

Deborah Pacini Hernandez. *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995. 267 pp. Paper \$18.95. Cloth \$49.95.

While cultural anthropologists are becoming increasingly comfortable with music, dance, television, and other popular cultural forms, attention to these topics is still relatively recent compared to the accumulated attention awarded more traditional themes. It is, therefore, refreshing to see a full-length ethnographic work devoted to understanding a popular musical form, especially one that claims its roots and popularity among a largely impoverished male audience in crowded shantytowns—specifically in the *colmados* (grocery stores), brothels, and bars—of Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic. This ethnography introduces the reader to the beloved musical form known as *bachata*, a genre developed in the midst of massive rural-urban migration during the 1960s and 1970s and derived from a collective experience of economic, social, and cultural dislocation. Pacini Hernandez's engaging ethnography provides a framework for understanding the evolution of musical genres in the context of dictatorship and shifting class/culture formations. It also provides insights into the development of a familiar, humorous, romantic, and macho form of male sentimentality.

The *bachata*, a guitar-based trio (guitar-bongo-maraca), shares with its audience a raunchy barrio sentimentality marked by bawdy humor that connects eating with sexuality, an aesthetic form celebrating heavy drinking, easily obtained sex, and a macho delight in elaborating upon gendered "inversions" of sexuality, where powerful men are made weak by the sexual prowess of women. It emerged mostly in male public spaces (*colmados*, bars, and brothels) rather than family spaces, thus perhaps explaining the apparent gender distinctiveness of this musical form—mostly male performers singing about women who cause them pain, often because of unrequited or relinquished love.

Pacini Hernandez provides an interesting and provocative account of why, until 1990, the *bachata* was the black sheep of the country's music business. In the process, she also provides an original case that perfectly illustrates—though without explicit reference—Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the development of taste and distinction and their relation to class formation and maintenance. Here "taste" not only seems to be gendered, but is classed as well. This ethnography traces the musical aesthetic tastes developed within the context of a 30-year-long Latin American/Caribbean dictatorship. The Trujillo dictatorship (1930-1961) not only structured political and economic possibilities, but also exercised control over everyday life right down to the minutiae of popular musical tastes.

Pacini Hernandez's study explains how a relatively homogeneous set of musical tastes developed and why *bachata* was only able to fully emerge in the post-Trujillo era. She convincingly demonstrates how Trujillo's preference for a particular form of rural *merengue* (the accordion-based style from the Cibão region) was transformed—through his personal interest and investment—into an *orquesta* style music danced to by the country's elite in ostentatious hotels. The poor participated only by listening to the broadcasts of these same events by radio. Through the combination of a tightly controlled mass media and a series of dictatorial rituals, *merengue* came to signify the only true national music and, accordingly, won exclusive preference throughout the class structure.

Indeed, during Pacini Hernandez's time in the field (1986), *bachata* was still regarded by the middle and upper classes as a delegitimized art form—an indigenous form of “low-brow.” Those who listened to *bachata* were *la gente baja*. One record store owner explained to Pacini Hernandez that they didn't sell *bachata* because they didn't want to attract the clientele who listened to it. In 1990, however, the status of *bachata* began to change with the release of *Bachata Rosa*, a record album by Juan Luis Guerra, the well-respected *merengue* musician.

Pacini Hernandez offers a unique approach to the analysis of the production and distribution of taste. She incorporates the music business, radio, and mass media into her analysis, examining the roles played by recording studios, record producers, vendors, radio disc jockeys, and others involved in the production and distribution of *bachata*. Her analysis is deepened further through interviews with key musicians and their fans. She also observed musical performances in *colmados* and bars in slums and poor barrios (working-class neighborhoods) in Santo Domingo. While *bachata* has been a popular musical form, the public spaces in which it was heard were generally not considered appropriate for “decent” women, and her presence as a woman in such spaces was continually questioned and challenged. By eliciting the support of male friends in accompanying her, and by managing to look convincing as an observer, wielding the baggage of her trade—cameras, recorders, and notebooks, Pacini Hernandez succeeded in carrying out this difficult component of her fieldwork. Her ethnography takes us through the evolution of *bachata* as it was “transformed from musical pariah to radical chic” (227), and analyzes the unique mix of forces that enabled it to become more acceptable.

One of the most entertaining chapters of the book has to do with the transitions that she traces as having occurred within the *bachata* genre itself. In the 1960s, the music resembled the slow romantic Cuban *bolero* and the lyrics of the songs were poetic statements about the pains and

pleasures of love. During the 1970s, a wider range of problems associated with love, sex, and gender emerged and were expressed in the context of a deepening economic crisis. In the 1980s, many *bachata* musicians who were attempting to shed the negative connotations of the music began to call their style *música de amargue* (music of bitterness) rather than *bachata* in the attempt to win wider acceptability.

One aspect of this study that is interesting to consider further is the fact that most *bachateros* have been men and that the lyrics have often represented the male voice of romantic machismo. She notes an interesting transition from the *bachatas* composed in the 1960s to those composed in the 1980s. The 1960s *bachatas* refer to women subjects in the second person familiar *tú* form, whereas in the 1980s women are referred to indirectly, in the third person *ella*. It is in this not-so-subtle erasure of the subject that Pacini Hernandez traces the effects of the loss of authority and control experienced by men in the unstable economic situation they faced in the urban shantytowns. In these songs, women are frequently portrayed as aggressors and men as victims: "*Bachateros* complained about betrayal, alienation, and hopelessness, yet they did not blame these problems on the economic and political elite who had indeed betrayed and abandoned the poor as a class, but on women" (184). Pacini Hernandez is clear that "these lyrics were the symptoms, not the causes, of social disintegration, which demanded conscientious analysis and fundamental structural changes, not facile moral condemnation" (228).

This analysis suggests a way to analyze macho romanticism as a sentiment produced and reproduced in the context of *savaga* capitalism and of social dislocation. But it would also be helpful to know how women from the poorest classes react to these songs. Is this an aspect of "the popular" that women share in to some extent? Do women secretly love these songs and take some sort of identity cue from the women making men suffer in the particular ways outlined in the lyrics and style of the songs?

In her concluding chapter, Pacini Hernandez explains why *bachata* emerged as a distinct style—it captured in its form the mood and tenor of disruption experienced by migrants who moved to urban shantytowns and lost subsequently romanticized aspects of rural life. It is less clear, however, why so many of the lyrics are focused on the transience of romantic relationships between men and women. Why, indeed, did pain and suffering with regard to love and lust become the vehicle for transmitting the sad and nostalgic aspects of this population's discontent? It is also interesting to ponder how *bachata* might develop in the future—for instance, whether women will become *bachateras* in greater numbers

and whether the spaces where it can be listened and danced to will become more appropriate spaces for a wider range of women. All in all, the book is quite captivating and draws the reader into full emotional contact with a popular, sad, and humorous musical form that might otherwise be inaccessible.

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Sheldon, Ruth. *Bob Wills: Hubbin' It*. Country Music Foundation: Nashville, 1995. 100 pp. \$14.95.

Hubbin' It, originally published by journalist Ruth Sheldon in 1938, remained the only real biography of Bob Wills until Charles Townsend published his *San Antonio Rose* in 1976. Sheldon's book was published privately, available only by mail order. She chronicles the life of Bob Wills from his humble beginnings as a farm boy through his rise to fame as one of the world's greatest fiddlers and band leaders. Sheldon was originally assigned to write a story on Wills for the *Tulsa Tribune*. Her boss told her to go investigate the man who gets a "thousand fan letters a week" due to the publicity generated from his radio shows and dance appearances (1). Sheldon found Wills so charming and invigorating that she decided his story should be told.

Willis was the son of a poor farm family. His father, also a fiddler, vowed to make his son a "fiddler" from the day he was born (5). Although as Wills grew up his interest in music was not as great as his family anticipated, he had a natural talent for playing. Sheldon tells the story of how as a young boy Wills picked up the fiddle for the first time and outplayed his thirty-five-year-old cousin Olford. After hearing Wills, Olford never "attempt[ed] to play the fiddle" again (11). Wills was always a hard worker and never shied away from hard labor. As a young man of sixteen, he went out in search of work and a better life. Wills did not find a better life, but he did occasionally find work on someone's farm, making one or two dollars a day. Working as a cotton picker at the age of seventeen, Wills felt the "call" to become a preacher. He had a family willing to sponsor him to go to seminary, but his "ancient pride" and "craving for independence" to make a life on his own terms, with no handouts, kept him from studying to become a Bible preacher (20).

Wills did not initially consider becoming a full-time musician. He would occasionally play a dance or a party. However, his reputation as one of the best fiddlers around preceded him and he was constantly being asked to play dances. While working as a barber, Wills decided to take music lessons to see if he could improve his playing, but he soon became dissatisfied with this because "he could play so much better than