

Fecha de recepción: 30 diciembre 2013
Fecha de aceptación: 28 enero 2014
Fecha de publicación: 10 febrero 2014
URL: <http://oceanide.netne.net/articulos/art6-1.php>
Oceánide número 6, ISSN 1989-6328

A Spaniard in America / An Americano in Spain: Xavier Cugat and his Incredible Story

Galina BAKHTIAROVA
(Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, United States)

RESUMEN:

El líder estadounidense Xavier Cugat (1901-1990), autoproclamado Rey de la Rumba, es uno de los nombres más conocidos en el panorama musical de los Estados Unidos desde finales de 1930 hasta la década de 1960. Nacido en la ciudad de Girona, en lo que hoy es la Comunidad Autónoma de Cataluña, en España, y educado como músico en Cuba, Cugat aprovechó el encanto de los ritmos exóticos asociados entre España y América Latina. Cugat siempre se auto-identificó como catalán y al tiempo, se sentía orgulloso de su ciudadanía americana. Su influencia en la música popular estadounidense y mundial fue enorme. Su trayectoria refleja, como ninguna otra, la historia de la música popular del siglo XX cuando se difuminan las fronteras nacionales y las culturas se mezclan entre sí. Un gran promotor de sí mismo e inteligente showman, ha participado en numerosos actos publicitarios, siempre dispuesto a conceder entrevistas. De estas entrevistas nace en parte el mito de Cugat, convirtiendo su biografía en una fusión entre realidad e imaginación, que sigue confundiendo aun hoy en día a escritores e investigadores. Una yuxtaposición de sus dos relatos autobiográficos, y múltiples entrevistas a los medios, insinúan cierta aura de fama, y un deseo desenfrenado de auto-promoción. Este artículo explora la vida de Cugat, en el contexto de la música popular y la cultura estadounidense de la primera mitad del siglo XX, y separa los hechos de la ficción que él mismo colaboró a inventar.

Palabras clave: música popular, música latina, industria del entretenimiento, tango, rumba, conga, mambo

ABSTRACT:

American bandleader Xavier Cugat (1901-1990), the self-proclaimed King of the Rumba, was a household name in the United States from the late 1930s to the 1960s. Born in the city of Gerona in what is now the autonomous region of Catalonia in Spain and raised and initially trained as a musician in Cuba, Cugat took full advantage of the allure of exotic rhythms associated with Spain and Latin America. Cugat always self-identified as a Catalan and was proud of being an American citizen. His influence on American and world-wide popular music was enormous. His trajectory as no other reflects the story of twentieth century popular music when national borders were blurred, and cultures were blended and transformed. A savvy entertainer and self-promoter, he participated in numerous publicity stunts and was always eager to give interviews and talk about himself. Stories that Cugat told to the media became part of his invented biography, which continues to confuse writers and researchers even today. A juxtaposition of his two autobiographic narratives and multiple interviews that he gave to the media throughout the world brings about thoughts about publicity, stardom and an unbridled desire for self-promotion. This article explores Cugat's life in the context of American popular music and culture of the first half of the twentieth century and separates facts from fiction that he invented about himself.

Keywords: popular music, Latino music, entertainment industry, tango, rumba, conga, mambo

American bandleader Xavier Cugat (1901-1990), the self-proclaimed King of the Rumba, was a household name in the United States from the late 1930s to the 1960s. Cugat's influence on American and world-wide popular music was enormous. So also was his involvement in the entertainment industry. Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Dinah Shore, Desi Arnaz, Carmen Miranda, Lina Romay, Miguelito Valdés, Abbe Lane and Charo Baeza, among many others, started their careers or performed at some point under the direction of his violin bow, which he often used instead of a baton. For sixteen years starting in 1933, his orchestra was the staple of entertainment at the most prestigious venue in the country, the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. The weekly radio broadcasts of his Waldorf Astoria show were a big hit with the listeners at the time when radio waves were the main purveyor of entertainment for the nation. Though his detractors routinely dismissed his arrangements of melodies borrowed from the rich Latin American and Spanish sources as not authentic, Cugat seemed undeterred by these criticisms. Into the 1960s, he continued to fill the dance halls and radio waves with his own crowd-pleasing and somewhat bombastic versions of the so-called latunes, American songs with a tropical flair. The success of his unique adaptation of Latino melodies to North American tastes paved his way to Hollywood where Cugat and his orchestra were featured in numerous motion pictures. Among the most popular were war time hits *You Were Never Lovelier* (1942) with Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth, *Bathing Beauty* (1944) with Esther Williams and Red Skelton and *Week-End at the Waldorf* (1945) featuring Ginger Rogers and Lana Turner. Later in the 1950s, he boasted an ubiquitous presence on TV and in concert and dance halls.

Even though Cugat did not fulfill his ambition of living one hundred years, his trajectory as no other reflects the story of twentieth century popular music when national borders were blurred, and cultures were blended and transformed.¹ Ever a showman with a keen eye, desire and intuition for innovation, Cugat took full advantage of developing technologies. He brought his own unique brand of Latino music to millions of newly converted fans. Long before the elegant Desi Arnaz conquered the hearts of American housewives beating the drums and greeting his TV and real-life wife with an inimitable Cuban speak, "Lucy, I am home;" long before Celia Cruz made dancing salsa a part of suburban American life-style; long before Americans rediscovered Cuban music through the

Buena Vista Social Club, Cugat filled dance rooms, music halls, stadiums and living rooms throughout the world with music that pleased and entertained.

Born in Spain in 1901 and raised and initially trained as a musician in Cuba, Cugat took full advantage of the allure of exotic rhythms associated with Spain and Latin America. A showman with a keen sense of what his audiences wanted and expected, Cugat was credited by the press and the media for the tango, rhumba, conga and mambo craze in the United States. A multitalented entertainer, Cugat was a virtuoso violin player, a reputable caricature artist, a painter and an entrepreneur. Over almost ninety years of his life, he gave his name to multiple ventures that included the breeding of Chihuahua dogs; the marketing of men's shirts and ties; traditional Christmas candy with a tropical flair which he called "Cugat Nugats;" smoking pipes (he never smoked himself); cocktails, and restaurants. Starting in the late 1920s, Cugat and his publicity agents used every opportunity to promote his exceptional talents for music and caricature drawing to advance his career. Numerous publicity stunts and stories that Cugat told to the media became part of his invented biography, which continues to confuse writers and researchers even today. His two autobiographical narratives *Rumba Is My Life* (1948), illustrated by the author and published in New York by Didier, and *Yo Cugat: Mis primeros 80 Años* (1981), published in Spain by Dasa Edicions, are an entertaining read, yet they prove to be an unreliable source. *Rumba is My Life* was published as the country was recovering from the trauma of World War II, while *Yo Cugat* appeared in Spain at the time when the nation was going through a not so easy transition from a repressive authoritarian regime to a modern democratic state. This was a time of artistic freedom and social changes never seen before in Spain. A juxtaposition of his two autobiographical narratives, one in English from 1948 and the other in Spanish from 1981, brings about thoughts about publicity, stardom and an unbridled desire for self-promotion. There is hardly any doubt that as he was growing older, he most likely believed the stories that he had told and retold to the media. From the very early appearances of his career that span almost eight decades, he promoted himself associating his name with celebrities, such as Enrico Caruso, the most famous tenor of the time, and Rudolph Valentino, the matinee idol of the 1920s, to name but a few. His invented biography continues to be recycled not only on the Internet fan sites but in

academic publications, music dictionaries, annotations of CDs and DVDs, and even in his obituaries in 1990.

Born in the city of Gerona in what is now the autonomous region of Catalonia in Spain, Cugat always self-identified as a Catalan. "My Shawl," a theme that he composed as an opening act for his orchestra, was based on Catalan folkloric music and, according to him, his orchestra started every show with this theme no matter where they performed.² His family with four young boys soon decided to search for a better life overseas, or *hacer las Américas*, as they say in Spain. Cugat sometimes hinted that his father had to leave Spain because of political persecution. When the family left Catalonia in search of a better life across the ocean, their destination was Mexico. However, after a strenuous forty-five day journey, they disembarked in Havana where Cugat's father, Juan Cugat, found a job as an electrician at a cookie plant. In an interview to Juan Poch Soler in 1990, Cugat acknowledged that he had no memories of the journey (Soler, 1990: 9). The discomfort, however, of a forty-five day voyage in third class where the family with four young boys occupied one small cabin was permanently embedded in his family's lore.

Though he was born in Catalonia and raised in Cuba, Cugat was as proud of being an American citizen and of his success in America as he was of his Catalan roots: "América es un país de especialistas...Yo triunfé, y me llamaron el 'rey de la rumba', porque fui el primero en implantar ese baile y no hacía otra cosa que tocar rumbas. Me especialicé en ese género y tocaba rumbas día y noche" (Soler, 1990: 87). (America is a country of specialists. I triumphed, and they called me "King of the Rumba" because I was the first to introduce this dance and I only played rumbas. I specialized in this genre and I played rumba day and night.) In 1981, Cugat claimed that he had sold 48 million recordings of his music (Cugat, 1981: 354). One thing is certain: he had an extraordinary confidence in his own strength and a keen understanding of the tastes of his audiences, both his listeners and his readers.

Young Cugat began a career in music at a very early age when he was presented with a quarter-size violin on the Three Kings Day in 1906. A child prodigy, by the time he was nine, Cugat, had won several awards, continued his studies at a music school and even got his first job, as he claimed in his Spanish autobiography. He played the violin in a trio that accompanied

silent movies at the centrally located movie theater Payret in Havana. His companion at the time was a young pianist who later became world famous as Moisés Simons, the composer of one of the most popular songs of the twentieth century, "El manisero," The Peanut Vendor. It was first recorded in 1927 or 1928 and often credited for the initiation of rumba craze in the United States. Cugat performed and recorded "El manisero" with many different artists later in life.

Cugat entered Conservatorio Peyrellada, the Peyrellada School of Music, one of the most prestigious in Havana, where he studied with Joaquín Molina who was also the concertmaster of the Orchestra of the National Theater of Cuba at the time. It was Molina who introduced his young pupil to Arturo Bovi, the Italian music director of the orchestra. The virtuosity of the young musician was so impressive that Bovi appointed him the first violin of the orchestra allegedly at the age of twelve: "I was a better violinist that (sic) any in his orchestra" (Cugat, 1948: 34).³ Most likely the child prodigy played with the orchestra until his departure for New York in 1915. The ship manifests available at the Ellis Island Foundation Archives show two records of Javier Cugat's arrival in New York.⁴ The first is the record of the arrival of Juan Cugat with his wife and four children on July 6, 1915, on the steamer *Havana* of the Ward Company. The second time, Javier and Juan Cugat entered through Ellis Island from Cuba on January 12, 1921, on the steamer *The Mexico*. In his American and Spanish autobiographies, Xavier Cugat offers two curious and vastly different narratives about his first arrival in New York. The family came following in the footsteps of Cugat's oldest brother who had immigrated earlier and was charged with renting an apartment and accommodating the family during the days of the transition. Because the apartment that his brother had rented was not ready for the move, the family stayed at a hotel and, according to Cugat, spent several days sightseeing. The description of the first days spent in New York sounds more like a leisurely tourist trip than an immigration undertaken in order to improve one's life. On the heels of a recent success of *Week-End at the Waldorf* (1945) directed by Robert Z. Leonard, in *Rumba is My Life*, Cugat talks more about his fascination with New York than about real-life travails of an immigration experience: "Yet, as we sailed into the harbor I was overwhelmed by its grandeur and magnificence. Who could imagine that years later I would be starring at its most famous hotel, the Waldorf-

Astoria, and be responsible for a new era in America's dancing taste?" (Cugat, 1948: 49). Clearly this pretentious statement was part of his publicity and self-promotion efforts that he expected to achieve with *Rumba is My Life*. The list of New York attractions is exhausting and worthy of a tourist guidebook: "Although I was thrilled by the bridges, the museums, the Metropolitan Opera House, Broadway, Fifth Avenue, Central Park, Greenwich Village, Chinatown and financial district, the Bronx Zoo, the Aquarium, Harlem, Coney Island, Riverside Drive and Automat, it was stately Carnegie Hall, as you might suppose, that made the deepest impression" (Cugat, 1948: 50). Cugat maintained throughout his life that as a young aspiring musician he had had two recitals at Carnegie Hall and that he was disappointed when the critics did not praise him enough to compare him with the giants such as Heifetz, Kreisler and Elman (Cugat, 1981: 63). There is no record in Carnegie Hall Archives of Cugat's solo recitals in the 1920s.

There is no doubt that media savvy Cugat knew very well what his readers and audiences wanted. At the time of the recovery from the wounds of World War II, an air of the mundane world traveler was more appealing to the American readers who preferred the glamorous stories of comfortable voyages and tourist sightseeing to those of poverty and struggling immigrants. Interestingly, thirty-two years later, in the Spanish version, Cugat expressed an opposite extreme: "Finalmente vino el momento que creí poseer el dinero suficiente para emprender aquel viaje soñado y a Nueva York me fui con mi violín bajo el brazo, envuelto en una funda que me hizo mi madre porque no teníamos suficiente dinero para comprar un estuche. Desembarqué en aquella ciudad portentosa sin cinco en el bolsillo y sin hablar una palabra en inglés" (Cugat, 1981: 39). (Finally I thought that I had enough money to undertake the journey about which I dreamed, and I left for New York with my violin in a cover made by my mother because we could not afford to buy one. I disembarked in that marvelous city without money in my pocket and without knowing a word of English.) The latter is certainly true. Like millions of other immigrants, Cugat started learning English upon arrival in New York. In the Spanish version, Cugat offered a story that highlighted the determination of a young immigrant who struggled all the way to the top of his artistic career. Cugat claimed that being on his own in New York, he had nowhere to stay and slept on a bench in Central Park: "Dormí muchas noches en el

parque. La oscuridad me espantaba y oía los lejanos ruidos de la ciudad que se iba durmiendo lentamente..." (Cugat, 1981: 39). (I slept many nights in the park. I was afraid of the dark and I could hear the far away sounds of the city that gradually went to sleep...).

There are two stories about his youth in New York City that Cugat reiterated numerous times and that continue to be repeated in many publications. The first concerns an alleged association with the great tenor Enrico Caruso while the second is about his recitals in Carnegie Hall as part of his ambition to become a virtuoso violin player. Arguably, the Caruso story originated when Cugat in his twenties moved to Los Angeles and was trying to make it as a cartoonist. Associating his name with that of the great tenor, who was a talented cartoonist and a publicity-savvy entertainer himself, helped Cugat to promote his career both as a musician and a cartoonist.⁵ However, this story is most likely a fruit of Cugat's imagination. The great tenor arrived in Cuba on May 5, 1920, on the Steamship *Miami* and left on June 23. Caruso was lured to Cuba by the highest honorarium any tenor ever received even through the 1970s. Cuba at the time was living what was later called "The Dance of the Millions," a short period when unbridled sugar speculation brought immense prosperity to the island. Most likely Cugat was not even in Cuba at the time of this visit. Carnegie Hall records indicate that he participated in two Spanish concerts together with other artists on June 27 and July 10, 1920. *La Nova Catalunya*, a magazine that was published in Havana in the first half of the twentieth century, in its October 1920 issue, published a note and a picture of young Cugat who was expected to arrive in Havana in November as part of his Latin American tour. Cugat and a virtuoso pianist Julian Huarte, a pupil of Catalan masters Granados, Pedrell and Morera i Nicolau, were expected to give concerts in Havana, Matanzas, Cárdenas, Cienfuegos, Santa Clara, Sagua La Grande, Ciego de Avila, Manzanillo, Guantánamo and Santiago de Cuba before leaving for Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo and Mexico (*La Nova Catalunya*, 1920: 19). Strangely, Cugat did not leave any recollections of this tour. He returned to New York with his father in January of 1921.

The early 1920s was the time of fervent apprenticeship and desire to make it as a virtuoso violin player. Without doubt, Cugat was an active participant of the incredibly active artistic and social life of the Spanish community in New York City in the 1920s. Concerts, opera performances, masked

balls with exotic Spanish theme, fans and mantillas were ubiquitous and apparently young Cugat was in the center of attention. On October 12, 1920 he played together with Julian Huarte (piano) two pieces by the Spanish composer Sarasate in a grand concert organized by the powerful Unión Benéfica Española at Carnegie Hall. He also appeared with the soprano Alice Verlet during her Carnegie Hall recital on March 17, 1922. In the early 1920s he left for Europe to continue studying the violin. His autobiographies skip this period almost completely and no details other than that he studied in Berlin and performed in Spain are offered.

Most likely in 1925, he returned from Europe disappointed at his prospects as a classically trained violinist. Having abandoned the dream of a solo career, Cugat soon took a position as a first violin with the Vincent Lopez Orchestra. Vincent Lopez, a son of Portuguese immigrants, was born in Brooklyn and had achieved success playing popular dance melodies at a number of venues around New York. He was one of the pioneers of weekly radio broadcasts of his music. At the time when Cugat joined the Vincent Lopez Orchestra, Lopez just opened his own club, Casa Lopez. Playing light dance music with Lopez did not inspire the classically trained Cugat who mentioned that he felt like a college professor who was back in middle school. He apparently detested the repetitive and simple music that Lopez played (Cugat, 1981: 65).

He was soon ready to move on. An opportunity presented itself in the figure of a Catalan antiques dealer, Ignacio Abadal. A regular at Casa Lopez, Abadal was looking for a representative on the West Coast to sell art and antiques imported from Spain. Los Angeles, with the burgeoning film industry and the real estate boom that ensued, seemed to be an appropriate and lucrative market for Spanish antiques. At the time, California was asserting its imagined Spanish identity through the proliferation of mansions in richly decorated Spanish and Mediterranean Revival styles. Despite his family's better judgment and objections to his moving to California, Cugat took on the challenge and left for the West Coast "with my carload of original paintings by El Greco, Goya, Velázquez and Sorolla" (Cugat, 1948: 78). In the Spanish version in 1981, Cugat is more cautious and undoubtedly more truthful. He does not mention the names of the great Spanish artists, just calls them "Spanish masters" (clásicos españoles). Most likely, he was selling imitations that

served the tastes of wealthy Americans on both coasts.

The arrival in Los Angeles, as Cugat admitted, was the most decisive turn in his life and career (Cugat, 1981: 66). The gallery where he displayed art work supplied by Abadal attracted Hollywood glitterati: Norma Talmadge, Douglas Fairbanks, Norma Shearer, William Powell and Charles Chaplin soon became his clients. He often mentioned that he had been hired by the *Los Angeles Times* to provide caricatures of Hollywood personalities under his mother's name, De Bru, but that he did not last there more than six months. On July 7, 1927, five of his cartoons appeared under the title "Local Celebrities as Seen by Spanish Cartoonist." The cartoons represent L.E. Behymer, a local impresario who organized classical music concerts; Lillian Gish, Douglas Fairbanks and Gloria Swanson, all three celebrated silent film actors; and Sid Grauman, owner of the Grauman's Chinese Theater. The text of the accompanying article is remarkable as it shows in a nutshell how a twenty-six year old Cugat was building his career and creating both publicity for the moment and a legend for life and after. Not only was he introduced as an exotic visiting musician from Barcelona, never mind that he had been living on the East Coast since 1915, but also the Caruso story appears here probably in its early version. Association with Caruso was repeated for decades and continues reappearing in print, on the covers of LPs, CDs, on the Internet and in academic publications even today:

Caricaturing many local celebrities, mostly from motion-picture colony, a collection of sixty-five cartoons has been completed by De Bru, a Spanish artist from Barcelona, who is here on his first visit to America.

De Bru, whose real name is Xavier Cugat, is a violinist by profession and does his sketching merely as a pastime, he says. During five years when he was assisting artist to Caruso in concerts throughout Europe they spent much time on the trains and it was here that he first began cartooning. Caruso, he said, also was fond of drawing and did it with a great deal of skill and together they used to pass the hours on trains with their sketching.

The artist was also a soloist with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra for a number of years and has attained the rare privilege of

home talent being requested to play before the King and Queen of Spain. Cugat's visit to Los Angeles was made for the purpose of giving fifteen concerts for L.E. Behymer beginning in September. The collection will be on display at the Montmartre Café, 6757 Hollywood Boulevard, beginning the 10th inst., and continuing ten days. (*Los Angeles Times*, 1927: A5)

What is really interesting here is the fact that the venue for the exhibit is the acclaimed Montmartre Café, a celebrity studded spot for lunching, dining, drinking, dancing and gambling. Montmartre was the first place in Hollywood where movie celebrities convened between shoots and in the evenings. It was closer to the studios than the Coconut Grove at the Ambassador Hotel located towards downtown Los Angeles, and was a real everyday hub for the Hollywood elite. It was at the Montmartre that Cugat started to play with his first band as a bandleader.

His first wife, Mexican actress and singer Carmen Castillo, might have played a more prominent role in his evolution as a musician than he ever acknowledged.⁶ According to Cugat, they met at the house of the Mexican star Dolores del Río where he came to make a caricature of the most prominent Hollywood celebrity actress of the time. Carmen worked as her double, and he mistook her for del Río. Apparently romance soon flourished and he became a frequent guest at Carmen's house that was always open to her expats and other Spanish-speaking actors, musicians and artists who aspired to make it in Hollywood. The soirées at Carmen's house often turned into exciting musical entertainment. Cugat soon put together a small band of musicians who started performing "tropical" melodies. It is this band that started playing at the Montmartre. As they excelled in playing Latino melodies, among them the song entitled "Estrellita," Cugat realized the impact that this music and his arrangements had on his audiences.⁷ The success at the Montmartre led to a contract at the fabulously famous Coconut Grove at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. This was a measure of real success as the Coconut Grove was the night club where the crème de la crème of Hollywood society came nightly to see and be seen. Cugat's band was first invited there as an opener for Gus Arnheim's orchestra and made his way to the top of the list very soon. "Mis ritmos latinoamericanos fueron inmediatamente captados por el público y el éxito fue tal que ya no fuimos considerados como la

'orquesta de reserva', sino como una de las dos grandes orquestas que participaban cada noche en el mismo espectáculo" (Cugat, 1981: 135-36). (My Latin-American rhythms were immediately captured by the public and our success was so great that soon we were not considered a 'substitute orchestra,' but as one of two big orchestras who were on the program each night.)

By all accounts, the tango popularized by Rudolph Valentino in the epic *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) continued to have an enormous cultural impact. The tango scene from the film where the matinee idol clad in a gaucho outfit a la Hollywood charmed impressionable *señoritas* had a particularly strong influence on the North American cultural imagination.⁸ It stimulated the unprecedented tango craze of the 1920s even though, to the great sorrow of millions, Valentino suddenly died at an early age of thirty-one in August of 1926. Among the proponents of tango was Charlie Chaplin. Not only did he perform it on screen but he was famously a regular at the Coconut Grove where he danced it with gusto. Cugat praised Chaplin as the only foreigner who knew how to dance a real Argentinian tango (Cugat, 1981: 138). Capitalizing on the success of the tango, Cugat, an ever creative showman, proposed to the owners of the club to hire professional Latin-American tango dancers who would demonstrate to the public a proper way to dance the tango.⁹ During the breaks, these couples dressed in tuxedos and glamorous ball-room gowns gave mini-lessons to the patrons. Men danced with female guests, while women would teach their male partners. This practice was very successful and soon it led to the creation of an orchestra that was baptized "Cugat and his gigolos." In retrospect, Cugat mentioned that it was not a very fortunate name. The French word "gigolo" contains a derogatory connotation of a male companion living off his sexual services to women, yet Cugat admitted that he went along with the name for the sake of publicity. It was then that he chose to dress his musicians and himself in exotic outlandish attires complete with flounces, frills and wide-brim hats. His female dancers were the precursors of Vegas-style entertainment, while his male singers sang with the Spanish accent that excited and thrilled the imagination of the audiences. It can be said without exaggeration that Cugat knew how to use Valentino's charisma to his own advantage as he exploited and perfected the image of the hot Latino lover first created by Valentino. His performances perpetuated the American way of dancing

and playing the tango, even though they sometimes offended the sensibilities of the proponents of the authentic Argentinian style. Striving for musical authenticity, he even incorporated into his orchestra a bandoneon on a permanent basis. This instrument, similar to the German concertina, was brought to Argentina by the immigrants from Eastern Europe and is essential for tango playing. Even though purists often objected to Cugat's tango arrangements, his interpretations of such tangoes as "Yira yira," "Nostalgias," "Adiós muchachos," "Inspiración," and the emblematic "Jalousie" in the concert hall and over the radio maintained the genre alive in the United States for a very long time. Curiously, a remastered version of "Nostalgias" is available to download as a ringtone today.¹⁰ There is no doubt that Cugat would have appreciated and embraced this twenty-first century commercial twist on his legacy.

In 1933, the flamboyant style of his arrangements and captivating melodies led to an invitation to open a new entertainment venue in New York City, the "Starlight Roof" at the recently opened Waldorf-Astoria Hotel that was designed to be a gathering place of utmost luxury. Even as his cross-country ride in his car with his musicians and his wife Carmen Castillo was not the most comfortable one, Cugat's arrival in New York soon proved to be triumphant. The repertoire of his orchestra that was soon renamed "The Waldorf-Astoria Orchestra" included a broad variety of international melodies and popular hits. The success was overwhelming. Looking back at the years at the Waldorf in 1981, Cugat analyzed probably better than anybody else the reason for his celebrity and success:

I did not have any doubts about the success of our music. The Hispanic rhythms, such as the tango, rumba or bolero captivated North Americans. It invited them to dance and not to listen just seated at their tables. They had never had a chance to do it before. The clubs that existed before played the music that created an atmosphere allowing people to continue talking at their tables, mostly about business. Our music created a different ambiance and it was very rare that people would resist for a long time at their tables. The dance floor of the Starlight Roof was filled with couples who lived a new life to the sounds of new music. (Cugat, 1981: 144)¹¹

Very soon new opportunities opened. The Waldorf-Astoria Orchestras existed before Cugat came to the Starlight Roof and had been broadcast on WJZ in Newark, New Jersey since the 1920s. By the time Cugat and his orchestra arrived at the Waldorf, the radio networks were growing and were bringing music to listeners far beyond the tri-state area. Cugat got his first big radio exposure from the Waldorf-Astoria as he played the show "Dinner at The Waldorf" that aired daily at 6:00 p.m. providing dinner-time entertainment to American families (Cugat, 1948: 148). Without exaggeration, it is radio that made Cugat a household name coast to coast. In 1935, Cugat and his Waldorf-Astoria Orchestra moved to a dining room decorated by a Catalan artist, José Maria Sert (1874-1945), who was actively working in New York. Sert was commissioned to replace Diego Rivera's controversial mural depicting Vladimir Lenin at the Rockefeller Center. At the Waldorf, Sert designed a series of panels that were based on Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.¹² Starting on December 1, 1934, Cugat participated weekly in a show, "Let's Dance," broadcast by NBC. The line-up for this show included the orchestras with Benny Goodman and Kel Murray at the helm. The popularity of his radio broadcasts helped to sell his recordings, and according to Cugat, thousands of those were sold (Cugat, 1981: 150).

In 1936, "Xavier Cugat and his Waldorf-Astoria Orchestra" went on an artistic tour of the United States coast to coast for the first time. In 1941, ASCAP, (the American Society of Composers, Artists and Producers), banned the broadcast of copyright songs on the airwaves. Cugat dug into hundreds of songs from the Spanish-speaking countries that were not protected by the U.S. copyright law. Adapting these songs made him the darling of broadcasting and won him a contract with one of the most popular national radio programs sponsored by the Reynolds Tobacco Company "The Camel Caravan."¹³

Cugat's secret had always been a vocally strong and sexually attractive front singer, male or female. Among those who performed with Cugat at some point in their career were Lina Romay, Miguelito Valdés, Dinah Shore, Buddy Clark and Desi Arnaz. Cugat assured that he produced the first recording of a young and unknown Frank Sinatra with his orchestra at Waldorf Astoria in 1933, when Sinatra was eighteen (Soler, 1990: 52).¹⁴ The Frank Sinatra Discography available online at the Sinatra Family website does not list this recording; however, Sinatra's recording of "My Shawl"

was released by Columbia in 1945.¹⁵ Cugat directed over 150 recordings with the Waldorf-Astoria Orchestra between 1937 and 1942, the earlier recordings for Victor and the later ones for Columbia.¹⁶ A *Time* magazine article in 1942, stated that he was making "an annual gross of \$500,000 purveying the Cuban rumba and other Latin-American rhythms to the U.S. public." Written in a viciously insulting tone, among other derogatory comments, the article mentioned that "Xavier Cugat rhymes with glue pot" (*Time*, 1942: 56). In 1946, Cugat earned a million dollars as the music director of an orchestra. At the time, it was the highest salary earned by a bandleader (Gasca, 1995: 157). Tours throughout the world followed with overwhelming success. Crowds greeted him as he drove through cities and towns, filled and sold out stadiums and bullfight rings. The Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, the largest concert venue in the United States with seating for nearly eighteen thousand, was sold out.

The popularity of his music opened doors into motion pictures and TV where he mostly performed as himself. According to the International Movie Database, he appeared as an actor in fifteen feature films between 1925 and 1980 and as himself in fifty-eight feature and TV movies starting with the 1928 short *A Spanish Ensemble*. His last TV appearance was in an episode in the Spanish TV series *La vida en un chip* in 1990, the year of his death. Between 1930 and 2008, his music has sounded on the soundtracks of thirty-five movies.¹⁷

You Were Never Lovelier (1942) with Fred Astaire, Rita Hayworth and a young Miguelito Valdés (1912-1978), a Cuban singer known as Mr. Babalú in this country, is still steadily re-run on TCM. *The Heat's On* (1943) with Mae West and Victor Moore and *Bathing Beauty* (1944) with Esther Williams, Red Skelton y Basil Rathbone were among the most financially successful. All of these were uplifting wartime musicals. So also was *Stage Door Canteen* (1943), a filmed concert with a story line and many celebrity cameos. The lengthy list of performers in this film included Yehudi Menuhin, Katharine Hepburn, Ethel Merman, Harpo Marx, Benny Goodman, Peggy Lee, Elsa Maxwell, Merle Oberone and many more. These wartime movies fulfilled a straightforward objective of distracting the audience from the hardships of war and giving them an illusion of happiness. It was successfully achieved with a dash of Cugat's tropical melodies and tons of glittering sequins on his dancers and singers. Interestingly, more than one of those optimistic

stories took place in exotic settings. The Caribbean, Argentina, México and Spain seemed to be the landscapes of choice for the Hollywood directors and producers, even though those landscapes and shores were most often built and painted on the back lots at Melrose Avenue in Hollywood or in Burbank. If not in person, but on screen, the audiences were transported to a tropical paradise, or conversely, to a seedy criminal ambiance. Cugat's upbeat rhythms and ever cheerful disposition was exactly what the doctor ordered at the time of war.

In the 1950s, with his new star Abbe Lane, he conquered Europe, Asia and Latin America. Even after a stroke in 1971, he continued plans for opening casinos in Ibiza and collaborated on various projects with Spanish TV, always lamenting the quality of the latter. He groomed and promoted young stars, such as Charo in the United States and Nina in Catalonia. His music transcended borders and national divides as did his life: from Catalonia to Cuba to the United States to the rest of the world, and back to Catalonia where he died at almost ninety. He lived his last twenty years reminiscing and exaggerating his glorious past. Similar to many of his compatriots who searched for happiness overseas, Cugat is an exemplary *americano*. That is what Catalans call successful emigrants who departed to the Americas in search of a better life, made a fortune and then returned home telling outlandish tales of their adventures, "la aventura americana." Yet, contrary to the mythology of *americanos* who famously built comfortable and spacious homes upon return that even today adorn the maritime promenades of many Catalan coastal towns, Cugat chose to live at a hotel in Barcelona upon return to his native Catalonia in the 1970s. Ever a wanderer and a true citizen of the world, he brought the already blended music of Latin America that had its roots in African, European and indigenous traditions, to a new level of cultural hybridity that was perfectly understood and enjoyed by his audiences no matter where he played.

WORKS CITED

- ANTÓN, JACINTO. (1986). "Interview with Cugat." *El País*, August 22. http://elpais.com/diario/1986/08/22/cultura/525045610_850215.html (Last Access 21 Oct 2013).
- CARUSO, D. (1945). *Enrico Caruso: His Life and Death*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- CUGAT, XAVIER. (1948). *Rumba is my Life*. New York: Didier.
- . (1981). *Yo Cugat: Mis primeros ochenta*

años. Palafrugell, Spain: Dasa.
 IMPACTOS. (1980). "Entrevista a Xavier Cugat, músico." Ràdio Barcelona. Barcelona.
 FAJARDO ESTRADA, R. (1998). *Rita Montaner: Testimonio de una época*. La Habana, Cuba: Casa de las Américas.
 GASCA, L. (1995). *Cugat*. Madrid: Ediciones del Imán.
 GREENFIELD, H. (1991). *Caruso: An Illustrated Life*. North Pomfret, Vermont: Trafalgar Square.
 LA NOVA CATALUNYA. (1920). "Xavier Cugat." 19 October.
 LOS ANGELES TIMES. (1927). "Local Celebrities as Seen by Spanish Cartoonist," 7 July: A5.
 POCH SOLER, J. (1990). *Cugat Vivió*. Barcelona: Tibidabo Actualidad.
 RUST, B. (1975). *The American Dance Band Discography 1890-1942*, Volume 1. New York: Arlington House.
 TIME. (1946) "Eet ees Deesgosting," *Time*, 28 December: 56.

NOTES

1. Throughout his life, Cugat maintained that he was born on January 1, 1900. He often said that his major ambition was to die on December 31, 1999, so that his life would have spanned a century. However, in a radio interview to the program *Impactos* in Barcelona in 1980, he acknowledged that he had lately learned that he was born on January 1, 1901. A copy of his birth certificate was published in the biography by Luis Gasca (1995) who still gave the date as January 1, 1900, even though the birth certificate looks clearly adulterated. The year is illegible because of writing over it, yet if one looks closely, one will notice that the number of letters corresponds to a longer "mil novecientos uno," 1901, than a shorter "mil novecientos," 1900. (Gasca, 1995: 14)
2. "Y, en todas las partes del mundo donde he estado y he actuado, he dicho siempre en público que yo era catalán. Y una prueba de ello es que, cuando se iniciaba un concierto, lo mismo si era en México, en Japón o en los Estados Unidos, la primera pieza que interpretaba mi orquesta era un tema catalán." (Soler, 1990: 133)
3. I have not been able to confirm this story in my search in Cuba at the archives of the Museo de la Música in Havana, Cuba. There is a picture of a young Cugat sitting with other orchestra players in his book autobiography published in 1981 (Cugat, 1981: 28-29).
4. The name is spelled Javier Cugat on Ellis Island record.
5. The details are abundant: Caruso walks

as a tourist on the streets of Havana and even takes off his uncomfortable shoes and walks in socks; Cugat and Caruso draw caricatures together because both are talented artists; Caruso, impressed by Cugat's talents, invites him to come to New York to hone his skills and forge a virtuoso career. The picture painted by the author is lively, full of details that are supposed to add realism to his story: "He often spoke of his wife, Dorothy, whom he affectionately called Doro, and his young daughter, Gloria" (Cugat, 1948: 43). This little piece of information is consistent with Caruso's well documented visit to Cuba. Caruso and Dorothy Park Benjamin were married in August of 1918 and their daughter was born in 1919. His wife published his letters from Cuba in her biography of the tenor in 1945.

6. In 1981, in his Spanish autobiography, Cugat claimed that at the age of eighteen he had married the star of the Cuban musical theater Rita Montaner (1900-1958) whom he divorced within three years. Rita's well-documented biography by Ramón Fajardo Estrada states that the star of Cuban musical theater was engaged at the age of sixteen and later married her first husband Alberto Fernández in 1918. Both Rita Montaner and Xavier Cugat studied together at Conservatorio Peyrellada and performed together in the United States later in life.

7. "Nos dimos cuenta de que la música hispanoamericana y el ritmo que nosotros le dábamos, penetraba en el público" (Cugat, 1981: 134).

8. In his Spanish autobiography in 1981, Cugat claimed that Rudolph Valentino, the sex symbol and ultimate movie star of the silent era, had invited him to collaborate on his famous movie *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. According to Cugat, Valentino invited him to organize a group of musicians to play in his tango scene in the film. Given that Cugat arrived in Hollywood no earlier than in 1925 and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* was released in 1921, Cugat's collaboration on this film is clearly impossible. In addition, as the restored copies of the film are widely available now, one can see that none of the musicians playing in the scene can be a twenty year old Cugat unless his appearance is heavily aged by make-up. Arguably, he does not mention Valentino and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* in his 1948 book for obvious reasons, too many people could have rebuffed these claims. When he published his memoirs in Spain where he lived in semi-retirement after 1971, Cugat was definitely looking for opportunities for aggrandizing his status.

9. "tal como se debía bailar el tango"

(Cugat, 1981: 138).

10. "Nostalgias," Remastered, by Xavier Cugat, *Myxer Social Entertainment*. <http://www.myxer.com/ringtone/id/8372052/Xavier-Cugat/Nostalgias-Remastered/> (Last Access: 1 March 2013).

11. "Yo no dudaba del éxito de nuestra música. El ritmo hispanoamericano, tanto en el tango como en la rumba y el bolero, cautivaba las multitudes norteamericanas. Les daba ganas de bailar y no de oírlos simplemente sentados en la mesa de la cena. Nunca se había asistido a un hecho semejante. La música de aquellos clubs era más bien creadora de un ambiente para que se mantuviera en las mesas conversaciones de todo tipo, predominando la de los hombres de negocios. Pero nuestro ritmo creó un ambiente diferente y era raro que los que escuchaban se resistieran por mucho tiempo en sus respectivas mesas. La pista de Starlight Roof estaba atestada de parejas que vivían, con el nuevo ritmo, una nueva vida" (Cugat, 1981: 144).

12. These were removed in 1972 and are currently in Spain in possession of a bank.

13. "Xavier Cugat Is Dead," *International Musician*, December 1990.

14. Interview with Cugat by Jacinto Antón, *El País*, August 22, 1986: "¿Ve este disco? Es el primero que grabó Sinatra, en 1933. Es una canción que yo escribí para él, que tenía 18 años. Lo grabó con mi orquesta." See also Cugat, 1981:175.

15. "Frank Sinatra Discography," *Sinatra Family News*, 22 Mar. 2011. <http://sinatrafamily.com/news/frank-sinatra-discography> (Last Access: 25th Feb 2013).

16. Rust, Brian, *The American Dance Band Discography 1890—1942, Volume 1*, Arlington House, New York, 1975, pp. 374-378, 399--402, and 974—981.

17. "Xavier Cugat," International Movie Database. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0191265/>. (Last Access: 25th Feb 2013).

Título: Un español en América / Un americano en España: Xavier Cugat y su increíble historia.

Contact: <BakhtiarG@wcsu.edu>