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### **Women artists in the Spanish African-American music scene: identities, discourses and emotions in the public sphere**

#### ***Mujeres artistas en la escena española de música afroamericana: identidades, discursos y emociones en la esfera pública***

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the presence and importance of women artists in the Spanish African-American music scene, specifically in the blues, jazz and soul-funk sub-scenes. It presents an ethnography focused on the increasing prominence of women, and it addresses different musical events, texts and artists associated with a diversity of voices, identities, discourses and emotions in the public sphere. Methodologically, we draw on participant observation, interviews, documentation and discourse analysis from a communicative and sociosemiotic perspective. We study the Spanish soul music scene, where African-descendant singers play a leading role, and we examine in depth the case of Aretha Soul Divas, a supergroup tribute to Aretha Franklin. The discourses analysed refer to the emotional dimension of musical experience, where the encounter between artists and audiences facilitates mutual understanding and emotional liberation. Furthermore, we verify the connection between the demands enunciated within the music scene, and the demands of the African descendant collective in Spain, which denounces racism and lack of visibility. The events, texts and discourses that emerge in these confluence spaces contribute to the passionate construction of a symbolic territory of their own, where the individual is combined with the collective.

#### **Keywords**

African descendant collective; emotion; music scene; public sphere; ethnography; African-American music.

#### **Resumen**

Este artículo explora la presencia e importancia de las mujeres artistas en la escena española de música afroamericana, en concreto en las subescenas de blues, jazz y soul-funk. Se trata de una etnografía centrada en el creciente protagonismo de las mujeres y aborda distintos eventos musicales, textos y artistas asociados a una diversidad de voces, identidades, discursos y emociones en la esfera pública. Metodológicamente, realizamos observación participante, entrevistas, documentación y análisis del discurso desde una perspectiva comunicativa y sociosemiótica. Indagamos en la escena de soul española, donde las cantantes afrodescendientes ocupan un rol protagonista, y examinamos en profundidad el caso de Aretha Soul Divas, un supergrupo de homenaje a Aretha Franklin. Los discursos analizados apuntan a la dimensión emocional de la experiencia musical, donde el encuentro entre artistas y públicos facilita el entendimiento mutuo y la liberación emocional. Además, constatamos la conexión entre las reivindicaciones enunciadas en la escena musical y las demandas del colectivo afrodescendiente en España, que denuncia el racismo y la falta de visibilidad. En esos espacios de confluencia emergen eventos, textos y discursos que contribuyen a la apasionada construcción de un territorio simbólico propio, donde lo individual se conjuga con lo colectivo.

#### **Palabras clave**

Colectivo afrodescendiente; emociones; escena musical; esfera pública; etnografía; música afroamericana.

## 1. Introduction

This article is framed in the wider examination of the issue "Discrimination and inequality in the music industry", and it assumes the idea that a democratic system requires an open and inclusive public sphere that enables the recognition of diversity and the participation of actors and voices interested in common issues (Peñamarín, 2017). The public sphere is understood as "a space configured by communicative actions and interactions around public issues and problems" (Peñamarín, 2017: 13), and as the space where the media, citizens and public institutions come together to talk about the common world. Thus, public issues are those problems that draw public attention and provoke divergences or conflicts between different actors.

Taking inspiration from Arendt (2009), this understanding of the public sphere delves into conflict, imagination and emotions as dimensions involved in the construction of public issues (Peñamarín, 2016). The diversity of voices is understood as an inherent aspect of a democratic public sphere, since its reality "relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised" (Arendt, 2009: 66). In addition, everything that goes through the public sphere undergoes a transformation, and "the most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and (...) in artistic transposition of individual experiences" (Arendt, 2009: 59). This research about female artists and music scenes is based on the analysis of sociocultural practices and discourses usually located in an underground sphere, along the margins of the public sphere, and whose development is intimately linked to textual and symbolic communication as well as with the construction of identities, discourses, emotions, values and lifestyles.

The general objective is to explore the presence and importance of women artists in the African-American music scene in Spain. The article focuses on the sub-scenes formed around the blues, jazz, and soul-funk music genres, which have been historically defined for their great emotional expressiveness and performances. The study also addresses the emotional dimension of musical experience through participant observation in live music events and through the analysis of the discourses and musical practices of a selected sample of female musicians. The ethnography started with a selection of music events, texts and artists that represent an inspiring diversity of emerging voices, identities, discourses and emotions in the public sphere. Along the gender variable, the analysis addresses demographic diversity (Albornoz and García Leiva, 2017), since the observed music scene brings together artists who were born in Spain and musicians who reside in Spain but have very different family, geographical, sociocultural and ethnic or racial backgrounds. Therefore, the music scene is understood as a place of encounter and dialogic interaction, which is built collectively and gradually (Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Pedro, Piquer and Val, 2018). In addition, the scene works as a stage for artists, and it may give them greater visibility in the public sphere. Consider the regular production of concerts, the constant interactions between musicians and audiences and the development of media promotion strategies.

There are important conceptual similarities between the public sphere and the music scene. Just like the current public sphere (Peñamarín, 2016), contemporary music scenes are spaces of collaboration and conflict between different actants who interact and struggle over power, recognition, appearance and visibility. Furthermore, those aspects of the public sphere that are most closely related to the stage and the performance take on special relevance and particular forms within the music scene due to the theatricality of popular music and the face-to-face, ritual encounter between musicians and audiences, where the expressed and aroused emotions are intensified. Both the public sphere and the music scene may be understood as semiospheres (Lotman, 1996: 25) –meaning-making universes with different dimensions or levels. Each (sub)sphere and (sub)scene is "both a participant in the dialogue [a part of the semiosphere] as well as the space of the dialogue [an entire semiosphere]" (Lotman, 1996: 25). Each one of them is distinguished by certain internal homogeneity, bounded by borders, but all of them are integrated into one same universe of broader meaning. Borders mark the separation between us and the others, as well as the reception and translation of foreign messages and texts. It is in the border and peripheral spaces where "accelerated semiotic processes" develop more actively, insofar the margins energise the centres and contribute to their transformation (Lotman, 1996: 15).

Research on music and emotions has been mainly focused on the classification and measurement of perceived and induced emotional responses to music listening (Song, Digson, Pearce and Halpern, 2016). These perspectives have favoured studies with ad hoc experiments and quantitative and computational treatments of emotional responses, often based on classifying databases. Thus, much of these studies have neglected the social context of musical emotion, from specific situations to broader contexts (Juslin

and Laukka, 2004: 225). Moreover, these studies have relied on a limited conception of musical experience, which is mainly associated with individual experiences, rational knowledge and the positions of artists –in contrast to the collective, physical movement and the role of aficionados (Juslin and Laukka, 2004: 226). In contrast, this study is based on an ethnographic exploration of music scenes that emphasises the key importance of contexts and pragmatic circumstances in the type of generated emotions.

The emotional dimension of musical experience is explored through observation and participation in several representative festivals of the African-American music scene in Spain, which brings together leading female artists in a novel way. The selection of this type of events, which are extraordinary to some extent, was motivated by the fact that they acquire an added importance and emotion, as well as greater media and public expectation, compared to standard performances. This exploration of the link between emotions, popular music and music scenes is based on a key idea regarding emotions: their construction and development is linked to movement, bodies, interpersonal contagion and social practices, as well as to the formation of beliefs and habits (Ahmed, 2014; Peñamarín, 2016; Saiz Echezarreta, 2012). In contrast to spontaneous and naturalised views, this exploration conceives music emotions and scenes as ongoing constructions that develop through sociocultural practices; hence the ethnographic observation of culture in action is so appropriate.

It is generally understood that those who attend a live music concert share an emotional readiness to feel the music and share a space-time of musical expression and communicative interaction. Concertgoers are willing to enjoy, get excited, loose themselves, free themselves and seek pleasure. They are willing to feel and develop emotion as a reaction throughout a series of songs and concerts, which allows them to move towards more elaborate and thoughtful feelings. Participating in a scene based primarily on live music involves feeling that scene, exposing yourself to its sounds, places, and the presence of others, to the impact of sound waves on the body, to the seduction of the show. In fact, as Arendt (2009: 60) points out with respect to the public sphere, “the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves”. The feeling of belonging developed in music scenes is common and is formed over time through the repetition and transformation of practices. It is a clear example of how participants consciously incorporate themselves into the stories, memories and imaginaries of *their* scene.

First, we describe the employed research methods. The discussion starts with multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), which aims to recognise a multiplicity of landmarks through mobile research. More particularly, offline and online participant observation was conducted within different live music events held in 2018 and 2019. In addition, we draw on the discourses of several leading artists, which have been obtained through the examination of some of their works and through personal interviews, as well through the participation in the panel discussion “Music and Diversity” (IV Dcode Lab, UCM, 08/05/2019). Furthermore, the study included the documentation in relation to musical, sound, audiovisual and journalistic texts that are representative of the blues, jazz and soul scenes, and of the media coverage regarding the selected live music events.

The contextualisation section offers a descriptive and analytical discussion of the ethnographic routes conducted. Deliberately exposing the dual dimension of ethnography as method and a writing genre (Geertz, 2003; Pedro, 2014), we translated the experiences lived during the research through first-person ethnographic accounts that bring us closer to the reality of the scene, its places and the practices, discourses and emotions of those who inhabit it. In an attempt to highlight their heterogeneity and complexity, this section contains a variety of illustrative examples of the presence and participation of women artists in the Spanish African-American music scene.

Then, we examine the case study of Aretha Soul Divas, an all-female band that pays tribute to Aretha Franklin, an artist with whom they share musical and political viewpoints. We introduce key information about Aretha Franklin and we explore Aretha Soul Divas' style and repertoire, as well as their links with the media. Close attention is paid to their performances and discourses, which illustrate the identity, sociocultural and political implications of musical and public performance. In the case of Astrid Jones and Juno Kotto –the female artists that participated in the aforementioned panel–, the discussion about music and diversity involves the affirmation and conversation about the ethnic-racial dimension associated with African-American music and with the lives of their people and performers. As black Spanish artists, Astrid and Juno articulate very significant reflections around music as an artistic, emotional and communicative expression closely linked to identity construction. Therefore, looking at the intersection between gender and race, we recognise the issue of discrimination and inequality in the

music industry as intimately connected with the denunciation of a broader public problem: racism, ethnic-racial discrimination and the acceptance of the African descendant population as a characteristic element of a plural country.

## 2. Methodology

Ethnographic research in the Spanish African-American music scene was conducted in 2018 and 2019, focusing on Madrid's blues, jazz and soul-funk sub-scenes. Ethnography is a predominantly qualitative sociocultural research method based on the observation, description and interpretation of a culture or way of life. To this end, different data collection techniques were strategically and simultaneously used and intertwined: participant observation, in-depth interviews, informal in-field conversations, group conversation and documentation.

Within the framework of multi-sited ethnography, focused on examining "the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in a diffuse space-time" (Marcus, 1995: 96), we employed the strategy "follow the music" (Pedro, 2018), which requires the researcher to visit different music venues in order to track music as a form of expression and as an artistic and sociocultural event of shared experiences and emotions. In this case, the follow the music strategy was applied with a focus on the gender and ethnic-racial dimensions of the scene and the artists. Thus, the monitoring of popular music in relation to the presence of women in the Spanish African-American music scene is a point of reference to trace connections between different places, artists, audiences, media and recording productions.

On the one hand, offline and online participant observation was conducted to investigate relevant live music events celebrated in Madrid. The offline observation focused on three music festivals: *Albatros Blues Festival*, *Ellas Crean* ("Women create") and *Madrid es Negro* ("Madrid is Black"). Meanwhile, online observation was centred on the social networking site Facebook, as well as on video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube, and websites dedicated to music festivals, music venues and music dissemination.

In this ethnography, the "diffuse space-time" of reference (Marcus, 1995) develops within the framework of daily production of the African-American music scene, which is built, extended and shaped by the different events that contribute to its identity and continuity. For this reason, ethnographic routes were completed jointly at the three aforementioned music festivals. First, participant observation was conducted at the sixth edition of the Albatros Blues Festival (15/09/2018), which featured five female-fronted bands. The festival was held on the outskirts of Mejorada del Campo between 2013 and 2018. Participant observation continued in the concerts of Quartetazzo and Ladies in Blues, both held on 8 March 2019 –on an International Women's Day marked by important demonstrations and social movements. These concerts were part of the 2019 *Ellas Crean* Festival, which has been organised by the Spanish Women's Institute since 2005 in order to increase the visibility of women artists.

Another ethnographic exploration was undertaken at the premiere of the Aretha Soul Divas supergroup (03/03/2018), framed in the eighth edition of the traveling festival *Madrid es Negro* (2018). By supergroup we mean the occasional, extraordinary meeting of musicians who are very well-known on their own (see Welch, 2000). This is the case of Aretha Soul Divas, a high-profile line-up that brings together four experienced soul-funk singers: Astrid Jones, Juno Kotto, Shirley Davis and Mayka Edjole, accompanied by The Silverbacks (Davis's regular band). *Madrid es Negro* (2011) started as a celebration of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the specialised magazine *Enlace Funk* and *Club Maderfaker* (1996) –two emblematic elements of the soul-funk scene– and it is held on multiple venues over the course of a month.

To complement participant observation, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with two music bands: Ladies in Blues and Quartetazzo. Marta D'Avilas (Madrid), Patricia Göser (Germany), Laura Solla (Pontevedra), Tatiana Firminio (Brazil) and Mariana Pérez (Bilbao), members of Ladies in Blues, were the first to be interviewed, at the rehearsal venue *Ritmo y Compás* (06/03/2019). The interview with Quartetazzo took place in front of the music school *El Molino de Santa Isabel* (07/03/2019) and it involved the participation of the four members: Carmen Vela (Madrid), Trinidad Jiménez (Almería), Emilse Barlatay (Córdoba, Argentina) and Leticia Malvares (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). These experienced female artists, with many years participating in the scene, addressed topics of great interest such as cultural diversity, sorority, stereotypes and female visibility.

Alongside these personal interviews, first-hand accounts were obtained from two members of Aretha Soul Divas, Astrid Jones (Madrid) and Juno Kotto (Equatorial Guinea), during their participation in the panel discussion on "Music and diversity", celebrated as part of the Dcode Lab's 4<sup>th</sup> "Music industry, Media and

University Meeting", at the School of Information Sciences of the Complutense University of Madrid (08/05/2019). The panel discussion was moderated by Josep Pedro and Patricia Rocu, coordinator of the guide titled "Strategies to incorporate the ethnic perspective at the university" (2019). The guest speakers were Igor Paskual, Astrid Jones, Juno Kotto, Eduardo Rocca, Miguel García, Natalia Vergara and Juan Merín. The group discussion was of great interest, yet in this article will only refer to the interventions of Astrid Jones and Juno Kotto as members of Aretha Soul Divas and experts in the African-American music scene, based on their proven experiences and musical projects. The discourse analysis adopts a communicative and sociosemiotic approach, and it draws on different artistic and journalistic texts that are representative of the African-American music scene.

On the other hand, we completed an extensive and strategic documentation process regarding the texts produced in and about the Spanish African-American music scene, including songs, albums, concerts, promotional posters, newspaper articles, biographical profiles, interviews, discographies, plays and cultural productions. Documentation is conceived here as an active and dynamic process of continuous monitoring linked to cultural agendas, communications shared by artists, and media coverage of music events. The specific objective has been to approach the representation and participation of these social and cultural groups in the public sphere.

In this way, we mapped the African-American music scene from a perspective that was oriented to the recognition of outstanding women artists in the blues, jazz and soul-funk sub-scenes. Based on our observations, we identify a relatively short list of artists as possible case studies: Ladies in Blues, Beatriz Zaragoza, Betta Blues, Susan Santos, Suzette Moncrief, Velma Powell, Sweet Martha, Ester Wax, Big Mama Montse, Quartetazzo, T.J. Jazz, Erin Corine Johnson, Koko-Jean Davis, Maika Sitté, Mayka Edjole, Aurora García, The Pepper Pots and The Sey Sisters. It should be noted that some of the documentation regarding the African-American music scene was developed prior to the research presented in this article. Previous listening, experiences and exploratory assessments have also contributed to our perspective and knowledge about the object of study.

We also address the documentation about the African-American music scene in relation to the observation and mapping of the growing cultural production and gradual public emergency of the African descendant population in Spain. Here, it is important to remember the words of African-American writer Amiri Baraka (2002: ix-x): "As I delved into the history of music, I discovered that [telling it] was impossible without at the same time delving into the people's history. (...) That music explained history and history explained music". In particular, we refer to the documentation carried out through the review of the bibliographic, journalistic and theatrical works of important (Afro)Spanish authors, who have a remarkable relevance in the media and the community. Some works worth highlighting include the book *Inapropiados e inapropiables* ("Inappropriate and inappropriable") (García, 2018), which features interviews with African and African descendant authors; the autobiographical discussion *Ser mujer negra en España* ("Being a black woman in Spain") by the Catalan writer Desiré Bela-Lobede (2018), who works as blogger and columnist for the online newspaper *Público*; the photobook *Y tú, ¿por qué eres negro?* ("And you, why are you black?"), created by Madrilenian photographer and teacher Rubén H. Bermúdez (2018); the literary works of Madrilenian journalist Lucía Asué Mbomío Rubio, *Las que se atrevieron* ("Those women who dared") (2017) and *Hija del camino* ("Road's child") (2019); and the theatrical works written by Basque actress and director Silvia Albert Sopale: *No es país para negras* ("No country for black women") (2014) and *Blackface y otras vergüenzas* ("Blackface and other embarrassments") (2019).

One of the followed documentation strategies was to invite Rubén H. Bermúdez and Lucía Mbomío to the seminar organised by the research group Semiotics, Communication and Culture (Complutense University of Madrid, 29/03/2019). In this seminar we were able to learn about Bermúdez's perspectives regarding the development of his autobiographical work and, in general, about black identities in Spain. For her part, Mbomío talked about representations of race and gender in the media. She highlighted the permanence of certain stereotypes, the invisibilisation processes, and the limited presence of Afro-descendent people in Spanish media. To follow the debate on diversity and gender in the public sphere, we also attended the panel discussion "Ethnic-racial diversities from a gender equality perspective". It was moderated by Patricia Rocu and it included Lucía Mbomío, María José Jiménez Cortiñas (Feminist Gypsy Women's Association for Diversity), Paula Guerra Cáceres (SOS Racismo), Ana Cebrían (Invisible Pedagogies) and Esther (Mayoko) Ortega (School of Information Sciences of the Complutense University of Madrid, 28/11/2019) as guest speakers.

### 3. Contextualisation: women artists in the blues, jazz and soul music scenes

The pivotal importance of women in African-American music, specifically in blues, jazz and soul, has been clear since its origins. In fact, the first blues recordings were made by artists such as Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, who narrated real and fictional experiences throughout their songs in the 1920s. Their ground-breaking protagonist role in the public sphere was particularly relevant in the liberation of women and in the articulation of black feminism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They told stories about female identity, sexuality and social relationships. In this regard, Angela Davis (1999: 33) explains that "through the blues, menacing problems are ferreted out from the isolated individual experience and restructured as problems shared by the community", which allows these threats to be addressed in a public context.

Historically, great African-American female artists have transcended their identification with a single music genre. For example, Billie Holiday stood out for her performances in the jazz scene, but she is also recognised as a singer that embodies the blues. Nina Simone's eclecticism is identified with the different music genres she has embodied with passion and spirituality: jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, and soul. She shares vocal and instrumental virtuosity with Aretha Franklin, who will be further explored below. From gospel to soul, rhythm and blues and disco, Aretha has emerged as a central figure whose trajectory is linked to several political movements such as the African-American civil rights movement and the struggle for women's rights.

We understand the issue of discrimination and inequality within the music industry in relation to the emergence of the "Me Too" movement and the contemporary resurgence of feminism –global turning points that raise implicit responses and sociocultural transformations in different areas of social life and the public sphere. In this regard, our observations and ethnographic explorations in Madrid indicate that since 2018 there has been a significant increase in music events dedicated to women, including the following: the continuity of the *Ellas Crean* Festival (2005-); the VI Albatros Blues Festival (15/09/2018); the publication of the book *Una chica sin suerte* ("A girl with no luck") (Sabugal, 2018), based on blues singer Big Mama Thornton; the concert series *Las mujeres del blues en Madrid* ("Women in blues in Madrid") (30-31/11/2018; 14/12/2019); the exhibition *Damas del Blues* ("Ladies in Blues") (03/09/2018-03/10/2018); the concert series *Women in Jazz* (01/10/2019); and the festival *Fémina Jazz* (03/10/2019-05/10/2019).

These activities are the result of collaborations between associations, private initiatives and public institutions such as the Spanish Women's Institute and the Community of Madrid, which participates in the organisation of the multidisciplinary festival *Ellas Crean*. Also noteworthy are the concert series dedicated to women artists organised by the Madrid Blues Society with the collaboration of the Municipal Board of the District of Salamanca. The concerts of the first edition were accompanied by the presentation *Las Damas del Blues*, given by Montse Pratdesaba, aka Big Mama Montse, the emblematic Catalan singer and guitarist. Below, we offer two brief ethnographic stories about the VI Albatros Blues Festival, and about the concerts of Quartetazzo and Ladies in Blues held during the 8-M (*Ellas Crean* 2019).

#### 3.1. VI Albatros Blues Festival

*Mejorada del Campo, Madrid, 15 September 2018.*

The weather is gentle at the end of this summer. We travel in Boni's car to Mejorada del Campo. While driving, this veteran musician of the Madrid scene talks about music bands that have marked his trajectory and, by extension, his life. He also recalls the dynamic development of record stores within the city centre. Boni is the guitarist of The Luckymakers, a blues, soul and gospel band formed in 2015 by two men and two women –Patricia Göser (vocals), J.B. Boni (guitar), Tatiana Firminio (piano) and Carlos Arsuaga (drums). The band is gender-balanced, an issue that they highlighted when performing at the *Ellas Crean* festival (Facebook, 08/03/2018). They are scheduled to perform later at the VI Albatros Blues Festival, which runs from two in the afternoon to about half past midnight.

This edition of the Albatros Blues Festival presents five female-fronted bands: Beatriz Zaragoza Band, Rowda Backbeat & Her Shameless, Virginia Rubio Trío, The Luckymakers, and Betta Blues Band. The festival's poster displays the event's slogan, "dedicated to you, women fighters", and the image of African-American singer Billie Holiday. The event is held within an outdoor setting, where an old train carriage spreads the scent of blues musicians that travelled like hobos. This area belongs to the Western Wagon Cultural Association, created to promote and produce sociocultural activities.

Madrilenian singer Beatriz Zaragoza performs songs from the blues tradition such as Bobby Bland's "I Don't Want No Woman" (1961), which she appropriates and transforms to narrate it from a woman's perspective. This orientation defines her album *Queens of Blues* (2018), which is presented as "humble homage" to the "brave and talented artists" of classic blues. In her appropriation, the artist develops a dialogic bond of the "I want to be that" type, based on the exploration of a differentiated other, a form of African-American music and female identity. As Jauss (1986: 33) points out, "openness to another world –beyond the reality of everyday life– is, also in our day, the most important step towards aesthetic experience". In the text that accompanies her album, the singer explains:

From the moment I listened to Big Mama Thornton, she caught me deeply. What a voice! What an energetic yet sweet way of singing... The more I listened to her, the more I liked her and wanted to meet more female classic blues artists. (...) Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Memphis Minnie, etc. As a woman, I connected with those intense and sincere lyrics that expressed their longings, their miseries, their truth in that difficult time that they had to live (Zaragoza, 2018).

Her discourse shows how music appropriation entails an affective and intimate dimension, which is nonetheless connected to certain sociocultural groups. Her testimony illustrates how these processes are marked by continuous emotional journeys from the primary affection of initial listening, to the collective emotion of exploring the history of popular music, sharing it, and performing it in front of others. This gives rise to the intense emotions that accompany the dialogic connection experienced by a singer of our time regarding women artists from another era. Finally, we identify an elaborate, conscious and thoughtful feeling of belonging within contemporary music scenes.

### 3.2. International Working Women's Day

Madrid, 8 March 2019.

The lights of Café Berlin go out at the start of the show. Marked by an old theatre atmosphere, this venue hosts two musical performances that are part of *Ellas Crean* festival. Quartetazzo and Ladies in Blues put the final touch to a day in which many women have fought for their rights. Both groups celebrate women's prominence in music, and they reflect on the importance of giving them a greater visibility during a day, the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, which has become a symbol of social struggle, equality and freedom. Quartetazzo is a jazz flute quartet formed in 2017 by instrumentalists Carmen Vela (C flute), Leticia Malvares (G and C flutes), Trinidad Jiménez (bass flute and C flute) and Emilse Barlatay (C flute). Originally launched in 2016, Ladies in Blues is a blues supergroup formed by Marta D'Ávilas (vocals), Patricia Göser (vocals), Laura Gómez Palma (bass), Tatiana Firminio (piano), Laura Solla (guitar) and Mariana Pérez (drums) [1].

The stage presence of the flute quartet is surprising, as it is not common for flutes to be the almost absolute protagonists. Jazz music was the starting point for these artists, who looked to develop their own eclectic and innovative sound by integrating swing, blues, flamenco, *chacarera*, *forró* and other forms of roots music. Quartetazzo's motto, "four women, three nationalities, a sea of styles", emphasises diversity in terms of gender, nationality and style. In a creative exercise of intercultural encounter and dialogue, these artists develop their shared identities and experiences during their performances, which are open to improvisation.

Carmen Vela describes the experience of playing with her companions as "a stronghold of peace", highlighting mutual understanding, shared leadership, teamwork, and rapport (personal interview, 07/03/2019). Together, they project an affective disposition of cheerful positivity and intercultural encounter, present in their discourses and images. Carmen summarised this union of strength and safety through the train analogy:

Nobody has to inform or remind anyone, because we're all here. We are a train. And of course, as we are also used to pulling the wagon from other places, now we see ourselves as four engine drivers in the same train. Just imagine it (personal interview, 07/03/2019).

Towards the end of the concert, Brazilian flamenco dancers Lisi Sfair Denardi and Gabriel Matías delight the audience with several unexpected appearances. Placed at the centre of the semi-circle of flutes, the *bailaoras* establish a curious and surprising communion with the flutists. Their flamenco passion enhances a show marked by movement, nuances and contrasts. Their heels contrast and connect with the soft and high-pitched sounds of the flutes. We experience an emotional journey driven by the flute players; by the whisperings, screams and blows of Quartetazzo.

23 hours.

An explosion of dance energy is transmitted to the public as the Ladies in Blues burst into the stage. With a cheerful and relaxed eclecticism that replicates more purist approaches to the genre, the Ladies form a plural, experienced and talented group. This urban blues sextet combines electric blues, rhythm and blues, soul and funk. Accordingly, throughout the concert they perform songs associated with well-known female blues musicians: Koko Taylor, Ruth Brown, Etta James, Sugar Pie Desanto and Katie Webster, as well as covers of blues, jazz and soul classics.

Developed in close collaboration with Café Berlin and producer Jorge Biancotti (former president of the Madrid Blues Society), this meeting of female musicians pays tribute to legendary artists while promoting the visibility of current female artists. Their performance during 8-M has received outstanding coverage in specialised news media outlets such as *Madrid en Vivo* magazine (2019), where they appear on the cover. On this occasion, the Ladies are joined on stage by Argentinean artist Marina Sorín, who plays the phonofiddle, an atypical stringed musical instrument that contrasts with the urban sextet during the performance of "Catfish Blues". The seemingly improvised encounter prompts the passionate applause of the audience, and it is the result of the constant mobility and interaction between musicians from different generations and geographical backgrounds. They intertwine their voices and immerse themselves into the cultural tradition of the blues, making it clear that they are ready to follow their own path.

Singer Marta D'Avilas referred to the idea of women empowerment in relation to music: "When a woman is on stage, she has to empower those who are below it" (personal interview, 06/03/2019). The connection and the bond between musicians and their audiences is based on musical discourse and performance, on sharing the encouragement to undertake, get up, take control, and step forward. According to her discourse: "It's like 'I'm here and, if you want to, you can be here too'".

#### **4. Analysis: from Aretha Franklin to Aretha Soul Divas**

Soul is a music genre that literally means "soul". Historically, it was the main soundtrack of the African-American civil rights movement (Guralnick, 2002). Artistically, it is defined by its expressive intensity, passionate performance and implications of sincerity and authenticity (Le Gendre, 2012). Dancing and performance, often dramatic, as well as emphatic rhythmic repetition and the use of screaming and crying in songs are also key to the genre. Consider, for example, James Brown's rendition of "Please, Please, Please". In his heartfelt narration, renowned music journalist Luis Lapuente (2018: 13) summarises the emotional and sentimental implications of this genre when he says that "soul returns again and again because no other music is more breath-taking, or more genuinely anchored in the corner of emotions". He refers to the characteristic richness and contrasts of what he calls the "emotional map of soul".

Our case study is the supergroup Aretha Soul Divas, and it features four singers who also perform independently with their own bands: Astrid Jones (Astrid Jones & The Blue Flaps); Juno Kotto (Juno & Darrell); Mayka Edjole (The Sweet Vandals); and Shirley Davis (Shirley Davis & The Silverbacks). First, we propose a necessary biographic and contextual approach to Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul to whom this band pays tribute. As we will see, there are multiple connections between Aretha Franklin and Aretha Soul Divas, which go beyond the music they share. Frequently, their social justice demands are intertwined, while the tradition of Black Power and the notion of diversity converge as sociopolitical dimensions that intersect with their art in different geographical and historical contexts.

##### **4.1. Aretha Franklin: an icon of the civil rights movement and feminism**

Aretha Franklin began her music career as a gospel singer in the church choir where her father, Clarence LeVaughn Franklin, was a minister. In 1961, she embarked on a secular-music career through soul music. She was also actively involved in the civil rights movement in the United States of America. Aretha Franklin identified with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, co-founded by Martin Luther King Jr., who was a colleague of her father. In an interview (Day & Night, 2014), Aretha Franklin stated that her life was changed by the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King. She recalled the car tours she took in her childhood, when they could not stop at certain restaurants due to "racial" segregation. After the

assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, Franklin performed at the memorial service to honour his memory.

In 1967, Aretha Franklin popularised Otis Redding's song "Respect". Her appropriation and resignification of this song, rearticulated from a female perspective, turned "Respect" and herself into feminist anthems and icons, respectively. While the original version of the song is about "a plea from a desperate man towards a woman" (Jackson, 2006: 229), Aretha's version reached a much higher impact and is considered a "suffocating cry for freedom" (Guralnick, 2002: 332). When presenting the song at the Monterrey Festival (1967), Otis openly dealt with the issue and casually explained: "[Respect] is a song that a girl took away from me. A good friend of mine, this girl, she just took the song, but I'm still going to do it anyway".

In Otis's version of the song, he asks for respect when he gets home. In a more or less explicit way, the narrator addresses his partner, telling her that he wants to maintain appearances, simulating a sort of marital loyalty, which he does not actually find at home.

*Do me wrong, honey, if you wanna  
You can do me wrong, honey, while I'm gone  
But all I'm askin' is for a little respect when I come home*  
("Respect", Otis Redding, 1965)

Aretha changes some of the song's lyrics and interpretation. Her version constitutes a response in the conversation, delivered through African-American music. Thus she replies that she does not want to hurt him and that she is not lying to him either.

*I ain't gonna do you wrong while you're gone  
Ain't gonna do you wrong 'cause I don't wanna  
All I'm askin' is for a little respect when you come home*  
("Respect", Aretha Franklin, 1967)

The fact that, as a woman, she asks her partner for respect turned this song into a feminist anthem of that era. Aretha insists on respect by repeatedly spelling the word and by placing it at the centre of the song much more explicitly. She challenges the listener over and over again. The singer translates and resignifies "Respect", and the song acquires new meanings linked to other identities, discourses and emotions.

*R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me*  
("Respect", Aretha Franklin, 1967)

The prominence of the choir in Aretha's version of the song stimulates emotions of unity and strength, which are in sync with the call and response dialogic interactions that are established between different voices. Gilroy (1999: 78) points out that call and response constitutes a democratic and community moment "that symbolises and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new or non-dominant social relationships". Historically, the energetic demand for "Respect" is framed within the context of the claims and demands of the American second-wave feminism, developed in the 1960s and 1970s. While there were limits and tensions, in the development of this wave there were alliances with political movements in favour of the rights for African Americans (Thornham, 2010).

In 1970, Aretha Franklin performed at the Spanish Song Festival at Benidorm (Godes, 2018). In his chronicle, journalist Ángel Casas (1970) described the concert as one "of the greatest attractions of the festival", since Aretha's presence alone "justified attendance to the event". However, as Casas explained, while many foreigners were attracted by Aretha, "a large share of the Spanish public (...) left their seats during the performance of the American soul star". This is indicative of the divergence between different audiences in terms of tastes and interests. In addition, the singer was featured in one of the covers of *Mundo Joven* magazine (1970), where she was introduced in relation to her ethnic-racial identity and geographical origin: "In Spain Aretha Franklin. 'Nationality: Black-American'".

## 4.2. Aretha Soul Divas and the Queen of Soul: connections beyond music

Aretha Soul Divas' performances in the music venue *But* (Madrid) coincide over time with important events in Aretha Franklin's life. This may be a strategic response in cultural production, which seeks to maximise the possibilities of appearance and visibility in the media, the music scene, and the public sphere. The band's first performance took place in the eighth edition of the *Madrid es Negro* festival (03/03/2018), once Aretha had definitively retired from the spotlight. As the news of her retirement spread, renowned music critic Diego Manrique (2017) referred to Aretha as "the greatest survivor of that golden age of black music" and claimed that this farewell was "a bitter pill to swallow" for the Queen of Soul.

A few months after the death of the artist, which was covered by many mainstream and specialised media (Mars, 2018; Scarpellini, 2018), Aretha Soul Divas performed again as a tribute that anticipated the ninth edition of the *Madrid es Negro* festival (16/11/2018). Later, in October 2019, the band offered a new concert in Madrid as part of the Women in Jazz series, which coincided with the Spanish premiere of the long-awaited *Amazing Grace* documentary (Elliott and Pollack, 2018). Two members of Aretha Soul Divas, Astrid Jones and Mayka Edjole, were interviewed for a television news report in *La Sexta* TV, dedicated to the Women in Jazz series, and the newspaper ABC highlighted their performance in the series. These events illustrate the access of Aretha Soul Divas to the central or mainstream public sphere.

### 4.2.1. The songs

Aretha Soul Divas' repertoire includes songs recorded by Aretha Franklin during the late 1960s and early 1970s: "Respect" (1967), "I Never Loved a Man (the Way I Love You)" (1967), "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" (1967), "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" (1967), "Think" (1968), "I Say a Little Prayer" (1968), "That's All I Want From You" (1970) and "Rock Steady" (1972). These songs were released during a crucial period in Aretha's career, given that when she signed with Atlantic Records in 1967 she left behind the polished "to perfection" sounds of her sessions with Columbia to embrace the greater modernity and expressiveness of soul linked to funk (Jackson, 2006: 228).

In terms of content, the identified songs are characterised by the frequent interrelationship and confusion between two main thematic dimensions in popular music: love or relationships, and social, cultural and political demands. As mentioned, "Respect" is one of the main hits performed by Aretha Soul Divas. Aretha's original recording is included in the same album as "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" and "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" (1967). The three songs are about love and relationships. In fact, in "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" Aretha conveys a call for respect similar to that in "Respect".

For its part, the song "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" (Lady Soul, 1970) centres on relationships and offers a first-person account of a woman in love. "I Say a Little Prayer" and "Think", two great hits included in *Aretha Now* (1968), follow the same thematic direction. The first one is a love declaration dedicated to an absent character. The second one, connected to "Respect", has also established itself as a feminist anthem that situates reflection, thought and freedom as central value objects. In this sense, the emphatic repetition of the word "freedom", proclaimed in crescendo by the singers and the band during the performance, is outstanding.

Throughout their performances, the Aretha Soul Divas singers fluently perform several roles. They are in constant interaction and alternate their positions based on the song performed. On the one hand, they are part of the choir –the collective voice that, together with the instrumentalists, accompanies, protects, enhances and stimulates the lead singer, the band and the public. On the other hand, each of the four singers –Astrid Jones, Juno Kotto, Shirley Davis and Mayka Edjole– also acts as the main frontwoman of the line-up. In contrast to musical, sociocultural, and poetic approaches focused on individual figures as strong and immovable stars or leaders, this type of group interpretation fosters the relationship of interdependence between the individual voice and the collective voice. Thus, in a broader sense, we also recognise an expressive and artistic manifestation of the idea of the individual as an inter-dependent (Berlant, 2011; 1998), which replicates its understanding as an autonomous and self-sufficient figure. The collective voice can only be constructed from the combination of different individual voices, while the individual voice tends to develop fully in the dialogic context of polyphonic interpretation (see Bajtin, 1989; Monson, 2009; Pedro, 2018).

#### 4.2.2. Astrid Jones and Juno Kotto: discourses on music and diversity

At the panel discussion about music and communication (Dcode Lab, 08/05/2019), we explored the relationships between music and diversity with a group of experts on musical performance, the music industry and cultural associations. Primarily identified with soul as a broad genre in contact with rhythm and blues, jazz, reggae and electronic music, singers Astrid Jones and Juno Kotto promoted a complex and multidimensional understanding of popular music, capable of integrating entertainment, education, political activism and healing.

In her first intervention, when asked "what are we talking about when we talk about diversity?", Juno reflected on her identity based on a marked duality expressed in national (Guinean-Spanish) and ethnic-racial (black) terms: "I come here as a Guinean, a descendant of Guineans, but also as a Spaniard [...] Because, well, I am black, I am Guinean, but I am Spanish" (panel discussion, 08/05/2019). Juno remarks that "diversity is not only what comes from outside, it is not the other, the one different from me, but what is already here". This suggests that we are also the others, and it seeks to normalise Spanish blackness. In addition, the artist emphatically stresses the cultural and ethnic-racial diversity that actually exists in Spain, both in social and musical terms: "I live here, I work here... and the diversity that exists in Spain is already very large. It exists! (...) Not just in people, but in music. For me, diversity is rather the variety within a reality" (Ibid.). In this way, she positively questions and invites the public to participate in music and intercultural encounter associated with live music performance.

Similarly, Astrid emphasised her desire for people to discover music and cultures through everyday experience: "It is interesting that we learn to discover the living music that exists in the places where we live" (Ibid.). Like Juno, Astrid also referred to her Guinean family origins ("my parents are from Equatorial Guinea"). She is a Spanish singer from Equatorial Guinean origin, specialised in African-American music, and she represents the diversity associated to hybridisation between different traditions that we find both outside and within our borders. In Astrid's words: "I am a Spanish singer of African origin, who sings African-American music, who loves salsa, and that is diversity in itself. That richness exists" (Ibid.). Astrid and Juno's emphasis on the existence of musical, cultural and ethnic-racial diversity in Spain also represents a response to the general lack of recognition, discrimination and inequality.

Also outstanding is the recognition and explicit affirmation that both artists make regarding the identity, sociocultural and political implications of musical and public performance. Juno highlighted the political character of image and performance: "If you are a woman you can choose to wear heels and make up, but you can also decide not to do it due to a political reason, an activist motivation" (Ibid.). In addition, she poses a historical reflection on the expression and representation of emotions in African-American music.

Music is an absolute means to transmit messages of vindication. If we look at African-American music in the forties, fifties and sixties, it tended to project a very clownish image of the black population. Everyone was always smiling a lot, wearing wigs to hide their natural hair... In the wake of the fight for civil rights, as early as the sixties and seventies, people began to strip off those costumes and show their bodies more. In the 1990s, there was a wave of artists, including Erykah Badu, who ceased to smile in concerts. She no longer danced or made striking gestures as a kind of vindication: "we can be serious artists and we do not have to be ridiculed" (Juno Kotto, panel discussion, 08/05/2019).

While certain smiling and cheerful expressions were associated with servitude and buffoonery in the media and the music industry, serious and even challenging attitudes were developed as political responses linked to gestures and attitudes that are often understood as representative of the collective.

As for Astrid, she acknowledges that her position as a singer gives her certain power to communicate, which she uses to act as a spokesperson and to give greater visibility to identities and voices of African descent.

Being on stage gives you the power to communicate, (...) to empathise. The power to be able to say certain things, open people's eyes, share knowledge about a reality, give visibility. I do feel a little bit of "responsibility" and partly the need to communicate certain things incorporated into the music (Astrid Jones, panel discussion, 08/05/2019).

In her multidimensional view, she also referred to music as "a healing process" for artists and their publics.

For me, music means many things. I see it as a healing process for both the performer and the audience. I think it is also a mechanism for communication, vindication and activism, beyond the fun and well-being that it can provide. In my case, I believe art is rebellion, fight, and all these things apart from the industry (Astrid Jones, panel discussion, 08/05/2019).

We understand this process of communicative interaction as an opportunity for participants to express and free themselves emotionally, moving towards the intimate connection of shared musical experience. It was precisely through her artistic experience, this time as a theatre actress in the play "An Invisible Piece of This World" (Peris-Mencheta, 2012), that Astrid discovered in greater depth the problem of Immigration Detention Centres. Her approach to associations advocating for the closure of these centres and her involvement in artistic performance marked a turning point in her awareness.

Exploring the intersection between gender and "race," we recognise the issue of discrimination and inequality in the music industry as intimately connected to the denunciation of a broader public problem: the denunciation of systemic racism and ethnic-racial discrimination, and the acceptance of the African descendant population as an own element of a plural country. In Spain, the African descendant population responds to the public problem of racism and discrimination in different ways. We highlight two key dimensions that are intertwined but have their own unique singularities. On the one hand, the multiple and constant work of denouncing racism, which involves collective organisation in associations such as *SOS Racismo*, the Madrid Union of Street Vendors (commonly known as *manteros*), the Barcelona's Popular Union of Ambulant Sellers, and *Afroféminas* ("Afro-women"). These organisations have articulated specific demands regarding laws, state policies and police actions, including the closure of Immigration Detention Centres; the end of discriminatory police profiling; the denunciation of racist assaults; and the creation of an African descendant culture institute in Spain.

On the other hand, we observe the action of collective self-affirmation practiced by the African descendant collective in Spain through the construction of a symbolic territory of their own. It appears full of inspiring and thoughtful artistic texts that challenge stigma and build a strong sense of belonging to a valuable collective, which is manifested through shared experience, emotion, music and the strength to keep walking day to day. In addition to music, we find artistic manifestations in different cultural fields, such as photography, literature and theatre, which reflect on Afro-Spanish identity based on a process of self-interrogation, public exposure and artistic discourse.

For example, through theatre, Silvia Albert Sopale created and performed the play *Blackface y otras vergüenzas* ("Blackface and other embarrassments") (2019), which addresses different traditions and celebrations with racist components. From a critical perspective, the author stages racist celebrations, characters and events, such as the Three Kings day parade in Alcoi (Alicante), *La Negra Tomasa*, Sara Baartman, and *el Bosquimano de Bañolas* ("the Negro of Banyoles"). Through these cases, the artist challenges the image of the African descendant population that is conveyed to society, as well as the cultural imaginary they perpetuate. An important part of the performance is focused on reflection and criticism around the practice of blackface and the use of blackness as a costume. At one point in the play, Silvia Albert Sopale puts herself in Baartman's shoes, the so-called "Hottentot Venus", and she asks for the company and embrace of a black woman present in the audience. This results in an emotionally intense encounter that provokes the applause of the audience.

In the practice of blackface, of using black make-up and large red lips in traditional festivities, parties and carnivals, we explicitly appreciate the emergence of a public controversy between two opposing sides. The African descendant community denounces it as offensive because of the history, ridicule and infantilisation associated with this aesthetic, which perpetuates a stereotypical image of black people. For example, *Afroféminas* (2020) has repeatedly denounced the massive blackface staged in the Three Kings parade in Alcoi, and they have also requested the government to stop considering it a Cultural Interest Asset.

On the other hand, advocates of these practices are offended by accusations of racism. They tend to see it as a tribute, as a fun activity or a prize linked to a tradition. The City Council of Alcoi, a strong defender of the traditional parade, has ignored these criticisms (Martínez, 2020). For its part, the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE) from Alcoi filed a motion in favour of this celebration in 2017, expressing its opposition to the accusations of racism (*El Mundo*, 2017). We find a double manifestation: on the one hand, the feeling of being an object of mockery and, on the other, the temporal and caricaturised game of identification with the other.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has addressed the issue of women in music through ethnographic research focused on the exploration of cultural, ethnic-racial and gender diversity. Using the "Follow the music" strategy, we have identified different female-fronted music groups, as well as events and albums dedicated to their contributions. Overall, we have noticed a growing prominence of women artists in the African-American music scene, which also emerges from collaboration with their male counterparts. In these alliances, the unconventional and often misunderstood lifestyle of local musicians tends to become an element of union and cohesion between diverse peers with common practices.

The discourses of the protagonists point towards the decisive emotional dimension of musical experience. It is characterised by the communicative interaction between artists and audiences, speakers and listeners who coincide or not in space and time, and this sociocultural encounter facilitates emotional liberation and potential personal healing. They present examples of female cooperation, solidarity, diversity, inspiration and empowerment, and they illustrate the ways in which popular music and glocal music scenes stimulate intercultural and intergenerational dialogue (see Robertson, 1994; Pedro, 2018). In addition, the analysis of the verbal, visual and musical discourses of the selected artists has revealed significant value objects related to ideals such as respect and freedom.

African descendant female singers play a leading role in the Spanish soul scene. They tend to establish dialogic and emotional bonds with the tradition, and they develop works and discourses with clear political implications. In this way, we can appreciate the connection between the demands made within the music scene and industry, and the emergence of the African descendant movement in Spain, which denounces racism and the lack of visibility as wider public problems. African descendant female artists publicly articulate anti-racist and pro-diversity demands, drawing on their personal and artistic experiences. Thus, the socio political discourses that are articulated maintain a relationship of continuity with the Black Power and black feminism movements, historically linked to soul music. Their discourses seek to strengthen intragroup relations through the construction of their own symbolic territory, where the individual is combined with the collective.

Through a movement that transcends national borders and supports a broader ethnic-racial bond, the African descendant community seeks to push the boundaries of the traditional definition of nation from the margins (Stanfield, 2005; Herbst, 1994). In contrast with the same tiresome and uncomfortable questions about their origins and ethnic-racial traits, the construction of an Afro-Spanish symbolic territory seeks to shape a shared space of expression, freedom and recognition. Far from assuming a position of victimhood, the proposals of the African descendant community mainly insist on identity exploration, on the emotional path travelled so far, and on the construction of meaning about their experiences as African descendants. They mainly arouse empathy, identification, mutual support, strength and empowerment.

Due to its communicative, sociocultural and artistic dimension, we understand that music is a field that is especially suitable for the expression and analysis of discourses and emotions characterised by multiple interpersonal and intercultural connections and associations. As Turino explains (2008: 18), musical performance is capable of bringing people together by blurring multiple differences between participants, and by creating a sense of collective action and consciousness that emphasises the common, the similarities of role, space-time, sensitivity and purpose.

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## Notes

1. Percussionist Epi Pacheco regularly collaborates with Quartetazzo. In the first performance of Ladies in Blues (Café Berlin, 10/12/2016), the line-up included Susan Santos (vocals and guitar) and Ezequiel Navas (drums).

