

One Hundred Years of Glory

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Author in Hall of Famous Black Cuban Men and Women

Upon mentioning Ignacio de Loyola, Ignacio Villa or Faustino Oramas, many may not recognize the genius behind those names, but if we say Arsenio Rodríguez, Bola de Nieve and El Guayabero, out will come the myriad, unique stories about the lives, talent and creativity of these brilliant Cubans that fill the indelible pages of Cuba's cultural history.

Fate decided that the year 1911 be the year in which these men, each with his own

simplicity and humility, and by dint of his talent and dedication, became paradigms of the most genuine of Cuban music.

The Incredible Blind Man

Just having composed songs like "La vida es sueño," "Bruca manigua," "Mami, me gustó," "El reloj de Pastora," "Fuego en la 23" and "Tribilín cantore" has reserved for this man, Arsenio Rodríguez, a lofty place in the annals



Arsenio Rodríguez

of popular Cuban music. The exceptional contributions and innovations of this exceptional composer and interpreter, born in Güira de Macurjes (Matanzas) on August 30, 1911, make him a precursor and referent of the most authentic and modern Cuban dance music.

Arsenio, one of the greatest virtuosos of the island's traditional string instrument, the Cuban *tres* guitar, was accidentally blinded as a child, a tragedy that marked him throughout his entire life. Yet, it did not stop him from developing his musical talent and making far reaching contributions to the *son montuno* and traditional orchestra, into which he incorporated conga drums, a piano and three trumpets, thus creating the modern band. Without knowing it, he created the structural foundations of what we know today as *salsa*.

This composer of more than two hundred songs full of *criollo* flavor, humor and double entendre was a musical leader *par excellence*.

Among the musicians who accompanied him on his long and distinguished musical journey are the 1990s' Buena Vista Social Club's great pianist, Rubén González, Luís "Lily" Martínez, trumpet players Félix Chappottín and Chocolate Armenteros, and percussionists Papa Kila, Chano Pozo and Machito.

In the early 1950s, Arsenio left for the United States to fulfill his dream of recovering his sight. The negative diagnosis he received caused him great pain, but he continued his career in the U.S., completing important recordings and presentations till his death, in Los Angeles, California, on December 30, 1970. This marvelous blind man left a permanent legacy by enriching and developing popular dance music. It remains totally current, something obvious in the work of contemporary *salsa's* most famous composers. Many elements of what is called classic Latin music can be traced to his legacy. Any time his sort of



Bola de Nieve

band creates beautiful music for dancers anywhere in the world, or a piano's *tumbao* moves lovers of the most genuine Afro-Cuban music, this exceptional creator is somehow present. He did not need to recover his sight to compose some of the most extraordinary pages of the twentieth century's musical history.

Monsieur Bola

A family legend has it that his grandmother, "Mamaquina," pushed him into studying music, because her *santos* had told her to do as much. Bola de Nieve, as he became known in artistic circles, started a career that took him, with his unique charisma and what came to be known as his 'fruit vendor' singing voice, all over and onto the most famous of stages.

He was born into a large family in Havana's Guanabacoa neighborhood, on September 11th, 1911. Little Ignacio entered the Mateu Conservatory when he was eight years old. He became a professional teacher, and from a very young age worked occasionally as a substitute pianist at local theaters or at neighborhood cinemas, playing music for silent films. His artistic career began when he played for the Gilberto Valdés Band, in the early 1930s. His genius and charisma impressed even Rita Montaner, who hired him as her accompanist. With this diva, he travelled to Mexico, where he earned tremendous success, and it is there that his fructiferous international career began, and he developed and perfected his original style and and great talent. It was also then that Rita gave his nickname. Bola de Nieve travelled throughout the United States, Europe, Russia, China, Korea and all of Latin America. He shared stages with the likes of Conchita Piquer, Teddy Wilson, Art Dayton, Lena Horne, Barroso and Dorival Caymmi, the Cuban Esther Borja and Argentine Libertad Lamarque.

His musical collaboration with the great genius Ernesto Lecuona, who was also from Guanabacoa, was enormously important. With him, he travelled to a number of countries and interpreted songs as important as "El cabildo de María la O" and "Como arrullo de palmas." Bola de Nieve recorded various albums with the Mexican and Cuban affiliates of RCA Victor, the Spanish Montilla, and the Cuban Egrem. After his death, the Mexican Fotón and Catalan Discmedi also published his music. In addition, his music was used in various films. "Mama Inés," "La flor de la canela," "Monsieur Julián," "Vete de mí" or "Si me pudieras querer" were some of the top notch and inimitable interpretations that made Bola de Nieve an icon of Cuban

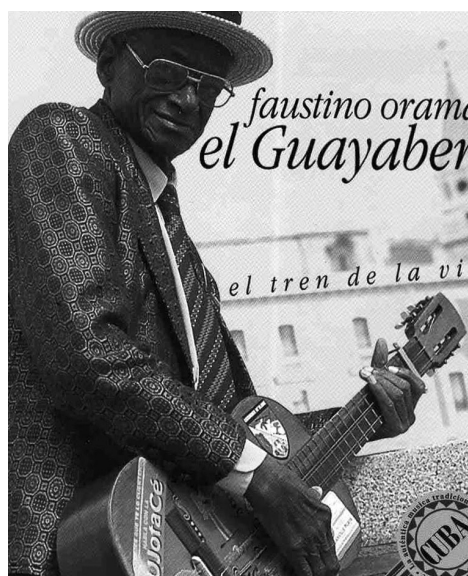
national culture. Even without making the high-falutin manifestations of political loyalty that were so common in the 1960s, Bola was respected by the Communist government. He became the Cuban artist who most travelled abroad during that tumultuous period. He never stopped working, even when his health was compromised by diabetes and asthma. Unfortunately, death caught him by surprise in his beloved Mexico City, on October 2nd, 1971.

A hundred years after his birth, and thirty after his death, the presence of the one and only, inimitable Bola de Nieve, with his genteel manners, talent and natural-born charisma, is still felt by those who admire him and acknowledge his genius.

The king of double entendre

An unaffected nature and folksy craftiness have had a likeness and voice for many decades: Faustino Oramas Osorio, who was born in Holguín on June 4th, 1911. This unrivaled player of the Cuban tres guitar regularly filled his verses with humor and double entendre, like the most venerated minstrel of the richest tradition of Cuban minstrelsy.

He began his career with the Tropical Septet, directed by the musician Benigno Mesa, and later formed his own band, with which he toured all throughout Cuba, Mexico and Spain. Wearing his white suit or *guayabera* shirt, and his old-fashioned and *de rigueur* white straw hat, he cultivated the very best of Cuban *son montuno*. As such, he delighted all of his audiences with hilarious verses full of grace and simplicity. In them, he retold ribald tales filled with popular and period-appropriate images. Yet, he always maintained that he said what he said, and that it was his listeners who supplied the double entendre.



El Guayabero

Without ever leaving his native Holguín, in 1938, he adopted the artistic name “El Guayabero,” and acquired some national recognition with songs like the already classic “Cuida’o con el perro,” “Cómo baila Marieta,” “Cómo venga este año,” “El tren de la vida,” “En Guayabero,” “La yuca de Casimiro,” “Mañana me voy a Sibanicú” and “Mi son retozón”. Through this music he achieved a perfect synthesis of traditional troubadour-style *son* and the typical rhythm of country folklore. His artistic longevity came to an end on March 27th, 2007, after having won numerous awards and decorations. Above all, though, he received the love and admiration of the Cuban people.

Despite the fact that a great deal of 2011 has passed, the cultural authorities do not seem ready to pay tribute and honor to these champions of Cuba’s national culture. The journal *ISLAS* has offered a place in which those who admire Arsenio, Bola and El Guayabero can express themselves, and thus, offer simple homage to those who deserve it.