

Notes about Chano Pozo

A close look into the life and works of a celebrated Cuban musician

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The Cubanity was sprout from the bottom and not rained from above.

Fernando Ortiz

A rhythm is, overall, culture.

Antonio Benítez Rojo

The poly-rhythmic and poly-metric density of our popular music is, definitely, the seal that represents and has made Cuban nationality known throughout the world. In fact, to paraphrase Professor Enrique Patterson, its influences have imposed a new position on the world. Currently, in countries, such as Japan and South Korea, the contagious Cuban music is listened to and enjoyed between tastes of food, such as *natto* or *banchan*. To connoisseurs, the already mixed Cubans in those distant lands and the natives of the backyards or lots represent the mythological war between Oggun and Chango, a duel of cutting steel between the biggest drums of the world.

Without a doubt, popular music has been Cuba's best calling card at the international level. Its history is complex and fascinating. Since the early 20th century, there has been documented evidence of Cuban music influences and its conquering of avid music spaces.

All of the above exemplify the life and works of Chano Pozo, "Cuba's Drum". Without a doubt, all of his works were "sprouted from below" because he lived in the depth. Despite his triumphs, Chano never

rose above being lower class. He always lived a marginal lifestyle. Nonetheless, his musical rhythm is an essential part of the Cuban culture. It originated from the very deep, from very important African ethnicities—*Yoruba*, *Conga* and *Ñañiga*—that compose Cuba's national identity. His compositions are poly-lingual, that is, they are comprised of those African languages and some Spanish (almost another language). This is an important feature now that there is much talk about bilingualism. His music is a challenge for the experts and, in general, for anyone who claims to know African languages, which have an unknown origin and are spoken routinely on the streets of Havana or in sacred and secret practices.

Since childhood, Chano suffered in poverty with his family. He lived in different lots his entire life. Even when he had money, he chose to continue living in a lot. Was this a habitual need? He was bold and often picked fights, but he was not a thief. He was in a detention center for several years as a teenager. Although he learned automobile body shop skills and how to write while in the detention center, the streets were his school.

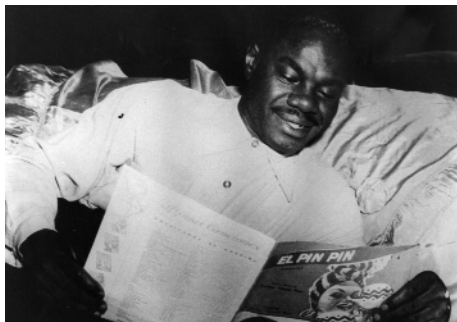
The street environment was his doctorate. They were difficult times, as all times are. He was black, in fact very dark. He chose the drum to transcend with his talent into a society full of prejudice.

Then the band and the drum arrived at the clubs, the hotels, and the theatres. Chano was famous amongst his people, fought over by neighborhoods so that he could dance in their bands and offer them some of his compositions. In any case, he was a lucky man and always felt fortunate. It's good to have luck on your side in such a hostile environment. He was likeable, extroverted, extravagant, and a storyteller.

When he had money, he spent it on clothes, jewelry and, of course, entertainment. A more elegant Cuban did not exist. His friend, Kid Chocolate, challenged him in elegance for a while in New York. This is proven by a picture of the time at the Havana carnivals, in the Dandy's band. Chano was dressed in a suit with a top hat and a cane, all in white.

On another occasion, about 1941, Chano was selected as the main dancer in the mythical production of Panther Congo for the inauguration of the Tropicana cabaret. The production had the rumba, *Parampampin*, as its main act. He played a hunter of a beautiful Russian panther of the Bolshoi, Tania Leskova, and was accompanied by such drummers as the legendary Mongo Santamaria and Silvestre Mendez.

Can one really count a lot of true friends in life? It is said that Chano never had friends. However, in my opinion he had one dear friend, Miguelito, Miguelito Valdés, Mister Babalú. Miguelito was more than a friend. He was his Eleggúa, the person that opened many doors for him. Other friends, to mention the most significant, included former senator Hornedo; Amado Trinidad, the owner of the most important radio station of the



time, RHC Cadena Azul; Rita Montaner, who was more than just a friend because Chano was a big womanizer; and Bauza.

With his rhythmic contributions and compositions, Chano imposed his seal on Cuban music. For example, his onomatopoeic composition, *Blen blen blen*, is symbolic. Synthesis of synthesis. He was ahead of all, all that passed and those to come. Destiny was his destiny.

Chano's collaboration with Dizzy Gillespie lasted a year and a half until he was murdered in Harlem in the United States. This collaboration gave another shape to Jazz. The Be-Bop went from Afro Cuban Be-Bop to Cu-Bop (now known as Latin Jazz, to be correct, politically correct). *Manteca* ("espiki African") is one of the compositions that originated from Chano's collaboration with Gillespie (or Disi as Chano called him). It had record sales and is one of the most played compositions in the world of jazz. Further, Chano was selected as one of the most important musical artists of 1948 by specialized magazines in the U.S. Between Chano and Disi (I like to call him like that, like Chano did), it is known that one did not speak English and the other did not speak Spanish. Both, however, "espiki African," as stated by the author of *Manteca*.

At the time, Cuban society lived without in depth knowledge of Chano's musical triumphs. However, things were different for Pello El Afrokán, another musical artist, who

was very dark-skinned and popular. Cuba's communist government excommunicated him in the 1960's. The same happened to Celia Cruz. She was virtually unknown in the 1980's in Cuba. Was it also because of her color or for her political opinion? Even today, she still is not heard on Cuban radio, may she rest in peace. The list of unheard artists is infinite.

As a "rumbero" – that is how David Oquendo and Vicente Sanchez call me – without the ability to follow the clef but putting in my steps, "Columbian" (Columbia is a dance and a type music) on both sides, I would have liked to know Chano.

About Aché Obanilú, cinematic script

The script for *Aché Obanilú* describes the life of Chano Pozo, a "rumbero," composer and dancer, and the circumstances of his long-term friendship with Miguelito Valdes, the singer and composer. At the same time, the script includes several musical and one mythological story that run parallel to one another. *Aché Obanilú* is a story with many stories.

In Havana, a musical story comes about via the Afro Cuban culture and its rituals, which also influence the compositions and lives of the two musicians. Specifically, I am referring to the "ñañigo" rituals of initiation, of the abakua death, and to the religious celebrations of Santería and Palo. It also includes different Havana carnival bands and Chano, with all his elegance, in one of his famous compositions and Miguelito in the background. The script shows the entire splendor of the inauguration of the Tropicana cabaret and Chano as the main dancer and composer of the Panther Congo spectacle while performing with a Russian dancer.

Parallel to the above, figures the story of the music of the period: El Manisero of

Moises Simmons, a Cachao danzón, Rita Montaner and the short lived sentimental relationship she had with Chano.

The musical story of Chano continues in the U.S. and Europe. First, with Miguelito (the Elegua who opened paths for him) in New York and then, with him joining the big band of one of the maximum exponents of Be-Bop, Dizzy Gillespie. The latter important collaboration resulted in the Cu-Bop through the Afro Cuban poly-rhythmic influences now call Latin Jazz.

Finally, within the script there is a mythological story or Patakí lucumí that also runs parallel. The tragedy predestines Chano's cursed life and ultimately his violent murder. Chano is Changó in his different mythological moments, e.g. in childhood, in rage, when womanizing, and in his position as king of the drum (Obanilú). Miguelito, Chano's friend, represents the Elegua and is the one that opens the doors of artistic triumph for him. Laura, Chano's wife, represents Oyá, who is always by his side, saving him and giving him advice. Cacha, as the name implies, is Oshún, the beautiful and famous dancer who seduces Changó (Chano) on countless occasions, in order to get him to compose music for the Belen band (Belen was the neighborhood where Miguelito was born), and to take him to United States. Both women, in that mythological and real struggle, try to win over Changó's (Chano's) favors.

Since childhood, Chano's life was marked by predetermination, which was reiterated by a "babalawo" (Santería, Ifa priest). His life met with a tragic ending because of a broken promise. The divine outline of the four cardinal points or winds (Antrofo-makoirén abakua) closed Chano's cycle of life.

ACHÉ OBANILÚ

*(Fragments of a cinematic script dedicated to
Chano Pozo)*

HAVANA

15 (Scene 15). EXT. (Exterior). Column Arch. DAYTIME.

At the corner of Belascoain and Zanja, under the column arches. Chano's father sits on a bench, cleaning his client's two-colored, black and white shoes. He gives Chano, who is also cleaning other shoes for another very elegant client, a serious look out of the corner of his eye...

CHANO'S CLIENT

- Listen Cecilio, the kid creates music even when he's cleaning shoes.

This one'll be quite a phenomenon when he's older.

Scene 37. Exterior. Patio of the lot. During the day.

Abakua initiation. Chano, Miguelito and other indísimes wait to be consecrated...

The sung march toward the Famba is initiated, walking in line.

ALL

-Indísime Emparawaó Kendé Yo.

ALL

-Indísime Emparawaó Kendé Yo.

ALL

-Indísime Emparawaó Kendé Yo.

Each one of the initiated has the ideograms of initiation painted on their bodies. The arrows of the ideograms point downward. When they are going to enter the Fambá, Nasakó tells them:

NASAKÓ

-Ekue ntuana Abasí umbariyén.

...

Scene 42. Interior. Interior patio of an elegant hotel. In the afternoon.

The director of the orchestra, Obdulio, is sitting in front of the piano. The musicians are sitting in their places.

OBDULIO

- I scheduled an earlier meeting with you to tell you that, only to interpret the fastest compositions, I have invited some... of the Los Barracones ensemble.

MUSICIAN 1

(a very dark black man)

- What...?

The musicians look at each other, very surprised. Some make gestures of disapproval.

OBDULIO

- It'll only be for the second round and with this we close...

MUSICIAN 2

- And we continue in the lot, Africa, until daylight comes.

All of them, even Obdulio – who has been very serious –, start laughing very hard.

MUSICIAN 3

- But Obdulio, do you know what you're saying?

OBDULIO

- Gentlemen, the tourist is the one who pays here... And they want to listen to that music...

MUSICIAN 1

- But Obdulio, those rumba players are not cultured... They don't know how to read...

OBDULIO

- Look, the hotel's administration has requested it... They hope that it brings in money for them... And they have promised me that if it works, they will give us a contract for the entire season. What should we do?

They all remain silent. Chano arrives at that moment with two more musicians. Chano is carrying two drums on his shoul-

ders; he's hanging them from some straps. The other musicians are "jimaguas." They have baby faces. Chano's elegance and the jewelry he carries in some of his fingers are in contrast with the other musicians, who stare at him in silence.

CHANO

- Somebody told me that we would play something more than son and danzón, but not in a funeral...

Some begin to laugh, until all laugh little by little.

CHANO

(Says to Obdulio)

- At least people laugh at this funeral.

The laughter continues...

Scene 44. Interior. Anselmo's house. In the afternoon.

Chano, Miguelito and Anselmo are seen in the living room of the house and in front of the piano. Anselmo plays the piano. The black and white piano keys are seen. There is insistence on three black and two white, remembering the clef's rhythm. When the piano is played, fingers jump from white ones to black ones in a mixture from white to black. A counter pointing is created between the white ones and the black ones. This can also be seen in the ruled paper, which Anselmo transcribes of what Chano is dictating to him. At the same time, Anselmo carries the clef close to the pedal with his double-toned, white and black shoes. Miguelito is on the side, as always very attentive to what he can add to the work of the other two. Chano marks the clef with his hands and at the same time, marks some little step with his feet, as if he were turning off a cigarette butt. His black and white, double toned shoes are distinguished in the black, black, black, white, white, white counter-pointing. The black and white game continues with another little step, as if he were cleaning the shoes behind the

white pants. That part of the white pants and the black tip of the shoes are emphasized by being hidden and shown again. He continues in counter-pointing with Miguelito as he pours three spoonfuls of white sugar in three white coffee cups with very black, steaming coffee, that Anselmo's wife has just brought. Next to the coffee cups, there's a white ashtray and a lit dark cigar. There's a half-empty bottle of Bacardi rum...

Scene 48. Interior. Chano and Laura's room. In the afternoon.

The thick and long gold chain descends, fastened to the belt loop, creating a big arch until it ascends again, disappearing in his left pocket. He inserts his left hand, covered by a white glove, in his pocket. He slowly pulls out a gold watch. He opens the cover and looks at the time. He looks at the watch for a moment. He closes the cover. He inserts the watch in his pocket again. The thick chain oscillates for a moment. You see Chano's whole body sideways, dressed in white from head to toe: top hat, jacket, shirt, pants, shoes. He looks up at the Santa Barbara altar. All of his attributes remember the Changó representation. The saint is wrapped in her red cape and sword. She has, as an offering, a red apple at her feet. The long and well defined shadow of Chano's silhouette, his face, is reflected on the wall. In Chano's face shadow, one notices that he moves the corners of his lips invoking Chango. What he says is not heard, only a whisper. Before he goes out, he finishes a drink that he has served in a glass. The ostentation of his attire is contrasted by the poverty of the room. As he leaves, he looks at the ceiba tree with reverence.

CHANO

- Asere ukano entomiñon beconsí sanga abakuá.

...

Scene 51. Exterior. Havana carnival. Paseo de Martí (Prado). Night time.

The Dandys' music is heard at full volume. Chano is seen smiling, with his two gold teeth gleaming in the Havana night, in its entire splendor. He comes forward as the main figure, in between the two lines of The Dandys' ensemble. He's dressed all in white, in a suit with top hat and a cane, walking with a very beautiful and elegant mulatto woman. She's circling, at his arm, to the rhythm of the music, in her beautiful white silk dress with somewhat dark circles. She's wearing very pretty shoes with a gold platform. She's wearing white gloves and a white decoration in her hair, in addition to beautiful earrings and necklaces. The Dandys ensemble passes by singing. It's composed of men and women. The women are wearing very elegant white silk dresses, with white gloves and shoes and jewelry. They're wearing a white decoration in their hair. The men arrive wearing a white suit, white hat and white shoes. They are singing.

ALL

- I feel a bass drum
honey it's calling me
I feel a bass drum
honey it's calling me
Yes, yes, it's The Dandys
Yes, yes, it's The Dandys.

Silence. People enjoy the carnival-like spirit of the Havana night in their apotheosis. Lucky Havana, which confuses people: nobody in particular is distinguished. The people are one body in that mass, their gestures are only one gesture, their clothing is only one clothing, their happiness is only one happiness, their beings are only one being, their enjoyment is only one enjoyment, their color is only one color.

DEEP VOICE (OFF)

- Iyá nlá, Iyá Oyibó, Iyá erú, Iyá, mi lánu.

...

Scene 65. Exterior. Patio of the lot in front of the door of Chano's room. Daytime.

Several years later, Chano and some friends are sitting, drinking moonshine from a bottle. Chano is dressed in a red silk bathrobe and some red loafers. He's wearing several rings on his fingers and a gold necklace on his neck, with the Santa Barbara medal that has a ruby in the crown.

CHANO

- Look at me. I was the same as you and now everybody knows me for my compositions. All of you, if you can put your minds to it, you can also be somebody.

PERSON 1

- Chano, you've been lucky. Not everybody accomplishes what you have accomplished.

PERSON 2

- Things ain't like that for us.

A friend arrives, interrupting the conversation.

PERSON 3

- As the saying says: It's best to arrive on time than to be invited. Look at what I brought to celebrate the world premiere.

He opens a portable rectangular iron structure, hollow in the center, where Chano's three drums will afterward be mounted. Chano tests the structure to see how strong it is. He makes a gesture of approval.

CHANO

- Moforibale. Oggún alaguedé. We really are going to celebrate today. Nagüe, tell Laura to give you the three drums to test the artillery (he pulls out a bunch of bills from the pocket of his robe and gives one of them a bill). Sanga, go to the store and bring three Bacardi bottles to celebrate.

...

UNITED STATES

Scene 96. Interior. Location of rehearsal with Dizzy's Orchestra. Daytime.

The orchestra is rehearsing. They are all sitting in their respective positions. The saxes are in the first line and in front of Dizzy. In the second line are the trombones and the trumpets, the drums in the center, the base, the bongó, and the bongo in the left end. Very parted, it's almost unseen. The piano is in front of the bongo, covering it. The temperature is very hot, some aren't wearing shirts. Some cardiac pulsations can be very lowly heard. The music isn't heard. The drummer's, the bassist's and the pianist's hands play their instruments. Chano is playing his bongo. The drummer, the bassist, the piano and Chano have difficulties being concordant. Both sides seem frustrated. The orchestra stops playing and starts again. The cardiac pulsations are heard a little louder. The drummer, the bassist and Chano have communication problems again. Both parts seem frustrated. The orchestra stops playing and starts again. The cardiac pulsations are heard louder than the previous time. The bassist and Chano have difficulties being concordant. Once again, the orchestra stops and then starts. The cardiac pulsations are heard louder than the previous time. Dizzy comes to Chano's ear and tells him the melody making some gestures. Chano understands and keeps going, for the first time the drum and the bongo seem to harmonize. Their gestures flow. The cardiac pulsations are heard very loud and rhythmic. The fifth comes in with a very sharp and dry note. Silence.

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Scene 99. Interior. On the way to Boston. Daytime.

A yellow arrow on the road indicates north. Dizzy and his orchestra are on their way to Boston in a bus. Chano, Dizzy and sev-

eral musicians are at the end of the bus. Chano is teaching them to play rumba. In the seat next to Chano, there is an ekón with the Abakuá signature (the cross and its four little zeros) painted with yellow plaster. Chano has the fifth, Dizzy the three-two, another musician the opener, another one the clef and another one drumsticks. Chano signals the clef so that he can begin.

CHANO

- Open cuta... Ta ta ta, ta ta. Ta ta ta, ta ta. (he gestures to the bus driver) African Jarri.

Chano starts to play the opener's drum so that this one can repeat it.

CHANO

(he makes a gesture for him to listen)

- Open cuta...

He repeats it again. The opener begins his attempt to repeat what Chano has played. Chano accepts it. He plays on Dizzy's drum, whom plays the three-two. Dizzy starts to play the three-two at Chano's signal. The three-two rhythm is more flourished and of louder tone than the opener that serves as a bridge between the opener and the fifth. Chano plays a little flourish in the fifth.

DIZZY

- It's good?

CHANO

- No piki ingli, piki African. (Chano continues with the fifth) Aaaaa.

Dizzy and George are speaking in the front seats of the bus. Chano keeps singing.

CHANO

- Efor Efik Eribó erón ndibó ndeme Efor Eribó Erón ndibé ndeme Efik Bongó itá Abasi aroropá aprokurí Mosongo kokomambisa kokoriko mbayaka.

GEORGE

- I think that we should start today with Cubana Be and let Chano do the solo in the first part of Cubana Bop and after that, the guys can catch him with the chorus.

DIZZY

- That's great... Let's piki African with him.

They both laugh...

Scene 121. Exterior. Pasadena Civic Auditorium in California. Nighttime.

Thousands of followers, mainly young, without racial or gender distinction, dress with berets, sunglasses and goatees. The girls have the goatee painted on. They all want to imitate Dizzy's attire. In the entrance of the theatre, the program announces: "July 19th, (with big uppercase letters) CU-BOP. Dizzy Gillespie and his big band. Chano Pozo with his Congo Drums (also in big uppercase letters) SOLD OUT." Because there are so many people wanting to enter, they're only allowing in those who are dressed like Dizzy...

Scene 124. Exterior. In front of the La Palma restaurant (Lenox, between 114 and 115 Streets). Nighttime.

Chano and Miguelito come out of the restaurant. They are both very elegantly dressed.

CHANO

- So you think that with Erikundí y Ekón...?

MIGUELITO

- He's already asking for it with the enkame that you put on him in California... And keep on telling him stories for the lessons.

CHANO

(sings)

- Blood are red after dead.

They start laughing.

MIGUELITO

- We have to milk the cow more.

CHANO

- You know that if it were up to me, I would put up the entire Havana... That way everything is a spectacle... now we cover the first part...

A black paperboy approaches, interrupting them.

BOY

- Sir, Sir. The Indians won Game four. (He shows them the picture with Steve Gromek, the white pitcher, and Larry Doby, the black centerfielder, hugging and cheerful after the victory.)

MIGUELITO

- Let me see.

Chano keeps looking at the boy. Miguelito is ready to pay for the newspaper when Chano gets ahead of him and gives the boy a bill. Surprised, the boy looks at him, while Chano tells him with a gesture that it's all for him. The boy gives him all the newspapers that he has in his hand. Chano and Miguelito start to laugh. Miguelito hugs Chano by his neck, both faces together, mimicking the picture they have seen in the newspaper. They both look very happy. Somebody takes a picture. The boy keeps looking at them and also laughs