

Improvisation Transformation: An Exploration of Musical Influence between the Cuban Descarga and American Jazz Movements

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Abstract : Improvisation, one of the most expressive qualities of the performing arts, has allowed for entire compositions to be created through descargas. A topic relatively understudied, these combo-inspired jam sessions originated in Cuba and intrigued jazz musicians in the United States to experiment with their improvisation after the Cool Jazz era. Through the exploration of prominent improvisation-based Cuban dance styles, the crucial jazz musicians that contributed to the progression of the descarga movement and comparing such facets to that of jazz in the United States, this paper offers a critical comparative analysis to suggest how the descarga influenced American jazz. This paper specifically focuses on harmonic construction, form and rhythmic qualities, as well as how these recorded jam sessions started to change the way people listened to and enjoyed this style of music. Examining the harmonic intricacies of descargas offers the likelihood of having influenced the construction of the blues scale in American jazz. Since these recorded jam sessions originally stemmed from Cuban dance styles (the cumbia, guaracha, rumba, etc.), descarga compositions changed the way musicians structured their improvisation to meet recording guidelines as well as their audiences' listening needs. The ways in which the descarga inspired harmonic and rhythmic change led to the movement's influence on the jazz culture as it progressed from Cuba to New York during the 1950s. Exploring the descarga provides insight into a movement that is not commonly studied and encourages further discussion about how certain aspects of Latin American culture have influenced the United States socially and creatively.

Keywords : descarga, harmony, improvisation, jam session, jazz

Conference Title : ICPAC 2019 : International Conference on Performance Art and Creativity

Conference Location : Madrid, Spain

Conference Dates : March 26-27, 2019