with a recognizable, hard-swinging style of improvisation. During his years in Europe, Alemán's blackness was reconfigured once more. Arriving several years after the *tumulte noir* that overtook the continent in the 1920s, Alemán's racial appearance conferred a certain legitimacy that his Argentine origins could not. No longer an indication of a rural Argentine "criollismo" nor of a vague, tropical exoticism, his blackness now resonated with cosmopolitan images of jazz modernity.

By the time Alemán arrived in Europe, black musicians were not the novelty they had once been. African American performers had danced the cakewalk in Paris as early as 1902, but World War I incited a new French fascination for blackness by bringing thousands of black soldiers to the continent. James Reese Europe's Harlem Hellfighters regimental band achieved enormous popularity performing a mixture of classical music, minstrel tunes, and early jazz throughout France in 1918. Other African American groups soon followed, including Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra, eliciting an enthusiastic response on tours of Britain and France. The fascination of Picasso and other modernists with African sculpture and masks had prepared the Parisian avant-garde to embrace jazz as an expression of an essential blackness. Between 1918 and 1925, "negrophilia" was, in Bernard Gendron's words, "the most widespread fashion movement in Parisian cultural life."<sup>19</sup>

Unlike belly dancing and tango, two of the most popular Parisian fads of the 1910s, jazz eventually lost its association with exotic spectacle and thereby achieved a more enduring place in French popular culture. At first, jazz had been criticized as an alien import threatening French tradition. Particularly problematic was the widespread notion that only black (and therefore foreign) musicians could play the music well. But beginning in the late 1920s, several

French musicians gained acceptance as jazz musicians. This trend culminated with the founding in 1932 of the musical appreciation society called the Hot Club de France and its sponsorship two years later of a new quintet led by gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt and featuring only French musicians. While jazz retained its associations with blackness, the idea of French jazz was no longer oxymoronic.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, French audiences developed a more nuanced understanding of blackness itself. In particular, Josephine Baker, France's most iconic black performer, engineered a rather dramatic transformation of her public image. Although Baker's initial appeal lay in her performance of primitive, black sexuality, she was also figured as an emblem of modernity. This duality reflected the attitudes of French avant-gardists, for whom jazz represented both African primitivism and cutting-edge modernism. The famous images of Baker created by poster artist Paul Colin explicitly linked her erotic blackness to modern skyscrapers and Art Deco design. By 1930, Baker had abandoned the banana skirt and crafted a much more sophisticated, high-fashion image. Starring in advertisements for skin lotion, hair pomade, and cigarettes, Baker was figured as the epitome of the modern woman. In her movement from savagery to refinement, Baker seemed to enact the civilizing mission of France's colonial project.<sup>21</sup> In any case, by 1931, when Oscar Alemán arrived in Paris to join her band, French audiences were accustomed to thinking of jazz music and of black musicians as both sophisticated and ultramodern.

While discussions of jazz in Europe often depict it as an instance of bilateral cultural exchange, the jazz milieu of the 1920s and 1930s is more accurately seen as a broader Atlantic World phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> Jazz traveled along circuits forged by the Argentine tango and the Brazilian *maxixe*, which had aroused North American and European enthusiasm during the 1910s. It was not a coincidence that one of the first magazines dedicated to promoting jazz in France was called *Jazz-Tango*.<sup>23</sup> Since the first Paul Whiteman records had become available in Buenos Aires in 1918, jazz had attracted South American fans and musicians. During the 1920s, Brazilian bands that specialized in choro and maxixe also played jazz, as did the leading Argentine tango bands. Moreover, Parisians in the grip of negrophilia did not limit their consumption of blackness to its North American variants. The legendary Brazilian band Oito Batutas, led by the samba pioneer Pixinguinha, enjoyed a six-month stay in Paris in 1922, earning enough acclaim to significantly improve its reputation back home.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, many of the African American jazz musicians who performed in Europe also toured Brazil and Argentina. Violinist and clarinetist Paul Wyrer, a pool shark known as "the Pensacola Kid," played in W. C. Handy's Memphis

Blues Band in the 1910s before touring England and France as a member of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra and several other jazz bands. In 1923, he traveled to Buenos Aires, performing in both the Argentine capital and in Rio de Janeiro. He would remain in Argentina for the rest of his life, leading several outfits including the Dixie Pals, whose long residency at the swank Alvear Palace Hotel made it one of the most prominent Argentine jazz bands of the 1930s.<sup>25</sup> And Wyer was not alone. The Philadelphia-born pianist Sam Wooding first toured Europe in 1925 as the leader of the pit band for a revue called *The Chocolate Kiddies*. Wooding's band played throughout Argentina for six months in 1927, igniting the enthusiasm of Argentine jazz fans anxious to get their first look at an authentic band composed entirely of African Americans. Two years later, Josephine Baker herself brought her scandalous version of jazz performance to Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro.<sup>26</sup>

When he arrived in Europe as a member of a Hawaiian guitar duo, Oscar Alemán was already a part of this transnational jazz scene. The duo's recordings of fox-trots, as well as its inclusion in a revue called *Hello Jazz*, suggest that jazz's various associations—as modern, cosmopolitan, and black—also attached to Les Loups. After Alemán moved to Europe, these associations would deepen. Unlike in South America, European advertisements for Harry Flemming's *Hello Jazz* foregrounded race, announcing that the troupe was composed of “whites and blacks.”<sup>27</sup> In the revue's European sojourn, which included stops in France, Belgium, and Italy, as well as an extensive tour of Spain, jazz took on greater prominence. Flemming hired European and North American jazz musicians, including trumpeter Robert De Kers and trombonist Jules Testaert, both from Belgium, as well as saxophonist Ray Butler, and formed a jazz band called Flemming's Bluebirds specializing in “real North American music.” In Spain, they shared a bill with Sam Wooding's band, now back in Europe.<sup>28</sup> Alemán was still not playing jazz music—at least not in public—but he was closely connected to the world of jazz.

Alemán became a jazz musician in 1931 when he left Les Loups and joined Josephine Baker's newly formed band, the 16 Baker Boys. Robert De Kers and Jules Testaert were members of the new band, and it was likely they who recommended the Argentine guitarist to Baker. But Alemán's South American roots, and particularly his Brazilian background, were also helpful. Baker had established enduring ties with Brazilian musicians during her 1929 visit. In particular, she was a fan of Romeu Silva's Jazz-Band Sul-Americano. Silva's group emulated the classy and refined sound of Paul Whiteman's orchestra, recording sambas, maxixes, tangos, and fox-trots for Odeon in the 1920s. Silva spent much of the late 1920s and early 1930s touring Europe, performing

alongside Baker at the Casino in 1931. When Baker returned to the studio for Columbia Records in 1931 and 1932, she enlarged her backing group with several Brazilian members of the Jazz-Band Sul-Americano: Romeu Silva on tenor sax, Luis Lopes da Silva on bass sax, and the drummer Bibi Miranda. The guitarist on these recording sessions was Oscar Alemán.<sup>29</sup> Led by an African American singer and composed of a mixture of Europeans and South Americans, Baker's recording band was a microcosm of the transatlantic jazz world; as a capable player who had lived for years in Brazil and therefore spoke Portuguese, Alemán fit right in.

Alemán's ascent within the Parisian music scene was rapid. He immediately became an integral part of Baker's touring band. In addition to his jazz guitar work, he sang in Portuguese, French, and Spanish, played the pandeiro (a Brazilian tambourine) and the cavaquinho, danced rumba, and occasionally played Hawaiian guitar. Despite his inability to read music, Alemán even served for a while as the band's musical director. On stage, he was often a comic presence; one photograph shows him imitating Baker herself, wearing skimpy briefs, spangled gloves, an elaborate headdress and women's dancing shoes. When he was not touring with Baker, Alemán gained steady work as a studio musician, sideman, and bandleader, and by 1935 he was, along with Django Reinhardt, one of the two most prominent guitarists on the Parisian jazz scene.<sup>30</sup>

European audiences saw Alemán as a person of African descent. Charles Delaunay, the longtime leader of the Hot Club de France, described the Argentine guitarist in overtly racialized terms: "Oscar was a small *bonhomme* with copper-colored skin—a *métisse*, as we said—sharp and quick as a monkey, always ready for a joke."<sup>31</sup> For his part, Alemán loudly objected to any hint of racism. On a tour of Rome, some audience members refused to let Alemán go on because they took him for an Ethiopian.<sup>32</sup> Once the Italian fans had been convinced of Alemán's national origins, the guitarist honored the terms of his contract, but he refused to play any encores. An anecdote told by North American trumpeter Bill Coleman is even more revealing. Alemán had a regular gig for a while playing in Coleman's band at a Parisian nightclub called the Villa d'Este. According to Coleman, the French heavyweight boxer Georges Carpentier, a regular visitor to the club, used to call Alemán "little monkey" in English. The guitarist did not speak English, but he eventually asked his bandmates what the word meant. The next time Carpentier came by the club, Alemán shouted out from the bandstand, "Hello Georges Carpentier, you big white monkey!"<sup>33</sup> That he felt free to respond so confrontationally illuminates both his personality and the racial context that shaped his life in France. Like the many African American jazz musicians who chose to live and work in Paris

FIGURE 1.3 • Alemán performs with Josephine Baker. *Sintonía* 10:430 (November 25, 1942).



FIGURE 1.4 • Alemán imitating Baker. *Crisis* (January 1975), 31.



during the interwar years, Alemán was able to take advantage of the relative freedom afforded by French *negrophilia*.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, within European jazz circles, Alemán's blackness could be helpful. According to one anecdote, Duke Ellington visited Josephine Baker in Paris and asked to meet Alemán, about whom he had heard great things. Impressed by the guitarist's chops, he invited Alemán to tour the United States as a soloist with the Ellington band. Baker, however, refused to part with Alemán, explaining that it would be impossible to replace a guitarist who could also sing and dance and for whom she had had seven suits and pairs of shoes custom made. But her final argument was the most telling: any replacement for Alemán would have to be black.<sup>35</sup> Alemán was often the only black member of Baker's band, and she valued him in part for helping her satisfy her audience's desire for jazz authenticity, which it associated with blackness. Similarly, a poster for a 1939 Dutch jazz festival featuring Alemán billed him as "the extraordinary black guitarist," while an announcement in a local magazine explained the relevance of race: "He will bring the authentic element, being the only black man at the Jazzwereldfeest."<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, North American and British observers, for whom an Argentine jazz guitarist was much more of an anomaly than a black one, did not often remark on Alemán's blackness. For example, the famous British critic Leonard Feather, a great admirer of Alemán, referred to him as an "Argentinian Indian."<sup>37</sup> But in France and in much of the rest of Europe, the modernity and excitement of jazz was still deeply connected to its status as black music. In that context, Alemán's dark skin conferred prestige. Of course, in France Alemán's blackness also underscored his foreignness. Here, the contrast with Django Reinhardt is instructive. Despite entrenched anti-gypsy sentiment in France, skin color and linguistic affinity helped Reinhardt secure the sponsorship of the Hot Club de France, backing that Alemán never enjoyed. According to Reinhardt's biographer, this sponsorship enabled him to record hundreds of sides and helps explain why the legendary gypsy guitarist has eclipsed his now obscure Argentine rival in jazz history.<sup>38</sup>

Like Reinhardt, Alemán developed a guitar style that was not steeped in African American blues, typically considered the wellspring of jazz. Neither guitarist played with the behind-the-beat, relaxed feel and blues tonalities of Eddie Lang, the Italian American who performed on countless jazz and blues records in the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>39</sup> Yet Alemán was no Django copy. Unlike Reinhardt, who famously played a Selmer Maccaferri, Alemán preferred a metal-bodied, National tricone resonator guitar, which had a much heavier, almost electric tone (see figure 1.3). More interesting are the stylistic contrasts. As an accompanist, Alemán often combined chords with single-note ostinatos

reminiscent of his playing in *Les Loups*, while Reinhardt preferred the percussive, up-and-down strum known as *la pompe*. Alemán's solos tend to be more restrained and perhaps more thought out than those of Reinhardt, who was given to displays of reckless virtuosity and seemingly spontaneous improvisation. It is tempting to attribute these differences to genealogy: whereas Reinhardt applied gypsy melodies and styles to jazz, Alemán must have drawn on Brazilian and Argentine traditions.<sup>40</sup> Without ruling out those influences, I would argue that other factors were more decisive. Alemán was an entertainer before he was a jazz guitarist, and he developed his style over the course of a career dedicated to showmanship. The Josephine Baker show was long on crowd appeal and short on jazz virtuosity. Bill Coleman's account of his Villa d'Este stand with Alemán makes it clear that customers came to the club not to sit and listen, but to dance.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, as a sideman on jazz recordings, Alemán had developed the ability to express a complete musical idea over the course of a short solo.

These influences are apparent in the handful of sides Alemán recorded in 1938 and 1939, his only sessions as a front man during his European phase. Inspired by the success Reinhardt had enjoyed with the jazz standard "Limehouse Blues," Alemán recorded the tune with a sextet including the Brazilian drummer Bibi Miranda and the Danish violinist Svend Asmussen. Unlike the Reinhardt version, in which the guitarist solos with his usual joyful virtuosity, Alemán's take on the song seems built for dancing. The track opens with a brief, heavily syncopated drum break from Miranda, signaling the group's emphasis on rhythm. Alemán's solo never ventures far from the melody; instead, he focuses on clever ornamentation and rhythmic play, offering short repeated phrases, quick runs, and sustained notes struck with heavy vibrato. The result is a deeply swinging feel and a fun, extremely danceable record. Given his appearance and given the racial expectations of his European audiences, Alemán probably *sounded* black, but this was a blackness that did not express itself via the serious melodrama of the blues. Instead, Alemán's guitar style was forged in the light popular entertainment of the music revues.

### *Losing the Jazz Wars: Race and the Rise of Bebop in Buenos Aires*

The Nazi invasion of Paris in June 1940 swiftly ended the city's reputation for racial tolerance. Although jazz survived in occupied France, it did so by trumpeting its Frenchness and downplaying or even denying its African American origins.<sup>42</sup> Fearing imprisonment, Alemán, like many African American jazz musicians, decided to leave Paris and return home. In his hurried departure he

left most of his possessions behind, and his two metal-bodied National guitars were confiscated at the border to be melted down and used for the German war effort. Still, he brought something far more valuable from his decade in Europe: a reputation as a jazz guitarist who had earned commercial success and critical acclaim in Paris. Welcoming him home as a national hero, one local jazz magazine declared him “the most famous Argentine musician in the world of jazz” and marveled that “an Argentine is, on his instrument, one of the greatest practitioners in the world.”<sup>43</sup> The jazz columnist for the music magazine *Sintonía* could not contain his astonishment: “It is difficult to believe that a phenomenon like that represented by Oscar Alemán could occur among us.”<sup>44</sup> Alemán quickly translated his reputation into paying work. By May 1941, he had formed a new quintet with Argentine jazz musicians and was performing at Gong, a porteño nightclub.<sup>45</sup> In October, his quintet played a major concert at the Teatro Casino and began appearing twice weekly on Radio Belgrano, the city’s most popular radio station.<sup>46</sup> The following month, Alemán signed a contract with Odeon Records and made the first of dozens of sides that he would record for the multinational company over the next two decades. Alemán remained a significant presence in the porteño entertainment world until the late 1950s: throughout this period, his groups enjoyed regular nightclub and radio gigs and toured Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay. But if Alemán was celebrated as an Argentine jazz musician, he was also seen as a black man, and for local critics, his blackness was closely articulated with a particular version of jazz, one that gradually fell out of favor as time passed. In this way, race imposed clear constraints on Alemán’s Argentine career.

Despite some significant overlap, the meanings that attached to jazz in Argentina were different from those that accompanied the music in France. Argentines were not immune to negrophilia: local critics had responded to Josephine Baker’s visit in 1929 with the same mixture of condescension and awe as their French counterparts.<sup>47</sup> But black musicians remained far less numerous and therefore far more exotic in Buenos Aires than in Paris. With a handful of exceptions, such as Paul Wyrer and the saxophonist and clarinetist Booker Pittman, who was a major presence on the local scene in the late 1930s and early 1940s, most jazz musicians in Buenos Aires were white Argentines. Jazz was extremely popular both on the radio and on the dance floors, but it was always a distant second to tango, which reigned supreme throughout the 1940s. In 1941, jazz accounted for 18 percent of the music programs heard on porteño radio stations, a substantial portion but a far cry from the 52 percent dedicated to tango.<sup>48</sup> Given the well-known popularity of jazz in the United States and Europe, Argentines perceived the genre as the sonic expression of

modernity itself. Yet no Argentine jazz band could ever express Argentine national identity in the way that Django Reinhardt's Quintette du Hot Club de France could express Frenchness.

As a black Argentine jazz musician, Alemán challenged the categories through which Argentines understood jazz. Nevertheless, he could not single-handedly nationalize the music. In fact, his association with the genre occasionally put him at odds with Argentine nationalism. At one concert in 1943, Alemán was about to take the stage after a succession of tango bands, only to find that the master of ceremonies, the self-proclaimed “defender of tango” Julio Jorge Nelson, refused to announce him.<sup>49</sup> More seriously, Alemán sometimes had difficulty navigating the intense nationalism of the Perón regime (1946–55). Asked at the last minute to perform at an official event at which the president and first lady were to speak, Alemán, no fan of the government, recognized that he had little choice but to accept the invitation. But when he showed up with his quintet, he was told that President Perón did not want to hear any North American music. Alemán managed to avoid sanction by playing “Caminos Cruzados,” a song by the Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona. It may not have been Argentine music, but at least it avoided the taint of imperialism.<sup>50</sup> For the most part, Alemán did not face official harassment, but as a jazz musician in Argentina, he played a foreign music.

Although Alemán's association with jazz sometimes called his Argentine identity into question, his blackness was initially a boon to his jazz career, just as it had been in Paris. In fact, Alemán's reception in Argentina was decisively shaped by the fact that local jazz fans and critics saw the music through the lens of race.<sup>51</sup> During the 1920s, the Argentine media used stereotypical images of blackness to mark jazz as exotic. Local jazz bands often painted caricatures of smiling black people on their bass drums, while fan magazines illustrated their jazz coverage with cartoons of thick-lipped, dark-skinned, and carefree musicians.<sup>52</sup> In the 1930s, the growing international prominence of African American musicians and bandleaders reshaped the way jazz was understood in Argentina. The immense talents and professional self-presentation of musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, and Fletcher Henderson demanded a more complex response than simple exoticism. Yet even when they raved about the musical innovations of African American jazz musicians, Argentine critics and commentators rarely failed to mention their race. In one typical issue of *Sintonía*, the magazine's jazz writers referred to “the black trumpeter and singer Luis [sic] Armstrong,” hailed Ellington as “the first figure of black jazz,” and noted that the latest recording by the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra had “all the characteristics of black ‘swings’ [sic].”<sup>53</sup>

These writers considered black musicians as a category apart, treating “black jazz” and “white jazz” as two distinct genres.

From the moment he returned to Argentina, Alemán was inserted into this racialized discourse; his blackness was both obvious and obviously relevant. In 1941, Argentine jazz guitarist Jorge Curutchet published an overview of the major practitioners of the instrument for a local jazz magazine. As was typical in such articles, Curutchet divided the world’s jazz guitarists into black ones and white ones, insisting that the latter “cultivate a very different style.” Alemán, “an Argentine guitarist with phenomenal technique and good jazz ideas,” was the last guitarist Curutchet listed in the black category.<sup>54</sup> Five years later, Alemán provided the musical accompaniment for a recital of poetry by black authors from throughout the Americas. The racial essentialism that characterized press descriptions of the event make it clear that Alemán was chosen at least in part for his blackness: “How the throats of black people heat up with their songs of pain and hope! What a feeling of palm trees and cotton, sensuality and mysticism strangely married. . . . What anxious happiness, what rhythmic sadness. . . . That atmosphere erupted in the Empire Theater during the recital of black music and poetry offered by the actress Lisa Marchev—immense eyes, voice of the jungle—and the world famous artist of color Oscar Alemán.” Asked by the reporter about his rapport with Marchev, Alemán commented that blacks and Jews have historically faced similar mistreatment. “Meanwhile,” he went on, “black people sing. . . . I am not a politician. I am black. And all of the black people of the world can be in my beat [*pueden estar en mi tam-tam*] and in the . . . mouth of Lisa Marchev.”<sup>55</sup> Reports like these highlighted Alemán’s blackness as well as the spirituality, intensity of emotion, and rhythmic expertise that were stereotypically associated with it.

Alongside his commercial and critical success in Europe, Alemán’s blackness gave him instant jazz credibility. At the same time, the inverse was also true: it was his association with jazz that made his blackness so visible. This becomes apparent if we compare Alemán’s reception in Argentina with that of another prominent musician of ostensibly African descent, the tango pianist and bandleader Horacio Salgán.<sup>56</sup> Beginning in the mid-1940s, Salgán’s tango band was a fixture on porteño dance floors and on the radio. In 1952, when his band replaced Alemán’s as the main attraction on Radio Belgrano’s “Brilliant Rhythms” program, the two musicians appeared together in a photograph published in *Antena* magazine. The accompanying note referred to Salgán as “an authentic value of our popular music,” but did not mention his race.<sup>57</sup> This silence was typical of coverage of Salgán in the popular press of the 1940s and 1950s: unlike Alemán, the pianist was never described as black. The two

FIGURE 1.5 • Alemán  
(left) with Horacio  
Salgán. *Antena*  
(December 2, 1952).



musicians were friends, and it does appear that Alemán saw Salgán as black. In an interview conducted in 1975, Alemán's praise for the pianist included a subtle allusion to race: "He has that rhythm that is born inside one."<sup>58</sup> But for most Argentines, Salgán's blackness was rendered invisible by his association with tango.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Afro-Argentines had figured prominently among tango musicians and composers. Yet by the 1920s, when the birth of the recording and radio industries transformed tango from dance music to a genre of songs, lyrics rarely mentioned black characters, and the term *negro* was applied as a nickname to many tango performers who lacked any identifiable African ancestry. In this context, blackness alluded not to race but to class, signifying a populist affiliation with the poor Argentine communities from which the tango was said to have emerged. During the 1940s, a popular revival of the older genres *milonga* and *candombe* reminded audiences of tango's origins in the music and dance of Afro-Argentines, while firmly locating tango's racial blackness in the distant past.<sup>59</sup> The modern tango was the quintessential musical representation of Argentine national identity and as such it was white music. Within Argentine popular music, therefore, the visibility of blackness varied with the nationality ascribed to the genre. African ancestry

was visible in an Argentine musician who played jazz, a foreign music, but not in one who played tango. Notwithstanding their phenotypic similarity, jazz blackened Alemán, while tango whitened Salgán.

During Alemán's period of commercial success in Argentina, the pages of local jazz magazines were filled with debates over the alleged racial essence of the music. In an essay published in an Argentine jazz magazine, the Chilean musician and critic Pablo Garrido insisted that jazz arose from "the anguish and tribulation of an oppressed race. Jazz is, then, exclusively black-American (*negro-americano*), and for that reason its authentic interpreters are black-American musicians."<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Uruguayan critic Francisco Mañosa argued that jazz was "an essentially black music" and that white jazz musicians could only be imitators; to the extent that they improved on the work of their black colleagues, they were no longer playing jazz.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, just three years later, the same magazine published a column that ridiculed a radio commentator for insisting on the blackness of jazz, noting that whoever hired the Argentine jazz band that played on the same show must not have seen the musicians' faces.<sup>62</sup>

By the 1950s, this debate over race intersected with another series of arguments provoked by the rise of new subgenres of jazz. In a development that replayed events in Europe and the United States, the Argentine jazz community split between traditionalists and modernizers. Inspired by its French namesake, the Hot Club de Buenos Aires was founded in 1948 to promote local bands who specialized in the old "hot" jazz style associated with New Orleans and, especially, with Louis Armstrong. Just two years later, fans, critics, and musicians who embraced bebop and other styles of so-called modern jazz founded the Bop Club Argentino.<sup>63</sup> Rejecting traditionalism and nostalgia, this group celebrated the vanguardism implicit in new forms of jazz that were as sophisticated and challenging as any modern art. Since modern jazz required an educated audience, the Bop Club organized a series of lectures aimed at "elevating the listener's degree of comprehension."<sup>64</sup> As one of the group's members put it, "Jazz is not the result of a strong dose of enthusiasm, but rather it requires preparation and extremely intense study, as well as a very profound knowledge of music."<sup>65</sup>

The dispute between traditionalists and modernizers was not fundamentally about race, yet it was fought on discursive terrain that was marked by race. The leaders of the bebop revolution—musicians like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie—were African American, as were many of their most important successors, including Miles Davis and John Coltrane. But while the Bop Club's members praised these artists, they also celebrated the innovations of

white musicians like Stan Kenton, Stan Getz, and Lennie Tristano. The embrace of jazz modernism weakened the hold of racial essentialism; it opened a path to jazz authenticity that did not require blackness. In an essay called “Jazz and Modern Art,” the young pianist Lalo Schifrin, perhaps the leading Argentine musician in the modern camp, compared the best modern jazz to the works of avant-garde composers like Paul Hindemith and Igor Stravinsky. This argument had racial implications: “It is said that only blacks can play jazz. . . . These are no more than absurd and snobbish arguments and cannot be considered serious artistic theories. Jazz is no longer a mythological legend.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Luis Borraro of the Bop Club Argentino argued that like all great art forms, jazz needed to evolve with the times. “You may speak to me about the feeling of the oppressed race. [But] while jazz began as exclusively black, it has universalized. Jazz can be played not just by a black person, but also by a Pole or a Lapp, and authentically.”<sup>67</sup> In these formulations, the argument against traditionalism coincided with the argument against racial essentialism. As a black guitarist who specialized in swing, Oscar Alemán was on the losing side of both debates.

Between 1941 and 1957, Alemán recorded more than a hundred sides for Odeon, first as the leader of a sextet and after 1951, at the helm of a nine-piece “orchestra.”<sup>68</sup> These recordings reveal a guitar style rooted in swing and marked by an easy virtuosity. Having lost his National guitars, Alemán now played a Selmer Maccaferri, the same guitar as Django Reinhardt, but his playing still sounded quite different. His tone was thicker, and his improvisations still hewed closer to the melody. He now developed a theatrical tendency to punctuate his riffs with a ringing harmonic, a high-pitched double stop, or a sustained note struck with heavy vibrato. Above all, Alemán’s records betray a musical personality characterized by humor and showmanship. His rendition of the standard “Sweet Georgia Brown,” recorded in 1941 in his very first session for Odeon, is less inventive and adventurous than the version Reinhardt recorded for Decca three years earlier, but it is a crowd pleaser. Alemán first offers a largely straightforward reading of the melody and then develops playful, heavily syncopated variations, before finishing with a couple of rapid-fire riffs and an explicit allusion to Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.” His English-inspired vocalizations throughout the piece—“yeah!”—add to the mood of levity. Alemán’s showmanship was even more evident on stage. In a scene from the 1949 film *El ídolo del tango* (dir. Héctor Canziani), Alemán performs his song “Improvisaciones sobre boogie woogie” at a fancy porteño nightclub. He does a comic, rubbery-legged dance while playing the guitar, puts the instrument down to do some enthusiastic scat singing, and then jumps off the stage to dance with one of the female patrons.

In his initial recording sessions for Odeon, Alemán's repertoire was comprised exclusively of instrumental jazz tunes—either North American standards or his own originals. But this changed in 1943 when his band cut a lighthearted, uptempo, swing version of “Bésame Mucho,” a bolero first recorded two years earlier by the Mexican singer Emilio Tuero. On the flip side, the band recorded “Nega do cabelo duro” (Nappy-haired Black Woman), a *batucada* that had been a hit in Brazil during the carnival season of 1942. These two sides marked Alemán's debut as a singer: he sings the bolero in Spanish and the *batucada* in Portuguese. They also established a pattern. Over the next fifteen years, Latin American pop songs, especially from Brazilian genres like samba, choro, and *baião*, featured prominently in Alemán's discography, often paired with jazz numbers. In contrast to his take on “Bésame Mucho,” which he played as if it were a swing tune, Alemán did not generally “jazz up” his Brazilian material. The rhythm section plays the appropriate Brazilian beat, and while Alemán's jazz phrasings are still evident in his guitar playing, he generally avoids taking improvised solos, focusing instead on playing the melody with minor embellishments. In 1951, Alemán recorded a version of Waldir Azevedo's current choro hit “Delicado,” labeled the biggest record of the year by one Argentine magazine.<sup>69</sup> Already covered by some seven Argentine acts by the time Alemán recorded it, the original was a catchy, instrumental *baião* that Azevedo played on a *cavaquinho*. Alemán played it on the guitar against a more prominent bass drum pulse and ornamented the melody with flashy riffs, including a series of lightning-fast triplets. The result was not recognizable as a jazz record. Alemán's recordings of Brazilian pop music were the work of a jazz musician open to another musical tradition, but they were also commercial products, with which Odeon clearly hoped to tap into a bigger market than the one composed of jazz aficionados.

Alemán's commercialism raised the hackles of Argentine music journalists. For *Sintonía*'s jazz critic, he was “a black guy [*un morocho*] who can do whatever he wants with the strings, who feels the rhythm and what it transmits, but . . . [h]e has two personalities: one legitimate and one commercial.”<sup>70</sup> Such critics were particularly offended by Alemán's comic scat singing—his “*grititos*”—which seemed to militate against musical seriousness.<sup>71</sup> And as the proponents of modern jazz gained prominence within Argentine jazz circles, negative reviews became more common. For these writers, Alemán's records were hackneyed, commercial fare, good for dancing to and appealing to his uninformed fans, but lacking substance. The tone of these reviews was dismissive: “A series of riffs in Oscar's more-or-less habitual arrangement . . . it certainly won't add much to his harvest but it will no doubt please his followers and those

who love to dance.”<sup>72</sup> “Why won’t he try to rise to the challenge of renovation and of doing something really serious that will elevate him among those who ‘know’ what jazz is?”<sup>73</sup> Critics particularly lambasted Alemán for his Brazilian and other nonjazz material. *Jazz Magazine’s* reviewer ostentatiously declined to comment on records like “Delicado” and often gave Alemán’s fox-trots the backhanded compliment, “at least it’s in 4/4 time.”<sup>74</sup> One typical review dismissed the latest Alemán release as “strictly dance music” and pleaded with him to return to jazz: “Now that Django has hopped the fence to bebop, [Alemán] is one of the few who remain to defend a school that seems destined to disappear.”<sup>75</sup> Even if modern jazz aficionados could accept Alemán’s old-fashioned style, they could not forgive his betrayal of jazz itself.

The antipathy of the hardcore jazz audience was not racially motivated. These writers rejected Alemán’s commercialism, his fondness for comic singing and dancing, and his enthusiasm for nonjazz material, not his blackness. Nevertheless, the rise of bebop and other modern genres had disrupted the racial essentialism implicit in the idea of jazz as the expression of African American experience. In so doing, it altered the landscape in which Alemán’s blackness had functioned as a badge of authenticity. For the jazz avant-garde, sophistication, technical mastery, and artistic seriousness were the hallmarks of the authentic musician; being black was no longer sufficient to guarantee Alemán’s jazz credibility. Had Alemán been North American and had his musical style been clearly derived from the blues tradition, it might not have mattered. But Alemán’s blackness was associated not with oppressive cotton plantations or seedy New York bars, but with fancy Paris nightclubs and, secondarily, with Brazil. By the early 1950s, Alemán had been marginalized by the jazz critics of Buenos Aires.

This critical disdain had little effect on Alemán’s ability to earn a living. Until 1957, he continued to record prolifically for Odeon, to appear on the radio, and to perform in Buenos Aires and abroad. Only at the end of the decade did these gigs begin to dry up. Alemán’s career could withstand bad reviews in specialized jazz magazines but not the dramatic change in the musical tastes of the mass audience. By the late 1950s, both big-band jazz and tango had lost their position of dominance on porteño radio waves and dance floors, replaced by new imports from the United States, including singers like Frank Sinatra and, most importantly, rock and roll. This transformation represented a major blow to all Argentine musicians associated with styles that now seemed antiquated.<sup>76</sup> Yet some fared better than others. In particular, some tango stars who could no longer afford to maintain their large orchestras reemerged in small-group contexts. Horacio Salgán, for example, dissolved his tango band in

1957. Later that year, he formed a duo with guitarist Ubaldo de Lío. By 1960, he was performing and recording alongside other tango legends in the Quinteto Real.<sup>77</sup> In this way, Salgán was able to survive the end of the dance-band era. Like jazz in the United States, which had evolved from big-band dance music to the more cerebral, small-group style of bebop, tango was now music for listening rather than dancing. The new, more sophisticated version of the genre was epitomized by the so-called New Tango invented by Astor Piazzolla in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But even if Salgán never achieved the stature of Piazzolla nor even recovered his own earlier prominence, he was able to thrive on a more modest scale. Alemán, by contrast, disappeared into obscurity.

The contrasting career trajectories of Salgán and Alemán reflected primarily the very different status of tango and jazz in Argentina. Whereas tango was the music par excellence of Buenos Aires, jazz was a foreign import. No matter how old-fashioned it seemed, tango would always appeal to nationalist nostalgia. By contrast, once swing jazz came to seem outdated, it was simply jettisoned in favor of the next new import. But race mattered here as well. As we have seen, Salgán's blackness was invisible in the 1940s and 1950s. As a result, he avoided any association with the primitive, African roots of tango and could be seen as a member of the avant-garde. As early as 1956, the mainstream press linked Salgán to Piazzolla, describing both as key players in a "New Guard" of innovative musicians who were modernizing tango by ignoring the dancers and injecting the music with quality and sophistication.<sup>78</sup> Alemán's blackness, saturated as it was with associations of frivolity, corporality, comedy, and the Parisian nightlife, closed this path to him. Other Argentine jazz musicians were able to join the jazz vanguard; some, such as Lalo Schifrin and Gato Barbieri, even became international stars. Alemán's roots in an older style as well as his particular way of being black prevented him from doing so.

After more than a decade away from the limelight, Alemán was rediscovered in the early 1970s. In 1971, EMI/Odeon reissued some of his 1940s and 1950s material on LP, and over the next three years, Redondel, a small Argentine label, released three albums of new recordings. Now in his sixties, Alemán returned to public performance and drew the attention of a new generation of music journalists. Press reports from this era focus even more attention on Alemán's race than those of earlier decades. At the beginning of his rediscovery, one article introduced him as follows: "Oscar Marcelo Alemán, 61, one of the greatest guitarists in the world, a black thing [*cosa negra*] possessed by all the spirits of rhythm and of music."<sup>79</sup> The following year, a concert review highlighted his "black fingers" and his "black rhythm."<sup>80</sup> In an extended interview published in 1975 in the left-wing magazine *Crisis*, Gerardo Sopena asked

Alemán if he thought a musician's race influenced the music he played, "or in your case, does African descent determine a natural sense of rhythm?"<sup>81</sup> For Alemán, whose answer was a qualified "yes," blackness once again seemed to open doors rather than close them. Alongside his instrumental virtuosity and his Parisian past, his blackness itself was now a factor that attracted the attention of journalists. By this time, debates over the racial essence of jazz had long since lost relevance, but the black roots of contemporary popular music, including North American jazz and rock as well as Brazilian and Caribbean genres, were well established. In this context, Alemán's blackness was *musically* interesting. Blackness no longer anchored a claim of jazz authenticity—the idea of a white jazz musician was entirely unproblematic by the 1970s—but it still carried with it essentialist associations of rhythmic aptitude.

Alemán's career played out within a set of overlapping circuits that structured transnational, mass cultural exchange in the mid-twentieth century. Jazz music was not simply disseminated outward from the United States; rather, it flowed in various directions among a number of key sites throughout the Atlantic World. Alemán's connection to the music came by way of Brazil and the cosmopolitan jazz scene in Paris. His position within these circuits shaped his choice of repertoire and his musical style, but it also informed his racial identity: Alemán embodied a blackness that alluded to Parisian nightclubs and frivolous Brazilian tropicalism, rather than to the tropes of African American suffering and oppression. His commercial success in Buenos Aires, as well as the limits of that success, demonstrate that popular music represented a privileged space within which Argentines experimented with evolving, transnational racial discourses. The existence of a black Argentine jazz musician of Alemán's caliber enabled local fans to engage with images of black modernism and authenticity. Yet his blackness, made visible by his association with jazz, prevented him from embodying Argentine national identity. As a result, his commercial fortunes were directly tied to the international status of blackness. When jazz lost its position as the quintessential musical expression of modernity, Alemán became yet another invisible Afro-Argentine. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, decolonization, black power, and soul music revived Argentine interest in blackness and, not coincidentally, Alemán's career. Unfortunately, the positive associations that attached to blackness in the musical sphere did not reshape Argentine racial attitudes more generally. In a country that remained committed to a vision of itself as white, it was Alemán's status as a well-known musician that protected him from discrimination. As he explained in the *Ebony* article, he was "accepted everywhere" in Argentina, but "with another black man . . . it might be different."<sup>82</sup>