

# Fiesta Negra

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Many exclude the concept of Afro-Cubanness from the myriad musical genres that have come out of both Republican and contemporary Cuba. In the popular imagination, it seems to be limited to native rhythms, preserved in the historical memory of the thousands of Africans who were brought here during the slave trade starting in the sixteenth century. The rhythms and beats used by African blacks from Guinea, Togo, Ghana, Nigeria and the shores of the Congo, preserved for more than 500 years, are still seen as purely African expressions. Yet, by 1923, a group of young people that included ethnologist Fernando Ortiz (among others, like Alejo Carpentier and Amadeo Roldán) announced the birth of an Afro-Cuban trend or current within Cuban music, and that it was a component and not just part of the traditional rhythms.

The integration of those rhythms required the overcoming of many prejudices. The era's intellectuals considered them primitive to the dominant concept of music in Cuba. In referring to the difficulties that musicians had to overcome to achieve this integration, Carpentier once said: "When I think of those bitter moments, the struggles, the sarcasm, the rejection it has cost me this past eight years...of the firm desire to consider my modest efforts to defend and

praise Afro-Cubans...as unbecoming of our culture!"<sup>1</sup>

It became anti-Cuban to take foreigners around the island to hear son music played by the beach and popular bands playing certain dance music in Regla. According to the 'bosses' then, a well-educated musician would consider only danzas, boleros, la criolla or the zapateo as dignified enough to be considered folkloric. Afro-Cuban songs and the prodigious percussion of black originated music were exiled to the Teatro Alhambra. Newspapers printed polemic arguments about what was and wasn't Cuban. But Carpentier and Roldán kept shouting: "Down with the lyre, up with the bongo! They listened to Papá Montero and María la O; went to a ñañigo ballet, met with Cuarto Fambá, and incessantly interacted with the Iremes [little devils] in Guanabacoa or Regla.

Despite the resistance of those who decreed all things Afro-Cuban to be taboo, because it was too vulgar, barbarous and loud, this new style of music became all the rage in Cuba, as well as in Paris, Prague, Barcelona and Berlin in the 1930s. Works like "Obertura sobre temas cubanos," "Danza Negra," "Fiesta Negra," "La Rebambaramba" and "Los milagros de Anaquillé," all composed by Amadeo Roldán, overcame the prejudices and attempts to bury it. This is how Afro-Cuban rhythms became national in Cuba.

The same could be said about Alejandro García Catarel. Among his most outstanding

work is “Bembé,” “Dos poemas negros,” “Tres danzas cubanas” and “Sabá,” all of which integrated Afro-Cuban rhythms to classical themes and arrangements that had never before been allowed, because they were considered “vulgar and primitive.” Other musicians, singers and composers, for example, Alejandro Barreto, Moisés Simons and Rita Montaner, became famous with a very Cuban style and Afro-Cuban rhythms that have brought prestige to Cuban music, and achieved a fusion between everything known as classical and popular in which they coexist and feed off each other—“the high brow with the low brow”—as some still try to distinguish.

As Carpentier wisely wrote, the triumph of Afro-Cuban music was due to the fact that “Afro-Cuban sensibilities were an inherent virtue. They cannot be acquired like a new tie. To write “La rebambaramba” or “Bembé” you must have a Roldán or Caturla; to compose lyrics and music such as those found in “Chivo que rompe tambó” or “El paso ñáñigo” you must be Moisés Simons”.<sup>2</sup>

In Cuba, everything is different, and it’s not due to a lack of talented musicians, but because a lack of freedom and resources to be creative. These are few spaces where individuals or groups that want to keep all musical styles, genres and rhythms interwoven. There has been nothing but confusion and chaos since the beginning of a revolution that wanted to abolish racism by decree, but relegated negritude to being a concept removed from opportunities.

The relegation of the conga, guaguancó, rumba and other Afro-Cuban rhythms as something suitable only for black festivals and parties, is not an acknowledgment of the autonomy of blacks, but rather an act of marginalization. You, blacks, the bongó, tumba and bembé are for you. That’s what the Palacio de la Rumba, el

Callejón de Hamel and any solar anywhere are for, black Cuban music. The alternatives? Reguetón and hip-hop. You, whites, the violin, piano and trombone are for you. That’s what the music halls in Centro Habana and Miramar are for, white music. The alternatives? The discotheque at the Aché bar, El Sauce, El Son de la Madrugada or Don Compay.

This is not segregation by decree, but there is no other option. The National Ballet cannot get beyond “Swan Lake,” and offer “The Rite of Spring” or offer us the opportunity to see “The Nutcracker.” Black offerings are for the group Síntesis or the National Folkloric Group. The Cuban National Symphony Orchestra and some of its frequently invited soloists, like Frank Fernández or Guido López Galván, cannot mix the music of Tchaikovsky with that of a black man, or Beethoven with that of a mulatto.

Leo Brower cannot arrange “La rebambaramba” or “Los milagros de Anaquillé”: he has to rescue the Beatles after he did so with the ICAIC’s Experimental Sound Group. The Romeu Camerata can do no more to help musical integration. That group’s Zenaidita Romeu does plenty when she imitates bongó beats on a viola and has two black violinists.

This is one of the realities that reveals the difference between Afro-Cubanism and the other music: exclusion, or a call to all to take part in it, but each in his or her own space. This is a leap backwards in the interrelation of all the rhythmic trends and traditions that identify each genre in Cuba’s musical heritage, without exception.

#### Notes:

1-Carpentier, Alejo. “La rué Fontaine”. *Carteles* (October 1932), in *Crónicas II*. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986: 107.

2- Ibid.