Opinion
Culture
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The rising trend of reggaeton artists delivering their lyrics in a melodic, emotional style is far from novel. As much as the genre has developed a reputation for its aggressive tone and lyrics, this more vulnerable style first emerged during the genre's primary commercial explosion in the mid-2000s. Use of this sound by newer breakout stars like Dalex, Sech and Rauw Alejandro brings out an element of longing and nostalgia that's built into the standard dembow rhythm of reggaeton.

Ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall traces both the rhythmic and lyrical evolution of reggaeton in his essay "From Musica Negra to Reggaeton Latino: The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization," published in the 2009 collection titled *Reggaeton*. The genre, he explains, is situated in a continuous tension between influences of dancehall reggae and rap.

The percussion patterns borrow largely from Jamaican dancehall riddims (instrumental tracks that often are reused by multiple artists), while also incorporating rhythmic and aesthetic elements from hip-hop, salsa, *son* and *bomba y plena*. As the genre gained more commercial viability, producers like the wildly successful duo Luny Tunes began incorporating even more hip-hop influences in their percussion patterns.

Lyrical content has varied from the 1990s, focusing on partying, dancing and celebrating Latino and pan-Caribbean identity, to the early 2000s, which played up themes of sexual inhibition, machismo and occasionally, violence or drugs.

The evolution of lyrical delivery has a similar trajectory to that of the rhythm patterns. Marshall points to the example of Daddy Yankee, who made his debut on the famous "Playero 37" mixtape in 1994. In the early '90s, Yankee's singing style and aesthetic borrowed more heavily from dancehall reggae (Marshall cites his "double-time deliveries and lilting melodies") as well as from the "nasally tinged projections of salsa *soneros* ... [and] *bomba* singers." Daddy Yankee's mainstream breakout hit "Gasolina" in 2004 relies instead on the "more complex rhyme schemes and speech-like flows of hip hop MCs," writes Marshall.

The delivery styles that emulate those of U.S.-based rappers bring out the harshness and sexual aggression embedded in the dembow percussion pattern. But alongside artists like Daddy Yankee and Wisin & Yandel were others whose style of delivery are reminiscent of the more heartfelt elements within dembow.



Daddy Yankee performs in Mexico in November 2015. (Wikimedia Commons/YouTube screenshot)

Taking their cues from the singing styles of R&B and Latin pop artists, acts like R.K.M. & Ken-Y, Zion & Lennox, Angel & Khriz, and Alexis & Fido, among others, incorporated melodic, occasionally bordering on whining, vocal styles paired often with lyrics that explored themes of heartbreak and romantic longing.

Take Zion & Lennox songs like "Bandida" or "Alocate," which carry out syllables in a melismatic way, giving them a tinge of aching and desperation. Or "Hay Algo en Ti," in which the lyrics paint a picture of the singers' longing: "There's something about you, baby, that drives me crazy/I find it hard to believe that our [relationship] was only a fling/because I've begun to miss you, need you, search for you everywhere." Or take the Tito El Bambino song "Mi Cama Huele a Ti" featuring Zion & Lennox, in which the chorus cries out using romantic imagery: "My bed smells like you/like your honey perfume/I close my eyes and think of you."

The duo R.K.M. & Ken-Y followed a similar style, going as far as branding themselves as "*el dúo romántico*." Their melismatic melodies and nostalgic lyrics are remarkably vulnerable compared to those of most other reggaetoneros. "You kill me/when you look at me and don't speak to me/I know you want me too" they croon in "Me Matas ."

In "Un Sueño," they fully unleash their longing for a lost lover, holding nothing back: "The hours pass and I'm still here missing and desiring you/and when night falls/I imagine I'm still with you/because I can't live if I don't have you." They similarly pine nostalgically in the intro to "Tu No Estas": "Why is it so difficult for me to accept that you're not here anymore/because now I'm drowning every day in my loneliness/and I pretend that you'll come back one day/but you're not here anymore."

This style made a further breakthrough when artists like J Balvin and Ozuna rose to popularity. Their image contrasted largely from previous mainstream *reggaetoneros*, altogether abandoning themes of sex and machismo (Ozuna publicly committed to avoid objectifying women in his lyrics). Lyrically, their songs cover themes not only of romantic longing and heartbreak, but also more introspective and personal themes about their own identities and spirituality.

Younger *reggaetoneros* like Dalex, Rauw Alejandro and Sech are borrowing more heavily from contemporary alternative or "emo" R&B (think The Weeknd, Brent Faiyaz), incorporating a vulnerable, melodic singing style paired with more varied lyrics, ranging from sexual adventurousness to romantic longing. While similar to some of their predecessors, these artists seem to be more intentionally embodying an "emo" aesthetic. They have multicolored hair, painted nails and tattoos galore, perhaps emulating the styles of Lil Pump and other "SoundCloud rappers."

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Some of their songs juxtapose sexually aggressive lyrics with melodic delivery. In " 2/Catorce," Rauw proclaims to his lover in a smooth whiny croon using expletives that he is going to sleep with her, thus imbuing the otherwise raunchy, womanizing lyrics with a layer of vulnerability and longing. "You're always going to love me, and I'm the owner of your whole body." Perhaps not exactly the most romantic way to express the sentiment. But when delivered in this vocal style, he reveals his desperate need for a kind of love that surpasses the moment, and the fear that his

lover might not remain with him for the long run.

Dalex, on the other hand, labels himself as a Latin R&B singer, and attributes his "sensual" singing style to inspiration from artists like Chris Brown and Usher. That being said, several of his tracks are sung over a traditional dembow beat. His lyrics are often sexually explicit, as he sings songs to "turn girls on." In songs like, "Hola" and "Cuaderno," he delivers sexualized lyrics in his R&B style voice over a dembow rhythm. "Get on top of me, *bellaquita* [sexy girl]/don't silence what you feel, scream/let the neighbors hear you," he sings with a bouncy, melodic delivery.

This singing style highlights the air of longing and nostalgia embedded deep within dembow. As I have expressed previously, reggaeton's powerful spiritual significance is indebted to the percussion pattern of the dembow rhythm, which is full of paradox and existential tension. It seems to build up to a climax without reaching a clear resolution. There is something to be said also about the tension between sexuality and spiritual longing in the tribal drum patterns of West African fertility cults, from which much of the dembow rhythm is derived.

In a 2017 interview in America magazine, Dominican author Junot Díaz highlights the historical roots of this tension, saying "the Caribbean ... is a site of empire and a site of the starting point of New World slavery and all of the inhumanities and survival responses that that produced." Diaz remembers a family member who was believed to be a medium who "whenever she heard certain kinds of music or certain kinds of drums that she would become possessed."

Díaz further comments on how Dominicans' New World cosmology ascribed a mystical significance to the body and sexuality. This meaning was in some ways an attempt to achieve liberation from the bondage of slavery and colonialism, as well as from the oppressive political regimes of the 20th century.

"We had, for centuries, no rights to our bodies and that all of the traditional pleasures and all of the traditional freedoms of human agency were forbidden to those of us of African descent in the New World," Díaz said. "For people who come out of the African Diaspora in the New World, simply to fall in love, when you have historically been denied love, the right to just connect to the body which you have chosen and that has chosen you, means that an act of love is not only revolutionary, it's not only transcendent, but it is the deific. It is Godlike. It is a taste of the omnipotent."

So while it may seem contradictory, both sexually aggressive and romantic/vulnerable singing styles and lyrical themes can comfortably exist in tension with each other in the dembow rhythm. Both are expressions of the spiritual tensions that constitute human desire — which the dembow rhythm embodies so well.