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Musicians in Transit

Karush, Matthew B.

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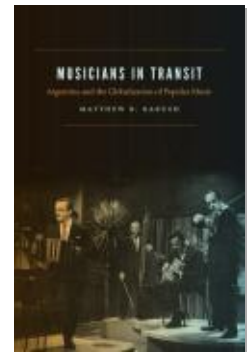
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CONCLUSION

The musical careers I have examined in this book represent at least four distinct patterns of transnational interaction. Oscar Alemán and Arco Iris created versions of foreign genres for consumption by domestic audiences. Lalo Schifrin and Gato Barbieri also worked in foreign genres, but they aimed their products primarily at the North American market. Astor Piazzolla and Mercedes Sosa were specialists in Argentine musical forms who incorporated foreign influences to attract audiences both at home and abroad. Finally, Sandro and Gustavo Santaolalla invented new genres or subgenres that appealed to audiences throughout Latin America.

These four patterns suggest the variety of ways that the history of Argentine popular music has been shaped by the transnational context in which it is embedded. At different moments and toward different ends, Argentine musicians have listened to and borrowed from their counterparts in Europe, North America, and Latin America. Similarly, they have created music for both the domestic market and for various distinct foreign audiences, tailoring their creations to meet a specific set of assumptions and aesthetic preferences in each case. In itself, this diversity of influence and audience rebuts accounts that reduce the globalization of popular music to a simple story of homogenization or cultural imperialism. And yet, this is not to dismiss the very real power differentials that shape global culture. All Argentine popular musicians have had to navigate a deeply unequal field constructed by the transnational music business. Each of the musicians analyzed in this book recorded for one or more of the major multinational corporations that dominated this business, a fact that had a significant influence on the music they produced. In the last instance, it was the men who ran these corporations who decided what sort of music would be recorded and to which audience it would be marketed.

Still, no matter how unequal, the economic and ideological structures of the global music business yielded opportunities that Argentine popular musicians were able to exploit. Musicians' creative responses to these opportunities produced surprising effects. Although Alemán's appearance and national identity limited his career opportunities both in Paris and Buenos Aires, they also enabled him to find an audience for his distinctive version of cosmopolitan blackness. Barbieri was forced to inhabit the foreign musical category of Latin, but he was able to expand it to include South American rhythms and instruments. Sosa confronted the exoticizing primitivism of European and Argentine folk audiences, but she used it to construct her own, innovative persona. In each case, the global music business imposed real limits on what musicians could achieve, but their efforts to create within these limits yielded unexpected and consequential outcomes.

Most important, musicians emerged as key intermediaries between Argentina and global culture. When their music was consumed by North American and European audiences, it stretched hegemonic ideas of Latin identity in new directions. Within Argentina, it made available new resources for identity formation. Piazzolla's New Tango, in dialogue with contemporary jazz even as it was deeply rooted in Argentine tradition, enabled his urban, middle-class audience to express a new, cosmopolitan form of Argentine nationalism. Sandro drew on North American rock and doo-wop, as well as French, Spanish, and Italian pop, to craft a style of balada that resonated with local traditions of popular melodrama and encouraged his fans to enjoy his music as distinctively Latin. Santaolalla's rock latino reconciled young Argentines' desire to be part of cosmopolitan culture with their quest for authenticity and, in so doing, enabled many to overcome their snobbish condescension toward Latin American culture. These musicians helped transform the way Argentines understood their place in the world.

Sorting through the overlapping chronologies of these career narratives, one can begin to assemble an overarching story of change over time. In particular, what emerges is a picture of the way that the globalization of popular music led to the extension and deepening of various forms of Latin identification. At the dawn of the mass cultural era, the recording industry divided the music of the world into two categories: North American and local. This arrangement promoted North American influence and preserved local musical genres like tango, but it minimized the opportunities for other sorts of musical exchange; in this context, Latin Americans were unlikely to think of the music they enjoyed as Latin. By the 1940s, the diffusion of the bolero throughout Latin America had emerged as an important exception to this pattern, as

the record companies began to recognize the potential for a common Latin American music market. Nevertheless, the structure of the music business continued to limit the formation and dissemination of hybrid forms. Late in his life, Alemán complained that he had invented bossa nova twenty years before João Gilberto but that no one had picked up on it.¹ Alemán's jazzy recordings of Brazilian songs were popular in Argentina, but they did not circulate much outside of the country.

The North American and European demand for the exotic represented an important channel for the transnational circulation of music from Latin America, but it also limited the way musicians and fans engaged with it. So-called Latin music, usually in the form of Cuban-inspired rhythms and stereotyped lyrics, had been popular in the United States since the 1930s. In subsequent decades, Caribbean musicians and North American jazz players pushed this exoticism in novel directions. Still, music producers, critics, and consumers remained committed to an international division of labor in which Latin America provided exciting rhythms, while North America remained the source of melodic or harmonic "ideas" and sophisticated arrangements. Astor Piazzolla's New York quintet of 1959 failed to find an audience partly because it violated this formula. Three years later, Lalo Schiffrin helped sell bossa nova to audiences in the United States by sticking to it.

The advent of rock and roll in the mid-1950s and the dramatic expansion of global record sales in subsequent decades created new opportunities for musical transnationalism. In particular, the multinationals implemented a new strategy focused on unifying the Latin American markets. Even as they flooded these markets with rock and pop music from the United States and Europe, the major labels hoped to find Latin American products that could sell throughout the region and among the growing Latino population in the United States. They achieved limited success with the lighthearted pop of the Nueva Ola, but the real breakthrough came with Sandro and the invention of balada in the late 1960s. Since it was built out of contemporary, cosmopolitan materials, balada did not exoticize Latin America, nor did it participate in the logic of the international division of labor. It was enthusiastically embraced by audiences throughout the Americas as a distinctively Latin aesthetic preference.

The strategies of the multinational recording companies and shifting demographics in the United States were not the only factors that encouraged the dissemination of Latin identity. The deepening of the Cold War provided another impetus. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, anti-imperialist or even revolutionary forms of musical Latin Americanism gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. Gato Barbieri's Latin-jazz third worldism, reflected the influence of

Latin American as well as African American radical movements. But perhaps because it was produced from within the North American jazz establishment and designed primarily for the U.S. market, Barbieri's music made less of an impression in Latin America. On the other hand, Arco Iris's contemporaneous folk-rock fusion experiments did attract a loyal following among Argentine rock fans, but the major labels' lack of interest in rock nacional meant that it had little chance of being heard outside the country. By contrast, Mercedes Sosa's revolutionary Latin Americanism gained a massive audience throughout Latin America. Philips had signed her in the hopes that her sophisticated version of folk music would appeal to discerning, middle-class consumers in Argentina, Europe, and the United States. But Sosa's version of Argentine identity, grounded in a close connection to the indigenous Andes, resonated in the rest of Latin America, as did her self-conscious affiliation with the oppressed.

In the 1980s, the major labels belatedly realized that Argentine rock music, like balada and folk, would sell in other Latin American markets. Reliant on intermediaries who could identify bands with commercial potential, the multinationals empowered Gustavo Santaolalla to create a new style of rock music that incorporated elements from a diverse array of Latin American genres. Like balada, rock latino attracted a broad audience from throughout the region and interpellated it as Latin. However, because it retained the countercultural ethos of the rock music of the 1960s and 1970s, this music tended to be much more politically engaged than balada. North American exoticism persisted during this period, taking the form of world music, a trend that enabled Astor Piazzolla to gain an audience in the United States toward the end of his life. But it was major-label rock, not the ostensibly more authentic music packaged as world music, that enabled audiences to express their resistance to the devastation wrought by neoliberal economic policies.

Over the course of the twentieth century, then, the globalization of popular music contributed substantially to processes of identity formation throughout Latin America. The deepening of transnational economic and cultural connections, controlled as it was by a small number of multinational corporations, had multiple and contradictory effects: it substantially increased the volume of North American and European popular music consumed in Latin America, and it promoted the marketing of exotic representations of Latin America in the United States and Europe. But it also gave rise to new musical expressions of Latin identity, including a homogenous form of Latin pop music, an anti-imperialist folk genre that hailed a politicized Latin American audience, and a style of rock built on a pastiche of Latin American and global genres. As a result

of their privileged position in transnational musical circuits, Argentine musicians were central to all three of these continent-wide musical developments.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the global music industry has experienced rapid dislocation and transformation. For the major labels, the advent of the mp3 and the surge in music piracy represented a profound crisis, eroding profits and undermining well-established business strategies. The problem of piracy was particularly severe in Latin America, leading the major labels to cut back on their efforts in the region. At the same time, the advent of new technology created new opportunities for Latin American popular musicians, who no longer needed the support of a multinational corporation in order to reach foreign audiences. While many artists used online promotional tools to distribute their own music, the period also saw a flowering of independent labels specializing in various forms of Latin music. Recently, though, the major labels have begun to regain their footing, increasing their revenue through both downloads and streaming services. Meanwhile, thanks to improvements in digital infrastructure, between 2011 and 2015 Latin America has seen the fastest growing music sales in the world, and in response, the major labels have returned.² These developments have transformed the opportunities and obstacles that Argentine popular musicians face. Nevertheless, much as in the previous century, the aesthetic and ideological effects of these changes will not be determined simply by the structures of the global music industry. On the contrary, the music produced and consumed by Argentines will continue to reflect the choices made by the nation's musicians in transit as they navigate a shifting transnational landscape.