

## ***Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana*** by Geoffrey Baker

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Baker, Geoffrey. *Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 410 pages; \$25.95 paper.



In *Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana*, Geoffrey Baker tells the transnational story of the intertwined histories of hip hop in New York City and Havana. Hip hop burst onto the Havana music scene in the late 1980s, forming collectives that mirrored the formation of posses in South Bronx hip hop culture. Baker's analysis situates the trajectory of Cuban hip hop and the rise of reggaetón within a framework that brings together urban studies, music ethnography, and performance studies in order to examine how music and dance are able to dialogue with revolutionary ideology, claim urban space, and create informal economies. Drawing on interviews with leading artists and extensive fieldwork in Havana's cultural centers and underground music venues, the book is a model of how to conduct research with hard to pin down archives: Baker spatially conceptualizes Cuban hip hop and reggaetón in terms of their physical urban settings in order to demonstrate the relation between cultural politics and socio-spatial borders.

The major strength of *Buena Vista in the Club* lies in its description of the complicated informal markets and underground venues where hip hop and reggaetón have proliferated, as well as in its self-reflexive analysis of the field of Cuban hip hop studies. Drawing attention to the role scholars in North America and the United Kingdom have played in establishing and sustaining the profile of Cuban hip hop. A specialist in Latin American music—Baker's prior work is on music in colonial Peru—Baker's book is the culmination of seven years of research on the

Cuban urban music scene. It gives a critical analysis of Cuban hip hop and offers a perspective on hip hop as a transnational movement, paying attention to the singularities and commonalities of the global phenomenon.

*Buena Vista in the Club* is divided into four sections. The first traces the institutionalization of Cuban hip hop, arguing that the relationship between hip hop and the Cuban state was not one of usurpation, cooptation nor appropriation. Rather, hip hop leaders and state officials held similar revolutionary ideologies that facilitated negotiations between practitioners, cultural officials and the state: hip hop artists played a central role in the formation of the state-run Cuban Rap Agency and participated directly in incorporating hip hop into the construction of national culture and identity. In analyzing how hip hop leaders such as Rodolfo Rensoli, Pablo Herrera, and Ariel Fernández negotiated a place for hip hop within Cuban national culture, Baker demonstrates that hip hop artists were protagonists in the construction of Cuban national identity. However, these same artists, while working with the government, used their lyrics to also critique its failure to uphold the promises of the revolution. Throughout this section, Baker unravels the relationship between Cuban hip hop and the political and economic environment of the Special Period, following the end of the Cold War, in dialogue with its U.S. precursor's culture of resistance within the context of the U.S. civil rights movement.

In section two, Baker discusses reggaetón's rise in popularity and charts its historical and cultural significance as a "body-centered" genre that transgresses linguistic norms as it is expressed through dance. He also discusses the political and academic agendas that prioritize hip hop over reggaetón because hip hop can be productively discussed as a movement that participates in upholding or reshaping national identity. Academic scholarship has paid little attention to reggaetón, largely because of its over-simplified, intentionally vulgar and repetitive lyrics. In his critical examination of the genre, Baker argues that the lyrics perform a deconstructive assault on language and demonstrate an ideological shift from hip hop to reggaetón. Whereas the hip hop generation saw their music as a mode to express resistance to the drastic changes in the socio-economic milieu, reggaetón's crude movements and absence of political dialogue reflect the sentiments of a generation who grew up in Cuba after the Special Period, in the "harsh new world" (166) marked by economic crisis and food scarcity.

The third section of Baker's study identifies the commonalities between the global manifestations of hip hop, in particular the historical reverberations of dissent that have taken shape in the context of unequal processes of urbanization. Hip hop movements in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paris, and Tokyo, like the South Bronx and Havana, emerged from divided urban spaces, or dual-cities. Pushing to expose or diminish socio-economic polarities in the urban setting, hip hop wordsmiths use their lyrics to shine light onto urban spatial inequalities that are demarcated by class and racialized boundaries. Through their lyrics, rappers remap a "hip hop cartography" that reimagines and connects marginal spaces thereby staking claim in the environments in which they reside.

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The final section of the book asserts that foreign representations of Cuban music—including films such as Wim Wenders' *Buena Vista Social Club*, scholarly articles, doctoral theses and Baker's own outsider perspective from the "cobbled streets of Oxford" (26)—have determined the discursive frame within which Havana's hip hop scene is understood. Analyzing representations of Cuban urban music by foreign contributors, Baker argues that Havana has become the nostalgic site for the revolutionary politics that U.S. hip hop once symbolized. Cuban hip hop studies were central in the international reception of Cuban hip hop, and Baker underscores the field's problematic tendency to blur the lines between research and advocacy, which has perpetuated the mythology of hip hop, and stresses the need to reexamine discourses that may have been distorted for redemptive purposes. This, ultimately, is the central argument and contribution of *Buena Vista in the Club* to the study of Cuban hip hop and reggaetón, as well as of global hip hop more generally.

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