CENTRO Journal
Volume xvi Number 2
fall 2004

The Musical Poet,
A Session With Victor Hernández Cruz

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The following conversation took place a few years ago. As Victor Hernández Cruz and I drove from Aguas Buenas to Cayey, we talked about poetry, popular music, and as Miguel Algarín put it in *Nuyorican Poetry* (1975), "the experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York"(15) during the 1960s. This is the time that Hernández Cruz came of age in the Big Apple. Later we drafted a copy of the conversation as an interview.

Francisco Cabanillas: Hey, Victor, in reading and rereading *Snaps* I have come to the conclusion that it should be regarded as "the book of music." We can be more specific, still: we can call *Snaps* "the book of Latin *bugalú*." What do you think?

Victor Hernández Cruz: Music was an integral part of my youth. I was very much into the orquestral arrangement of the Latin bands in and around New York. Many Puerto Rican musicians were reproducing old Cuban tunes, *son montunos*, *guajiras*. Around the mid sixties, the phenomenon of the Latin boogaloo came in. I was very much into the sway of the music and its cadence and energy were showing up in my first poetic period. It's a nervous rhythmic energy that is within *Snaps*.

FC: Definitely it is a kind of subtext that makes the book very urban and hip, as if it were pushing modernity into a Nuyorican mold.

VHC: I also grew up with acappella du-wop, and there are some references to this form in the book as well. Du-wop is an African-American street corner style that some say sprang out of Philly or simultaneously out of various urban centers

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and definitely New York. When I was in my early teens in the early 1960s the music of the 1950s was still lingering. Within my house my folks listened to the *trio* music of Puerto Rico and Mexico—Los Panchos, Johnny Albino's Trio San Juan, Los Condes—that too is a form of acappella, romantic lyrics sailing with guitar strings. They were songs of love and tragedy, betrayal, renewal, absence; many of the composers of these *boleros* were popular poets and the lyrics were very developed. They were composers like Mexico's Agustín Lara and Puerto Rico's Rafael Hernández.

FC: So music allows your generation to articulate the new and the traditional.

VHC: I was both into the local music and the music that came from Veracruz, Havana, San Juan. We would bring the records of Johnny Pacheco and those of the Paragons, who had that New York City hit called "Florence"; we would go into the Avenue D housing projects and we partied to that music. We were Puerto Rican and Afro-American youth, occasionally working class white kids would hang with us also. The large hallway entrances of the projects had great acoustics for du-wop. Even better were certain school hallways or bathrooms, because they had porcelain which was really good for echoes—sound just bounced right off. Groups like the Harptones and Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers were composed of Afro-American and Puerto Rican members.

FC: Are these groups connected with Latin bugalú? Also, what do you think about the conspiracy theories regarding an alleged sabotage against Latin bugalú, which Vernon W. Boggs talks about with Johnny Colón in *Salsiology* (1992).

VHC: That joint street culture we could say was the origin of the Latin boogaloo. Latin bands were changing their sound into an R&B tempo and listening to lyrics in English. Perhaps there were pockets of traditionalists that didn't identify with this movement but I never saw it as a conflict between the *típico* Latin and Latin boogaloo.

FC: Yet, some claim there was an organized repression against Latin bugalú that affected the younger and emerging Nuyorican musicians.

VHC: Latin boogaloo emerged out of a reality that existed in the city; it was culture turned into song and music. It erupted up out of the streets fast and jumpy like Joe Bataan's "Gypsy Woman," or jazzy like Johnny Colon's "Boogaloo Blues." Even Eddie Palmieri did some boogaloos; he did some things with a singer named Cindy and some where he featured Cachao, the bassist, taking solos. Those tunes were very well arranged and had excellent musicianship.

FC: What else was going on?

VHC: Also an East Harlem *timbalero* was doing innovations with jazzy rhythms and blues; that was Willie Bobo, who was recording with the Verve label back then. There were lots and lots of fusion going on. Let's not forget Dizzy Gillespie's relationship with Chano Pozo, a Cuban *conguero* and the work of Machito and Mario Bauzá, all in the early 1940s. Around the early 1960s I used to listen to the Symphony Sid radio show. I mean the first job I had, the first paycheck I got, I bought a portable radio just so that I could hear Symphony Sid and walk the streets with it, and listen to the jazz and Latin tunes that Sid used to mix up. Later on he switched over to total Latin programming, but I really dug it when he would play Latin and jazz tunes side by side: John Coltrane "My Favorite Things" followed by a *pachanga* by Charlie Palmieri. We used to hear Oscar Brown Jr., Nina Simon, Tito Puente, La Lupe, Mongo Santamaría, Wes Montgomery, all coming out of the same program.

FC: You talked about it in *Panoramas* (1997) in an interesting way, linking popular and high culture when you said, "Ah, to be fifteen and Latin from Manhattan walking

around the Avenue to housing projects with a portable transistor radio listening to the Symphony Sid show, with a copy of William Carlos Williams's *Selected Poems* stuffed into your back pocket" (112).

VHC: Yes, it was a late night program, I mean it came on at 11 PM and went on till 3 AM, but New York has always been a late night environment.

FC: And all that listening, dancing, and walking around ended up—did it not?—in *Snaps*.

VHC: The electricity that was going on through *Snaps* can be attributed to music, that strong affinity that poets have with music and that some poetics have with painting. All through *Snaps* there is the Latin boogaloo; it was choppy, fast images, jolts, jittery, young, arrogant, foul-mouthed, naked, uneven raw exhibition like a volcanic eruption in the middle of urbanity.

FC: You seem a bit self-critical about *Snaps'* youth, but every time I read the book I like it better. Your way of referring to *Snaps* has a nice momentum, but I also register in the book a poetic maturity—and I am thinking about the metapoetic level of the book—that, for instance, Latin bugalú lacked, if we consider that it only lasted three years.

VHC: Yes, we could say that bands doing boogaloo simmered off after a while, but we mustn't forget that típico tunes never went out of style. At a big boogaloo bash, circa 1967 at the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn, I saw Machito and his big band, his *clave* firm as ever and the people dancing the Latin steps. The boogaloo never erased the traditional playing; everything was existing simultaneously. It operates the way the Caribbean operates, what Benítez Rojo said in the *Repeating Island* (1992), "the Caribbean is organized chaos."

FC: A choreographic interplay of differences, which, from a different angle, Ángel Quintero Rivera sees in asymmetrical terms.

VHC: Yes, let's take the *bolero*, which has African pacing. Who said that the bolero was a slow *guaguancó*?

FC: Who?

VHC: Think about it; it also has North African, Arab lute tempos, especially in the introductory chords; it is also a song of sadness, it is a lament. Listen to contemporary singers from Iraq how they make the audience cry. Bolero is a form of blues, a love that has been lost; the woman has gone; the man has gone or there is a triangle. This bolero music lives side by side with the happy music, *alegre música tropical*, that makes you dance, that talks about juicy fruits, that sings to curved hips waving like the sea, that says you have to go out and walk the streets and fall in love. It contains lyrics that are hymns to beauty, songs that make you love, that say that life is "*una tómbola, tómbola, tómbola*." And like rice with sausages, which could be the survival of the *paella* in the Caribbean, or something like *chorizo* from Burgos alongside of *guanimes*. Something Taíno and the modified dance steps of the Yorubas; we are not dancing in two rows, one of men one of women, but the coquetry is individualized, one on one, but the same African courtship dances following the same *conga* rhythms with brass trombones or violins.

FC: *Saoco*!

VHC: We live within this stew; so to me, the Latin boogaloo was just a branch, a possibility that was realized; it was something that could have been done and was. Music itself is just a form of sounds blossoming and fusing—it's what music does.

FC: And it spreads all over...

VHC: That spirit of combining soul and Latino music spirits went into many

different outlets. What flourished as rap or hip hop, break dancing out of the Bronx, singers like Angela Bofill and on into forms of Latin jazz, which as I have mentioned, has roots in Mario Bauzá and Machito and Chano Pozo. It has contacts with Gillespie and the Puerto Rican trombonist who was with Duke Ellington, Juan Tizol, who wrote "Caravan" and other tunes for Ellington's big band. This Latin jazz continues to make a music of contemplation and cadence, alert to improvisation and melody, and great drops into valleys of eternal rhythmic laws. Everyone must know the kind of brewing that went down in New Orleans and why it gave birth to so much rhythmic/melodic flavor, not to mention gumbo; the Caribbean city of the U.S., with its Spanish-French Catholic background just brings us all home again.

FC: There are a few poems in *Snaps* that make reference to dancing halls. Do you want to talk about that?

VHC: A place called Colgate Gardens, or El Hipocampo, The Psycho Room (get a load of that name; it comes from the psychedelics that in another America the hippies were experimenting with), these were small time barrio promoters. Some promoters, the bigger and better organizers, were filling hotels, and, sometimes in one night, on a hot Friday night or a holiday, the Bronx Music Palace (Hunt's Point Palace) would be filled and the same orchestras would also be featured at the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn. So those musicians were packing up into cars and hitting the freeways; let's say Pacheco or Larry Harlow's band could have been going to Brooklyn having just played the Palace in the Bronx. That was big time promoting. A promoter like Ralph Mercado, who had some unit called "3 and 1 Club" out of Brooklyn, was doing things like that. He has gone on to be quite an impresario, an international salsa agent, and has his own recording label, RMM.

FC: Did you have a favorite venue?

VHC: One place that I want to mention and it was one of my favorites was Village Gate—Monday night at the Village Gate.

FC: Indeed, you dedicated a poem to Ray Barretto in *Snaps* that makes references to the Village Gate.

VHC: I used to go in there when I was 17 and they had the Monday night live bands there, all the great bands, like Charlie Palmieri, Tito Puente. Then they started to do "Salsa Meets Jazz" and that was like being in paradise; to see Dexter Gordon taking a solo and weaving through a Latin band guaguancó or Billy Taylor, Frank Wes—this was a dynamic experience.

FC: Boggs' *Salsiology* contains an interview with the owner of the Village Gate entitled just like that, "Salsa Meets Jazz at the Village Gate."

VHC: There is nothing in the world like the kind of things that were happening in New York, I mean the things that came together.

FC: Other things were not as good. I need to ask you something that I cannot figure out just by reading your poetry. In many of your early books—*Snaps* (1968), *Mainland* (1973), *Tropicalization* (1976)—there are numerous references to what we can call, following Aparicio, the politics of dancing. We know that during the first part of the 1960s there was the *charanga*/pachanga combination, which you point out in *Panoramas*, "A dance called pachanga, which featured some vicious foot stomping, was knocking buildings down" (25). Charanga groups, associated with the pachanga dance such as Charlie Palmieri's Duboney, were in vogue approximately from 1961 to 1964. On the other hand, Latin bugalú, also vicious dancing music, took off in 1966. The question is this, do most references to dancing in *Snaps* point to the pachanga or bugalú rage?

VHC: I saw people doing the pachanga which was around but fading around 66, right next to other people who were throwing boogaloo steps. I used to like to go to the dances and stare at feet and legs and that swift scissors work choppiness made it into some of the fast pace of the poems in *Snaps*. *Snaps* was percussion with words, it was choreography, motion, catharsis, finally possession.

FC: Even though many musicians played and recorded bugalú songs, most people point to Pete Rodríguez "I Like It Like That," Johnny Colón's "Boogaloo Blues," and Joe Cuba's "Bang Bang" as the hottest early singles. There is one reference in *Snaps* to Cuba's hit in the poem "The Eye Uptown and Downtown (three days)." On stanza 25 you simply wrote "BANG BANG" (112). Was Joe Cuba Mr. Latin Bugalú for you?

VHC: Joe Cuba was always special, a Puerto Rican who adopted the stage name "Cuba" cause that's where the rhythms he was playing were from. I once saw him at the Apollo Theater on 125th street and let me tell you, lots of the Puerto Rican Latin bands of the city played the Apollo. Palmieri was there; he's got that tune "El tema del Apollo." So at the Apollo he had everybody on the edge of their seats. You know that tune where he "bang bang" is also "Oye y ese pito." Now, anybody who was on the Puerto Rican streets of New York could tell you that *pito* was a marijuana joint, and that's the tune where he swings into "I never go back to Georgia," and I am not sure but that might be one of Dizzy Gillespie's tunes. So here were these New York City Puerto Ricans talking about "I'll never go back to Georgia" and perhaps none of them had been south of the Jersey turnpike, but in a spiritual relation we certainly have our "Georgias" and that tune made a very important connection.

FC: So you did have a special like for Joe Cuba.

VHC: Joe Cuba was also barrio music, Spanish Harlem, I mean 110th street, 111th street, 112st, Lexington Ave., Madison. The songs that Cheo and Jimmy Sabater did were full of local stories, "Hey I'm going to move to the end of the Bronx so that that woman doesn't find me." They would call out the names of real street people in their recordings. Joe Cuba had Jimmy Sabater doing du-wop tunes like "To Be With You." His band was exciting to look at, they joked and played with each other. They were *alegre*, it was music to party, it was party music. Cheo Feliciano did lots of the important music with them. Cheo took care of the típico material back then, classics like "Cita a las seis," "Tremendo coco," "Comprenderás," "Cachondea." Joe Cuba had a special flavor that was Caribbean but brewed in New York. It was tropical urbanity.

FC: So, can we conclude that Latin bugalú is behind *Snaps*?

VHC: If a music can be identified with my poetry, always sounding in the background, it is the rhythms of the Caribbean. Given the separation of syllables within words that makes up our language, the poetic form is a parade of rhythmic patterns.

FC: *Mainland* (1973) registers your "migration" from New York to California at the cost of freezing time—as seen through the musical references you put forth in the book, all of which, in my view, belong to *Snaps*. Thus, you went to California from New York but, musically, you never left New York in your second and third books. What do you think?

VHC: In *Mainland* the poems are musical though not always about music. Around the mid seventies there is a feel that what was by then described as salsa music was having a national expansion or a wider following. I remember going to a big dance in a hotel in San Francisco, it was the first time that Willie Colón and his singer Héctor Lavoe played the San Francisco Bay Area. For many people it was a new sensation and Willie Colón a new phenomena; it was around 1971 or 1972, so for me it had been old news, but lots of the people around me were very excited.

So that must be the boom that many people talk about: the new wave of a boom that is part of a series of booms, like the *rumba* sensation in New York in the 30s, the Cubop jazz innovations of Mario Bauza-Gillespie-Machito of the 40s. And just the way the tropical population is, waiting on one dance after another, among the barrio dancers. After the 40s, three more explosions take place: the skeletal breakdowns of the *cha cha chá* of the 50s, the foot stomping jolts of the pachanga of the 60s and finally the expansion, out of the Caribbean communities into larger Anglo sectors. Always there have been all sectors enjoying the music, especially in New York, always a large Jewish following, in dancing and lots of great Jewish musicians of the music, the latest and best known being Larry Harlow.

FC: In general terms, how do you compare New York and California?

VHC: The three places I am identified with are New York, San Francisco and Puerto Rico. They are three different moods and levels or sets of associations. I must repeat, there is nothing like New York. I grew up speaking to great works of art that were permanent parts of the different museums in the city. *Guernica* was one of my best friends over at the Museum of Modern Art. New York was a place where you can weave in and out of different communities and also go into enclaves of Puerto Rican turf where customs, food and music stayed intact. On the other hand, San Francisco had some good jazz clubs, like "Both/And" and "Keystone Corner." It has a very loose and wild sense like anything goes. Well, California feels like that to me; nothing is accomplished; everything is in experimentation, though perhaps here I am talking more about literature and mores, or just dumb orientations.

FC: How about the musical landscape in the Bay Area, where you were?

VHC: What developed in the Bay Area was different than New York. It was more like Latin rock. That's what Carlos Santana is about and also a group like Malo. I truly like their music, the energy of Santana's first album; I mean it just exploded and had more access to white kids because it was on the wings of Rock & Roll. The tune "Suavecito" by Malo has a very distinct West Coast feel—well arranged, great vocals, *fantástico*. Much West Coast Latin music was produced in this vein. Cal Tjader was the greatest Latin jazz musician of the West Coast. The two albums he did with Eddie Palmieri are gems, such sweeps of montunos and *bossa novas* and just new unidentified swaying spaces.

FC: One can almost talk about a musical geography, where Latin bugalú from the New York space...

VHC: Let me mention also that there was another level of the Puerto Rican community that was not on the musical wave of the Latin boogaloo. Those were the islanders who came of age on the island and migrated to New York as adults, or even as young adolescents, and stayed within the orbit of traditional families and remained much more in a capsule—New York as a city had less formation upon them. Though they dealt with the pressure of New York, felt the cold weather that turned into unbelievable snow storms in the fifties, filled many of the unskilled jobs of the city—their relationship with the city as a cultural affront was much more at the edges.

FC: What did they contribute to the musical landscape?

VHC: This crowd maintained in tune to the world of the boleros. They filled the Puerto Rico Theater in the Bronx when performers like Miguel Mejías, Duo Irizarry y Córdoba, Felipe Rodríguez, Yayo El Indio, and a host of others came to town. They were also into the Caribbean rhythms but not so much as rumba, more at pachanga and straight ahead típico or *plena* rhythms. Now they had their own spaces and they are perhaps the parents of the Nuyoricans. There was the Happy Hills

Casino and the Broadway Casino, and numerous other venues sprinkled throughout the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Jersey City. These are the people who would have told you quickly that they were Puerto Rican. They would not have had to hesitate like I have seen to come up with "I am of Puerto Rican descent" or "I am from New York but my parents are from the island." Even "I am Hispanic," "I am Latino," or "I am American but from Puerto Rico." These people didn't have that identity problem. They still remembered the hills of Yauco, the plaza of Moca, the beach of Manatí, and *el mercado de* Caguas; so, they knew who they were. Their English was down to the words necessary to get along at the job or to do some shopping. Their children were translators.

FC: Can we finish up with the relationship between musical and poetic *descargas*, of which you refer to in *Snaps*? How do you react to the Latin descarga?

VHC: Musicians improvise within set parameters—if they are going to be within blues, they all would know their limitations within the free flow; same thing with Latin descargas—they are within a *bomba* or a guaguancó and they build on that. When I am listening I am the body receiving and I hear the music from the dancer's point of view, which is also point of shoe. How can we grasp the charge of music, the actual sensation? It might be impossible. If the poem is heard, we can approximate the singer in a slower cadence. Sound poetry can have its uses and there are a number of performers who take poetry into sound effects. Music is harmonious; things fit; the Cuban metric law of the clave which underlines all Latin music, 3–2, three two beats, the other rhythmic instruments fill in the space in front or behind the count, the orchestration jumps on upon that. After a while, all this creates the sense of a circle in sound, a mandala spinning. Each musician is on a different seat of the ferry wheel, but *clave* remains the motor that makes it move. Within this harmonious collectivity, solitude is the source of freedom. Individuality reins at the moment of the solo, loneliness within a carnival; the solitude never erases the spirit of the clave, the common link between beings. In Caribbean culture there is no privacy, it is a public culture; like the Mediterranean people, we constantly walk the streets, our solos are shared.