

Book Review

– *Musicians in Transit: Argentina and the Globalization of Popular Music* by
Matthew B. Karush, Duke University Press, 2017

Matt Karush, arguably one of the most important historians of Argentina working today, has written a wonderful book about Argentine ‘musicians in transit’, i.e. composers and performers who, while very popular in Argentina, were also highly engaged with the transnational music movement of the twentieth century in general. Karush’s main goal is to demonstrate, through the narrative trajectories of these seven musicians, how the transnational music market offered aesthetic and commercial opportunities for these musicians, while also putting limits on what types of musical expressions were viable for them to pursue. In this way, through their creative agency, these seven musicians in transit redirected transnational flows beyond the designs of owners of major record labels and music venues. Simultaneously, and this a crucial part of Karush’s argument, these musicians in transit offered Argentines, through the music they created out of their international engagement and their efforts to connect with foreign audiences, new models of national identification that highly influenced how native Argentines understood their ‘Argentineness’.

The first three chapters of the book deal with Argentine musicians engaged with jazz: Oscar Alemán, Lalo Schifrin and Gato Barbieri. Oscar Alemán was a swing guitarist who, though he really didn’t know his actual heritage beyond his mother being a member of the Toba tribe (something that qualifies him as ‘Indian’), identified himself as Afro-Argentine and built a career in Argentina and Europe taking advantage of this identity. On the other hand, pianist and composer Lalo Schifrin took advantage of a ‘Latin’ ethnic category to advance his music career in Europe and the United States, completely independent from his Jewish identity. Something similar occurred with Gato Barbieri, who, in different ways than Schifrin, also developed a ‘Latin’ identification only after leaving Argentina. Chapter four describes how Astor Piazzolla successfully transformed the image of tango as old-fashioned dance music into a sophisticated genre that appealed very much to the new cosmopolitan identity of middle-class Argentines during the 1960s. The chapter also analyzes

Piazzolla's initial failure to gain an audience for his music in the United States and his eventual success in doing so in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The final three chapters of the book deal with the musical trajectories of Sandro, Mercedes Sosa and Gustavo Santaolalla. In the case of Sandro, Karush craftily shows how Sandro was one of the inventors of *balada*, a native Latin American music genre that was incredibly popular in the 1960s and 1970s all over the sub-continent and among the Latino population in the United States. The case of Mercedes Sosa reveals a different aspect of the process through which popular music became increasingly transnational after WWII, namely how the revolutionary Latin Americanism of her musical proposal was promoted by a multinational record company. Finally, Karush demonstrates how the extraordinary success of rock musician and producer Gustavo Santaolalla originated in his role as a key mediator between multinational record companies in search of a Latin product, and Latin American fans who desired an authentic rock music of their own.

Karush's book is an outstanding contribution. Among other things, it deals quite well with the complex issue of ethnic and racial categorizations in Argentine popular music, usually problematic for historians and social scientists who are not of Argentine descent. It is an issue that presents multiple puzzles: Mercedes Sosa, whose heritage was clearly mestizo, is called 'la negra Sosa' though she had no African ancestry; Carlos Solari, whose heritage is European, is called 'el indio Solari' though he has no Indian ancestry; and Oscar Alemán, who claimed an African heritage, was never in fact called 'el negro Aleman'. The fact that Afro-Uruguayan percussionist Rubén Rada is known as 'el negro Rada' confirms what I am pointing out here. Rada is an Uruguayan musician, not an Argentine one, and in Argentina it is a common sense assumption that 'there are no blacks in Argentina but they are many in Uruguay'. To my knowledge, the only Argentine case in which racial ancestry coincides with categorical classification is the case of the tango pianist Horacio 'el negro' Salgán'.

I want to end my review offering some ideas to 'continue the conversation' opened up by this path-breaking book. The excellent research done on Gato Barbieri can be actualized with certain information some of us knew, but were not allowed to disclose in order to protect the musician's migration status in the United States. Now that Gato is no longer with us, we can safely disclose this information, which, I am sure, will shed new light on some of Karush's ideas. The ideas that motivated Barbieri's initial connection with the free jazz movement and its civil rights movement imprint, as well as his later involvement with third world oriented Latin-jazz, were not entirely developed after he left Argentina for Europe and the United States. In fact, Gato Barbieri was a member of the Argentine Communist Party and many of those ideas belonged to the party credo. While he was never an officer of the Communist Party, Barbieri is still well remembered for his efforts to collect money for the party among fellow musicians during the annual 'campañas financieras'.¹

Thus, his political involvement, which is so important to understand his musical trajectory, precedes his moving abroad. Again, this is something that Karush could not have known because his informants, would have certainly not reported it in order to protect the musician.² To summarize, this is an indispensable book that I can highly recommend to anyone interested in Argentine society, Argentine music, Latin music, processes of globalization and the construction of national identities.

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Notes

1. This information was personally communicated to the author by Alberto Nadra, former Argentine Communist Party officer on December 6, 1995.
2. Any foreigner that wanted to enter the United States had to declare that he/she had never been a member of the Communist Party.