

“Yo tengo sentido, tengo rima”: Cano Estremera and the Art of the Soneo

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ABSTRACT

Calling himself *El dueño del soneo*, “the boss of vocal improvisation,” the Puerto Rican singer, Carlos “Cano” Estremera, is at the forefront of many innovations in *soneos*. For the uninitiated, a *soneo* is a vocal improvisation sung by a lead singer during the *montuno*, or call-and-response section in Afro-Cuban *son*-based musics, commercially referred to as salsa. As he is always up for a good duel, planned or unforeseen, the results of Cano’s *duelos* have been recorded both legally and illegally and spread throughout the world by salsa fans. Through conversations with Cano and a look at several techniques he uses when improvising, this article shows Cano Esteremera’s improvisational framework to be a synthesis of previous *soneros* as well as singers and musicians from beyond the realm of salsa. His style can be summed up as unique and creative while remaining in the tradition. [Key words: salsa, music, singers, improvisation, *soneo*, vocalists]



El dueño
del soneo

Cano Estremera

Introduction

Calling himself *El dueño del soneo*, “the boss of vocal improvisation,” the Puerto Rican singer, Carlos “Cano” Estremera, is at the forefront of many innovations in *soneos*. For the uninitiated, a *soneo* is a vocal improvisation sung by a lead singer during the *montuno*, or call-and-response section in Afro-Cuban *son*-based musics, commercially referred to as salsa.¹ As he is always up for a good duel, planned or unforeseen, the results of Cano’s *duelos* have been recorded both legally and illegally and spread throughout the world by salsa fans. Cano Estremera’s improvisational framework is a synthesis of previous *soneros* as well as singers and musicians from beyond the realm of salsa. His style can be summed up as unique and creative while remaining in the tradition of the *sonero*.

Dueño del soneo

Carlos Estremera was born in 1958 in Barrio Obrero, the working class section of Santurce, Puerto Rico. An albino, hence the nickname, *El Cano*, Estremera was socially stigmatized when school teachers mistook vision problems for ignorance. As a young person, his early musical activity was in the local folkloric genres of *bomba* and *plena*. He sang in a neighborhood salsa group before joining the folkloric group, Los Pleneros del Quinto Olivo, and later sang with Orquesta Mulenze, which signed on with Fania Records. In 1978, Cano began a musical association with Bobby Valentín that lasted for six records, including the hit “La boda de ella.” In 1988, he left Valentín’s band to begin a solo career, releasing various albums and earning the name he gave himself, *El dueño del soneo*. Always trying to outdo himself and please his fans, Estremera has publicly sung hundreds of *soneos* at a time without repeating himself.

When I interviewed Cano at his house in Carolina, Puerto Rico, in August 2003, he agreed that because there is no systemization for singing salsa, the strict adherence to rhyme schemes found in folkloric musics is not found in salsa. For Cano, the *soneo* must indisputably rhyme with the *coro* (choral refrain); anything else is “subterfuge” (Estremera 2003). He explained that when a singer runs out of words to rhyme with the *coro*, s/he has a few options. The first, and easiest option is to rhyme a *soneo* with the next *soneo*, and ignore the *coro* until one can come up with something to get back to the rhyme of the *coro*. The second option is to rhyme the *soneo* within the *soneo*, ignore the *coro*, and rhyme with the next *soneo*. The most difficult technique is a triple rhyme where one rhymes within the *soneo*, rhymes with the *coro*, and then rhymes with the next *soneo*. Cano concluded that the *sonero*’s avoidance of the *coro* is due to a weak vocabulary and can be likened to a jazz musician having difficulty with a given tonality or set of chord changes.

In terms of content, the idea of staying within a song’s theme during all of the *soneos* is boring to Cano and in his opinion, to the audience as well. “How many ways can you say I love you in a song?” (Estremera 2003). People criticize him for leaving the theme, but they don’t realize that it’s done purposely. For Cano, it is best to bring up other themes, such as what happened during the day, news, politics, science: “I believe that the *sonero* who only sings about the theme of the song doesn’t know anything else” (Estremera 2003).

Politics and Puerto Rican pride are frequent themes in his *soneos*. In numerous performances he sings about the situation in Vieques and about his pride in being Puerto Rican:

Coro: Ay Boranda
Soneo: Lluvia de bombas en Vieques
A mí que no me hagan trampa
Soneo: Que no llegará mudanza
Yo no se qué es lo que pasa²

Coro: Ay Boranda
Soneo: Rain of bombs in Vieques
Don’t cheat me
Soneo: And the move doesn’t come
[U.S. withdrawal]
I don’t know what’s going on

Similarly, he is sympathetic to the themes and emotions expressed in reggaeton or *underground*, Puerto Rico’s indigenous hip-hop and dancehall hybrid. He identifies with reggaeton’s proletarian message and understands why themes of social injustice, racism, and corruption are being dealt with in this new musical language. To his ears, rap, reggae, and salsa all come from the same place: Africa. As a musician he does not feel threatened by this wildly popular genre of music, intimating that he will incorporate aspects of it into his own improvisational concept. His no-holds-barred attitude to singing and *callejero* (street) stage persona is often misconstrued by lesser singers who feel that Cano is rude or boorish. However, he takes the art of singing *soneos* more seriously than most other singers who call themselves *soneros*, and he humbles himself when discussing music and interaction with the audience (Rodríguez 2003). This mark of humility and openness is not lost on his audience and contributes to his success. In fact, he can be self-deprecating within his *soneos*:

Coro: Ay Boranda
Soneo: Oye dicen que a Cano Estremera
Le crece mucho la panza³
Coro: Ay Boranda
Soneo: Listen, they say about Cano
Estremera
That his belly has gotten bigger

When I asked him if he ever thought of adherence to *clave* when improvising, Cano explained that he didn’t think

about it during the actual *soneo*, that it was an instinctive abidance. He told me that he only looks at the *clave* at the end: “I enter in *clave* when the *soneo* ends... the only place where I unite with the *clave* is when I leave the *soneo*” (Estremera 2003). He does not feel that the *soneo* must be in *clave*. In fact, an entire band will often get fouled up when backing him because he can begin his *soneo* crossing the *clave*. Ultimately, he feels that the singer does not always have to be in *clave* while improvising because the musicians are always playing in *clave*.

According to Cano, singers such as Cheo Feliciano, Ismael Rivera, Tito Allen, El Chamaco Ramírez, Justo Betancourt, Héctor Lavoe, Marvin Santiago, Ismael Quintana, Ismael Miranda, and Adalberto Santiago are successful *soneros* because each truly improvises album after album.⁴ These singers form the “curriculum of salsa” as he has studied it, but “once you study these singers there’s no place left to go” (Estremera 2003).

For aspiring *soneros*, he offers the following advice:

“I believe that they first have to study the curriculum of classic salsa, Cuban music, Brazilian music, folklore from different countries and prepare themselves. [They must] try to look for what we *soneros* do and with this information as a base, learn to digest it. The curriculum is there to study, it’s the catalogue of classic salsa. Once one studies this catalogue, then one begins to mix it together. Many people tell me that I am unlike anybody, when actually I am like everybody” (Rodríguez 2003).

Theory and practice

Cano insists that an important element for succeeding as a *sonero* is to increase one’s vocabulary. To achieve this goal, he learns one new word a day. He also listens to jazz artists such as Bobby McFerrin, Al Jarreau, Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane,

and Charlie Parker, “people who truly improvise” (Estremera 2003). When I asked him if he transcribed or memorized solos and patterns from these improvisers, he indicated that he doesn’t. Instead, Cano internalizes broader concepts by understanding “the concept of improvisation that [these artists] have” (Estremera 2003). For Cano, these concepts include melodic ideas, melodic structure, harmonic structure, and lyrical structure. He points out that, for him, lyrical structure is important, because in salsa, not only do the soneos have to be melodically and lyrically distinct, they must also rhyme. To Cano Estremera’s ears, Miles Davis “rhymes” in all tonalities. He explained that the tonality of a given song will greatly impact a singer’s improvisations and any given singer, including himself, will perform better when a song is in a manageable key; this is why a singer will sound better on one day rather than on another day.

I was surprised when Cano explained that between family, work, and the problems of daily life, he has no time to set aside for practice. He laments the fact that great painters had patrons so that they could focus exclusively on producing art while he has not had similar support. Instead, Cano listens to as much as he can and incorporates it in performances. He does warm up before performing, but feels dissatisfied with his vocal range and voice quality.

But for Cano improvisation is more than technique; he told me, “everything in my life is improvised [and] you have to live improvisation” (Estremera 2003). For Cano, part of improvising is not knowing what you are going to do. Although one can prepare some things, for Cano the only way to practice is to actually improvise: “If you have to think about it then it’s not improvised” (Estremera 2003). And if he plans a oneo it doesn’t come out as intended.

Improvisational techniques

Cano has a wide range of techniques that he uses when improvising. What follows are some specific techniques that he uses when improvising: (1) Singing over the coro. Cano does not like improvising over short *coros*, finding it too repetitive: “The audience can’t hear what it is that you are singing because the coro is on top of you,” he states (Estremera 2003). When encountering a short coro, he does not think about it as such, continuing to sing through it, making his soneos as long as he wants them to be.⁵ In his own words: “It’s like saying you guys want to sing on top of me but I’m not going to let you” (Estremera 2003). (2) Rhyming about rhyming. Cano will often sing about the quality of his opponent’s soneos, belittling their lack of quality:

Coro: Ahora sí, vamos a ver quién da más
 Soneo: Yo tengo sentido, tengo rima, chequea lo tuyo que no rima ná [later] Tú no entiendes los soneos, porque tu mente no es igual [later] La manera en que tú rimas es más fácil para cantar⁶

Coro: Right now, let’s see you gives [sings] best
 Soneo: I have meaning, I have rhyme, check yours out it doesn’t rhyme at all [later] You don’t understand soneos, because your mind is not the same [later] The way in which you rhyme is much easier to sing

(3) Binarization of tertiary rhythms, which is often combined with (4) tongue twisters. Although these occur separately, Cano executes both simultaneously. When combined with sophisticated rhythmic manipulation, the tongue twister highlights the percussive dimensions of Antillean Spanish; this is something that Ismael Rivera also excelled at. (5) Imitation of instruments such as a trumpet, percussion, and a guitar with

a wah-wah effect. Cano will often preface these sounds by explaining what they are or why they are being used. Interestingly, Cano’s hands move while singing, as if he were playing an instrument. (6) Use of scat singing. Cano favors scat words that end with vowels, such as *sabada*, as they can rhyme easily with a given coro or soneo. (7) Hitting his lips and squeezing his nose; Cano will often interpolate lip sounds and nose sounds to create unique sound effects that are humorous and musically “in the pocket.” (8) Using other languages and, in some cases, parodying a language.

Coro: Soy de lo mejor, soy profesional
 Soneo: En Latin, En Latin, a tis yus mandus per secula seculorum Y asi te voy a dejar⁷

Coro: I am of the best, I am a professional
 Soneo: In Latin, in Latin, I will dominate you forever and ever And like this I will leave you.

(9) Using a long form that approaches a *décima*’s length if not its poetic structure. When pushed by a competitor such as Gilberto Santarosa, Cano excels at “long-form” improvisation, as evidenced by a widely circulated and illegally recorded *controversia* from Guaynabo, Puerto Rico (Santarosa n.d.). (10) Singing melodic lines that combine with those in the arrangement, such as mambos (composed instrumental interludes), and adding vocalized melodic lines to *moñas* (improvised instrumental interludes). Cano sums up his approach in his own words, “I consider myself an avant-garde sonero. I continue to experiment and play with the rules” (Figueroa 2002: 31).

Competition between soneros

Many salsa fans are aware that formal competitions between soneros are not without precedent and that encounters

between soneros in informal settings are eagerly anticipated. Merry Mac Masters (1995: 17) writes of a legendary encounter between Beny Moré and Cheo Marquetti that lasted for an hour and a half, in the early morning, at El Bremen, a nightclub in Cuba. In the 1971 film, *Our Latin Thing*, and the accompanying album, *Fania All-Stars Live at the Cheetah*, numerous singers are seen and heard exchanging both short soneos and *décimas* (1997 [1974]). These include Cheo Feliciano, Ismael Miranda, Pete “El Conde” Rodríguez, and Santos Colón, to name a few. Also in 1971 Bobby Valentín recorded *Vá a la cárcel* (1995 [1971]), live at Puerto Rico’s Oso Blanco Prison.²⁵ Here, Frankie Hernández and Marvin Santiago go head to head in a friendly battle of soneros entitled, “Dos soneros.” Several Cuban bands are known to do this in live settings, when two or more bands share a stage on a given evening or when a band features several soneros such as Los Van Van and Orquesta Revé.

Recordings by Cuba’s Areito All-Stars (1999 [1979]) and Puerto Rico’s Descarga Boricua (1993) also feature dueling soneros. In all of these examples, there is little in the way of a systematized format for these exchanges other than taking turns; adherence to any rhyme is very loose.

One formally organized duel between soneros took place at 8pm on February 9, 2001 at the Anfiteatro Tito Puente in Puerto Rico. According to some accounts, the event was so packed with fans eager to witness the verbal jousting that no space was left for dancers.⁸ This event, called Duelo al anochecer (Duel Until Dawn), was sponsored by Z93, one of the most popular salsa radio stations in Puerto Rico. Video and audio recordings of the evening have circulated around the world, achieving tremendous popularity and gaining attention among salsa fans. The evening was Cano’s concept, and it was originally conceived to be the first of many such concerts. The idea was to have a number of singers sing a song

individually, then in competing pairs, and ultimately in a free for all that would pit each against the other simultaneously. At the conclusion, the audience would determine who was the best sonero of the bunch. Four singers engaged in competition: José Alberto “El Canario,” Cano Estremera, Lalo Rodríguez, and Domingo Quiñones.

Duelo al anochecer revealed a variety of improvisational styles and techniques, rhythmic virtuosity, and musical creativity. There were numerous humorous musical moments that showed quick thinking and depth of technique on the part of each of the participants. To the press, and during his soneos that evening, Canario reproached Cano for being vulgar. Listening to the concert, however, one can see that Domingo Quiñones initiated much of the vulgarity in the final “battle royale” between the four singers. In response to this criticism, Cano argues that most popular music has picaresque lyrics, and since salsa is popular music from the barrio, it should reflect the barrio’s language. Ultimately, there was no real winner at the event, but many fans claim Domingo Quiñones showed his talents more effectively than others and the audience chanted his name when asked who was the king. Cano Estremera felt that everyone won, in the sense that, after the concert, the public bought albums by the singers and attended later concerts.

Billed as a rematch between Cano and Domingo, a second event took place in February 2002. According to Cano, the idea lost momentum after this second concert because of the egos involved. For Cano, the setting is just a place for an exercise and was not ideal for improvising. A major drawback is that the audience can’t evaluate the singers according to how the singers themselves want to be evaluated. As Cano explains, “If I say something to you and you say something to me, people will say that what you said had more quality lyrically,

because people don’t see how what I sang to you had more quality from a melodic structure” (Estremera 2003).

Conclusion

Cano’s style is derived from a combination of study and intuition, an organic process that combines instinct and the learning of the craft. In this way it is similar to other improvisationally based musics. He is bothered that the process of improvising in salsa is not well defined, with the result that anyone can call themselves a sonero. In the marketplace, consumers purchase records by physically appealing singers who have not done their homework, helping to propel their stardom despite the lack of quality. Cano is also upset by the fact that so many singers arrive at salsa when they have not achieved success in other genres. The implication is that salsa isn’t a serious genre with technical expectations that require hard work.

As an improviser, Cano is preoccupied with not repeating himself: his biggest fear is stagnation and producing records that are copies of one another (Figueroa 2002: 31). When I asked him about composing specific vehicles for improvisation, he answered that he couldn’t compose. Despite his affinity with jazz, Cano is not interested in working in jazz, because commercial considerations undermine the usefulness of the medium. Although he looks to jazz for pattern-based improvisation, Cano is interested in getting away from patterns, pointing out to me that this is what John Coltrane and Charlie Parker were trying to achieve: “He who really improvises is beyond patterns...he left the realm of patterns...this is someone who really plays” (Estremera 2003). Cano Estremera is moving in this direction, if he isn’t already in this place “beyond patterns.” Continuing to challenge himself and improve, it is clear why Cano Estremera is *El dueño del soneo*.

NOTES

- ¹ Little has been written about the soneo, but both Peter Manuel and Christopher Washburne have outlined some basic musical, non-textual premises of vocal improvisation in salsa, including phrasing that adheres to the clave (a five-stroke, two-measure pattern, which functions as a time line around which the other musical parts are organized) and the use of recurring, stock motifs (Manuel 1998: 137). For Washburne, an unsuccessful sonero is one whose improvisation strays too far from the clave or stays too close to it (1998: 171). In his study of Ismael Rivera, Rafael Figueroa Hernández details the principal techniques used by the singer who was affectionately called *El sonero mayor* (the best sonero) by peers, fans, and subsequent soneros (2002: 55–67). Ángel G. Quintero Rivera is another important scholar who has analyzed rhyme and meter in the salsa soneo, outlining techniques used by several singers, such as Ismael Rivera, Ruben Blades, and Gilberto Santarosa (1998: 311–41). Antecedents of current soneo practices are to be found in Spanish-Caribbean folkloric musics. Improvisation-centered genres such as *música jíbara* and *punto guajiro* impose numerous constraints on the singer. These two genres, which are cognates in Puerto Rico and Cuba, stress the supremacy of the *décima* (abbaaccddc), a ten-line, octosyllabic poetic form. Codified competition is central to these genres and is called *controversia*. Writing about *jíbaro* music, Prisco Hernández explains that “the poetry has primacy over the music, which serves as punctuation, ornamentation, and as the vehicle for a more emphatic delivery of the words” (1993: 35). Often the *trovadores* (singers) are required to use a *pie forzado* (forced foot), in which the last line of the *décima* is fixed. In Cuban genres such as *punto guajiro*, singers often begin the first line of their *décima* with the last line of their opponent’s verse. Alternatively, any phrase from an opponent’s verse can be used to ridicule him or her. It is common to have singers take turns improvising during the same *décima*. Other folkloric genres such as *rumba*, *bomba*, *plena*, *son montuno*, *nengón*, *changüí*, and *merengue* feature shorter vocal improvisations that exploit *coplas* or *cuartetos* (abba or abab) that fit easily into 2- or 4-bar phrases.
- ² Sonora Ponceña, “Boranda,” *45 Aniversario: Y seguimos haciendo historia...* (BMG 2000 CD 743218116728).
- ³ Sonora Ponceña, “Boranda,” *45 Aniversario: Y seguimos haciendo historia...* (BMG 2000 CD 743218116728).
- ⁴ Cano explained to this author that his most recent release, *Opera Ecuajéy*, is an attempt to “update Maelo’s body of work and continue where he left off.”
- ⁵ Quintero Rivera terms this “*pisar el coro*,” stepping on the *coro* (1998: 324).
- ⁶ *Duelo al anochecer*, Anfiteatro Tito Puente in Puerto Rico, February 9, 2001.
- ⁷ *Duelo al anochecer*, Anfiteatro Tito Puente in Puerto Rico, February 9, 2001.
- ⁸ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nuestratierra2/message/472>.

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VIDEOS

Cano Estremera. 2000. Orchard Beach, Bronx, NY July 9.

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