

Music and Nation

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The Rhumba

One thing that is undeniable is the impact of our African ancestors on the origin and development of Cuban music today. For example, contagious rhythms like *timba* and *songo*—two popular dance styles that owe their originality and staying power to the *rumba*, *guaguancó* and *yambú*, would not exist today. These are old musical forms that still privilege the use of percussion, a soloist, and a chorus that repeats refrains. Black slaves created the foundations for these styles, and these developed into more

elaborate forms due to a series of motivations and circumstances, among which we must consider a tremendous ability to improvise, and mitigating social realities that forced certain reformulations, to avoid greater rejection.

Many were the decrees that criminalized drum playing or instruments with similar characteristics. These limitations continued well into the nineteenth century. Even at the beginning of the twentieth, there were still regulations that impeded the public practice of certain musical and dance styles of Afri-

can origin, unless there was prior permission. There was always a reluctance to accept the cultural manifestations of a race that became part of New World history as objects to be used for slave labor. In time, they became the single greatest producer of a wealth that the white bourgeoisie had, at the expense of thousands of African families that were torn from their natural homeland.

In that society, one that stigmatized their customs, and considered them barbarous and foreign to a social model constructed on strictly European references, making noise with a drum came to be a punishable crime. Despite the grudge held by colonial authorities, the clergy, and the *criollo* bourgeoisie, who were against demonstrations of black dances, religious beliefs, and forms of music-making, blacks were able to preserve their cultural codes and even combine them with those of their colonizers. If one analyzes the disadvantageous position of blacks at that time, that fact that evidence of their musical contribution has prevailed through time is incredible. Just an examination of their perseverance in what are the most notable categories might explain the successful result that emerged from a challenge that cost them far too much humiliation, punishment, and death.

Throughout the entire trajectory of their cruel exploitation, and even during and after their mediated emancipation in 1886, blacks never renounced this singular ability to blend rhythms and vocal *coloratura* with tremendous skill. When the drum was criminalized, they employed a rustic, wooden box that emitted contagious sounds and attenuated resonance, which inspired even more hatred in their oppressors. Every beat immortalized rhythms that transcended the boundaries of Cuba, as part of a process that today has the highest of

credentials in the art of beautifully combining sounds in time and space.

If not for the instinct of blacks to improvise, and their special ability to construct musical discourse from practically anything, it would be impossible to speak of Cuban music. The key to understanding the superior instrumental and vocal quality of today's orchestras and groups can be explained, in part, by those antecedents that originated in the canefields and slave quarters in which African slaves attenuated their misery by singing ancestral songs and other forms of culture that survived the worst of their torments. These practices served as their defense mechanisms. The alternative was to escape to the countryside and live their indefinitely—a free but dangerous life—because they ran the risk of being pursued by the overseer and his henchmen, with their slave-hunting dogs and weapons.

Yet, blacks overcame these odds for reasons other than those aforementioned. Appreciating their ability to create a torrent of original, rhythmic sequences with percussion instruments, both those well known or others created out of a need to express themselves, and the censure they risked, are not enough to objectively see the inner and transcendental glory of black Cuban musicians, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The contradanza and danzón

Hundreds of blacks and mulattoes, and French colonists with their families, emigrated to the eastern part of Cuba in search of security and conditions propitious for them to reestablish their terribly weakened economic situation—due to the Haitian revolution of 1791. This uprising by thousands of slaves economically ruined a large part of the lo-

cal (Haitian) bourgeoisie, as thousands of plantations were sacked, and the number of deaths—of both rebellious blacks, and whites who refused to correct a situation that forced on blacks the humiliating conditions of slavery—was frighteningly high.

With faith and hope that they would be able to become a part of Cuban society and recover the fortunes they lost due to the rebellion, they came, and brought with them their customs. Without entirely losing their essential nature, these customs began to change in new ways that incorporated local forms. This is certainly true of a music and dance style that came from Haiti and marked an entire period: the *contradanza*. “Derived from the English *country dance*, and taken to Holland and France at the end of the seventeenth century, the *contradanza* had become an element of French citizenship.” According to Curt Sachs: “The circle and line are basic to all forms of choral dances, most of them going all the way back to the Stone Age. . . . Even a style that has men and women lining up in two lines, facing one another, and divided off into pairs, can be traced back to numerous African tribes, from Rhodesia, the Bergdams, and the Bokolis in the Congo, to name a few.”¹

The arrival of the *contradanza* is of “capital importance for the history of Cuban music because the French *contradanza* was adopted with amazing speed, remained on the island, and was transformed into the Cuban *contradanza*. All nineteenth-century, *criollo* composers wrote them. In fact, it was the first Cuban musical genre rooted enough to then be exported. Its derivations generated a family of styles, many of them still surviving. Out of the 6/8 *contradanza*—a considerably Cubanized form—emerged genres today called *clave*, *criolla*, and *guajira*. From the 2/4 variety, came the *danza*, *habanera*, and *danzón*.”²

This last genre was created and popularized by a black Cuban: Miguel Faílde (1852-1921). After more than thirty years of the *contradanza* dictating things musical in Cuba, the *danzón* appeared and took into account the differing tastes among the social classes. Thus, it is a form that reflects the fusion of three external influences that constitute the origins of Cuban culture: Spanish, African, and the least of them, French. Despite the fact it was well known, it wasn’t till January 1, 1879 that it officially debuted in the dance hall of the *Club de Matanzas* by Failes’s orchestra. The title of his original piece was “*Las alturas de Simpson*.”

Brindis de Salas, White and Jiménez

In any discussion of the contributions, virtuosity, and originality of blacks in the musical history of Cuba, one must mention three, first-rate instrumentalists: Claudio José Domingo Brindis de Salas (1852-1911), José White (1836-1912), and José Manuel (Lico) Jiménez (1855-1917). The story of Brindis de Salas’s hits is impressive. It is no wonder that Alejo Carpentier defined him as the Cuban Paganini. He earned his first accolades in the Paris Conservatory, and went on to acclaim in Milan, Florence, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and London. The French Order of the Legion of Honor knighted him; the Germans made him a Baron.

“In this group, the musician who remained the most tied to Cuban soil, despite his cosmopolitan life, was mulatto violinist José White. While one must always suspect superlatives that characterize Cuban references to the past, a comparison of reviews of his performances in Europe, Brazil, and Havana most definitely assure one that he was a totally extraordinary artist. There must have been a rea-

son he was given the Allard Chair at the Paris Conservatory.”³ His excellent interpretations of the classical repertoire were acclaimed in numerous salons and concert halls in Paris, Madrid, and New York. The imperial French family, and Queen Elizabeth, who bestowed upon him the Order of Charles the IIIrd, were among his admirers.

In 1875, White was expelled from Cuba for dedicating a number of his concerts to fundraising for the Ten Years War (1868-1878), Cuba’s first, great independence war. After the republic’s creation in 1902, he briefly returned to the island, but returned to Paris, where he gave violin lessons and composed music of high artistic value. One of his classical compositions is “La Bella Cubana,” classified as an *habanera*, a subgenre of the *contradanza* enriched by elements of Afro-Cuban origin. Pianist José Manuel (Lico) Jiménez was trained as a musician at the Paris Conservatory and became known for the important quality of his interpretations. “This talented, black youth was taken to the Wahnfried villa, where he played before Wagner. Liszt, whom he knew, and had already had the opportunity to warmly praise him. Armed with this technical and moral strength, he returned to Cuba in 1879, and gave a series of concerts around the island.”⁴

“The Cuban bourgeoisie, which preferred black orchestras to play at their own dances, totally overwhelmed José Manuel Jiménez with the full weight of all their racial prejudice, refusing to acknowledge the place he deserved as a musician, as an interpreter of music, and as a professor with a solid, foreign education.”⁵

Yet, despite these sociologically inspired defects, particularly after 1920, new musical forms took shape and others evolved towards finding an important place in Cuban music’s

potential; the *rumba* triumphs all over the world. Various aspects of African-American and Caribbean culture become fashionable in Paris. That city was home to the emergence of an artistic movement that endorses this type of art and, despite its detractors, it managed to capture the attention of a public surprised by its richness, lack of inhibition, and an aesthetic that broke with the traditions of a continent still governed by remnants of classicism.

Those who popularized the *rumba* internationally are white composers who captured the essence of what scholars won’t call a genre, but an ambiance, instead. A sensuous dance, ribald lyrics, and the clamor of drums manages to grab its audience.

In addition to this musical style, there are also songs and dances from the *bufo* theater, *son* music, and *guaracha* tunes. Among the most representative pieces of this period’s repertoire are: “Negrita” and “El Calesero,” by Ernesto Lecuona; “Quirino and his *tres* guitar” and “Ay, Mama Inés,” by Eliseo Grenet; “Vacúnala” and “Lamento Negro,” by Moisés Simons, etc.

One of the principal performers of this type of music was Afro-Cuban pianist, singer, and actress Rita Montaner. Thanks to her unusual versatility, she was able to distinguish herself in singing, film, *zarzuela*, and romantic ballads.

Another musician who made his mark on Cuban music of that era, especially with a style that combined masterful piano playing and an almost spoken kind of singing, was Ignacio Villa, better known as Bola de Nieve. This excellent, black composer, interpreter, and pianist imbued many of his anthological compositions with traces of his African ancestors. His poor vocal register was not an obstacle to reaching true fame. With his whispering voice,

combined with a mixture of piano harmonies he produced while barely looking at the keyboard, he was acclaimed internationally, and became an idol in Mexico, where he died suddenly after a long and successful career.

The Cuban *son* has its roots in the so-called traditional ballad, a musical form cultivated in Oriente (eastern Cuba) since the early twentieth century. The cities of Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo, and Baracoa were cradles of this genre, which was performed empirically: none of its principal creators had any formal music education, or any education at all. Sindo Garay, Manuel Corona, Miguel Matamoros, and María Teresa Vera are the founders of this style of ballad, and they are all *mestizos* who left their mark on Cuba's musical history, despite any disadvantage due to their social origin, race, or lack of instruction.

Another original and essential component of the *son* came from the proliferation of *clave* and *guaguancó* choruses. "This form of musical expression, first associated with the western provinces, constitutes a precursor influence on the *son* in Havana.... Both began as imitations of choruses made up of fans created by Spanish societies in Havana. *Clave* choruses, of mostly European influence, developed towards the end of the nineteenth century, and remained popular till the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1902, there were 50 or 60 of them in working-class, black neighborhoods."⁶

For their part, *guaguancó* choruses (also known as *guagancó* groups), seemed to be a more percussive and more African influenced variant of said groups. Frequently, they included drum and other percussion instruments associated with the *rumba* in their music, although we also know they included European instruments."⁷

These diverse currents came together during the demographic movements that transpired after the end of the War of Independence (1898). Many families were left vulnerable, so they searched elsewhere for a way to improve their social and economic situations. "A combination of factors caused the Oriente *soneros* to go to Havana and other cities during the first two decades of the twentieth century. This genre became popular among working-class, Afro-Cubans in these cities."⁸

The *son* consolidates through sextets made up of mostly black musicians. There were more than 60 of these groups between 1920-1945, among them the *Sexteto Nacional*, directed by Ignacio Piñeiro; *Occidente*, led by María Teresa Vera; *Diosa del Amor*, directed by Joséito Fernández; Isolina Carrillo's *Trovadores del Cayo*; and Félix Chapotín's *Carabina de Ases*. While the recording industry made its debut in 1904, the *son* reached its height in the thirties. The U.S. Brunswick label was one of the first to take an interest in *son* bands. This kind of promotion garnered *son* players and fans in Spain, France, and the United States.

Black Cuban composer and instrumentalist Arsenio Rodríguez deserves to be mentioned in a category all his own. He was able to overcome all the obstacles imposed on him by early blindness and dark skin. His goal was to revolutionize the sound of *son* groups, so he changed their format by increasing the role of the bass, and adding a *conga* drum, piano and two trumpets. By doing this, he became a reference point for future generations of musicians. This is how the *son* acquired lasting, rhythmic and harmonic dimensions that serve as models for a number of genres in the contemporary, universal music scene. Arsenio was a staunch defender of his race. In response to discriminatory actions, he emphasized in the

lyrics of some of his compositions elements of his African ancestry. “Soy de África” and “Bruca Manigua” are examples of this tendency, one that marked the life of this important musician from Matanzas who died in Los Angeles (in the U.S.).

Afro-Cuban musician Luciano Pozo González (1915-1948) is another figure found among the world’s musical stars, thanks to his virtuosity. After overcoming linguistic barriers, and teaching himself to play percussion instruments of African origin, “Chano Pozo” captured the attention of African-American jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie, and bequeathed an essential piece of Latin jazz to the world, “Manteca.” This immediately put this Cuban amongst *la crème de la crème* of this genre. Singer and composer Bartolomé Maximiliano Moré Gutiérrez, better known as Benny Moré, was another musical giant who brought transcendental, international fame to Cuban music.

With his tenor voice and inimitable charisma for interpreting *boleros*, *sones* and *mambos*, this Afro-Cuban broke audience records during his heyday, which started in 1944, and ended with his death in 1963 from cirrosis of the liver. In 2006, the film “Benny,” based on the life of a man who was baptized the “*Bárbaro del ritmo*,” debuted in Cuba. Mu-

sic by *Los Van Van* (directed by Juan Formell), celebrated pianist Chucho Valdés, and the *Orishas* hip-hop group make up the film’s soundtrack.

These last three exponents of contemporary Cuban music have inherited the syncretism that served as a base for the construction of Cuban national identity. Without the African component, Cuban music would have lacked the level of acceptance it had and has worldwide. A list containing the names of all the black and *mestizo* musicians who have contributed to the reputation of Cuban music would be nearly impossible. They are beneficiaries of a musical patrimony of great aesthetic and conceptual value, but it would also be fair to add to this list Elena Burke, Paquito D’Rivera, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Carlos Embale, Celia Cruz, Olga Guillot, Barbarito Diez, Beatriz Márquez, Moraima Secada, and the Aragón orchestra. It would be too difficult to list everyone who has earned the applause of various generations of compatriots and foreigners.

In Cuba, music synthesizes and embodies a definition of the nation. The language of the drums, *claves*, *güiro*, and *bongo* has not disappeared over time. It has not abated. It is part of the patrimony of all Cubans, wherever they are, be they white or black.

Notes:

1- Carpentier, Alejo. *La música en Cuba*. La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 1979): 98.

2- *Ibid.*, 100.

3- *Ibid.*, 218.

4- *Ibid.*, 215.

5- *Ibid.*, 216.

6- Moore, Robin D. *Música y mestizaje*. Madrid: Colibrí, 2002: 138.

7- *Ibid.*, 139.

8- *Ibid.*