

A Vision of Cuban Rap

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The city of New York, with its great contrasts between richness and marginality, with its hopes and its hopelessness, presented the proper place for that cultural phenomenon in the early 70's to arise in the South Bronx, named Hip Hop.

Much has been written about the history of this movement and the undeniable presence of young people from Puerto Rico, Jamaica and other islands in the Caribbean interacting with the Afro-Americans in the process of its birth, consolidation and development.

It has been set clear, also, that Hip Hop is not only music, but it also contains dancing expressions of extraordinary beauty and energy, such as Breakdance, to name only an example. Graffiti is a formidable carrier of visual messages, which amaze for that expressive diversity which is at the same time synthetic and embracing, but, without a doubt, Rap is its most popular and interesting element if one takes into account that it constitutes a modern manifestation of the black and mulatto presence, as an expression of resistance which gradually gathered vitality in the measure in which it approached the social problems which mark the abysmal difference between those who found the road forward and the countless hopeless who in spite of the efforts and the supposed social character measures, continued walking a weak tight rope on the frontier between extreme poverty and marginalities; hence the constant incidence of the texts in phenomena such as racism, which is without a doubt the greatest of the problems which interfere between non-whites and opportunities.

Personally, I enjoy the unencumbered and open style with which Cuban rappers today



assume their proposals, which does not mean that everything has been good; in fact, in the beginnings, back in the late '70's the first manifestations of Hip Hop appeared and I remember the great Breakdance competitions in the streets, but I do not think that the youth understood the real meaning of that movement and its expressive forms as a way of calling attention to their discontent at the inequalities, a reason why superficiality and imitation gravitated over many of them, a logically inevitable question if one takes into account the conceptual patterns by which they guided themselves and that is that the problems of Afro-Americans and Latin-Americans in the United States and these here had a common factor, but the circumstances and the conceptual appropriations were different.

This stage having been cleared, the followers of Hip Hop in Cuba started to understand its real value, while they paid attention to the texts which, once translated, contained deep assessments about the wrongs in society. Just as the Nueva Trova did in its time; that awakening made particularly Rap bring about an appropriate vehicle to bring out into the light and critically list the wrongs that afflict different social groups here and now, through speeches which have, since then, forced more and more to think about problems which were apparently solved or forgotten.

This new way to assume Rap enters the reasons generating the wrongs which gravitate over Cuban society and with a popular language points out among other subjects how

badly-treated or untreated racism conspires against national equity and unity. This has little by little raised a debate in the home, the neighborhood and the population, for the implications of racism basically in the inequalities which have manifested themselves lately, exemplified with crudeness in the phenomenon of the exclusions in spaces and working positions.

The problem of racism is very old. Martín Morúa Delgado wrote: "... Since 1524 the black race in Cuba has been suffering continuous torture and oppression"¹.

And in 2005 Alejandro de la Fuente in his article "*Un debate necesario: raza y cubanidad*", published in the *Gaceta de Cuba*, poses in one of its paragraphs: "... And it is that racism is not only a problem of unequal distribution of resources, but a system of ideas, values and social perceptions which it is necessary to uproot through systematic social action"².

The rappers have assumed the character role in this sense. One has to keep in mind that approximately 95% of those who have joined the movement in Cuba are blacks and mulattoes.

Everyone has tried to find an authentic way of expressing himself, to such an extent



that national identity of the genre is now spoken of. At last - and finally - the rappers have assumed their speech parting from our realities and our problems, and that has conferred credibility upon them.

In the different phases through which Cuban Rap has gone there were groups and individual factors which set paces; such are the

cases of : Amenaza-Orishas, Primera Base, SBS, Doble Filo, 100% Original, Reyes de la Calle, Yuri Congo, Aldeanos, Papo Record and El Adversario, among others. They have approached many social problems.

El Adversario warns:

*Rhyming with truth on one's shoulders,
in a direct way,
is an honest chore,
for subterranean master minds.*

*While Orishas, aware of the diaspora, say:
Sad crazy one he who has left behind
his sun, his people, his shirt,
without thinking, so far changes everything
and homesickness tears you to bits.*

The Aldeanos, fully submerged in the underground current, touch different subjects. Let us see:

*Impressions of two beings,
who from the time they come, keep themselves
more real than the CNN reports,
speaking what they live,
and not what is convenient, baby.*

*Selfish transformists,
graduated as pickpockets
in the great piggy banks
of the socialist population.
Perfection is sought
when few are honest
and I protest,
but I have faith
that another Ernesto will rise.*

*Many toss
their dreams of prosperity on raft,
since ninety miles
is the length of their hope.*

However, something very different happened with the Cuban female rappers, because they were authentic from their beginnings and it is that the very reason of being women imposed very special conditions on them, keep-

ing in mind that when they broke into the picture of Rap, the assumed genre was carrier - among so many other codes - of machismo, aggressive sexism, marginality and female underestimation, which were present in the origins of Hip Hop.

I remember having gotten a pleasant impression back around 1997 during the celebration of the first Cuban record fair, Cubadisco, when the girls of the trio Instinto appeared on the stage of the Cuba Pavilion, overflowing creativity starting out from the Cuban nature, in the saying and in the gesture language. They were the first women connected with this form of _expression with whom I worked and they from that moment on already expressed their need to communicate in a very personal and convincing manner.

From then to date much water has flowed under the bridge and we find ourselves before the undeniable reality that a whole movement exists of women rappers, as it was demonstrated during the festival Women in Rap, celebrated in the Avellaneda Hall of the Teatro Nacional a little over two years ago.

Since 1995, year in which Rodolfo Rensoli organized the first Cuban rap festival Swing 95, I have attended many of the events celebrated - basically featuring men, - where performances have been seen very rich in shades, and others which go on with the marked intention of imitating poses and styles. However, these ladies of rap - as I prefer to call them - are 100% authentic and each one knows what she wants to say and how she wants to do it, be they Las Krudas, Telmarys, La Atómica, Maryori, Nonó, Instinto or any other. They assume the genre from their individual or group perspectives, with a touch of vital and sincere independence which is projected with vigorous fullness, even though I think that some of them, be it in an individual way or as a part of a collective creative formula, will continue redefining themselves until they find the most convenient course.

That memorable evening in the Teatro Nacional I was a witness to a proposal of high karats in what is musical and what is aesthetic, with an interesting pattern of lights as a dramatic factor to support the intimate dialogue thrown like a bridge between them and us.



When the show ended, that nice sensation stayed with all of us of feeling satisfied and yet wishing for a little more, because they gave it all, and quite the Cuban way; there were no intentions of copying nor plagiarized styles. These ladies were all very authentic, even when one of them might have made a mistake because of the aggressiveness of a text or because of the irreverence of a gesture. Something that powerfully caught my attention was that they did not resort, with the habitual assiduity, to the Negro or blackness as a manipulative _expression of a supposed social fatalism.

Definitely, they have launched a crusade of sultry and sensual lyricism, in counter-position with machismo, in favor of their freedoms and rights, in favor of a larger acting space for women within the rap movement, in favor of that full equality that in the full meaning of the word dignifies them and against the supposed weaknesses which damage them.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Morúa Delgado, Martín. Obras completas, Tome III. Nosotros, S.A., La Habana, 1957.
2. De la Fuente, Alejandro. La Gaceta de Cuba, No. 1, Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba. January-February 2005, page 63.