

From Shout to Rumor in Cuban Rap

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Rumor

It will soon be 25 years since the first, young, Cuban voices expressed what they were feeling by using a singing style that shared a common origin with the African storyteller or *griot*¹ who survived Cuba's cane fields and coffee plantations, or U.S. cotton fields. This, despite the fact this new style was not native to Cuba's marginal neighborhoods.

Singing about pain and suffering was always necessary for those who were forcefully brought to these lands we collectively call America. It was always a way of releasing the pain of being uprooted and the burden of slavery that millions of beings were forced to endure. Yet, singing was also a way of transmitting messages, a way of singing about the goodness of life and, above all, a way to communicate ideas, feelings and traditions.

Singing allowed the African "beings" in these new lands to maintain their identity, color, sense of belonging and, above all other things, keep "alive" a spiritual being that can itself be identified within the great melting pot that colonization and the slave trade forged within that immense mixture of cultures we call Latin America.

For Cuban music, luckily, soon it will be 25 years since a specific prediction about it has not come true. When the first, young Cubans began to rap using American backgrounds, the culture

sensors immediately predicted the death of this nascent "new protest music," which created a volatile connection between these young people from the neighborhoods furthest from Havana's center and the Alamar Amphitheater².

From the very first moment, we, the audience at the Alamar Amphitheater and the Chusmita—a recreational and dining area in Alamar's Zone 12—identified with these kids. They were saying things that were real, living things, not with much singing technique, but with unquestionable sincerity. Their words signaled what was both bad and good about a society and movement that had not died, even though it had not yet been successful either.

One can pick and choose from among those young people who "trained" in the Cuban School of Hip Hop. Similarly, there are those one can listen to, and others one can forget. There are some, who for some reason or other, are at the vanguard, and others who are part of the rumor, part of the sound that a generation that has known how to create spaces "for all, but not necessarily for the good of all."

Shout

Anderson³ is a shout and rumor within Cuban rap's space. A singer with a particular charisma and unique voice, he is often an invited, special guest, for many choral presentations, either live or recorded. Anderson Ibáñez

Justis shouts over and over again with a gift, the ability to express the duality of belonging to a race and generation that has not yet found a space in which to dialogue with the nation. Yet, he does so from all possible scenarios. Anderson shouts so we can hear everyone's pain and know his pain, too. With joy, he shouts the individual and collective pain of a generation of social agents who are still seeking to create a permanent and collective tribune from which to express themselves.

There is a lot of shouting in Cuba—everywhere. Anderson has turned the reality of the person-to-person dialogue found in Cuba's streets into a spectacle full of clarity and surprises—political, social and generational clarity. Anderson shouts in your ear, following the flow of the social background he expresses in his lyrics. His most recent release is the CD *Para esto me presto* [I'm Down With That] (2012), a call to reflect on the here and now of space and time in Cuban society. This is a here and now that reflects a 50% chance of a desperate, despairing future, and doubts about a society that at the verge of definitively changing its course, a society whose future will be white or black.

The CD begins with “Ni me digan na' de nadie” [Don't Tell me Nothin' 'bout Nobody], with a provocative, crude intro. It is a declaration of life: *en mis andanzas sigo encontrando caras plásticas, yo sigo calculando como las calculadoras*, mirando el terreno del juego de la vida. *¿Quién soy? y ¿Quién eres? Sin máscaras. Sin sombras* [everywhere I go I find plastic faces, I keep calculating like a calculator, looking at the playing field of life. Who am I? and Who are you? With no mask. With no shadows].

“Esta canción es para molestar a gente fantástica, que de tanto fantasear se pueden atormentar” [This song is meant to bother pretentious people, who pretend so much they can become tormented]. With the social crisis, the economic crisis, the political one? This first song is the door through which the rapper

invites us to discover an intimate and brutal Cuba. It is a Cuba unknown (ignored)—by the State-controlled, mass media—but fully conscious and willing to survive and communicate, a Cuba with two generations lost at sea or to distance, or alcohol, or suicide. It is these young people that he sings the seventh song: *Voy en el aire, para mirar desde arriba lo que pasa abajo, esas modas que relajo... cuando tú vas a darte cuenta porque yo veo que no es normal lo que está sucediendo* [I travel through the air to see from above what's going on below, what goes on, what a mess... when are you going to realize because from what I see what's going on is not normal].

“Para esto me presto” is the fifth song on the CD; it delivers an intimate and personal declaration—a self-criticism—of his desire and worries, of discoveries and possibilities not yet sold by this creator's market. He is ready to grow economically and become a one of our greatest and most important stars. It is a declaration of business interest and also of a understanding of the real situation in which he is as a singer developing his art.

“Everything is an Interest” is song number 3 on the CD; it talks about those changes in values and new mobility that personal interests have transmitted to society. As someone who works at some commercial and food businesses, Anderson sings to us—in the first person—some of their truths, using a flow in which he critically jabs at some of his crudest experiences within the social milieu of some of Havana's darkest zones.

This CD, which was recorded at numerous alternative studios, had important producers: “El Prófujo,” DJ “Lápiz” and Bárbaro “El Urbano” Vargas, and has a private label from a very special space for Cuban music over the past 20 years: the *Casa Productora Real 70*, where he recorded “Antes de la partida” [Before Leaving], with which this rapper bids us farewell with a pain that understands this reality and

does not call for a pain that provokes, is rancorous or hateful. From a clearly autobiographic point of view, he describes experiences from the perspective of many narrating and feeling people, creating a game of realities, so he can ask himself and respond while dialoguing with *cosas, cosas reales... camínalo, tiempo al tiempo te cuento sobre ese hombre, sobre ese, un rato* [things, real things... walk it, once in a while I tell you something about this man, about him, a while].

Rap is the modern result of a tradition of orally transmitting ideas. Many ideas and events in today's Cuba have begun and also ended with a shout. Anderson knows how to use irony and sarcasm in the powerfully vibrating voice, which when he is presenting, is also accompanied by unique movements: *un break más crudo y urbano, menos coreográfico y más*

guapo [a cruder and more urban, tougher and less choreographed break].

Anderson ends his third CD shouting: *A la mierda todo, todo es falsedad, mucha suciedad en la sociedad... tiempos del que puede más, de quedar contigo mal y no pasa na'... a la mierda todo, la política, la amistad... lo repito hace falta dinero en cantidad... para relaciones, pa' que no tiren en la basura debes crear tu propia dictadura* [Fuck everything, it's all about falseness, a lot of filth in society... a time for the most powerful, of doing you wrong and nothing happens... fuck everything, politics, friendship... I repeat, we need money, lots of it... for relations, so you don't get thrown in the trash you've got to create your own dictatorship]. Anderson proposes to us a stable and honest ethical state, an ethics of values, an ethics for life, *un rap que me sale del alma* [a rap that comes from my soul].

Notes:

- 1- A *griot* or *jeli* (*djeli* or *djéli* in French) is a narrator of West African stories who tells them the way a poet would; a singer of praises or itinerant musician. He is a keeper of oral tradition and, as such, he is known as a bard. According to Paul Oliver, in his work titled *Savannah Syncopators* (1970), "although [the griot] should know many traditional songs, without a doubt, he also should have the ability to improvise about current events, chance incidents, and everything around him. His genius can be devastating and knowledge formidable." They are known popularly as praise singers, but they can use their vocal talent for gossip, satires or political commentaries.
- 2- The prediction about the premature death of that "stuttering, American" music did not come true, but the cultural intellectuals and leaders attacked the First Cuban Rap Festival with all the strategies they could come up with. *pero los intelectuales y dirigentes de la cultura arremetieron contra el Primer Festival de Rap Cubano con todas las estrategias posibles.* Socio-cultural debates and studies that broke with institutionalized, State guidelines took root as a result of the events planned by Grupo Uno, the Festival's official organizer in different locations throughout the city and at the Alamar Amphitheater. These conversations offered visibility to an "other" voice in public; in them the subject of black Cubans was part of that singing voice. It was no secret that Cuban rap's most intense, remembered and famous voices are from mostly black people. In recent history, even if we do not write about Cuba rap, it has been black groups who have made their mark. There is a before and after. Let's recall *Explosión Suprema, Los Reyes de la Calle, Anónimo Consejo, Hermanos de Causa, La Comisión Depuradora, Los Aldeanos*, etc.
- 3- Anderson Ibáñez Justis (Havana 1969). Degree in Business and Gastronomy. Self-taught singer known as Anderson "El Profesional." He launched his CDs from the Producción General REAL 70 studio: *Salgan del medio* (2005) *El profesional* (2009) and *Para esto me presto* (2012), as well as the CD *En Vivo* (2007), recorded during one of his presentations at the mythic *Barbarán* club (Calle 26, Nuevo Vedado, Havana), in which DJ Raimel Orisamel, a member of *Anónimo Consejo*, participated by special invitation.