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5-3-2017

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### Recommended Citation

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# *The Music and Politics of Willy Chirino*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in History.

By  
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Christina D. Abreu

## **ABSTRACT**

*Cuban musician and singer Willy Chirino, the self-proclaimed inventor of the “Miami Sound,” was sent to the United States as a teenager in the 1960s under Operation Pedro Pan to escape the influence of Fidel Castro's communist regime. Throughout his career, he has used his music to spread a personal and political agenda; his rejection of communism and the Castro regime can be seen through his song lyrics, humanitarian efforts, and direct engagement in the world of politics.*

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April 2017

History

University Honors Program

**Georgia Southern University**

## *Acknowledgements*

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Christina D. Abreu who was not only my mentor throughout this whole process, but my friend throughout my time at Georgia Southern. Without her guidance, dozens of revisions, and extensive knowledge, there is no way I could have completed this project. To Melissa and Gera Luna, thank you for all of the translations... you are lifesavers! The biggest thank you in the world to Tiffany Yancey who is by my side through everything, good and bad, and is truly the best friend a person could ask for. Jonathan Thoma, thank you for your constant motivation and for keeping me on track when I tended to get distracted. And last but certainly not least to Sam Balczunas, whose unwavering support and love through my whole life has truly made me the person I am today.

## *The Music and Politics of Willy Chirino*

“Your art is a weapon, a rifle you can use to bring about change.”<sup>1</sup> These are the words of Willy Chirino, a Cuban musician and singer, who is the self-proclaimed inventor of the “Miami Sound.” Chirino has served as a symbol for Cubans living in Miami and is key to understanding Cubans’ use of music as an agent for political change. This project will identify and analyze the various ways that Chirino’s experiences as a child of Operation Pedro Pan and as a Cuban exile shape his brand of political activism and humanitarianism through his music and performances. Chirino’s position as a Cuban-born, American-raised musician allows his music to show off characteristics of transnational Latin music, including both traditional and modern influences. Several of the books, such as *Latin Music: Musicians, Genres, and Themes*, that make up the historiography of Latin music focus on how the music is made or the “formula” that is followed when making a certain kind of Latin music, like salsa, bachata, and merengue. These studies also discuss the origins of Latin music and how time and location affect changes in music over time.<sup>2</sup> Because Chirino’s sound is a mixture of both Cuban and American musical styles, these sources are helpful in identifying how the historical moment and the location in which Chirino has made music has affected the kind of music he has produced and how he created the “Miami Sound.”

The existing historiography on Latin music also discusses the ways in which Latin music and musicians have shaped the culture of the regions and countries through which

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<sup>1</sup> Maylin Legañoa, “Willy Chirino: “I feel tremendous nostalgia for Cuba,” *Havana Times*, June 23, 2015, accessed February 23, 2016, html. <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=112135>

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ilan Stavans, ed., *Latin Music: Musicians, Genres, and Themes* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2014).

they migrated across time. Frances Aparicio and Candida Jaquez offer numerous studies in this area, in their edited volume, *Musical Migrations*, such as analysis of the influence of rock and roll on Peruvian music and a study of the way in which Puerto Rican salsa music has influenced music in Venezuela.<sup>3</sup> John Storm Roberts, in *The Latin Tinge*, argues that Latin music has had the largest influence of any outside force on music in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Books of this nature serve to explore how Latin music travelled around the continent and how it influenced the cultures it came in contact with. Studies on Cuban music and musicians offer similar models that detail how the music was made, the specific elements within a Cuban song, and how Cuban music has had an effect on music in the United States. One example of this kind of work is *Cuba and its Music*, which argues that Cuban music as we know it today was born from a mixture of African and Spanish influences, along with the effects of racism and cultural control from religion and the government that shaped what became the music of the island.<sup>5</sup> Historians of Latin music tend to offer cultural biographies or case studies of well-known Cuban musicians, many of whom first arrived in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, or they focus on Latina and Cuban women artists of contemporary era, like Celia Cruz, Shakira, or Jennifer Lopez.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Frances Aparicio and Candida Jaquez, *Musical Migrations: Transnationalism and Cultural Hybridity in Latin/o America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> John Storm Roberts, *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Nick Sublette, *Cuba and its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Christina D. Abreu, "Celebrity, 'Crossover', and Cubanidad: Celia Cruz as 'La Reina de Salsa', 1971-2003," *Latin American Music Review* Vol. 28, no. I (April 2007): 94-124; *Rhythms of Race: Cuban Musicians and the Making of Latino New York City and Miami, 1940-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Raul Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Maria Elena Cepeda, *Musical ImagiNation: U.S-Colombian Identity*

What remains less examined in the existing scholarship on Latin music is deep and lengthy analysis of the historical significance of song lyrics. There is one notable book on the subject, *Song and Social Change in Latin America*, which looks at how music has been used throughout Latin America during times of political turmoil and argues that songs aimed to enact social change often contain lyrics that reflect the grievances of the masses and calls for unification against oppression.<sup>7</sup> There are also very few studies that focus on Chirino's personal life and professional career. My study works to fill in these gaps by offering sustained analysis of Chirino's song lyrics, arguing that these lyrics serve a political purpose. Chirino is known internationally as someone who time and time again has taken a stand against the regime of Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, advocated for the return of human rights and democracy to the island, and remained popular among Cuban exiles in the United States.

There are very few works that focus solely on Chirino. There are no books about his contributions to Latin music or music in general, and only one journal article has been written solely about him and his contributions to the world of Latin music. In this work, Rivero argues that Chirino is responsible for a new type of Latin music with his "Miami Sound" which uniquely combines Cubans rhythms with American rock style. She illustrates this point with Chirino's song "Soy" and the impact it has had in the Latin American community.<sup>8</sup> In the books and journal articles cited above, Chirino is

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*and the Latin Music Boom* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); David F. Garcia, *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Lauren M. Shaw, ed., *Song and Social Change in Latin America* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Eliana Rivero, "Cuba Sí, Cuba No: La Fusión de son y Rock en la Música de Willy Chirino," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, vol. 22 (January 2003): 207-216.

mentioned briefly, and the crossover nature of his music is discussed, but there is shockingly little writing that is dedicated directly to him. The gap in the historiography of Willy Chirino is addressed in this writing by focusing on his life, musical contributions, and most importantly, his political activism. Pulling information from his life events, his career, and his song lyrics and musical style will allow for an understanding of Chirino's contributions.

To better understand Chirino's political positions, it is important to remember that he was a child of Operation Pedro Pan, the planned exodus of more than 14,000 Cuban children to the United States in the first few years following the Cuban Revolution. There are several works devoted to the history of Operation Pedro Pan, such as *Operation Pedro Pan* by Yvonne Conde which contends that of the thousands of children of the program, the vast majority have gone on to be very productive and important members of American society to this day – even though they are very often forgotten about.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Maria de los Angeles Torres aims to tell the history of the program and the lasting effects on the children it impacted through an examination of government documents and first-hand accounts shared by those who were sent unaccompanied to the United States as children.<sup>10</sup>

There are also several historical novels and memoirs that detail the individual experiences of these children, like *90 miles to Havana* by Enrique Flores-Galbis, that serve to paint a picture of the struggles that faced the kids who were made to carve out a

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<sup>9</sup>Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Maria de los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

life for themselves in a strange land that they did not necessarily go to willingly, while giving background information on the political context in which Cuban parents were making the decision to send their children to the United States.<sup>11</sup> It is this background information on the children of Operation Pedro Pan, both through official documents and personal accounts, which allows one to understand Chirino and what he went through as a child of Pedro Pan and why his past in that program would make him want to affect political change.

Given Chirino's connection to Miami, the history and historiography of Cubans in Miami is also pivotal to my study. Joan Didion argues that Miami has been the main link between the United States and Cuba, both in terms of a destination for exiles and also in terms of economic and political relations between Castro's Cuba and the United States.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, other authors contend that Miami has served as a crossroads between cultures, and that Miami acts as a melting pot for Cuban and American identities that so many exiles are left to try to sort out once they arrive.<sup>13</sup> This part of the historiography is of particular interest for this project, because of Chirino's experiences in Miami, which has a distinct transnational flavor. This mixture was one factor that was directly responsible for Chirino's desire to affect political change through his music, which served as a

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<sup>11</sup>Carlos Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy* (New York: The Free Press, 2011); *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* (New York: The Free Press, 2003); Enrique Flores-Galbis, *90 Miles to Havana* (New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2012); Gustavo Perez Firmat, *A Cuban in Mayberry: Looking Back at America's Hometown* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Joan Didion, *Miami* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Maria Christina Garcia, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida 1959-1994* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997); Robert M. Levine and Moisés Asís, *Cuban Miami* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).



“nonpolitical redress for political grievances.”<sup>14</sup> Miami has its own unique Cuban and American culture mixed into one, and Cubans often found themselves in the precarious position of trying to express pride in their culture and heritage, while trying to be accepted by Anglos in Miami as “American” enough.<sup>15</sup>

The emergence of an ethnic enclave in Miami was one of geographic convenience, and one that has always proven to be financially symbiotic. Beginning in the late 1800s, José Martí’s speeches to poor, disenfranchised Cuban workers who had come to the United States in search of better wages, while cautious about any future United States involvement in Cuba, reinforced the idea that the United States was a place where free speech could be utilized by Cuban ex-pats in order to inspire change at home. Also, Pre-Castro Cubans enjoyed relatively cheap and easy travel back and forth, with middle and upper class Cubans enjoying day trips for lunch and shopping in Miami, and back in Havana by the evening. This positive attitude to the political freedom found in America, the opportunity to find better wages, the physical closeness of Miami to the island, and the ease of travel for tourism purposes made Miami a familiar place for Cubans as they began to embark on mass exoduses after Fidel Castro came into power.<sup>16</sup> Over time, the American and Cuban cultures found in Miami became less distinct and melded into one with things like one of the first Spanish-language radio stations in the country (Super Q) that catered specifically to Latino audiences by playing Latino artists. Chirino and other artists were given an outlet in Miami by which to spread their music,

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<sup>14</sup> Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Didion, *Miami*.

<sup>16</sup> Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994).

which was often laden with political messages that piqued the interest of their listeners.<sup>17</sup> Wilfredo José Chirino was born in Pinar Del Rio, Cuba in 1947. When Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, many families fled the island in hopes that Castro would be overthrown soon. However, when it became evident that this would not be the case, thousands of middle- and upper-class families decided to send their children, unaccompanied, to the United States under the auspices of a program called Operation Pedro Pan.<sup>18</sup> The idea was to protect these children from communist indoctrination until Castro's regime was no longer in power. Chirino's parents recognized the very real possibility that their *patria potestad*, or parental authority, could be taken away at the whim of the Castro regime. On August 26, 1961, at the age of 14, he was sent to Miami.<sup>19</sup>

As soon as Chirino got settled in the United States, he began to work selling doughnuts door-to-door during the week and running a newspaper route for the *Miami News* on the weekends, mainly to earn money to send back to his family.<sup>20</sup> Chirino had an interest in music from a very young age and learned to play the drums shortly after his arrival to the United States. By the age of 16, Chirino was playing different instruments in various nightclubs up to six nights per week to support his family.<sup>21</sup> It was because of this interaction with the Miami music scene that Chirino started dabbling with a singing

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<sup>17</sup> Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 102; Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*, 223-224.

<sup>18</sup> Mario Rey, "Willy Chirino," *Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Maylin Legañoa, "Willy Chirino: 'I feel tremendous nostalgia for Cuba'," *Havana Times*, June 23, 2015, accessed February 23, 2016, html. <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=112135>: Willy Chirino, *Interview with Willy Chirino*, By Julio Estorino, University of Miami Library Cuban Heritage Collection, July 16, 2012, Luis J. Botifoll Oral History Project, Coll. No. CHC5212.

<sup>20</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*.

<sup>21</sup> Chirino, *Interview with Willy Chirino*, By Julio Estorino.

career.<sup>22</sup> *One Man Alone*, released in 1974, was Chirino's first album, and since that time he has recorded over twenty additional records and created the "Miami Sound," which is a unique combination of Cuban and American rock sounds.<sup>23</sup>

Chirino has been recognized in several different ways for his musical achievements, including a Grammy in 2006 for Best Salsa Album for *Son Del Alma*, along with another Grammy nomination in 2007 for Best Salsa Album. He has a star on the Calle Ocho Walk of Fame in Little Havana, and he has two streets named after him, one in Miami and one in Hialeah, Florida.<sup>24</sup> Chirino has written over 100 songs for sixty different artists, including Celia Cruz, Oscar D'Leon, and the Gipsy Kings. In 1997, he created his own music label, Latinum Music, along with his wife, Lissette Alvarez.<sup>25</sup> In 2011, Chirino released one of the most discussed albums of his career, *My Beatles Heart*, which was a Latinized version of several different Beatles classics.

Chirino has become known just as much for his humanitarian work as he has for his music career. He won the United States Legion of Honor award in 1976 for his work with underprivileged Latinos, and in the 1990s, he started the Willy Chirino Foundation with the goal of helping families in Latin America as well as Latin Americans living in southern Florida. He received recognition from the State Department in 1999 for the Foundation's efforts in aiding impoverished and displaced families in Peru,

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<sup>22</sup> Legañoa, "Willy Chirino."

<sup>23</sup> Rivero, "Cuba Sí, Cuba No," 207.

<sup>24</sup> "Biography," Willy Chirino, last modified 2014, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://willychirino.com/en/biography/>.

<sup>25</sup> Leila Coba, "Salsa Star Willy Chirino Strikes Out on his Own," *Billboard*, May 4, 2008.

Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Miami.<sup>26</sup> He was also recognized by UNICEF and given the Billboard Humanitarian Award in 1996 for his philanthropic efforts in Latin America.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Chirino himself has stated that much of his music is political in nature, and he has written several songs speaking out against the oppression caused by the Castro regime and the difficulties faced by Cubans on the island. Many of these songs can be found on his album *Cuba Libre*.<sup>28</sup> Many times, especially in the face of oppression, people express their troubles and dissent in the form of popular culture, whether that is art, poetry, or, in the case of Willy Chirino, music. Music serves not only as an outlet of expression for the artist, but also as a means of uniting those who listen to the music and identify with the message. In the face of an oppressive dictatorship, which quiets all voices who dare to speak out, many Latin Americans who live in the United States try to find ways to spread messages of strength and hope to their friends and family who stayed behind in their home country.<sup>29</sup> Chirino has said that the political nature of his career has been both positive and negative: positive because “seeing his brothers and sisters motivated by his music gives him strength;” negative because he believes the left-wing media, which he argues sympathizes with Castro, has control over the release and portrayal of his music.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "Willy Chirino Foundation and Cuban Salsa Singer Willy Chirino Honored for Work on Behalf of Children and Families," U.S. Department of State press release, September 27, 1999 on the State Department website, <http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/briefings/statements/1999/ps990927a.html>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> WillyChirino.com, "Biography."

<sup>28</sup> Rey, "Willy Chirino," *Grove Dictionary of American Music; Chirino, Interview with Willy Chirino*, By Julio Estroino.

<sup>29</sup> John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012) 42-45.

<sup>30</sup> Chirino, *Interview with Willy Chirino*, By Julio Estrorino.

Chirino's recording career took off in 1974 with the album *One Man Alone*. Off of this album comes arguably Chirino's most iconic song, "Soy." It has been recorded by over 60 other artists since it was released and serves as an anthem of sorts for the Latin American community.<sup>31</sup> "Soy" has a theme of connection with nature and enjoying the natural wonders of life, such as the "rising of the sun or the fragrance of a flower," giving the listener the feeling that all people are connected in a beautiful way through our experience of life's small pleasures.<sup>32</sup> This message of equality with one another and the world around us resonates with the Latin American community who has been marginalized throughout history and made to feel like a group constituted of "others."

The chorus of "Soy" says, "I am like the breeze that/ always hurried/doesn't announce its parting/and I'm like money/I go where I want/without a goodbye."<sup>33</sup> This description of the singer as one who is constantly drifting and moving without an exact destination is Chirino's effort to depict the plight of displaced Latinos who may never truly feel as though they can ever fully establish their lives in one place for an extended period of time. Similarly, "Yo He De Volver" or "I Shall Return" tells the listener of a person who expresses the desire to return to their homeland like the "morning light comes back" or like "a lover returns to their beloved."<sup>34</sup> This resonated with Latinos who experienced situations that caused them to relocate to the United States, but always felt the desire to return to their homes and pick back up on their lives there. Chirino's

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<sup>31</sup> "Willy Chirino," *Billboard*, April 11, 1998, EBSCOhost. Accessed 20 August 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Willy Chirino, "Soy," in *One Man Alone*, Gema Records, 1974, Vinyl record.

<sup>33</sup> Willy Chirino, *One Man Alone*, "Soy," Gema Records, 1974, Vinyl.

<sup>34</sup> Willy Chirino, *Chirino*, "Yo He De Volver," Gema Records, 1975, Vinyl.

personal familiarity with being forced from his home in Cuba made him the perfect person to express the feelings that many of his fellow Latinos experienced when resettling in the United States as well as their desire to have their home countries become a place that is safe to return to one day.

As Gustavo Perez-Firmat discusses in his book *Life on the Hyphen*, “Soy” is unique in that it separates “person from place.”<sup>35</sup> The song begins with the lyrics “I am the smallest village/ in a distant place/ I’m the sound of the tide/ in the immense sea/ I am neither chains nor gates/ I am sugar; I am salt/ If you love me or you leave me/ it’s the same to me/ I’m a bit of a vagabond/ I can either come or go.” Chirino does not say that he is *like* a small village, but rather that his *is* a small village. Similarly, with sugar and salt, he embodies them. This could very well be Chirino’s attempt at relating who he is at his core to the place he’s from – Cuba – which is known for its sugar production and populations residing in small villages, much like the one from which Chirino comes. Furthermore, the lyrics of “Soy” relate to the experiences of many Latin American immigrants and refugees who feel a sense of displacement or homelessness when he calls himself “a bit of a vagabond.” Because no certain place is ever named as the one being described, it leaves the audience to fill in the blanks with their own country or with their own experiences in leaving their homeland and coming to a new place that is not always welcoming.<sup>36</sup>

The rest of his debut album contains feel-good tracks with little substantive matter. Chirino has stated that music has always been a source of happiness and fun for

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<sup>35</sup> Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 109-111.

him, so making music that is fun and lighthearted is sure to be an extension of his personal views on the effects of music.<sup>37</sup> “Viva La Vida Buena” and “We Just Want to Rock and Roll” are just two examples from this album in which he talks about loving life and having a good time, all with an iconic 70’s disco feel over Latin beats. The distinct sound of Chirino’s music was compared to the disco-pop hits of Stevie Wonder and described as something that could not be mistaken as “beats that were taken from the Caribbean.”<sup>38</sup>

The unique mixture of rock, pop, and salsa rhythms can be heard from the very earliest records, and because of this Chirino was able to establish a sound that was all his own – the foundations of the “Miami Sound” that has become his own trademark mixture between his Cuban and American influences.<sup>39</sup> It was this combination of pop-salsa hit love ballads, and inspiring songs dealing with the plight of displaced Latinos in the United States that explain why Chirino has been able to find such a large, strong fan base among the Latino/a population in general, the significant Cuban-American communities in the United States, especially those in Miami, and the people on the island of Cuba.

Miami has early on been recognized as a melting pot of American and Latin American influences, but Cubans have been by far the largest segment of the Latino/a community since Fidel Castro took over control of Cuba in 1959. In 1979, Miami had 500,000 Hispanic residents, and 80 percent of that Hispanic community was composed of Cuban immigrants.<sup>40</sup> During the 1970s, the Cuban community in Miami was developing

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<sup>37</sup> Chirino, *Interview with Willy Chirino*, By Julio Estrorino.

<sup>38</sup> Mimi Korman, “New Musical Blends Evolve in Latin Community,” *Billboard*, April 7, 1979.

<sup>39</sup> Enrique Fernandez, “Willy Chirino is the Miami Sound,” *Billboard*, February 23, 1985.

along distinctly parallel lines – one of acceptance and one of despair.<sup>41</sup> Cubans émigrés struggled to deal with a sense of desire for their homes, while trying to establish a life for themselves in a country that allowed them the same kind of freedoms they wished they could enjoy back in Cuba. As a means of establishing a stronger sense of community among Cubans, the first Spanish-language television station in Miami was created and several different publishing houses for Hispanic authors and Spanish-language publications were founded.<sup>42</sup> Because of the influx of Cuban culture spreading throughout the city, it is no surprise that the music scene was affected. Chirino was vital in solidifying the Miami Sound, which was an attempt by Cuban artists to express their pride in their Cuban roots and to give their fellow Cubans an outlet to express their unity.<sup>43</sup>

Almost every year since 1974, Chirino has released an album with success never reached outside of the Latin music market audience. His Cuban flavor mixed with party themes and salsa beats gained him a relatively small but loyal following. Chirino found himself in very high demand to put on performances throughout Florida and in the Caribbean, and he could be recognized in places as far away as New York thanks to Miller beer advertisements that featured him.<sup>44</sup> However, Chirino’s adopted home of Miami remained where he had the most success. Of this local popularity, he noted: “When you are appreciated locally as much as I am, it kind of diminishes the urge to

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<sup>40</sup> Korman, “New Musical Blend Evolve” *Billboard*.

<sup>41</sup> Garcia, *Havana USA*, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Garcia, *Havana USA*, 108, 195.

<sup>43</sup> Aparicio, *Musical Migrations*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Fernandez, “Willy Chirino is the Miami Sound,” *Billboard*.



expand.”<sup>45</sup> The popularity he experienced in Miami and the diminished desire to expand could explain why the main focus of his early albums was to entertain rather than to be politically charged.

With several of the albums named after him, such *Chirino* and *Chirinismo*, it becomes clear that the first decades’ worth of albums released by Chirino did not have overwhelmingly political messages, but rather small bursts of political language intertwined throughout albums that were aimed at entertaining. These catchy songs that constitute Chirino’s early albums have the kind of subject matter and high-tempo dance rhythms that can be found on any kind of top 40 chart or played on a radio station.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Chirino’s music contained light-hearted messages, and one can see a general lack of activist work. The message of partying and having fun was delivered by a Chirino who was relatively unknown in the world of philanthropy and charitable giving. There were no headlines or stories published about Chirino in regards to his desire to help his fellow Cubans before the early 1990s, suggesting perhaps that the early phase of Chirino’s career was much more focused on gaining mainstream popularity or establishing a name for himself, rather than any benevolent motives. This is not to say that Chirino did not concern himself with the plight of his fellow Cubans, simply that his focus on financial support of Cuban refugees (or possibly his financial ability to lend them aid) was not established during the early 1970s and 1980s. Songs like “Soy” and “Yo He De Volver” reveal that since Chirino has been releasing music in the late 1970s, he has been writing music in which he relates his story to the plight of other

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<sup>45</sup> Ruben Bentancourt, “Miami Recording: Latin Boom Gives Rise to New and Better Studios in Exciting Dash for International Crossover Sounds,” *Billboard*, November 1, 1986.

Latin Americans who were displaced like he was and were now struggling to find their own place in a whole new environment. To write songs that are aimed at uniting Latin Americans and/or Latinos/as in the United States serves as its own brand of musical activism and gives Chirino a voice in the political resistance.

As one moves further into his career, a new common theme starts to emerge: a rejection of Castro and communism. Castro's Cuba was getting more support than ever from the Soviet Union, and in return Cuba was becoming one of the loudest supporters of communism throughout the world.<sup>46</sup> Throughout the 1970s, Cuba had sent troops to Angola and Ethiopia to assist them with their own communist revolutions and the country joined COMECON, a global financial alliance of communist countries founded by the Soviet Union. The Constitution officially established the island as a communist state in 1976.<sup>47</sup> The massive increase of Soviet influence and communist policies in the country left many Cubans looking for a way out.

In April 1980, Castro announced that the Cuban government would be opening the port of Mariel and anyone wishing to leave the island could do so, sparking the third wave of Cuban exiles coming to the United States.<sup>48</sup> During the six-month period of the Mariel Boatlift, tens of thousands of Cuban refugees fled from the island on overcrowded boats hoping to make it to the United States. By August 1980, nearly 1.3 percent of Cuba's population had reached Florida with approximately 121,500 people fleeing the tiny island.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Jorge I. Dominguez, "Cuba in the 1980s," *Foreign Affairs*, September 1, 1986, 118.

<sup>47</sup> Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015) 238.

<sup>48</sup> Garcia, *Havana USA*, 60-61.

<sup>49</sup> Kathleen Dupes Hawk et al., *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*

President Jimmy Carter announced that the United States would have “open arms and an open heart” for the Cubans coming to the United States, but public acceptance of this support waned as over-exaggerated, and sometimes completely false, reports reached the United States of Castro rounding up “undesirables” and sending them out of the country.<sup>50</sup> In fact, at the height of the boatlift, 90 percent of all news coverage of the event was negative.<sup>51</sup> This had the effect of influencing the way in which the refugees arriving in Florida were being treated, and it also contributed to a lack of public sympathy and willingness to integrate these newly-arrived Cubans into society. The influx of Marielitos proved that the United States was not always willing to accept Cuban refugees with open arms.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, there was a difference in the racial and class makeup of the Marielitos. The people fleeing in the boatlift were poorer and less educated than previous waves of Cuban exiles had been.<sup>53</sup> They were also mostly black or mixed-race Cubans, whereas earlier Cubans tended to have European ancestry. Other Cubans looked down on the newly-arrived Marielitos because of a traditional importance put on “good family,” which tends to mean “lighter-skinned, better educated, and with more financial resources,” which were traits not possessed by the new Cuban arrivals.<sup>54</sup> This tension within the Cuban community in Miami added to the lack of support for the Marielitos.

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(Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014) 6.

<sup>50</sup> Garcia, *Havana USA*, 65-66.

<sup>51</sup> Portes, *City on the Edge*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Hawk, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980*, 244-245.

<sup>53</sup> James Ciment and John Radzilowski, eds., *American Immigration: An Encyclopedia of Political, Social, and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 2015) 335.

<sup>54</sup> Ciment and Radzilowski, *American Immigration*, 335-336.

From the time Chirino began to write and produce records, there had been very few new developments concerning Cuban/American immigration policy even though Americans were keeping an eye on Cuban involvement in world affairs. However, that changed completely with the Mariel boatlift. At this time, most Americans did not have the thought of Cuban refugees in the forefront of their mind. With the massive rise in numbers of Cubans coming in to the United States, and the widespread news coverage and pictures of the refugee crisis, the idea of how to deal with Cubans was beginning to be rekindled in the minds of Americans. It was this wave of Cuban exiles and the attitudes created towards the subject that set the stage for the next unfolding of events in the history of U.S.-Cuban relations.

Chirino released eight different albums in the 1980s, but none of them dealt with the influx of the Marielitos. His albums of the eighties contained more Latin funk hits. For instance, *La Salsa Y Yo* and *Diferente* were produced in 1980 and 1981, respectively, and both feature pop hits that discuss heartbreak and friendship. One idea of why Chirino may have neglected to focus any of his music at this time on the flood of new Cubans or the terrible conditions in Cuba that made them want to leave could be that Chirino was still establishing his career. While he was making a name for himself, it may have been wiser to stay away from discussions of politics so he would not turn off anyone who may want to listen to his music for fun rather than in search of a political message. Similarly, the Cuban community itself was very torn about whether or not they should support the Marielitos, which Cubans from prior waves of exile seldom supported. Because Chirino was a member of the cohort of Cubans that arrived in the earliest wave, he may have shared the unpleasant views of the exilers of the 1980s.

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, diplomatic affairs between the two countries remained somewhat stagnant until the Clinton presidency because his predecessor, George H.W. Bush, was the first president to call for a change in regime and announced that U.S.-Cuban relations had no chance of normalizing until a more democratic Cuba emerged.<sup>55</sup> Fidel Castro repeatedly and very openly blamed the huge number of Cubans seeking to leave Cuba on the United States, claiming that the United States was “stimulating illegal immigration” with its friendly policy towards Cuban refugees. The 13 de Marzo incident in which the Cuban Coast Guard violently exploded a tugboat that a group of Cubans had stolen in an attempt to escape the island. This event caused massive outrage within Cuba, and an increase in riots and protesting occurred against Castro because of his refusal to allow people to leave the country.<sup>56</sup> In response, Castro announced that Cubans would be free to leave the island as long as they used their own vessels. However, by the time of this renewed allowance of mass exodus from Cuba, a new president was in office and the Clinton administration was not as willing to accept the large numbers of people that would be trying to get into the United States.<sup>57</sup>

President Clinton ordered the Navy to intercept any Cuban vessels attempting to come to the United States, and hold them at processing camps in Guantanamo Bay. This policy was much different from the way any other administration had handled Cuban

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<sup>55</sup> William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 266.

<sup>56</sup> Gay, *Leaving Cuba*, 89-90.

<sup>57</sup> Gay, *Leaving Cuba*, 91-92.

refugees since the Cuban Revolution in 1959, because refugees were no longer brought to the United States for processing if they were intercepted at sea.<sup>58</sup>

The two months of the crisis witnessed 34,000 Cubans sent to the Naval Base at Guantanamo after they tried to flee Cuba on makeshift rafts. Florida governor Lawton Chiles and President Clinton were extremely alarmed with the massive number of Cubans being arrested in United States waters. As a means of seeking more support for the United States' new harsher stance on the treatment of refugees, President Clinton sought to gain support from Cuban-American community leaders.<sup>59</sup> Elly Chovel, who had been a child of Operation Pedro Pan, was a member of the delegation that was invited to witness the conditions in the camps for refugees in Guantanamo in 1995 as part of the President's efforts to keep influential members of the Cuban-American community on board with the new immigration policy.

Chovel remarked that seeing what the Cubans in Guantanamo were going through reminded her of her own experiences under Pedro Pan. In contrast to her own story, she said, "My exodus seemed less important compared to what these people were enduring. How do we heal from this and make it better?"<sup>60</sup> Chovel was not alone in her concern for the refugees who were being detained at Guantanamo Bay, and because of the Balsero Crisis and the new attitude adopted by the federal government when dealing with Cubans fleeing to the United States, there was a renewed concern among Americans for the plight of Cubans trying to come to the United States to start a new life. President Clinton was

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<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Campisi, *Escape to Miami: An Oral History of the Cuban Rafters Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Campisi, *Escape to Miami*.

<sup>60</sup> Gay, *Leaving Cuba*, 93-94.

beginning to feel pressure from advocates for Cuban refugees and human rights and also politicians who were concerned about keeping immigration to the United States in check.

In an effort to compromise on the issue of Cuban immigration, the Clinton administration ordered a revision of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. The administration added the “wet foot, dry foot” policy which allowed refugees who reached U.S. soil (“dry foot”) to remain in the United States and apply for permanent residency after one year, whereas those intercepted at sea (“wet foot”) would be deported back to Cuba.<sup>61</sup> For every Cuban who may have been deterred by the policy to deport those who were caught at sea, there were dozens more who were encouraged to attempt escaping the island by the idea of making it to U.S. soil and getting the chance to become a permanent resident. Horrible conditions on the island reached a fever pitch as Cuba entered the Special Period. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Castro was left to figure out how to finance his country. Unable to find any other countries that were able to be the trading partner and lender that the Soviets were, the Cuban economy quickly sank to its lowest point.<sup>62</sup> This caused hundreds of Cubans to continue to construct dangerous rafts and risk their lives to make it to Florida.

The contentiousness surrounding the issue of Cuban refugees was further complicated by the Elian Gonzalez event. In 1999, a five-year old boy named Elian Gonzalez was rescued from the Florida Straits after the boat he and fourteen other Cubans had been using to flee the island capsized. He was taken to live with relatives in

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<sup>61</sup> Vicki Huddleston and Carlos Pascual, *Learning to Salsa: New Steps in US-Cuba Relation* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010); LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 299.

<sup>62</sup> Susan Kaufman Purcell, “Collapsing Cuba,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 1, 1992, 130-31.

Miami after it was discovered that Elian's mother had died at sea. Very quickly, Elian became a poster child for the dangers faced by refugees because of Fidel Castro, with headlines, stories, and images, like one featured in the *St. Petersburg Times*, charging: "Another Child Victim of Fidel Castro."<sup>63</sup> The enormous amount of news coverage surrounding Elian's arrival in the United States coincided with a demand from Elian's father and grandmother to have the child sent back to them in Cuba.

From that point onward, the battle for custody of Elian became an ideological argument of sorts between the United States and Cuba. The Cuban-American community in Miami rallied around the Elian's local family, who wanted the child to be allowed to stay in the United States so that he would have a chance to grow up in a free country. Others, however, including Elian's family on the island and the Castro-controlled media in the country, painted this case as yet another attempt by the United States to control Cuban affairs, sparking island-wide anti-American protests calling for Elian's immediate return.<sup>64</sup> The matter of returning the boy became seen as a battle between communism and democracy, as each side fought ferociously to keep Elian.

In an April 6, 2000 statement, Attorney General Janet Reno ordered the return of Elian Gonzalez to his father in Cuba: "Cuba is a repressive society. A society ruled by a dictator from which thousands have fled... to seek a better way of life. Because of this Miami has prospered and grown... But in the end this is a nation of laws by which all

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<sup>63</sup> Gay, *Leaving Cuba*, 112-113; "Politicized Custody," Editorials, *St. Petersburg Times*, December 2, 1999, p. 24A.

<sup>64</sup> Antonio Rafael de la Cova, "The Elain Gonzalez Case: The World's Most Watched And Politically-Charged Custody Battle That Reached The U.S. Supreme Court And Determined A Presidential Election," *Harvard Latino Law Review* 18, (Spring 2015): 151-200, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 4, 2016).



must abide.”<sup>65</sup> In the early morning of April 24, 2000, federal agents used “a battering ram to knock down the front door of Elian’s great uncle, Lazaro. Wielding machine guns, the body-armor-clad agents knocked over a picture of Jesus Christ and a statue of the Virgin Mary on Easter Eve. They then kicked down another door inside the Gonzalez home.”<sup>66</sup>

The violent and secretive way in which Elian’s removal was secured became a source of extreme embarrassment for the U.S. government and a basis for outrage among most Cuban-Americans in Miami. Cuban exiles were upset by the loss, both symbolic and literal, of an innocent little boy to a communist government who would never be able to afford Elian the opportunities that he may have had if he grew up in the United States.<sup>67</sup>

In the midst of all this, Chirino remained very aware of the situation surrounding Cuban immigration and witnessed, first-hand, the needs of Cuban refugees coming into the United States. In 1994, the same year as the *balseiro* crisis occurred, Chirino established the Willy Chirino Foundation with his wife, Lissette Alvarez. Initially, the mission of the organization was to aid Cuban artists who found themselves needing help after they fled from Cuba, but it quickly expanded to offer aid to all Cubans who found themselves in need.<sup>68</sup> During the first year of the Foundation’s existence, \$75,000 was

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<sup>65</sup> Cesar Guerra, *Elian: Shame or Sham?* (Lincoln: Writer’s Club Press, 2002) 84.

<sup>66</sup> Deroy Murdock, "Clinton Regime Outdoes Itself by Snatching Elian Gonzalez," CATO Institute, last modified April 24, 2000, accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/clinton-regime-outdoes-itself-snatching-elian-gonzalez>.

<sup>67</sup> Murdock, “Clinton Regime Outdoes Itself,” CATO Institute.

<sup>68</sup> Stevans, *Latin Music*, 127.

donated to Hermanos Al Recaste, which is a Cuban-exile right-wing civic group with a very anti-Castro bent.<sup>69</sup>

Chirino's desire to help, especially to help children, continued throughout the 1990s and is reflected in the dozens of awards he continued to be given through the decade. In 1995, Miami-Dade County held a ceremony for Chirino in which they renamed one of the streets in Little Havana "Willy Chirino Way." March 25, 1995 was proclaimed "Willy Chirino Day" by the Florida state senate in honor of the establishment of the Willy Chirino Foundation, and the Miami Children's Hospital honored Chirino with an award in appreciation of his donations to children in the Miami area. Chirino was awarded the Spirit of Hope award in 1998 by *Billboard* magazine for his humanitarian efforts in the Latin American community.<sup>70</sup>

His notable increase in humanitarian efforts surrounding the period following the Balseiro Crisis, the increased immigration following the wet foot, dry foot policy, and the international attention achieved by the Elian Gonzalez custody battle is reflected as a political agenda in the music he produced during this same time. In the 1990s, we begin to see songs and entire albums from Chirino that were dedicated specially to the idea of calling for a united Cuba that was freed from the control of Castro and communism.

In 1998, Chirino released *Cuba Libre*, his seventeenth studio album. One of the most popular tracks off of that album, "Nuestro Dia Ya Viene Llegando (Our Day is Already Coming)" tells the story of a child who is sent on the 90-mile journey from Cuba

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<sup>69</sup> John Lannert, "Latin Music Award Winners Include First-Timers, Familiar Faces," *Billboard*, April 11, 1998

<sup>70</sup> Lannert, "Latin Music Award Winners," *Billboard*.

to the United States by his father, because he was “running from an absurd ideology.”<sup>71</sup> This “absurd ideology” he refers to is that of Fidel Castro and the turn towards communism and the Soviet Union, which led thousands of Cubans to flee the island, others to send their children unaccompanied to the United States, and has led to economic instability on the island. As the song progresses, it shifts to a call for Cubans to unite: “announcing to all my brothers/ that our day is already coming/ I want to see our flag fly/ Cuba awaits us.”<sup>72</sup> Referring to his fellow Cubans as “brothers” and expressing the desire to return to a Cuba that has been freed from its oppression signals that this is a politically-driven song. He ends the song by reciting names of many different countries that were under the control of oppressive regimes, such as Czechoslovakia and East Germany, and ending the list with Cuba and then exclaiming “Libre!” or “Free!” after each troubled nation.<sup>73</sup>

A review of one of Chirino’s performances in 1997 shows that Chirino was already performing this song before the album was even released. Peter Watrous went to review a performance by Chirino at the Beacon Theater in New York City, and seemed to have some less than kind words for the artist and his band.<sup>74</sup> Watrous commented that the show was “30 percent full, at best” and really only appealed to the Cuban-American community living in the area. He described the show as entertaining and enjoyed by those

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<sup>71</sup> Willy Chirino, “Nuestro Dia Ya Viene Llegando,” in *Cuba Libre*, Sony Discos, 1998, cassette tape.

<sup>72</sup> Willy Chirino, “Nuestro Dia Ya Viene Llegando,” *Cuba Libre*.

<sup>73</sup> Willy Chirino, “Nuestro Dia Ya Viene Llegando,” *Cuba Libre*.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Watrous, “Music Review; Pan-Caribbean Approach With Politics Thrown In,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1997.

in attendance, but merely out of a sense of excitement over shared political values between the Cubans in the room, especially when Chirino performed “Nuestro Dia Ya Viene Llegando.”<sup>75</sup>

The first single off of *Cuba Libre* was the title track, and was set to be released in July 1998 in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a cocktail featuring rum and Coke, named the “Cuba Libre.” It was reported in an article in *Billboard* magazine that Chirino wrote the song at the request of Bacardi after he and the rum company reached a deal on a promotional campaign for the drink that would extend throughout 1998. By this point, Chirino was already well-known for “inserting messages that tweak Cuban leader Fidel Castro.” Chirino responded to that claim by saying that the song was primarily written for Bacardi to commemorate the cocktail, but “people are free to interpret a political significance from the lyrics.”<sup>76</sup> A few years after the release of “Cuba Libre,” Chirino reflected in an interview saying that while writing the song for Bacardi, he was inspired to continue with a full album that was made up of songs that acknowledged Cuba and featured duets with other Cuban artists.<sup>77</sup>

*Cuba Libre* has a double meaning when examining the lyrics. Not only can one be led to think the song is praising the alcoholic drink from lines such as “Cuba Libre/Cuba Libre/Como me gusta a mi cola y Bacardi/hielo and limon,” but one can also take the song to be a cry for a free Cuba from lines such as “Es un canto de amistad/para todos la

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<sup>75</sup> Watrous, “Music Review,” *New York Times*.

<sup>76</sup> John Lannert, “Latin Notas: Chirino’s Tongue-in-Cheek Toast,” *Billboard*, June 27, 1998.

<sup>77</sup> Judy Cantor, “Willy Chirino Foundation as Diverse as the Singer’s Music,” *Billboard*, April 28, 2001.

humanidad/que quiere Cuba libre.”<sup>78</sup> This last line explains that the song is a friendly one for all of humanity that wants a free Cuba, or if you don’t translate the last phrase, Cuba libre, the line could mean that the song is meant for all of humanity that wants a one of the drinks. The way in which the listener perceives the meaning of the song will sure depend on the background of the individual, and it will no doubt be taken by many to represent support of a democratic Cuba.

The presence of a sizeable number of songs and the presence of some whole albums containing a message of solidarity and the desire for freedom from oppression serves the purpose of being political regardless of Chirino’s intentions. Just because Chirino’s lyrics are not exclusively political does not mean that his music does not further a political agenda. A feeling of unity among members of a group is an important factor in causing political change, therefore select songs and albums that Chirino dedicates to ideas of unification serve to strengthen the political power of Latinos who identify with his lyrics, because one purpose of music is to support democracy.<sup>79</sup>

For example, on the album *Cubanismo*, the song “Memorandum Para un Tirano” discusses a deep desire to get rid of the tyrannical power, Fidel Castro, that has perpetrated injustice and evil against his people.<sup>80</sup> This song could not be more blatant in its reprimand of Castro, and its call for freedom throughout the island. Chirino begins the song with the lines, “To whom it may concern:/Cuba is going to get rid of the one who sacrifices it,” and carries this message through to the chorus that says, “Freedom,

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<sup>78</sup> Willy Chirino, "Cuba Libre," in *Cuba Libre*, Sony Discos, 1998, cassette tape.

<sup>79</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, 198.

<sup>80</sup> Willy Chirino, “Memorandum Para un Tirano,” in *Cubanismo*, Latinum Music, 2005, CD.

freedom/ Enough of injustice/ Freedom, freedom/ Cuba cries out and demands freedom.” The call for democracy is loud and clear as “Down with the dictatorship/ No more cruel despotism” is shouted along with demands for restored rights and better wages on the island.<sup>81</sup> The rest of *Cubanismo* is filled with songs that relate the beauty and wonder that Chirino feels when he thinks of Cuba, including “Hableme de Jatibonico,” which describes a man that never feels interest in hearing of his friends’ travels to France or Ibiza, but only feels joy when he hears of his “simple and beautiful village” in Cuba.<sup>82</sup>

One thing that can be seen as a small victory for Cubans still living on the island is the removal of the “blacklist” of singers whose music had previously been kept off the radio. Almost fifty different musicians and singers had previously been blocked from being played on state-owned radio stations, at state-sanctioned functions, and being sold openly in the market. This list included Gloria Estefan and Chirino because they were openly hostile towards communism and the Castro regime. The measure is largely symbolic because the banned artists did already enjoy a great amount of popularity among Cubans on the island, and the black market spread their music by way of cds, dvds, and flash drives coming to the island from the United States.<sup>83</sup>

Yoani Sanchez termed this blacklist removal “Raul Reforms,” which she described as “accepting what he can’t prevent, authorizing what is already happening and

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<sup>81</sup> Willy Chirino, “Memorandum Para un Tirano,” *Cubanismo*.

<sup>82</sup> Willy Chirino, “Hableme de Jatibonico,” in *Cubanismo*, Latinum Music, 2005, CD.

<sup>83</sup> Yoani Sanchez, “Cuba Removes Artists Such as Celia Cruz and Gloria Estefan From the Blacklist,” *Huffington Post*, August 10, 2012, Accessed February 5, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yoani-sanchez/cuba-removes-artists-such\\_b\\_1765658.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yoani-sanchez/cuba-removes-artists-such_b_1765658.html).

is unstoppable.”<sup>84</sup> It is likely that Cubans on the island identified with the political messages of nostalgia for a pre-Castro Cuba and freedom in a post-Castro Cuba in Chirino’s music. However, the removal of the official ban on certain artists who made music that was clearly anti-communist or anti-Castro did not immediately result in the music of these newly permitted singers to be played on radio stations. The government remains hesitant to play the voices of those who they consider in opposition because of their allusions to freedom or political transition, including Chirino and his anthem “Our Day Will Come.”<sup>85</sup>

Chirino can and does use the profits from his music to help Latin Americans in countries throughout North and South America, making the music itself an agent for politically-driven action. His funding of the Willy Chirino Foundation and his donations to different charities is another form of political voice. Chirino has always seen his foundation as a tool to support Cuban refugees on a large scale, and in the summer of 1994, at the outbreak of the Balsero crisis, Chirino stepped up his humanitarian efforts. The Willy Chirino Foundation began a crusade to help Cuban refugees “by delivering 20,000 tons of food to a refugee detainment camp at Guantanamo and providing assistance to those who had survived the dangerous journey to South Florida.”<sup>86</sup> Also, to boost morale and show support to his Cuban brothers and sisters, Chirino traveled to the detainment camp at Guantanamo Bay and performed a free concert with a message of strength and an understanding of the struggle they were facing.<sup>87</sup> Chirino used the wealth

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<sup>84</sup> Sanchez, “Cuba Removes Artists ... from Blacklist,” *Huffington Post*.

<sup>85</sup> Sanchez, “Cuba Removes Artists ... from Blacklist,” *Huffington Post*.

<sup>86</sup> Cantor, “Willy Chirino Foundation as Diverse as the Singer’s Music,” *Billboard*.

<sup>87</sup> Chirino, *Interview with Willy Chirino*, By Julio Estorino.

gained through his music career and his celebrity status in the Cuban community to support Latinos/as like him who rebel against a government which is oppressive in the treatment of its people. Just like unity of a group is needed in order for political action to succeed, monetary backing of a group serves the purpose of supporting those who have taken dangerous actions in defiance of a tyrannical ruler.

Chirino is not the only artist to use his career to further democracy. In a similar vein, Emilio Estefan and his wife, Gloria Estefan, both came to the United States from Cuba as children in the 1960s and struggled in situations of poverty until they made names for themselves in the music industry.<sup>88</sup> The couple rose to fame by their participation in the Miami Sound Machine during the 1970s and 1980s and gained quite a following of supporters during their time in the group. During the same time that the Miami Sound Machine was enjoying major success, there was a Cuban musical movement, called *nueva trova*, gaining momentum.

*Nueva trova* began in 1967 by several Cuban musicians who believed that there was a crisis in Cuban music because of the malicious influence of the United States. The artists wanted to create a style of music that combined traditional Cuban melodies as well as contemporary sounds – similar to the mixture of sounds that constitutes Chirino’s Miami Sound – but with the purpose of creating messages and lyrics that have an overtly political tinge.<sup>89</sup> “The defining feature of the *nueva trova* was its adoption of social and

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<sup>88</sup> “Gloria and Emilio Estefan Build a Music Empire and a Family Compound: The two musicians met in Miami after escaping Cuba in the ’60s,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 2015, Accessed December 3, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/gloria-and-emilio-estefan-build-a-music-empire-and-a-family-compound-1448988567>.

<sup>89</sup> Lindsay Michie and Eunice Rojas, Eds., *Sounds of Resistance: The Role of Music in Multicultural Activism* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013) 398.



political consciousness” and ability to support the Castro regime and the socialism that they believed was the remedy to the American invasion through their music.<sup>90</sup> The purpose of their musical movement was as a means of spreading their political agenda through song lyrics.

Emilio Estefan drew a stark contrast between *nueva trova* and artists such as himself and Chirino and his wife, Lisette, who is also a popular recording artist: “the main difference between us and the *nueva trova* is that we don’t believe in mixing politics with music.”<sup>91</sup> Estefan then goes on to explain that artists who were born in Cuba but raised in the United States believe that the only effective way to promote their political views is to “sing their own music and invest the proceeds to promote a cause.”<sup>92</sup> The use of profits from his artistic efforts seems to be more or less the method that Chirino has used in his career to allow his music to serve a political purpose, although in his later career he has released music that is dedicated to expressions of Cuban identity, such as “Memorándum Para Un Tirano” and “Nuestro Día Ya Viene Llegando.” Chirino’s work through his foundation, such as offering financial aid to those who have migrated to the United States after political unrest in their home countries, serves as a means of using his music as a tool for political change by using profits gained from his music for this purpose.

Use of his music as an agent, directly or indirectly, for political change does not make Chirino unique among Cuban musical artists but inserts him within their ranks.

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<sup>90</sup> Michie and Rojas, *Sounds of Resistance*, 400.

<sup>91</sup> Javier Santiago, “The Cuban Sound: Inside and Out,” *Billboard*, November 1, 1986.

<sup>92</sup> Santiago, “The Cuban Sound,” *Billboard*.

Celia Cruz was an Afro-Cuban singer whose career in music in the United States was marked by her very open disdain for Castro and her obvious love of her homeland. She used her music as a direct means of political voice.<sup>93</sup> This is to say that her music was specifically meant to create discussion and encourage change. Cruz was very vocal about her desire to be a voice of encouragement for Latinos, and she used her music to do so. In reference to her desire to have a political voice through her music, she said, “Latin Americans living in English-speaking countries should unite for their collective benefit,” with “Latinos en los Estados Unidos” being one song that she specifically cited as being part of her repertoire out of a sense of “political duty” because of its message of unification.<sup>94</sup> “In unity there is power/You will be respected Don’t let them convince you/Don’t lose the Spanish language” is part of the call to action that Cruz sings in an effort to bond together the masses of Latinos who now call the United States home.<sup>95</sup>

Crossover music, which is when a musician or singer achieves mainstream success by changing their typical style of music, exposes audiences to genres and artists that they wouldn’t normally experience.<sup>96</sup> One example of that is Chirino’s best-selling album, a Beatles cover album entitled “My Beatles Heart.” This album offers the listener a Latin-infused version of the Beatles’ greatest hits, completely in English unlike almost all of Chirino’s other music. This certainly seems to suggest that despite the popularity he

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<sup>93</sup> Richard M. Juang and Noelle Morrisette, Eds., *Africa and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008) 314.

<sup>94</sup> Abreu, “Celebrity, “Crossover,” and Cubanidad,” 97.

<sup>95</sup> Celia Cruz, “Latinos en Los Estados Unidos,” on *La Candela*, 1986.

<sup>96</sup> “Crossover.” Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed March 20, 2017. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crossover>.

enjoys in the Spanish-speaking community, the “crossover” market, which targets both Spanish and English-speaking audiences, still matters to performers like Chirino.<sup>97</sup> In a way, Chirino brings more visibility to a segment of listeners that may be seen as inaccessible to non-Latino audiences. At the same time, the popularity of salsa music that is performed solely in English suggests that Latin music must be made palatable to a non-Latino/a audience by getting rid of the Spanish language that is synonymous with the style of music.<sup>98</sup> Cynthia Fuchs discusses the idea of Latin crossovers by explaining that although Latina pop star Shakira had been releasing music in Spanish since 1990, she was almost totally unknown in the United States until she began releasing some songs that were totally in English and had a more mainstream pop feel.<sup>99</sup>

By being able to reach a diverse crowd of both Latinos/as and a non-Latino/a, crossover audience, Chirino may be able to bring the plight of Cubans to the forefront of the minds of Americans. Typically, the methods used by artists outside of the mainstream market to appeal to a broader and, generally, whiter audience are either collaborations with mainstream artists or performing covers of English-language songs that were originally sung by mainstream singers. Chirino has not performed any collaborations with non-Latino artists, but he has made his ventures into the crossover market by covering one of the most prolific bands in the mainstream. The success of Chirino’s endeavor into the mainstream of the Anglo-American market “allows Americans to congratulate

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<sup>97</sup> Matt Deoden, *American Latin Music: Rumba Rhythms, Bossa Nova, and the Salsa Sound* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2013) 55.

<sup>98</sup> Deoden, *American Latin Music*, 56.

<sup>99</sup> Fuchs, 169-171.

themselves on their appreciation of diversity as his music furthers the political imaginary of his own community through ostensibly nonpolitical celebrations of *cubanidad*.”<sup>100</sup>

This means that even when the goal of a crossover project is not to explicitly influence the political leanings of a broader audience, the effect is still that the artist will be able to spread their influence as they gain popularity.

In his later life, Chirino has slowed down both in terms of new music being released and performances being scheduled. However, he still has a loud voice when it comes to issues that are dear to him. For example, on November 25, 2016, it was announced that Fidel Castro had died, and Little Havana in Miami erupted into massive celebrations as Cubans, old and young, expressed their joy that a man who had caused so much suffering was now gone and perhaps democracy would finally have a fighting chance in Cuba.<sup>101</sup> Chirino quickly took to Facebook to express his passion and joy over the passing of the former Cuban dictator: “In the name of the executed, of the tortured, jailed, disappeared, thinking of the millions of Cubans who have suffered family separation, absence and longing for their fatherland because of this disgraceful man, I say to him now GO TO HELL!”<sup>102</sup> Chirino’s sentiments of anger were echoed by fellow Cuban musicians such as Emilio and Gloria Estefan as well as a certain segment of the Cuban-American community. Among the crowd of partiers in Miami was Leeza Fortunato who came to the United States during the Mariel boatlift. She said that she was

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<sup>100</sup> Aparicio, *Musical Migrations*, 43.

<sup>101</sup> Alan Gomez, “In Miami, celebrations break out after Fidel Castro's death,” *USA Today*, November 26, 2016, accessed January 28, 2017, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/11/26/miami-celebrates-fidel-castro-death/94465040/>.

<sup>102</sup> Howard Cohen and Jordan Levin, “The Estefans, Andy Garcia, Willy Chirino See Hope for a New Cuba After Castro’s Death,” *Miami Herald*, November 26, 2016, accessed January 29, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article117273738.html>.

celebrating in honor of her father who spent ten years in a Cuban prison before he and the rest of the family were able to escape the island.<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, Chirino used his musical career as a means of furthering a political agenda when it came to the announcement of Jeb Bush's candidacy for the presidency in 2015. Bush had gained a reputation as a politician largely friendly to Hispanics during his two terms as the governor of Florida, a state with a population that measures 25% Hispanic or Latino with more than 80% of the Cuban-American population living in South Florida.<sup>104</sup> Bush is married to a Mexican-born woman, and during his rally to announce his candidacy he featured several phrases in Spanish geared at the hundreds of Hispanic supporters in the crowd, which both contribute to the largely positive attitude that Floridian Latinos have of Bush.<sup>105</sup> "Cuban-American musical royalty" Willy Chirino was asked to be present at Bush's rally to sing the U.S. national anthem for the event, and he took the stage with his wife and his three daughters.<sup>106</sup> Bush's speech that followed Chirino's performance emphasized the many different ways in which Bush has supported the Hispanic community throughout his political career and outlined his hardline stance against reestablishing diplomatic ties with the Cuban government. Chirino's presence at the rally shows his personal support for Bush and his conservative Republican policies

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<sup>103</sup> Lisa Smith-Spark, "Crowds flood streets of Miami's Little Havana to cheer Castro's death," *CNN*, November 26, 2016.

<sup>104</sup> United States Census Bureau, *United States Census 2010 Florida QuickFacts*, Vintage Year 2015, accessed February 5, 2017, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/12>; Daniella Diaz, "How Does The Cuban Vote Stack Up In Florida," *CNN*, March 16, 2016, accessed February 5, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/15/politics/florida-primary-cuban-latino-voters-marco-rubio/>.

<sup>105</sup> Patricia Mazzei and Amy Sherman, "With Pressure On, Jeb Bush Delivers Forceful Speech Confirming 2016 Presidential Candidacy," *Miami Herald*, June 15, 2015.

<sup>106</sup> Mazzei and Sherman, "Jeb Bush Delivers Speech Confirming Candidacy," *Miami Herald*.

and makes public Chirino's stance on Cuban-American relations. Chirino is again able to use his fame and music career to entice other Cuban-American and Hispanic voters to put their support behind Bush and become politically active.

In the same vein, in an op-ed written for *Billboard* in 2014, Willy Chirino stated that he believed that relaxing relations with Cuba was a mistake.<sup>107</sup> Chirino called the increased diplomatic ties initiated by the Obama Administration a "defeat for those of us who wanted to see a free, sovereign Cuba."<sup>108</sup> Chirino argued that allowing artists to perform on the island who agreed to not speak out about the Castro regime or the negative effects of communism really did nothing but silently accept Castro's oppression. In his view, and the views of many of Cubans in his age bracket, the economic benefits to corporations and governments would not outweigh the violation of basic human rights of the people of Cuba that will only continue to worsen under a Castro regime.

Traditionally, the majority of Cubans in the United States have not favored the warming of diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Cuba, but research now shows that more than half of all Cubans in Miami no longer support the U.S. embargo on Cuba.<sup>109</sup> Support for ending restrictions on travel and money sent between the countries, and opening up direct dialogue between the two governments is particularly strong among Cubans in the 18-45 year old age bracket and those who entered the United States after the Mariel boatlift. Older Cubans in Miami and those who entered the United States

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<sup>107</sup> Willy Chirino, "Willy Chirino Op-Ed: Why U.S.-Cuba Thaw Is No Victory," *Billboard*, December 18, 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Chirino, "Willy Chirino Op-Ed," *Billboard*.

<sup>109</sup> Jorge Duany, *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 147.

before the 1980s, like Chirino and his entrance in the U.S. under Operation Pedro Pan, are less likely to be in favor of such developments.<sup>110</sup>

Chirino's scathing report of diplomatic ties between the United States and Cuba, teaming up with Bush and the Republicans, and his use of direct political and patriotic language in some of his music demonstrates the fact that he is willing to speak out about his political views in a more direct way. Chirino has made his career by not only entertaining but also uniting his listeners through themes of pride, freedom, and fun. Chirino has evolved from using his occupation in a more passive way to a more overt means of enacting his political voice. Passive action was found in the utilization of profits from his music to spread the influence of democracy to those Latin Americans affected by conflict and oppressive governments, and a more direct political expression can be seen later in his career through his song lyrics and his public comments and presence in today's political happenings.

One lesson that Chirino's career offers is that being a public figure allows one to have a powerful influence on the world of politics. On the surface, one may discount an artist who does not constantly address political matters in their music, as can be seen by the example of Chirino's early career, but political agency can be enacted in an indirect way and still have just as much influence. The humanitarian acts that were carried out by Chirino through his Foundation and his sense of Cuban pride has sent a loud and clear message against the oppression to which his fellow Latin Americans have so often fallen victim.

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<sup>110</sup> Duany, *Blurred Borders*, 149.

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