

# Rock-a-Cha-Cha: The Erased Impact of Latin American Music on the Rhythmic Transformation of US Popular Music

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## Abstract

This article interrogates an overlooked claim made by Mario Bauzá, that the impact of Latin American musics on a fundamental change in the rhythm of twentieth-century music has been written out of history. After presenting four original analytical definitions, a corpus analysis establishes that a transition occurred from swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet ‘monorhythm’ to straight-quaver polyrhythm in US popular music, culminating in early 1960s rock ‘n’ roll. Focusing on Paul Anka’s ‘Diana’ and the style ‘rock-a-cha-cha’, a combination of music analysis and reception history demonstrates that Afro-Latin musics were the predominant influence on the rhythmic transformation – which was erased by rock historians, influenced by three factors. This impact of Latin American music and migration is theorized in terms of cosmopolitanism. The article concludes that the impact of Latin American music on the United States is not a superficial ‘tinge’: it prompted a paradigm shift in the rhythm of twentieth-century music.

THERE HAS BEEN A RHYTHMIC REVOLUTION IN ROCK . . . The basic patterns are now in even 8ths (as opposed to the traditional triplet feeling of most jazz). This has made another extremely important development possible: some very complex polyrhythms.

Don Ellis, 1969<sup>1</sup>

The Cubans, we came here and changed your American music from the bottom up!  
And nobody knows this! NOBODY WRITES ABOUT THIS!

Mario Bauzá, 1988<sup>2</sup>

As the 1960s drew to a close, jazz trumpeter Don Ellis and music educator Thomas MacCluskey each published an article proclaiming that two coalescing rhythmic trends had occurred in post-war popular music.<sup>3</sup> In the subsequent two decades, the founding fathers of Latin jazz Mario Bauzá and Dizzy Gillespie asserted that Afro-Latin musics

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1 Don Ellis, ‘Rock: The Rhythmic Revolution’, *Down Beat* 36 (1969).

2 Mario Bauzá as quoted in Robert Palmer, ‘The Cuban Connection’, *Spin* 4 (1988), 28.

3 Ellis, ‘Rock’; Thomas MacCluskey, ‘Rock in Its Elements’, *Music Educators Journal* 56 (1969), 49.

influenced this rhythmic transformation<sup>4</sup> – specifically, a transition from swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet ‘monorhythm’ to straight-quaver polyrhythm, which culminated in rock ‘n’ roll of the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Bauzá, the musical director of mambo pioneers Machito and his Afro-Cubans, claimed that the impact of Cuban music and migration on this fundamental change in the rhythm of twentieth-century music has been written out of history. Ellis’s and MacCluskey’s articles seem to be evidence of Bauzá’s claim. Neither article posits a Latin influence on the coalescing rhythmic trends, even though straight-quaver polyrhythm is most associated with Afro-Cuban music.<sup>6</sup>

Three decades later, Bauzá’s claim has not been interrogated by scholars. Corpus analyses suggest that a shift occurred from swung-quaver subdivisions and compound time signatures to straight-quaver subdivisions in US popular music between the 1950s and the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Alexander Stewart’s study of the shift from the shuffle, 12/8 and 6/8 to straight eighths assumes that the transition occurred and does not reference empirical evidence.<sup>8</sup> Latin American music and migration are most commonly identified as an influence on the rhythmic trend, principally by researchers positing ‘Latin tinges’ on US music such as John Storm Roberts, Robert Palmer, and Ned Sublette.<sup>9</sup> Citing Bauzá, Sublette suggests several explanations for the ‘amnesia’ of the Cuban influence on the trends.<sup>10</sup> However, no empirical evidence has been provided to indicate that a larger rhythmic transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm occurred, that Latin American music and migration were the predominant influence on this transition, nor that this influence has been erased. Recent monographs on popular music analysis have either overlooked the rhythmic trends or the historiographical significance of a forgotten Latin influence on them.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Latinx studies has

4 Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . To Bop: Memoirs* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 318 and 490; Bauzá as quoted in Palmer, ‘The Cuban Connection’, 28.

5 For readers who have studied music theory, monorhythm and polyrhythm are defined precisely later in the main text. For readers who have not studied music theory, swung-quaver monorhythm and straight-quaver polyrhythm are illustrated without recourse to Western staff notation in Example 4.

6 Julian Gerstin, ‘Comparisons of African and Diasporic Rhythm: The Ewe, Cuba, and Martinique’, *Analytical Approaches to World Music* 5 (2017).

7 For example, Garry N. Tamlyn, ‘The Big Beat: Origins and Development of Snare Backbeat and Other Accompanimental Rhythms in Rock ‘n’ Roll’ (PhD diss., University of Liverpool, 1998); Jon Fitzgerald, ‘Popular Songwriting 1963–1966: Stylistic Comparisons and Trends within the U.S. Top Forty’ (PhD diss., Southern Cross University, 1996).

8 Alexander Stewart, ‘“Funky Drummer”: New Orleans, James Brown and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music’, *Popular Music* 19 (2000).

9 John Storm Roberts, *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music in the United States* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1979), 160 and 209; Palmer, ‘The Cuban Connection’; Ned Sublette, ‘The Kingsmen and the Cha-Cha-Chá’, in *A Momentary History of Pop Music*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 78, 81, and 91.

10 Ned Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), vii; Sublette, ‘The Kingsmen and the Cha-Cha-Chá’.

11 For example, Walter Everett, *The Foundations of Rock: From ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ to ‘Suite: Judy Blue Eyes’* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61; Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 22; David Temperley, *The Musical Language of Rock* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 68–9.

understandably focused on the direct participation of Latinx musicians in rock 'n' roll,<sup>12</sup> rather than the often indirect influence of Afro-Latin rhythm on US popular music.<sup>13</sup>

In order to fill this gap in the literature, this article answers one overarching question. Simply put: was Mario Bauzá right? Has a significant impact of Latin American music and migration on a rhythmic transformation of twentieth-century music been written out of history? This question is divided into four lines of inquiry. Did a rhythmic transition occur from swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet monorhythm to straight-quaver polyrhythm in post-war popular music in the United States? Were Afro-Latin musics the predominant influence on a trend towards straight-quaver polyrhythm? How can the impact of Latin American music and migration on this rhythmic trend be interpreted? Has a Latin influence on a rhythmic transformation of US popular music been erased, and if so why? In response to these questions, the article employs an original 'mixed methods' approach, combining music analysis, reception history, and sociocultural theory. Answering these questions is significant because, as Robert Palmer surmised, if Bauzá is right, 'then the history of American music since World War Two is in need of serious revision'.<sup>14</sup>

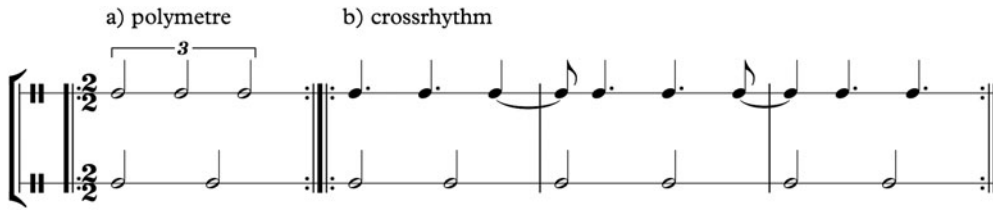
This study is structured in four sections, each of which addresses one of the four lines of inquiry. The first two sections focus on music theory and analysis. The last two sections focus on sociocultural analysis. The second and fourth sections also draw on reception history, comparing the reception of straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the music-industry trade press of the 1950s and early 1960s with the rock press of the 1960s and early 1970s.

First, I define key analytical terms before presenting the longitudinal findings of a corpus analysis. Specifically, I define monorhythm and polyrhythm based on musical examples provided by Bauzá and Gillespie, thereby introducing the basis of an original taxonomy of rhythmic texture. Then I establish empirically that a rhythmic transition occurred from swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet monorhythm to straight-quaver polyrhythm in US popular music, culminating in 1961. Second, focusing on Paul Anka's 'Diana' and the hybrid musical style 'rock-a-cha-cha', I demonstrate that Afro-Latin musics (particularly Afro-Cuban styles) were the predominant musical influence on the transition to

12 Rare exceptions of Latinx studies scholars discussing the indirect impact of Afro-Latin musics on US popular music include: Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va! Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010), 44; Paul Austerlitz, 'The Afro-Cuban Impact on Music in the United States: Mario Bauzá and Machito', in *Machito and his Afro-Cubans: Selected Transcriptions*, ed. Paul Austerlitz and Jere Laukkanen (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2016), xlviii. 'Latinx American' is a gender-neutral term that denotes a US-American with Latin American ancestry.

13 The expression 'Afro-Latin musics' is employed throughout this article. Afro-Cuban music was the most influential type of Latin American music in the United States at the time – specifically, *son* and *bolero* of the 1930s and *mambo* and *cha-cha-chá* of the 1950s. However, other Afro-Latin styles were also influential – namely, Afro-Argentine *tango* of the 1910s and the Afro-Brazilian styles *samba*, *baião*, and *bossa nova* of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, respectively. The expression 'Afro-Latin musics' usefully groups together Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Argentine styles, which, although distinct, share a greater use of straight-quaver polyrhythm than was common in the United States prior to the 1950s. The expression also accounts for the fact that Afro-Cuban music was typically performed by Puerto-Rican Americans and Mexican Americans in the United States.

14 Palmer, 'The Cuban Connection', 30.



**Example 1** a) Polymetre, three over two; and b) cross-rhythm, ‘three across two’.

straight-quaver polyrhythm. Third, focusing on rock-a-cha-cha and its predecessor rumba blues, I argue that the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation is a product of cosmopolitanism, which is shaped by both the mass migration to and mass media of global cities such as New York and Los Angeles. Fourth, I demonstrate that this Latin impact was erased by early rock historians, influenced by three main factors: the Black/white binary paradigm of race, the ‘Christ-like’ narrative of rock ‘n’ roll history, and the ‘tinge’ metaphor of Latin influence.<sup>15</sup>

### Analytical definitions and rhythmic trends

There are two main definitions of polyrhythm: a narrow definition and a broad definition. The narrow definition understands polyrhythm as polymetre or cross-rhythm. Polymetre denotes the superimposition of different metres, achieved by dividing the bar into multiple metres simultaneously – usually, three over two (e.g., triplet minims in 2/2; [Example 1a](#)). Cross-rhythm denotes the overlapping of different rhythmic groupings – usually, ‘three across two’ (e.g., dotted crotchets in 2/2; [Example 1b](#)).<sup>16</sup> However, there is consensus among scholars of polyrhythm that Afro-Cuban music is polyrhythmic,<sup>17</sup> even though *son* and mambo do not feature polymetre while bolero and cha-cha-chá do not consistently feature cross-rhythm. Thus, the narrow definition of polyrhythm as polymetre or cross-rhythm is too limited – it works for much West African drumming in 12/8 but not for most Afro-Cuban music nor most US popular music in 4/4.<sup>18</sup>

15 There are increasing calls to capitalize the ‘w’ in ‘white’ when referring to race. ‘White’ is not capitalized in this article because of the house style of the journal. For a persuasive argument in favour of capitalizing ‘White’ in scholarship, see Matiangai Sirleaf, ‘Rendering Whiteness Visible’, *American Journal of International Law* 117 (2023).

16 In Harald Krebs’s taxonomy of ‘metric dissonance’, polymetre and cross-rhythm can both be categorized as types of ‘grouping dissonance’. Polymetre has been subcategorized as ‘measure-preserving’ by Keith Waters and ‘beat-preserving’ by Brad Osborn, while cross-rhythm has been subcategorized as ‘tactus-preserving’ by Waters and ‘beat-changing’ by Osborn. Harald Krebs, *Fantasy Pieces: Metrical Dissonance in the Music of Robert Schumann* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1999); Keith Waters, ‘Blurring the Barline: Metric Displacement in the Piano Solos of Herbie Hancock’, *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 8 (1996), 19–37; Brad Osborn, *Everything in Its Right Place: Analyzing Radiohead* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63–81.

17 Gerstin, ‘Comparisons of African and Diasporic Rhythm’. Afro-Cuban music often features truncated forms of cross-rhythm; for example, the 3–3–2 *tresillo* rhythmic pattern discussed later in the main text.

18 In Latin America, Afro-Latin musics are typically notated in 2/4. In the United States, they are typically notated in 4/4 (or 2/2). 4/4 is employed throughout this article for consistency as to what subdivisions constitute the ‘quavers’.

The broad definition of polyrhythm is lesser known but widely used. In his 2016 book *The African Imagination in Music*, Kofi Agawu defines polyrhythm as ‘the simultaneous use of two or more contrasting rhythms in a musical texture’.<sup>19</sup> This broad definition is employed in this article because it works for Afro-Latin and African-American styles. However, Agawu does not clarify what type of rhythmic patterns produce polyrhythm in the 4/4 context. The examples of polyrhythm provided by Bauzá and Gillespie (discussed below) are neither poly-metre nor cross-rhythm. Instead, the bandleaders seem to distinguish between monorhythm and polyrhythm according to what I term ‘beat-level’ and ‘bar-level’ rhythmic patterns – a reformulation of Jay Rahn’s ‘symmetrical’ and ‘asymmetrical’ patterns.<sup>20</sup> Building on a distinction between beat-level and bar-level rhythmic patterns, I nuance the broad definition of polyrhythm (and monorhythm) below.

Bauzá stated that Afro-Cuban music influenced a change in the bass and drum parts of US jazz and popular music from the short rhythmic patterns (based on crotchet divisions) of swing in the 1940s to the longer rhythmic patterns (based on straight-quaver subdivisions) of Afro-Cuban music by the late 1950s:

We made changes starting from the bottom—the bass, the drums . . . Before they started to listen to us in the 1940s, all the American bass players played nothing but dum-dum-dum, 1-2-3-4, ‘walking’ bass. Then they heard the Cuban tumbaos (bass riffs) Cachao [Israel López Valdés] was playing, and they started to go da-da-dat—stop and rest—da-dat! Da-da-dat—stop and rest—da-dat! And the American drummers, the same. They were playing this even swish-swish-swish-swish on the ride cymbal, you know? Then they hear us, and the snare and the tom-tom start talking back and forth, like Cuban congas and bongos. When the electric bass guitar comes in, around 1957, the style people develop for that instrument, the patterns, the whole feel, it’s Cuban.<sup>21</sup>

Bauzá’s illustrations of US bass and drum patterns of the 1930s and 1940s are a walking bass-line and a crotchet ride pattern, as heard in recordings such as Louis Jordan’s 1950 instrumental ‘Psycho-Loco’. These are ‘beat-level’ rhythmic patterns. I define a beat-level rhythmic pattern as a repeated rhythmic cell that is one-to-two beats in length (Example 2a).

I infer from Robert Palmer’s verbal transcription that Bauzá’s example of Cuban-influenced bass and drum patterns is ‘Louie Louie’, which was made famous by the Kingsmen in 1963. ‘Da-da-dat—stop and rest—da-dat!’ evokes the riff from ‘Louie Louie’ for two reasons. First, in Richard Berry’s original 1957 recording of the rock ‘n’ roll standard, the riff was performed by a bass-register doo wop vocalist with ‘da-da-dat’ syllables. Second, Berry took the riff from a cha-cha-chá recording released earlier that year (namely, René

19 Kofi Agawu, *The African Imagination in Music* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2016), 176.

20 I employ the terms ‘beat-level’ and ‘bar-level’ instead of ‘symmetrical’ and ‘asymmetrical’ because I find Rahn’s metaphor of translational symmetry to be convoluted. Jay Rahn, ‘Asymmetrical Ostinatos in Sub-Saharan Music: Time, Pitch and Cycles Reconsidered’, *Theory Only* 9 (1987); Jay Rahn, ‘Turning the Analysis Around: Africa-Derived Rhythms and Europe-Derived Music Theory’, *Black Music Research Journal* 16 (1996).

21 Bauzá as quoted in Palmer, ‘The Cuban Connection’, 28 (emphasis original).

a) Beat-level rhythmic patterns

b) Bar-level rhythmic patterns

**Example 2** Mario Bauzá's examples of a) US 'beat-level' bass and drum patterns of 1930s and 1940s swing, with pitch added; and b) Cuban-influenced 'bar-level' bass and drum patterns of the late 1950s – implicitly, the straight-quaver bass-vocal riff of Richard Berry, 'Louie Louie' (1957; transposed to C major) with the conga accents of René Touzet, 'El Loco Cha Cha' (1956).

Touzet's 'El Loco Cha Cha'), which Palmer discussed later in his article.<sup>22</sup> The passage 'the snare and the tom-tom start talking back and forth, like Cuban congas and bongos' implies a common adaptation of the standard Afro-Cuban conga pattern to the drum kit. This standard conga pattern can be heard in 'El Loco Cha Cha' and the drum kit adaptation of it can be heard in Ray Charles's 1959 hit 'What'd I Say'. Bauzá's illustrations of the Cuban-influenced bass and drum patterns of the late 1950s are 'bar-level' rhythmic patterns. I define a 'bar-level' rhythmic pattern as a repeated rhythmic cell which is one-to-two bars in length (Example 2b).<sup>23</sup>

Pitch is not considered in these categories. The walking bassline is categorized as a beat-level pattern because rhythmically it is a repeated crotchet, despite the fact that melodically it may not repeat at all. Hypermetre is also excluded. Both a backbeat and a swing ride pattern repeat every two beats and are therefore categorized as beat-level patterns, even though musicians conceive of them as being one bar long.<sup>24</sup> At its simplest, Bauzá argued that, in the 1950s, Afro-Cuban rhythmic patterns were longer (one-to-two bars long) than US-American rhythmic patterns (one-to-two beats long). It follows that layering longer,

22 Palmer, 'The Cuban Connection', 83 (emphasis original). Bauzá's vocalization 'Da-da-dat—stop and rest—da-dat!' might be interpreted as referring to 3-2 *son* clave. However, unlike the 'Louie Louie' riff, clave is not a bass pattern and does not have accents on its third and fifth onsets.

23 The name and definition of beat-level and bar-level rhythmic patterns are based on US popular music of the 1950s and early 1960s. The corpus analysis indicates that, in this period, crotchets or quavers are consistently the shortest unit of (sub)division. The distinction between beat-level and bar-level patterns would need to be adapted to account for US popular music from the late 1960s onwards, in which semiquavers are often the shortest unit of subdivision – such as the semiquaver polyrhythm of funk, disco, and electronic dance music.

24 Similarly, the standard Afro-Cuban conga pattern (a bar-level rhythmic pattern) is categorized as a one-bar pattern, even though Afro-Cuban musicians may conceive of it as a two-bar pattern in the context of clave.

bar-level rhythmic patterns leads to a more complex rhythmic texture than layering shorter, beat-level patterns.

Gillespie strongly implied that Afro-Cuban music influenced a transition from monorhythm to polyrhythm.<sup>25</sup> He cited his 1940s composition ‘Night in Tunisia’ as an early example of polyrhythm in African-American music.<sup>26</sup> Gillespie does not define monorhythm. However, based on a comparison of two early recordings of ‘Night in Tunisia’, I argue that he understands monorhythm as a musical texture in which no more than one bar-level rhythmic pattern is employed simultaneously (hence the prefix ‘mono-’), alongside any number of beat-level patterns. Gillespie seems to define polyrhythm as a musical texture in which more than one different bar-level rhythmic pattern is employed simultaneously, again alongside any number of beat-level patterns.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, in 1944, Gillespie recorded ‘Night in Tunisia’ for the first time, with Sarah Vaughan, as a swing song entitled ‘Interlude’, which was released by Continental. ‘Interlude’ is monorhythmic. It features one bar-level pattern in the horns over three beat-level patterns in the rhythm section (Example 3a). Two years later, Gillespie recorded ‘Night in Tunisia’ as a Latin-jazz instrumental for RCA Victor, which was released in 1947.<sup>28</sup> ‘Night in Tunisia’ is polyrhythmic. It features five bar-level patterns and no beat-level patterns (Example 3b).

On one occasion Gillespie does define polyrhythm as ‘four or five different musicians playing different rhythms at the same time’, as heard in the 1947 recording of ‘Night in Tunisia’.<sup>29</sup> However, he also indicates that two bar-level patterns are sufficient for polyrhythm in reference to the song, stating that ‘where the bass says, “do-do-do-do-do-do,” and “daanh-da-da-da-da-da” was being played against that [in the saxophone]. That was the sense of polyrhythm (see again Example 3b).’<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in three additional Latin-jazz

25 Along with Afro-Brazilian styles, Gillespie implies that West Indian musics also influenced his adoption of straight-quaver polyrhythm. African-Trinidadian calypso and African-Jamaican mento often featured straight-quaver polyrhythm and both styles were popular and influential in the United States. For example, all but two of the eleven songs on Harry Belafonte’s 1956 album *Calypso* feature straight-quaver polyrhythm and the album was the first LP to sell over a million copies in the United States, kick-starting the 1957 calypso craze. That said, the music-industry trade press only suggested a calypso influence on one of the straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample: ‘Honey Love’ by the Drifters from 1954. Consequently, the impact of calypso is not interrogated in this article.

26 Dizzy Gillespie as quoted in Palmer, ‘The Cuban Connection’, 28; Gillespie with Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . To Bop*, 485 and 490. ‘Night in Tunisia’ does not seem to have had a strong influence on a trend towards straight-quaver polyrhythm in popular music. However, its successor ‘Manteca’ did. The riff of ‘Manteca’ audibly influenced the riff of Bobby Parker’s 1961 rumba blues ‘Watch Your Step’, which in turn influenced the Beatles’ straight-quaver polyrhythmic 1964 hit ‘I Feel Fine’, according to both John Lennon and George Harrison. The Beatles, *The Beatles Anthology* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2000), 160.

27 Gillespie’s definition of polyrhythm differs from Gerstin’s. Gerstin lists three types of polyrhythm: 1) ‘the staggering points of entry’, 2) ‘alternative groupings of subdivisions within the same cycle’, and 3) three-over-two polymetre. Gerstin’s second definition is closest to Gillespie’s. However, Gerstin’s example of this type of polyrhythm is an ‘asymmetric’ (bar-level) pattern against a symmetrical (beat-level) pattern – specifically, a *tresillo* against a backbeat. Conversely, Gillespie seems to require at least two bar-level patterns for a polyrhythmic texture. Gerstin, ‘Comparisons of African and Diasporic Rhythm’, 14–15.

28 All dates given refer to US release dates.

29 Gillespie with Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . To Bop*, 485.

30 Gillespie with Fraser, *To Be, or Not . . . To Bop*, 490.

**a) Sarah Vaughan, 'Interlude' (1944)**  
Swung-quaver monorhythm  
♩ = ca. 100

Horns

Electric Guitar

Double Bass

Drum Kit

**b) Dizzy Gillespie, 'Night in Tunisia' (1946)**  
Straight-quaver polyrhythm  
♩ = ca. 186

Vibraphone

Tenor Saxophone

Piano

Double Bass

Drum Kit

'daanh - da - da - da - da - da'

'do - do - do - do - do - do'

**Example 3** An inference of Dizzy Gillespie's distinction between monorhythm and polyrhythm, illustrated by a comparison of two recordings of 'Night in Tunisia'. A section, first six bars, accompaniment: a) Sarah Vaughan, 'Interlude' ([1944] 2001; 0:21–35), an example of swung-quaver monorhythm; and b) Dizzy Gillespie, 'Night in Tunisia' (1946), an example of straight-quaver polyrhythm. By John 'Dizzy' Gillespie and Frank Paparelli. Copyright © 1944: UNIVERSAL MUSIC CORP. Copyright Renewed. All Rights Reserved Used by Permission. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Ltd.



recordings of 'Night in Tunisia', Gillespie employed these two bar-level patterns alone (the bass and saxophone pattern) without any other bar-level patterns.<sup>31</sup> I employ Gillespie's definition of monorhythm and polyrhythm in this article.<sup>32</sup>

Played simultaneously, Bauzá's examples of Cuban-influenced bass and drum patterns of the late 1950s create a straight-quaver polyrhythmic texture (see again [Example 2b](#)). However, his examples of US bass and drum patterns of the 1930s and 1940s do not feature any quaver subdivisions (see again [Example 2a](#)). The resulting rhythmic texture is categorized as crotchet monorhythm. Bauzá's claim of a fundamental change in the rhythm of post-war popular music in the United States seems to refer to a transformation from crotchet and swung-quaver monorhythm to straight-quaver polyrhythm, culminating in rock 'n' roll of the late 1950s and early 1960s such as 'Louie Louie'. I add compound time signatures to the crotchet and swung-quaver category since 12/8 and 6/8 were common in 1950s R&B; for example, Fats Domino's 1956 hit 'Blueberry Hill'. Thus, I interrogate a transition from swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet monorhythm to straight-quaver polyrhythm.

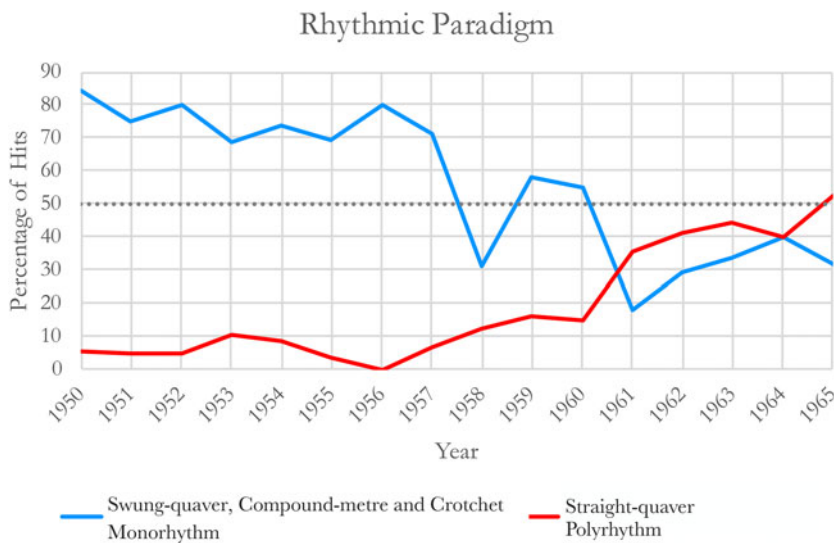
Having defined my terms, I conducted a corpus analysis of the rhythm of 431 year-end hits on *Billboard's* mainstream, R&B, and country & western singles charts from 1950 to 1965.<sup>33</sup> The findings are illustrated in [Figure 1](#).<sup>34</sup> Straight-quaver polyrhythm became the dominant

31 It is necessary to define monorhythm and polyrhythm as a binary in order to interrogate Bauzá's claim. However, within this binary, there is spectrum. A recording that features one bar-level rhythmic pattern is closer to polyrhythm than a recording that features no bar-level patterns – for instance, 'Interlude' is closer to polyrhythm than Bauzá's example of US bass and drum patterns in the 1940s. But both recordings are monorhythmic. Similarly, a recording that features five bar-level rhythmic patterns is more densely polyrhythmic than a recording that features two bar-level patterns; for example, the RCA Victor recording of 'Night in Tunisia' is more densely polyrhythmic than the V Disc, Guild, and Dial recordings of the tune. But both arrangements are polyrhythmic. Boyd Raeburn and his Orchestra, 'A Night in Tunisia', vinyl single, V Disc 275B, 1944; Boyd Raeburn and His Orchestra, 'Interlude (Night in Tunisia)', vinyl single, Guild 107B, 1945; Charlie Parker Septet, 'A Night in Tunisia', vinyl single, Dial 1002, 1946.

32 The formal structure of Gillespie's 'Night in Tunisia' corroborates Bauzá's suggestion that, before the 1960s, swung-quaver monorhythm was a US-American rhythmic paradigm and straight-quaver polyrhythm was a Latin American paradigm. Gillespie's 1947 Latin-jazz recording of 'Night in Tunisia' alternates between straight-quaver polyrhythm in the A section (the 'Latin') and swung-quaver monorhythm in the B section (the 'jazz'). A decade later, Leonard Bernstein's 'The Dance at the Gym' from the 1957 musical *West Side Story* made the same distinction: the Anglo-American Jets dance to a swung-quaver monorhythmic 'Blues' before the Puerto Rican-American Sharks dance to a straight-quaver polyrhythmic 'Mambo'.

33 There are problems with the *Billboard* charts in terms of both their somewhat dubious representation of the popularity of songs and their low representation of female performers. However, as David Brackett states, *Billboard* is 'the richest source of information about popular music making and the music industry' in the 1950s and early 1960s. For this reason, *Billboard's* single charts and reviews are analysed in this article. Peter Hesbacher, Robert Downing, and David G. Berger, 'Sound Recording Popularity Charts: A Useful Tool for Music Research', *Popular Music and Society* 4 (1975); Timothy J. Dowd, Kathleen Liddle, and Maureen Blyler, 'Charting Gender: The Success of Female Acts in the U.S. Mainstream Recording Market', *Transformation in Cultural Industries* 23 (2005), 99; David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 29.

34 I analysed the songs by ear. For time efficiency, I used a text-based rhythmic shorthand to 'transcribe' all of the rhythmic patterns in each song because this shorthand was searchable. For more information on the methodology employed in the corpus analysis, including how distinctions were drawn between swung- and straight-quaver subdivisions, a small number of exceptions to the beat-level/bar-level binary, and appendices showing how every song in the sample



**Figure 1** A comparison of the percentage of year-end hits that feature swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet monorhythm and straight-quaver polyrhythm on the *Billboard* mainstream, R&B, and country & western singles charts combined from 1950 to 1965.

rhythmic texture by 1961.<sup>35</sup> To hear this rhythmic transition in effect, listen to Elvis Presley's 1956 number-one single 'Heartbreak Hotel' (swung-quaver monorhythm; [Example 4a](#)) followed by his 1960 comeback single 'It's Now or Never' (straight-quaver polyrhythm; [Example 4b](#)). This study establishes empirically that a rhythmic transition from swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet monorhythm to straight-quaver polyrhythm did occur in post-war popular music in the United States, culminating in 1961.

## Musical influences

In this section, I interrogate the musical influences on the rhythmic transformation. I assess the influences on the songs in the sample that feature straight-quaver polyrhythm through both the music analysis of a representative case study (the teen idol Paul Anka's 1957 hit 'Diana') and the critical reception of these songs in the contemporaneous music-industry trade press. I then take a supplementary sample of songs that were reviewed at the time as examples of 'rock-a-cha-cha' and analyse those. Methodologically, this movement from music analysis to critical reception and back again provides an original model for the study of musical influence.

was categorized see Samuel J. Flynn, 'Rock-a-Cha-Cha: The Erased Impact of Latin American Music on the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music' (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2021), 60–83 and 179–203.

35 94% of the sample was in duple metre (that is, 4/4, 6/8, or 12/8). Only 6% of the sample was in triple metre (3/4 or 9/8).

**a) Elvis Presley, ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ (1956)**

Swung-quaver monorhythm

	1	+	+	2	+	+	3	+	+	4	+	+
Guitar 1	X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X
Bass, Snare, Guitar 2	X			X			X			X		

**b) Elvis Presley, ‘It’s Now or Never’ (1960)**

Straight-quaver polyrhythm

	1	+ a	2	+	3	+	4	+
Hi-Hat & Piano	X	X X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Snare & Claves			X	X			X	
Bass	X			X	X		X	

**Example 4** An example of the rhythmic transformation: a) Elvis Presley, ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ (1956), swung-quaver monorhythm; and b) Presley, ‘It’s Now or Never’ (1960), straight-quaver polyrhythm.

**Analysis: ‘Diana’**

‘Diana’ is a representative case study for two reasons: first, it is the earliest example of rock ‘n’ roll that features straight-quaver polyrhythm in the sample; second, each of the three bar-level rhythmic patterns that underpin the A section of ‘Diana’ features in around a third of the straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample. It is not possible to establish a specific chain of influence on the rhythmic patterns employed in ‘Diana’ because there are no published interviews with the song’s producer and arranger Don Costa.<sup>36</sup> The lineages illustrated below refer to Latin influences on the most common bar-level rhythmic patterns in general, rather than to documented Latin influences on ‘Diana’ in particular.

Before discussing the impact of Afro-Latin musics, I consider two other possible influences on the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm: West African drumming and swung-quaver polyrhythm. West African polyrhythm does not appear to have influenced the rhythmic transformation for two reasons. First, West African polyrhythm did not become well known in the United States until 1960, three years after the release of ‘Diana’, with the popularity of Babatunde Olatunji’s *Drums of Passion* – which comprises Nigerian percussion and chanting. Indeed, *Billboard* and *Cash Box* did not employ the term ‘polyrhythm’ to describe African music in the 1950s and early 1960s. Instead, they most often used ‘polyrhythm’ to describe Latin jazz, such as Machito and his Afro-Cubans. Second, although the majority of the tracks on *Drums of Passion* feature straight-quaver polyrhythm, none of the polyrhythmic songs in the sample seem to exhibit any specific West African instruments or techniques.

36 Paul Anka suggests that calypso influenced the melody of ‘Diana’. However, he states that Don Costa arranged the song’s accompaniment and therefore its rhythmic patterns. Paul Anka and David Dalton, *My Way: An Autobiography* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 2014), 43–5.

♩ = 140  
straight quavers

B. Vocals  
Wop be did dy doo, wop be did dy doo, wop be did dy doo, wop be did dy doo.  
Only for four bars

Piano  
G Em C D

E. Guitar

Saxophones  
E. Bass

Drum Kit  
Bass drum inaudible

**Example 5** Paul Anka, ‘Diana’ (1957), A section, accompaniment. Words and Music by Paul Anka. Copyright © 1957 Pamco Music Inc. All Rights Administered by Sony Music Publishing (US) LLC, 424 Church Street, Suite 1200, Nashville, TN 37219. International Copyright Secured All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Europe Ltd.

For example, the chanting heard on *Drums of Passion* is not heard in the sample.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, all but one of the thirteen songs in the sample that feature straight-quaver polyrhythm before ‘Diana’ exhibit a Latin influence. Specifically, straight-quaver polyrhythm is heard on the mainstream charts in bolero- and tango-influenced hits and on the R&B charts in ‘rhumba blues’ – a term that was employed at the time to denote a Cuban-influenced style of R&B that typically featured straight-quaver polyrhythm – for example, Ray Charles’ ‘What’d I Say’. Afro-Latin musics seem more likely to have influenced the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm than West African drumming.

Swung-quaver polyrhythm does not seem to have been the predominant influence on the rhythmic transformation: 5% of the songs in the sample feature swung-quaver polyrhythm, while 13% feature straight-quaver polyrhythm. Two-thirds of the swung-quaver polyrhythmic songs are found on the R&B charts. Early examples of swung-quaver polyrhythm appear to have been influenced by swing ostinati, while later examples feature Latin-influenced rhythmic patterns. R&B featuring swung-quaver polyrhythm had some influence on rock ‘n’ roll featuring straight-quaver polyrhythm. This can be seen in ‘Diana’. ‘Diana’ features a bar-level backing-vocal pattern with straight-quaver subdivisions in four bars of the A section (Example 5). This backing-vocal pattern is previously heard with swung-quaver subdivisions in early 1950s R&B; for example, the Dominoes’ 1951 hit ‘Sixty-Minute Man’. However, this bar-level pattern may also have been influenced by Afro-Latin musics, since a variation of it features in the tenor saxophone in Gillespie’s ‘Night in Tunisia’ (see again

<sup>37</sup> Sub-Saharan African chanting is not audible in US popular music until the 1970s; for instance, Manu Dibango’s ‘Soul Makossa’ (1972).





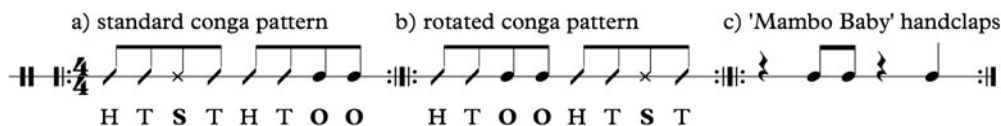
**Example 7** Bolero percussion pattern in: a) Xavier Cugat, ‘Green Eyes’ (1940; 0:13); b) Patti Page, ‘All My Love (Bolero)’ (1950); and c) the Ames Brothers, ‘The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane’ (1954).

harmonic structure (Example 6b). African-Americans adapted the *tresillo* to the 12-bar blues context. The *tresillo* bass pattern in ‘Diana’ appears to have been influenced, perhaps indirectly, by the *tresillo* basslines of Bartholomew’s productions. Specifically, the bassline of ‘Diana’ is doubled in the saxophones, which was an arrangement technique of Bartholomew’s, as heard in ‘Country Boy’. However, the ‘Diana’ bass pattern is performed as a roots-and-fifths bassline within a repeated harmonic vamp (I–vi–IV–V) in 32-bar song form. Non-Hispanic Americans therefore adapted the *tresillo* to the late 1950s rock ‘n’ roll context. The bar-level bass pattern of ‘Diana’ seems to be an adaptation of the Afro-Cuban *tresillo*, as performed in African-American R&B.

The electric guitar pattern in ‘Diana’ is an arpeggiated version of an Afro-Cuban bolero pattern, which is traditionally played on the bongos, maracas, and timbales. Bolero was popularized in the United States through the ‘rumba’ craze. The bolero percussion pattern can be heard in Xavier Cugat’s 1940 recording of ‘Green Eyes’ (‘Aquellos ojos verdes’) (Example 7a). When the pattern was used in mainstream popular music, the Cuban association remained. For example, a syncopated version of the pattern is found in the guitar part of Patti Page’s 1950 hit ‘All My Love (Bolero)’, which acknowledges the Cuban influence in its title (Example 7b).<sup>44</sup> An arpeggiated and truncated version of the bolero pattern appears in the guitar part of the 1954 hit ‘The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane’ by the Ames Brothers, alongside the full pattern in the bongos (Example 7c). ‘The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane’ provides a ‘missing link’ between the bolero of Cugat and Page and the arpeggiated electric guitar pattern heard in ‘Diana’. The bolero percussion pattern became characteristic of rock ‘n’ roll of the late 1950s and early 1960s; for example, it features in the ride cymbal of the Everly Brothers’ 1958 ballad ‘All I Want to Do Is Dream’ and is arpeggiated in the piano in the B section of Roy Orbison’s 1964 hit ‘Oh, Pretty Woman’. The bar-level electric guitar pattern in ‘Diana’ seems to be an arpeggiation of an Afro-Cuban bolero percussion pattern, which was seemingly learnt via American-Latin recordings such as ‘The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane’.

Finally, I argue that the piano pattern in ‘Diana’ is a rotated version of the standard Afro-Cuban conga pattern. The standard conga pattern was widely heard in the United States from the late 1940s onwards due to the popularity of Latin jazz and mambo recordings such as Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo’s 1948 collaboration ‘Manteca’ (Example 8a). In R&B

<sup>44</sup> Along with a *tresillo* bassline, the bolero percussion pattern is also characteristic of rumba blues, in which it is performed in an improvisatory manner on the snare drum (played open, with the snares disengaged, or cross-stick) and tom-toms; for example, Big Mama Thornton’s original 1953 version of ‘Hound Dog’.



**Example 8** a) Standard Afro-Cuban conga pattern, b) rotated conga pattern, c) heard accents of the rotated conga pattern handclapped in Ruth Brown, ‘Mambo Baby’ (1954; 0:27–44) – ‘H’, ‘T’, ‘S’, and ‘O’ stand for heel, toe, slap, and open, which are four different tones achievable on the conga (the last two of which are the loudest).



**Example 9** a) 3–2 son clave and b) 2–3 son clave – a rotated version of 3–2 son clave.

of the early 1950s, the conga pattern is rotated, with the first and second halves swapped, creating a new conga pattern which is not characteristic of Afro-Cuban music; for example, Lloyd Glenn’s 1951 rhumba blues ‘Chica Boo’ (Example 8b).<sup>45</sup> The heard accents of this rotated conga pattern are clapped in Ruth Brown’s 1954 rhumba blues ‘Mambo Baby’. ‘Mambo Baby’ explicitly links the accents of the rotated conga pattern to the ‘mambo’ mentioned in the lyrics (Example 8c). The opening lyric summarizes the plot of the song: ‘all my baby wants to do is the mambo’. At the end of the first verse, Brown sings ‘he goes’, introducing three iterations of the handclapped accents of the rotated conga pattern, before concluding ‘all the time, ’cause that mambo rhythm feels so fine’. Given that the rotation of the two halves of the Afro-Cuban clave pattern is a central part of clave as an organizing principle (or ‘rhythmic key’) in Afro-Cuban music (Example 9), it is not a stretch to suppose that musicians might have subjected other Afro-Cuban rhythmic patterns to this rotation technique.<sup>46</sup> The accents of the rotated conga pattern subsequently became emblematic of rock ‘n’ roll of the late 1950s and early 1960s; for example, in the snare drum of the Beatles’ 1964 version of ‘Twist and Shout’. The bar-level piano pattern in ‘Diana’ seems to be a rotation of the heard accents of the standard Afro-Cuban conga pattern, as performed in African-American R&B. Thus, the three bar-level patterns heard in ‘Diana’ (henceforth the ‘Diana’ patterns) appear to be creative adaptations of Afro-Cuban patterns, learnt from American-Latin recordings.

The ‘Diana’ patterns were influential. Don Costa went on to arrange Carole King’s late 1950s singles and King states that she ‘had practically worn out [her] copy of “Diana”’.<sup>47</sup> Both Costa and King arranged songs written by King in the ‘Diana’ mould, featuring a

45 Other examples of this rotated conga pattern and its accents include Percy Mayfield’s ‘Louisiana’ (1952), T-Bone Walker’s ‘Teenage Baby’ (1954), and Joe Loco’s ‘El Baion’ (1954).

46 It seems likely that Latinx musicians were involved in the creation of the rotated conga pattern. I cannot find any information about Earl Burton, who played this pattern on ‘Chica Boo’, but he does not have a Latinx name (although this may be an Anglicized name).

47 Carole King, *A Natural Woman*, large print edition (New York City: Grand Central Publishing, 2012), 92.

The image displays ten musical examples of bar-level rhythmic patterns in 4/4 time, organized into five rows. Each row contains two or three patterns, each starting with a double bar line and repeat dots. Row 1: 'bolero bass pattern' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), 'habanera' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), 'tresillo' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), and 'baião bass pattern' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter). Row 2: 'bolero percussive pattern' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), 'cinquillo' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), and ''tresillo right-hand' pattern' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter). Row 3: 'conga accents' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), 'rotated conga accents' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), 'chachachá step 'in 1'' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter), and 'chachachá step 'in 2'' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter). Row 4: '3-2 son clave' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter) and '2-3 son clave' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter). Row 5: 'bongo-bell pattern' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter) and 'mambo-bell pattern' (quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter). Open circles 'o' and plus signs '+' indicate bell patterns.

**Example 10** Common Afro-Latin and American-Latin bar-level rhythmic patterns in straight-quaver poly-rhythmic songs in the sample – ‘o’ and ‘+’ indicate open bell and closed bell, respectively.

straight-quaver polyrhythmic texture comprising two or more of the ‘Diana’ patterns – namely, Costa’s arrangement of King’s 1959 B-side ‘Under the Stars’ and King’s arrangement of the Shirelles’ 1960 hit ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow?’. Moreover, several straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample feature two or more of the ‘Diana’ patterns; for example, ‘It’s Now or Never’ and ‘Oh, Pretty Woman’. The straight-quaver polyrhythmic arrangement of ‘Diana’ influenced at least one significant songwriter and producer of rock ‘n’ roll of the late 1950s and early 1960s and perhaps inspired more.

Other common bar-level patterns of the period seem to have been influenced by Afro-Latin musics. Bass patterns associated with Afro-Cuban bolero, habanera, and Afro-Brazilian *baião* were widely employed as was the Afro-Cuban *cinquillo*, Afro-Cuban bell patterns, and patterns that emphasize the accents of *son clave*. Other American-Latin bar-level patterns were also common, including a *tresillo* ‘right-hand’ pattern, which uses chordal accents to fill in the gaps between the three onsets of a *tresillo* bassline, and the rhythm of the cha-cha-chá dance steps (Example 10). In total, 80 per cent of the straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample feature two or more of the Afro-Latin or American-Latin bar-level patterns illustrated in Example 10 (including small variations of these patterns). While there were other influences on the shift to straight-quaver subdivisions (as Alexander Stewart discusses), the corpus analysis indicates that Afro-Latin musics were the predominant influence on the ‘Diana’ patterns and therefore on the rhythmic transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm. Note, I am not arguing that most *Billboard* hits were in a Latin American style by 1961. This was not the case. In the early 1960s, most hits featured an emphatic snare-drum backbeat (which was not characteristic of Afro-Latin styles at the time) and continued to accent the first beat of the bar (which



Afro-Cuban styles de-emphasize). Instead, I am arguing that most *Billboard* hits were in an *American-Latin* style, like ‘Diana’, by 1961.<sup>48</sup>

### Reception: ‘rock-a-cha-cha’

In order to ascertain whether the Latin influence on rock ‘n’ roll was identified at the time, I interrogated the reception of the 58 songs in the sample that feature straight-quaver polyrhythm, through single reviews published in *Billboard* and *Cash Box* from 1950 to 1965.<sup>49</sup>

Although the trade press did not employ rhythmic terminology, it regularly suggested that Afro-Latin musics influenced the straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample. *Cash Box* described ‘Diana’ as ‘sport[ing] an exciting latin-beat arrangement’.<sup>50</sup> More generally, over a third of the straight-quaver polyrhythmic hits in the corpus were described as exhibiting a Latin influence by either *Billboard* or *Cash Box*. The reviewers did not suggest that any other polyrhythmic styles (such as West African drumming) influenced these straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs. The reception study intimates that the trade press saw Afro-Latin musics as the predominant influence on the adoption of straight-quaver polyrhythm at the time.

*Cash Box* employed the term ‘rock-a-cha-cha’ to describe one of the straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample: the Marcels’ 1961 version of ‘Blue Moon’. ‘Rock-a-cha-cha’ is a portmanteau denoting a mixture of rock ‘n’ roll and cha-cha-chá. A content search of *Cash Box* (via the online database *World Radio History*) indicates that the publication used the term on 629 of its pages between 1958 and 1966 – two pages a week on average.<sup>51</sup> All but eleven of these references to ‘rock-a-cha-cha’ were made between 1958 and 1963 – a marginalized period in rock ‘n’ roll history, which is discussed later. *Cash Box*’s use of the term peaked in 1961: just less than a third of the total number of references come from this year. The late 1950s and early 1960s also saw a significant Latin influence elsewhere in musical culture with the production of the stage and film versions of *West Side Story* in 1957 and 1961, respectively. Although *Billboard* scarcely employed the term ‘rock-a-cha-cha’, the publication still posited a Latin influence on straight-quaver polyrhythmic rock ‘n’ roll, describing Jackie Wilson’s 1958 hit ‘Lonely Teardrops’ (which features two of the ‘Diana’ patterns) as a ‘Latinish effort’.<sup>52</sup> The term ‘rock-a-cha-cha’ was also used beyond the trade press. Three songs entitled ‘Rock-a-Cha’ were released between 1958 and 1961 by Irving Ashby, Oscar McLollie & Annette, and Annette Funicello. All three featured straight-quaver polyrhythm. Perhaps most striking is the fact that *Cash Box* mentioned rock-a-cha-cha more often than

48 By the mid-1960s, non-Hispanic US Americans seem to have become less dependent on variations of stock Afro-Latin rhythmic patterns. Instead, they created their own bar-level rhythmic patterns; for example, the guitar riff in the Rolling Stones’ ‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction’ from 1965. However, a Latin influence can still be heard on such songs. ‘Satisfaction’ features the same bass pattern (an embellished *tresillo*) that is heard in ‘Diana’.

49 For more information on the methodology employed in the reception study, see Flynn, ‘Rock-a-Cha-Cha’ [PhD diss.], 84–85.

50 [Unsigned], ‘Record Reviews’, *Cash Box*, 22 June 1957, 10.

51 World Radio History website, <https://worldradiohistory.com>. The specific number of times that *Cash Box* mentioned ‘rock-a-cha-cha’ will be much higher than 629 since the publication occasionally mentioned the term as many as five times per page; for example, [Unsigned], ‘Record Reviews’, *Cash Box*, 4 November 1961, 8.

52 [Unsigned], ‘Reviews of New Pop Records’, *Billboard*, 27 October 1958, 44.

either it or *Billboard* mentioned the related portmanteau rock-a-billy (rock 'n' roll mixed with hillbilly music). Thus, *Cash Box* and other sources frequently identified a Latin influence on straight-quaver polyrhythmic rock 'n' roll of the late 1950s and early 1960s, peaking in 1961.

Moreover, *Cash Box* consistently used 'rock-a-cha-cha' to denote Latin-influenced rock 'n' roll that featured straight-quaver polyrhythm, in the style of 'Diana'.<sup>53</sup> *Cash Box* described 39 recordings as 'rock-a-cha-cha' in 1958 and 1959 – the first two years that the publication employed the term. Of the 36 of these recordings that I could access, 34 feature straight-quaver polyrhythm (94%).<sup>54</sup> The 'Diana' patterns are also the three most common bar-level patterns employed in the 'rock-a-cha-cha' recordings. Each of the three patterns features in around a third of these songs. In 1961, two well-known straight-quaver polyrhythmic hits were described as 'rock-a-cha-cha': the Drifters' 'Save the Last Dance for Me' and Del Shannon's 'Runaway'.<sup>55</sup> It seems more than coincidental that 'rock-a-cha-cha' peaked in 1961 – the same year that the rhythmic transformation culminated. The trends towards straight-quaver polyrhythm and rock-a-cha-cha appear to have been one and the same.

Both music analysis and critical reception indicate that Afro-Latin musics were the predominant influence on the rhythmic transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm. Although commentators occasionally identify a Latin influence on the 'Diana' patterns,<sup>56</sup> this is the first study to argue that Afro-Latin musics were the principal influence on a transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm in post-war popular music in the United States.

### Sociocultural interpretations

I argue that the Latin influence on the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm is a product of cultural cosmopolitanism. I do so by interpreting the two most prominent American-Latin styles: rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha. I focus on these styles because, as demonstrated, American-Latin recordings such as 'Country Boy', 'The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane', and 'Mambo Baby' seem to have been the vehicle for the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation.

53 Other characteristics of rock-a-cha-cha include an untrained teenage voice, the so-called 'doo-wop' harmonic loop (I–vi–IV–V), and AABA 32-bar popular song form – as opposed to the gritty vocal timbres and 12-bar blues form and harmony of rhumba blues.

54 Only eight of the 'rock-a-cha-cha' recordings feature Afro-Cuban percussion. This indicates that rock-a-cha-cha refers to rhythm, not timbre.

55 [Unsigned], 'Record Reviews', *Cash Box*, 3 June 1961, 6; [Unsigned], 'Record Reviews', *Cash Box*, 16 September 1961, 3. Despite the allusion to Afro-Cuban cha-cha-chá, *Cash Box* described rock 'n' roll songs that feature any Latin influence as 'rock-a-cha-cha'. For example, the publication referred to the Drifters' 'Save the Last Dance for Me' as 'rock-a-cha-cha' but its producers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller posit the impact of Afro-Brazilian *baião* on the song. Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller, and David Ritz, *Hound Dog: The Leiber and Stoller Autobiography* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 157–8.

56 Maury Dean, *Rock N Roll Gold Rush: A Singles Un-Cyclopedia* (New York City: Algora Publishing, 2003), 419; Larry Birnbaum, *Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'n' Roll* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 307; Ed Morales, *The Latin Beat: The Rhythms and Roots of Latin Music from Bossa Nova to Salsa and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 280.

My use of cosmopolitanism goes ‘against the grain’ in terms of power dynamics. Postcolonial cultural theorists typically employ cosmopolitanism as an alternative to globalization. In that usage, cosmopolitanism is a bottom-up model for understanding instances in which globally subaltern groups (who are often local elites) mix ‘their own music’ with music popularized by globally hegemonic groups in big cities.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, I use cosmopolitanism as an alternative to the hybridity/appropriation binary. In this article, cosmopolitanism is a way of understanding instances in which either globally hegemonic groups or subaltern groups mix ‘their own music’ with subaltern music in global cities – for example, African Americans and European Americans mixing R&B and rock ‘n’ roll with Afro-Latin musics in New York and Los Angeles. My aim is to highlight both the positive and the negative aspects of the engagement of non-Hispanic Americans with Latinx American culture in global cities, as seen in rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha.

The American-Latin styles are neither examples of cultural hybridity nor cultural appropriation. Although rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha are musical hybrids, they cannot be understood in terms of cultural hybridity because Latinx Americans were seldom involved in the production of the styles. Only three of the fifty-eight straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample were written or performed by Latinx American artists.<sup>58</sup> The styles do not seem to be examples of unjust cultural appropriation for three reasons. First, because rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha were original styles that adapt, rather than simply adopt, Afro-Latin rhythmic patterns – as illustrated by the ‘Diana’ patterns. Second, rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha songs were rarely offensive or harmful, which are usually seen to be necessary for a charge of cultural appropriation.<sup>59</sup> For instance, Ruth Brown’s ‘Mambo Baby’ is the only rhumba blues or rock-a-cha-cha song in the sample that mentions Latinx culture and it does so innocuously. Third, the hybrid styles do not seem to have put Latinx musicians out of work, as the thriving 1950s New York mambo and cha-cha-chá scene demonstrates. The American-Latin styles can neither be theorized as cultural hybridity nor cultural appropriation.

Scholars associate the American-Latin styles with two peoples and two places. Literature on rhumba blues emphasizes African-American performer-songwriters from New Orleans, particularly Professor Longhair – who is considered to have pioneered the style.<sup>60</sup> Scholarship on

57 For example, Thomas Turino, *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jayson Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds: The Cosmopolitan Mediations of Hindi Film Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Steven Feld, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

58 Namely, Peréz Prado’s ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White’ (1954), LaVern Baker’s ‘Jim Dandy’ (1956; which was written by the Afro-Latino Lincoln Chase); and the Champs’ ‘Tequila’ (1958). A prominent example of rock-a-cha-cha from outside the sample that has been theorized as cultural hybridity is the Mexican-American Ritchie Valens’s 1959 hit ‘La Bamba’: a straight-quaver polyrhythmic recording of a Mexican folk song. Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!*, 10, 29, and 40.

59 Erich Hatala Matthes, ‘The Ethics of Cultural Heritage’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu>.

60 Mark McKnight, ‘Researching New Orleans Rhythm and Blues’, *Black Music Research Journal* 8 (1988), 116. Peter Narváez, ‘The Influences of Hispanic Music Cultures on African-American Blues Musicians’, *Black Music Research*

rock-a-cha-cha emphasizes Jewish-American staff songwriters from New York, particularly those associated with the Brill Building such as Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.<sup>61</sup> Although rhumba blues was typically written and performed by African-Americans and rock-a-cha-cha was often recorded in New York, scholars over-emphasize the link between New Orleans and rhumba blues and the link between Jews and rock-a-cha-cha.

There is little evidence to support the claim that rhumba blues originated in New Orleans or the notion that rock-a-cha-cha was unique to Jewish Americans. Jelly Roll Morton's 'New Orleans Blues', which was published in 1925, is a precursor to rhumba blues, with its mixture of a *tresillo* bassline and twelve-bar blues form. However, the earliest and most popular examples of straight-quaver polyrhythmic rhumba blues that I have encountered were recorded in the mid-1940s in cosmopolitan New York and Los Angeles – for example, Cecil Gant's 'In a Little Spanish Town' and Slim Gaillard's 'Cuban Rhumbarini', which were both recorded in Los Angeles in 1945, as well as Earl Bostic's 'Earl's Rumboogie', which was recorded in New York in 1947.<sup>62</sup> These songs were produced before rhumba blues became associated with Mardi Gras in New Orleans through a string of recordings released between the late 1940s and the mid-1950s. Specifically, the association started with Joe Lutchter's 'Mardi Gras', which was recorded in Los Angeles in 1949, before the release of the Mardi Gras anthems such as Professor Longhair's 'Mardi Gras in New Orleans' in 1949, Sugar Boy Crawford's 'Jock-a-Mo' in 1954, and the Hawketts' 'Mardi Gras Mambo' in 1955. Moreover, none of the eight rhumba blues songs in the sample was recorded in New Orleans. Instead, they were produced in New York, or in one case in Los Angeles – and none of these songs mentions Mardi Gras culture in the lyrics. Similarly, the earliest and most popular examples of rock-a-cha-cha were recorded by gentiles. 'Diana' was written and performed by Paul Anka, who is Middle Eastern Canadian, and arranged and produced by Don Costa, who was Italian-American. Although over a quarter of the straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample were written by Jewish Americans, more of these hits were written by Anglo-Americans and African-Americans – and these were recorded around the country.<sup>63</sup> Contrary to popular thought, rhumba blues does not seem to have emerged in New Orleans with the piano style of Professor Longhair. Relatedly, rock-a-cha-cha was not exclusively written by Jews. Nevertheless, rhumba blues from New Orleans and rock-a-cha-cha written by Jews are used as examples below because there is more information published about these than there is about other musicians involved in the production of the American-Latin styles.

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*Journal* 14 (1994), 175–96, at 186. Cheryl L. Keyes, 'Funkin' with Bach: The Impact of Professor Longhair on Rock 'n' Roll', in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives On Black Popular Culture*, ed. Tony Bolden (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Christopher Coady, 'New Orleans Rhythm and Blues, African American Tourism, and the Selling of a Progressive South', *American Music* 37 (2019), 102.

61 Jon Stratton, *Jews, Race and Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 2009), 121.

62 Various Artists, *Rumba Blues from the 1940s: Latin Music Shaping the Blues*, CD, Rhythm & Blues RANDB026, 2015.

63 For example, the Fleetwoods' 1959 single 'Come Softly to Me' (which was written by the European-American group and recorded in Olympia, Washington) and Jackie Wilson's 1958 hit 'Lonely Teardrops' (which was written by the African-Americans Berry Gordy, Gwen Gordy, and Billy Davis and was recorded in Chicago, Illinois).

Cosmopolitanism brings together the two main sociocultural processes that introduced straight-quaver polyrhythm to the United States: transnational migration and transnational circulation. Non-Latinx Americans encountered straight-quaver polyrhythm through both the migration of Latin American people to US cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, and the circulation of Afro-Latin musics around the world, which centred on cosmopolitan cities. Here is a brief summary of this argument. In the early half of the twentieth century, Latin Americans migrated to the United States en masse. The Latinx population increased twelvefold during this period, from 500,000 in 1900 (0.7% of the population) to 6.3 million by 1960 (3.5% of the population).<sup>64</sup> The emerging Latinx community centred on Puerto Ricans and Mexicans who typically migrated to New York and Los Angeles, respectively – where, as noted, most of the songs in the sample that feature straight-quaver polyrhythm were recorded. Latin Americans migrated to the two cities because they offered unparalleled employment opportunities for both musicians and the low-income workers that made up most of the migrants. New York and Los Angeles were also the twin centres of the US music industry. Latin American migrants to the cities became significant producers and consumers of Afro-Latin musics. Juan Flores argues that Latin American migration influenced the mainstream popularity of Afro-Latin musics in the United States.<sup>65</sup> Non-Latinx Americans then adopted Afro-Latin rhythm because of both its perceived cultural value and its proven economic value. This argument is made in full in the rest of this section.

The mass migration of Latin Americans to cosmopolitan cities in the United States helped to introduce straight-quaver polyrhythm to non-Latinx Americans. Bauzá claimed that Cuban migration led to the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation. Of course, Cuban migrants such as Pérez Prado, Frank ‘Machito’ Grillo, and Bauzá had a huge impact on US-American music. However, most Latin American migrants to the United States were from Puerto Rico or Mexico, not Cuba. Both Richard Ripani and Ari Katorza suggest that the mass migration of Puerto Ricans (and other Caribbean peoples) to New York from the late 1910s onwards influenced the rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha that was recorded in the city.<sup>66</sup> As demonstrated below, the mass migration of Mexicans to Los Angeles during the same period also influenced the American-Latin hybrids.

One example of the impact of Latin American migration on the American-Latin styles in cosmopolitan cities is the so-called Brill Building songwriters. Here, I focus on Jerry Leiber

64 Brian Gratton and Myron P. Gutmann, ‘Hispanics in the United States, 1850–1990: Estimates of Population Size and National Origin’, *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 33 (2000); Antonio Flores, ‘2015, Hispanic Population in the United States Statistical Portrait’, *Pew Research Centre*, [www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2017/09/18/2015-statistical-information-on-hispanics-in-united-states/](http://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2017/09/18/2015-statistical-information-on-hispanics-in-united-states/). This migration occurred in two waves: first, in the 1910s and 1920s (following the Mexican Revolution and the 1917 Jones Act, which granted US citizenship to Puerto Ricans), and then after the Second World War.

65 Juan Flores, *Salsa Rising: New York Latin Music of the Sixties Generation* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

66 Richard J. Ripani, *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm & Blues, 1950–1999* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2006), 63; Ari Katorza, ‘Walls of Sound: Lieber [sic] and Stoller, Phil Spector, the Black-Jewish Alliance, and the “Enlarging” of America’, in *Mazal Tov, Amigos!*, ed. Amalia Ran and Moshe Morad (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

and Mike Stoller because they wrote more Latin-influenced straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample than anyone else – including hits such as Ben E. King’s ‘Stand by Me’ from 1961, which is in the rock-a-cha-cha style. Leiber and Stoller lived and worked alongside Latinx Americans in Los Angeles and then in New York. Stoller attended Belmont High School (a predominantly Mexican-American school) in East Los Angeles (a predominantly Mexican-American neighbourhood). There he played in a band led by Blas Vasquez (a Mexican-American saxophonist) that played a range of styles, including Mexican music.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, Leiber became a fan of Latin music while working in a Filipino restaurant.<sup>68</sup> In 1953, Leiber and Stoller wrote the rhumba blues ‘Hound Dog’ for Willie Mae ‘Big Mama’ Thornton. The recording featured Johnny Otis on drums, who had played with Latinx percussionists such as Emmanuel ‘Gaucho’ Vaharandes since 1951 on his own Latin-influenced recordings such as ‘Mambo Boogie’. In 1954, Leiber and Stoller founded the record label Spark in West Hollywood and the Mexican-American saxophonist Gil Bernal’s combo was the house band. Leiber and Stoller continued to record rhumba blues with Bernal’s combo, such as the Coasters’ 1956 debut single ‘Down in Mexico’.<sup>69</sup> In 1957, Leiber and Stoller moved to New York where they became associated with the Brill Building (1619 Broadway) and Aldon Music (1650 Broadway). They worked alongside other Jewish rock ‘n’ roll songwriting partnerships – such as Carole King and Gerry Goffin, Mort Shuman and Doc Pomus, and Cynthia Weil and Barry Mann as well as individual writers such as Phil Spector and Bert Berns. The songwriters were located within four blocks of the Palladium Ballroom (1698 Broadway) where the ‘big three’ mambo bands of Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez had residencies. Songwriters such as Mort Shuman and Bert Berns regularly attended the Palladium (which had an all-mambo programme) in the same period that they wrote Latin-influenced hits such as ‘Save the Last Dance for Me’ and ‘Twist and Shout’.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Cynthia Weil, who co-wrote the Righteous Brothers’ Latin-influenced straight-quaver polyrhythmic hit ‘You’ve Lost that Lovin’ Feeling’ from 1964, stated that Afro-Latin music ‘influenced everybody’ in New York.<sup>71</sup> Thus, rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha were influenced by the mass migration of Latin Americans to cosmopolitan cities in the United States.

The global circulation of Afro-Latin musics, which centred on cosmopolitan cities, also introduced straight-quaver polyrhythm to non-Latinx Americans. Rhumba blues was influenced by mass-distributed Latin recordings. Stewart points out that the Hawketts’ 1955 rhumba blues ‘Mardi Gras Mambo’ features the trademark grunt (‘uh!’) of the commercially

67 Reebee Garofalo, ‘Off the Charts: Outrage and Exclusion in the Eruption of Rock and Roll’, in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 122; Anthony Macías, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 164.

68 Macías, *Mexican American Mojo*, 163.

69 Macías, *Mexican American Mojo*, 160–5.

70 Ken Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air: The Bomp and Brilliance of the Brill Building Era* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), 123; Sublette, ‘The Kingsmen and the Cha-Cha-Chá’, 88; Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*, 129.

71 Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air*, 126.

successful Cuban bandleader Pérez Prado.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Sugar Boy Crawford's 1954 rhumba blues 'Jock-a-Mo' features a straight-quaver bar-level saxophone pattern that was popularized by Pérez Prado's 1950 hit 'Mambo No. 5'. Rock-a-cha-cha was also influenced by the transnational circulation of Afro-Latin musics. The 1959 single 'There Goes My Baby', which was written by Leiber and Stoller for the Drifters, features the Brazilian *baião* bass-register pattern. As Ken Emerson notes, the songwriters learnt this pattern from a Spanish-language song that they heard in an Italian film – namely, 'El Negro Zumbon' from *Anna*, which was distributed to the United States in 1953.<sup>73</sup> This pattern was widely employed by Brill Building songwriters; for example, Jeff Barry states that it influenced the introduction of the Ronettes' 1963 hit 'Be My Baby', written by Barry, Ellie Greenwich, and Phil Spector.<sup>74</sup> The influential *baião* pattern was not brought to the United States by Brazilian migration, it was brought by Italian media.<sup>75</sup> As well as Latin American migration, rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha were also influenced by the global circulation of Afro-Latin musics, centring on cosmopolitan cities.

The cultural value associated with Afro-Latin musics influenced the adoption of straight-quaver polyrhythm by US-Americans. Stoller stated that he and Leiber drew on Afro-Latin rhythm in the late 1950s and early 1960s for musical reasons, not political reasons:

At the end of the fifties and start of the sixties, Jerry and I started introducing new elements into our records. We weren't radicals with an agenda, just two guys fascinated with certain colors and rhythms. We loved using different percussion instruments. Latin grooves, for example, had always fascinated me.<sup>76</sup>

Leiber and Stoller were 'fascinated' by Afro-Latin rhythm and 'loved' Latin percussion. This indicates that they valued Afro-Latin musics as culture, not only as commerce.

The economic value associated with Afro-Latin musics also incentivized the adoption of straight-quaver polyrhythm by US-Americans. Rhumba blues was in part economically motivated. As Stewart notes, Art Neville – the vocalist and pianist of the Hawkets – said of 'Mardi Gras Mambo' '[w]e gave it a little mambo snap to cash in on the craze of the day'.<sup>77</sup> Rock-a-cha-cha was also influenced by commercial considerations. Brian Ward and the contemporaneous journalist Ren Grevatt posit that the music industry recorded rhumba blues and rock-a-cha-cha in an attempt to extend the longevity of the contemporaneous trends for R&B and rock 'n' roll respectively.<sup>78</sup> Both the cultural value ascribed to Afro-Latin musics

72 Stewart, "Funky Drummer", 307.

73 Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air*, 60.

74 Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air*, 152.

75 Similarly, the Argentine tango reached the United States via Parisian media, not via Argentine migration. There was minimal Brazilian and Argentine migration to the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Flores, *Salsa Rising*, 6.

76 Leiber, Stoller, and Ritz, *Hound Dog*, 157.

77 Sublette, 'The Kingsmen and the Cha-Cha-Chá', 82. In fact, 'Mardi Gras Mambo' is a cover of a country recording by Jody Levens – indicating that the style is not unique to African-Americans. Various Artists, *The History of New Orleans Rhythm & Blues Volume 2 – Jazz, Blues & Creole Roots 1947–1953*, CD, Rhythm & Blues Records RANDB014, 2011.

78 Ren Grevatt, 'On the Beat', *Billboard* (15 December 1958); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 44.

and the proven economic value of Latin styles influenced the American-Latin hybrids and therefore the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm.

Rock-a-cha-cha songs portrayed the style as cosmopolitan at the time. Annette Funicello's 'The Rock-a-Cha' from 1961 does so in two ways. First, it suggests that the style emerged through transnational circulation. The lyrics claim that US goods and culture such as the 'Fender bass' and 'rockin' beat' travelled to 'South America', where they inspired the locals to mix rock 'n' roll with supposedly native cha-cha-chá, creating rock-a-cha-cha. The lyrics then state that rock-a-cha-cha was imported back to the United States where it became a craze. Second, the song presents rock-a-cha-cha as a cultural hybrid. Although the lyrics claims that rock-a-cha-cha was created in South America, they seems to liken the hybrid style to the hybrid identities of Latinx Americans in the line '*señoritas* and *caballeros* wearing denims and Capris'. This origin story of rock-a-cha-cha is fabricated. It appears to be an attempt to translate the cultural value associated with Afro-Latin styles such as cha-cha-chá into economic value, in the form of a craze for rock-a-cha-cha. There is no evidence to support the notion that rock-a-cha-cha was created by Latin Americans in Latin America. Instead, the style seems to have emerged among non-Latinx Americans in the United States. The implication in 'The Rock-a-Cha' that mass media influenced the style, with no influence of mass migration, should be disregarded. Nonetheless, 'The Rock-a-Cha' indicates that the hybrid style was understood as cosmopolitan at the time.

The fictitious origin story of rock-a-cha-cha also suggests that the Sherman Brothers, who wrote the song, were anxious about the possible perception that rock-a-cha-cha had been contrived by non-Latinx Americans in the United States for economic gain. Although I do not consider rock-a-cha-cha to be an example of cultural appropriation, 'The Rock-a-Cha' illustrates that American-Latin songs sometimes portray Latinx culture problematically. The song begins with the line 'In the land of cha-cha-chá, known as South America', ignorant of the fact that cha-cha-chá is Cuban and Cuba is in North America. Moreover, 'The Rock-a-Cha' offensively employs 'mock Spanish' in the line: 'the cha-cha-chá is for square-os, but the rock-a-cha: gee whiz [pronounced as 'wheeze']'.<sup>79</sup> Rock-a-cha-cha was occasionally homogenizing and offensive.

The Latin influence on the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm is a product of cosmopolitanism. In 1960, Latinx Americans represented 3.5% of the US population. The music of 3.5% of the population would almost certainly not have influenced a rhythmic transformation of US popular music if both the Latinx population and the US culture industries had not been centred on the same two cosmopolitan cities: New York and Los Angeles. Interpreting the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation as cosmopolitan emphasizes both the musical innovation and the problematic representation that can arise when engaging with 'someone else's music', as seen in 'Diana' and 'The Rock-a-Cha', respectively.

79 The only overtly discriminatory American-Latin song that I have encountered is Peggy Lee's 1948 hit 'Mañana (Is Soon Enough for Me)'. Employing mock Spanish, Page associates Mexican youth with laziness, low-paid manual labour, and stupidity in lines such as 'my mother thinks I'm lazy and maybe she is right, I'll go to work *mañana* but I gotta sleep tonight'. Jane H. Hill, 'Mock Spanish: A Site for the Indexical Reproduction of Racism in American English', *Language & Culture: Symposium 2* (1995), <https://language-culture.binghamton.edu/symposia/2/part1/index.html>.



## Latinx erasure

In this section, I interrogate when and why the impact of Afro-Latin musics on the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm was written out of history. I do so by comparing the critical reception of songs in the sample that feature straight-quaver polyrhythm in the trade press and the rock press – specifically, thirteen early histories of rock 'n' roll published between 1961 and 1976.<sup>80</sup> Although neither the trade press nor the rock press discusses the rhythmic transformation explicitly, both posit influences on rock 'n' roll.

After 1961, the year in which straight-quaver polyrhythm became the norm, the popular-music press rarely identified a Latin influence on rock 'n' roll. Between 1950 and 1961, the trade press (either *Billboard* or *Cash Box*) suggested that Afro-Latin musics influenced half of the straight-quaver polyrhythmic songs in the sample, for which at least one review was accessible. Conversely, between 1962 and 1965, the trade publications only suggested that Latin styles influenced three out of the twenty-one straight-quaver polyrhythmic hits in the corpus. Similarly, after 1961, *Cash Box* used the term 'rock-a-cha-cha' less and less often, from a peak of 193 references in that year to one reference in 1964 and no references by 1967. This trend is also seen in the rock press. Although 'Diana' is mentioned in eight early histories of rock 'n' roll published after 1961, only one posits a Latin influence on the song's rhythm.<sup>81</sup> The impact of Latin American music on rock 'n' roll (and therefore the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm) was written out of history throughout the 1960s. As noted, this erasure remains in effect to this day, despite Bauzá's intervention in 1988.

Ned Sublette describes this phenomenon as 'amnesia'.<sup>82</sup> The term 'amnesia' implies that the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation was forgotten due to 'landscape amnesia' or 'creeping normalcy', in which a significant change occurs so gradually that it is imperceptible. But these terms do not explain why historians have not overlooked the African-American influence on previous rhythmic transitions, such as the 1950s trend towards the 'the big beat' (i.e., emphatic snare-drum backbeats).<sup>83</sup> 'Amnesia' suggests that the process was not influenced by social factors such as race or gender. However, it seems

80 Royston Ellis, *The Big Beat Scene: An Outspoken Exposé of the Teenage World of Rock 'n' Roll* (York: Music Mentor Books, 2010; orig. pub. 1961); John Rublowsky, *Popular Music* (London: Basic Books, 1967); Derek Johnson, *Beat Music* (Oslo: Norsk Musikforlag, 1969); Nik Cohn, *Rock from the Beginning* (New York City: Stein and Day/Publishers, 1969); Carl Belz, *The Story of Rock* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1969); Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (London: Sphere, 1969); Jerry Hopkins, *The Rock Story* (New York City: New American Library 1970); Richard Robinson, ed., *Rock Revolution: From Elvis to Alice Cooper—The Whole Story of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York City: Curtis Books, 1973); Mike Jahn, *Rock from Elvis Presley to Alice Cooper* (New York City: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co., 1973); Brian van der Horst, *Rock Music* (New York City: F. Watts, 1973); Albert Raisner, *L'Aventure Pop* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1973); Tony Palmer, *All You Need Is Love: The Story of Popular Music*, ed. Paul Medicott (New York City: Grossman Publishers, 1976); Jim Miller, ed., *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* (New York City: Rolling Stone Press, 1976).

81 Hopkins, *The Rock Story*, 35. The early rock histories only occasionally suggest a Latin influence on rock 'n' roll: Ellis, *The Big Beat Scene*, 35; Jahn, *Rock from Elvis Presley to Alice Cooper*, 146.

82 Sublette, 'The Kingsmen and the Cha-Cha-Chá', 69.

83 Tamlyn, 'The Big Beat'.

almost certain that this substantial Latin impact on US popular culture would not have been ‘forgotten’ if popular music history was principally written by Latinx Americans.<sup>84</sup> It is the white male authors of rock ‘n’ roll history that are primarily responsible for the supposed ‘amnesia’.<sup>85</sup> The term ‘erasure’ therefore seems more suitable. Anton Allahar defines erasure as ‘the act of neglecting, looking past, minimizing, ignoring or rendering invisible an *other*’.<sup>86</sup> My intention is not to imply that every commentator, of any race, who has overlooked Latin influences on rhythmic trends in US popular music is a bigot. Erasure is understood in this article as a product of systemic prejudice, not individual prejudice.

There seem to be three main factors influencing the erasure of the Latin influence on the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm: the Black/white binary paradigm of race, the ‘Christ-like’ narrative of rock ‘n’ roll history, and the ‘tinge’ metaphor of Latin influence. Sublette posits several explanations for this erasure, the most persuasive of which is the Black/white binary paradigm of race. The Black/white paradigm is a conception of race in binary terms: Black or white.<sup>87</sup> The binary marginalizes Latinx American peoples and cultures, which are typically understood as neither Black nor white in the United States.<sup>88</sup> Reebee Garofalo identifies the Black/white binary in the conventional narrative that rock ‘n’ roll is a product of Black rhythm & blues and white country & western. Garofalo argues that this marginalizes Latin influences on rock ‘n’ roll.<sup>89</sup> I argue that the reductionist equation that ‘R&B + C&W = R&R’ also encourages historians to overlook the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation. Nine of the early histories of rock ‘n’ roll mention Elvis Presley’s cover of Big Mama Thornton’s ‘Hound Dog’. But none mentions the indirect influence of Afro-Cuban music on the song,<sup>90</sup> which was originally performed as a rumba blues by both Thornton and Presley.<sup>91</sup> The Black/white paradigm of

84 At least one Latinx rock-a-cha musician did overlook the Latin influence on rock ‘n’ roll. The Puerto-Rican American vocalist Tony Orlando recorded straight-quaver polyrhythmic rock ‘n’ roll songs such as his 1961 single ‘Halfway to Paradise’ (written by Carole King and Gerry Goffin), which *Cash Box* referred to as ‘rock-a-cha-cha’ at the time. But Orlando does not mention Latin influences on the rock ‘n’ roll of this era in his autobiography. [Unsigned], ‘Record Reviews’, *Cash Box*, 25 March 1961, 10. Tony Orlando with Patsi Bale Cox, *Halfway to Paradise* (New York: St. Martin’s Publishing Group, 2003).

85 All of the thirteen early histories of rock ‘n’ roll were written by men who present as white. I have not encountered any evidence to suggest that any of the authors had Latin American heritage.

86 Anton Allahar, ‘Identity and Erasure: Finding the Elusive Caribbean’, *Revista europea de estudios latinoamericanos y del Caribe/European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 79 (2005), 125 (emphasis original).

87 Katherine T. Gines, ‘Introduction: Critical Philosophy of Race Beyond the Black/White Binary’, *Critical Philosophy of Race* 1 (2013).

88 Examples include the marginalization of Latinx American soldiers and musicians respectively in: Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, prod., *The War* (television documentary miniseries), Arlington for PBS, 2007; Ken Burns, prod., *Jazz* (television documentary miniseries), Arlington for PBS, 2000.

89 Garofalo, ‘Off the Charts’, 118–19.

90 Similarly, Lynnée Denise’s recent, otherwise excellent, book on Thornton also overlooks the Latin influence on ‘Hound Dog’. Lynnée Denise, *Why Willie Mae Thornton Matters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023).

91 Presley performed ‘Hound Dog’ as a rumba blues on *The Milton Berle Show*, 5 June 1956.

race seems to have contributed to the erasure of the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation.<sup>92</sup>

The history of rock 'n' roll is typically told with what I call a Christ-like narrative: that is, a narrative of 'birth', 'death', and 'resurrection'. Rock 'n' roll was supposedly 'born' with Elvis Presley in 1955, had 'died' by 1959, and was 'resurrected' by the Beatles in 1964.<sup>93</sup> Nine early histories of rock 'n' roll exhibit this Christ-like narrative. Rock 'n' roll is either said to have died from 'natural causes' or to have been 'murdered'. The 'natural causes' explanation is that rock 'n' roll died between 1957 and 1959 when Little Richard joined the ministry, Elvis Presley enlisted in the army, Jerry Lee Lewis married his 13-year-old cousin (once-removed), Chuck Berry was imprisoned, and Buddy Holly died in a plane crash – 'the day the music died' in Don McLean's 1971 hit 'American Pie'.<sup>94</sup> The 'murder' explanation is that rock 'n' roll was 'killed' by the music industry.<sup>95</sup> In his 1973 book, Mike Jahn claims that 'Diana' is responsible for the supposed 'lean period' in rock 'n' roll in the late 1950s and early 1960s:

The years 1956 and 1957 comprised the First Golden Era of rock, but everything must end and by the latter part of 1957 one was able to suspect that a lean period was setting in. Seven lean years would pass before a musical group would appear which had the same aura as did Presley at the height of his power [the Beatles]. In any decline there has to be a starting point, and I prefer the release of 'Diana,' by Paul Anka.<sup>96</sup>

Jahn goes on to refer to Anka as the 'prototype' for the teen idols that dominated this period. Later, he describes rock 'n' roll as being 'dead' in this era.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Jahn effectively alleges that 'Diana' killed rock 'n' roll.

The Christ-like narrative is a retroactive application of the rock/pop distinction of the late 1960s to rock 'n' roll of the 1950s and early 1960s. This mass-culture critique casts mid-1950s rock 'n' roll as art and rock 'n' roll from 1959 to 1963 as mass culture. This view can be seen in both early histories of rock 'n' roll and in scholarship that is otherwise revisionist. The rock historian Greg Shaw describes Anka's songs as being 'unbelievably mechanical', evoking the archetypal mass-culture image of a Fordist production line, while Albin Zak refers to the teen idols as 'packaged'.<sup>98</sup> This mass-culture critique is also gendered. Both the rock historian

92 Relatedly, cultural nationalism may have influenced the neglect of Latin influences on US jazz and popular music: Alejandro L. Madrid and Robin D. Moore, *Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 148.

93 Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 3 and 167–68; Cohn, *Rock from the Beginning*, 69–79; Greg Shaw, 'The Teen Idols' in Miller, *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, 107.

94 Cohn, *Rock from the Beginning*, 72; Jahn, *Rock from Elvis Presley to Alice Cooper*, 67; Shaw, 'The Teen Idols', 107; Raisner, *L'Aventure Pop*, 51; Palmer, *All You Need Is Love*, 227.

95 Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 167–68; Cohn, *Rock from the Beginning*, 69–79.

96 Jahn, *Rock from Elvis Presley to Alice Cooper*, 66.

97 Jahn also claims that girl groups and their fans were responsible for the 'death' of rock 'n' roll as well as the notion that rock 'n' roll itself lived fast and died young. Jahn, *Rock from Elvis Presley to Alice Cooper*, 67, 73, and 103.

98 Readers may agree with Shaw when he describes Anka's couplets as 'pure doggerel'. The opening line of 'Diana' is less than poetic: 'I'm so young and you're so old/this my darling I've been told'. However, a weak opening line does not

Albert Raisner and the scholars Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie refer to the supposed ‘emasculatation’ of rock ‘n’ roll in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>99</sup> The Christ-like narrative leads critics and scholars to deny rock ‘n’ roll status to popular music of this period, which was described as rock ‘n’ roll at the time. Both Charlie Gillett and Allan Moore maintain that teen idols such as Paul Anka did not represent ‘real’ rock ‘n’ roll.<sup>100</sup> The Christ-like narrative represents a gendered mass-culture critique of the period from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, in which Latin-influenced rock ‘n’ roll such as ‘Diana’ and ‘rock-a-cha-cha’ led to straight-quaver polyrhythm becoming the norm. The Christ-like narrative of rock ‘n’ roll had a hand in the erasure of the Latin influence on the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm.

When the impact of Latin American music on the United States is identified, it is typically cast as a superficial ‘tinge’ – rather than a structural element, as Bauzá claimed. The tinge metaphor goes back to 1938, when Jelly Roll Morton told folklorist Alan Lomax that ‘you’ve got to have these little tinges of Spanish in it, in order to play real good jazz.’<sup>101</sup> John Storm Roberts popularized this metaphor in the title of his 1979 book *The Latin Tinge*. The phrase ‘Latin tinge’ has become associated with this area of scholarship.<sup>102</sup> Although the research of Roberts and others often argues that the impact of Latin American music on the United States is substantial, the presence of the word ‘tinge’ in the titles of such studies undermines this argument by implying that these Latin influences are surface-level.

The impact of Afro-Latin styles on US music is perhaps understood as superficial because Afro-Latin musics are associated with passing fads in the United States. Both the contemporaneous trade press and historicist scholars understand rock-a-cha-cha as an inconsequential craze. In 1958, Ren Grevatt wrote with exasperation in *Billboard* that ‘[w]e have seen plenty of the rock-a-cha-cha, rock-calyпсо and some rock-a-hula. It is possible in this crazy business that we will see such things as rock-a-folkas, rock-a-polkas, rock-a-sambas and maybe even rock-a-Indian war dances.’<sup>103</sup> In his 2010 book, Albin Zak cites Grevatt’s article and refers to rock-a-cha-cha, rock-calyпсо, and rock-a-hula as ‘oddities’.<sup>104</sup> Even the *Cash Box* editors who popularized the term ‘rock-a-cha-cha’ saw it as a joke. Irv Lichtman claims that his colleague Ira Howard coined the style descriptor and laughs, stating that ‘[i]t was

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mean that ‘Diana’ was not significant and influential. Shaw, ‘The Teen Idols’, 108–10; Albin J. Zak III, *I Don’t Sound Like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 226.

99 Raisner, *L’Aventure Pop*, 54; Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, ‘Rock and Sexuality’, in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (Routledge, 1990; orig. pub.1978), 326.

100 Gillett, *Sound of the City*, 167; Moore, *Song Means*, 134.

101 Jelly Roll Morton, “‘The Spanish Tinge’ / ‘New Orleans Blues’ / ‘La Paloma’”.

102 Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*; Robert Stevenson, ‘The Latin Tinge 1800–1900’, *Inter-American Music Review* 2 (1980); Alfred E. Lemmon, ‘New Orleans Popular Sheet Music Imprints: The Latin Tinge Prior to 1900’, *The Southern Quarterly* 27 (1989); Louise Stein, ‘Before the Latin Tinge: Spanish Music and the “Spanish Idiom” in the United States, 1778–1940’, in *Spain in America: The Origin of Hispanism in the United States*, ed. Richard L. Kagan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 199–208.

103 Grevatt, ‘On the Beat’, 8.

104 Zak, *I Don’t Sound Like Nobody*, 202.

really part of the fun'.<sup>105</sup> Both the 'tinge' metaphor and the notion that rock-a-cha-cha was a passing fad cast the impact of Latin American music on the United States as superficial. The 'tinge' metaphor seems likely to have played a part in the erasure of the Latin influence on the rhythmic transformation.

### Conclusion: more than just a tinge

Mario Bauzá was right. A significant impact of Afro-Cuban music on a fundamental change in the rhythm of twentieth-century music has been written out of history. The corpus analysis establishes that a transition from swung-quaver, compound-metre, and crotchet monorhythm to straight-quaver polyrhythm occurred in US popular music, culminating in 1961. Both music analysis and a reception study indicate that Afro-Latin musics (particularly Afro-Cuban styles) were the predominant musical influence on the transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm. Reception history reveals that the Latin influence on rock 'n' roll was erased by the 1960s rock press because of the Black/white binary paradigm of race as well as gendered and racialized notions of mass culture. However, Bauzá overlooked the impact of Latin American musics and peoples who are not Cuban on the rhythmic transformation. Afro-Brazilian music and both Puerto-Rican and Mexican migration also influenced the trends, as did the global circulation of Afro-Latin musics. The Latin influence on the rhythmic transition is not simply the influence of one nation on another. It is a product of cosmopolitanism – principally, the cosmopolitanism of New York and Los Angeles, which are hubs for both the Latinx American population and the global circulation of culture.

As Robert Palmer postulated, 'the history of American music since World War Two is in need of serious revision'.<sup>106</sup> Afro-Latin musics influenced a rhythmic transformation that bisects the twentieth century, separating the eras in which popular music was dominated by the swung-quaver monorhythm of jazz (c. 1920–45) and the straight-quaver polyrhythm of rock and soul (from the 1960s onwards).<sup>107</sup> This challenges the widely held notion in Latinx studies that the Latin influence on US-American music waned in the 1960s.<sup>108</sup> The culmination of a Latin-influenced rhythmic transformation of US popular music by 1961 indicates that the 1960s is the decade that exhibits the greatest, rather than the smallest, impact of Latin American music on the United States. This project is also pertinent to Black-music studies. The transition to straight-quaver polyrhythm facilitated a subsequent trend towards semiquaver polyrhythm, which has characterized African-American music from 1970s funk, disco, and jazz fusion through to twenty-first-century hip hop and electronic dance music.

105 John Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers: Voices of the Independent Rock 'n' Roll Pioneers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 205.

106 Palmer, 'The Cuban Connection', 30.

107 The twenty-first century has also seen popular revivals of American-Latin styles, such as Amy Winehouse's 2006 rumba blues 'Rehab' and Meghan Trainor's 2014 rock-a-cha-cha 'All About That Bass'.

108 Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*, 160; Macías, *Mexican American Mojo*, 279; Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!*, 29 and 40; Christina D. Abreu, *Rhythms of Race: Cuban Musicians and the Making of Latino New York City and Miami, 1940–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 137.

Scholars have not recognized that rock-a-cha-cha ‘polyrhythm-ized’ popular music years before funk.<sup>109</sup>

This research responds to calls to decolonize music studies. In his 2023 book *On Music Theory, and Making Music More Welcoming for Everyone*, Philip Ewell writes that ‘DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] focuses on BIPOC figures who have been erased by white structures, while antiracism focuses on the anti-BIPOC activities undertaken by white structures that kept whiteness in power.’<sup>110</sup> This article goes beyond equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI in the UK) to anti-racism and feminism. It promotes EDI in that it demonstrates that a significant Latin American impact on a rhythmic transformation of US popular music has been erased by rock historians. It is anti-racist and feminist in that it focuses on the (sometimes subtle) anti-Latinx and misogynistic narratives that have been propagated by white men that contributed to the erasure of this Latin influence.<sup>111</sup>

This study is also timely. Latinx Americans now represent a fifth of the US population, following a tenfold increase between 1960 and 2020, and are now the largest ethnic minority in the nation.<sup>112</sup> We cannot continue to marginalize the impact of Latin American music on the United States. Moreover, Latinx immigrants are often vilified, as seen in Donald Trump’s racist comments.<sup>113</sup> Of course, neither this article nor scholarship in the arts and humanities more generally can put a stop to the denigration of Latinx Americans. However, this study illustrates one of many significant contributions made by Latin American migrants to US culture and thereby helps to counteract Latinx erasure.

To summarize, this article draws three conclusions. The influences on rock ‘n’ roll are not Black and white: they are Afro-Latin too. Rock ‘n’ roll was not ‘emasculated’ and ‘killed’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s: it was Afro-Latinized. The impact of Latin American music and migration on the United States is not a superficial ‘tinge’: it prompted a paradigm shift in the rhythm of twentieth-century music.<sup>114</sup>

109 In my own future research, I will expand the definitions of beat-level and bar-level rhythmic patterns to allow for patterns with semiquavers as the shortest unit of subdivision. This will bolster the original taxonomy of rhythmic texture introduced in this article. It will also facilitate future research into the trend towards semiquaver polyrhythm with 1970s funk and disco.

110 Philip Ewell, *On Music Theory, and Making Music More Welcoming for Everyone* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023), 1–2.

111 Although many Latinx Americans do not consider ‘Latinx’ to be a race, Latinx Americans were racialized as non-White in the United States during this period. Thus, applying the term anti-racism to the fight against Latinx erasure seems suitable.

112 The Latinx population increased from 6.3 million in 1960 (3.5% of the US population) to 62.1 million by 2020 (19% of the US population). Cary Funk and Mark Hugo Lopez, ‘A Brief Statistical Portrait of U.S. Hispanics’, *Pew Research Centre*, [www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/06/14/a-brief-statistical-portrait-of-u-s-hispanics/](http://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/06/14/a-brief-statistical-portrait-of-u-s-hispanics/).

113 For example, C-Span, ‘Donald Trump Presidential Campaign Announcement Full Speech (C-SPAN)’, 16 June 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=apjNfkyjsbM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apjNfkyjsbM).

114 My justification for referring to ‘twentieth-century music’ and not ‘twentieth-century popular music’ here is that the prominence of rhythm characterizes US popular music and the prominence of US popular music characterizes the twentieth century. Brian F. Wright, Amy Coddington, and Andrew Mall, ‘Looking Towards the Future: Popular Music Studies and Music Scholarship’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 18 (2021); Nicole Biamonte, ‘Rhythmic and

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