

## IN THE TROPICS

Pages From A Journal

PAUL BOWLES

HAVANA, June 1945:—Until now I had never slept in Havana, only wandered about during the daytime stopovers for the boat enroute to Vera Cruz. I am already wondering why Cuba has recently been built up in legend as one of the world's most intensely musical countries. In 1932 I used to go nearly every day to the Sporting d'Été to listen to Don Azpiazu's Orchestra, imported, according to the posters, directly from Havana. While I never liked the *maracas* very much, the rest of the percussion section won me over completely, and was my introduction to West Indian music. It was gratifying later to learn that the *maracas* were the one Indian component of a drum section which otherwise derived totally from Negro sources. It seemed natural to believe that if Azpiazu's Orchestra had retained this much of its original vigor in transplantation to a spot like Monte Carlo, those playing groups which had remained behind in Cuba must be something pretty spectacular. And in the hills of Puerto Rico the following year I heard improvised orchestras of *marimbula*, *cuatros* and *guiro* which convinced me I would turn out to be right. Doubtless I was, then. But I waited too long to come here to Cuba. Music, along with everything else, is subject to the vagaries of fashion; and now in 1945 percussive frenzy is *démodé* and Havana is full of *Stormy Weather*, known as *Triste Lluvia*. A *bongó* is sometimes rapped timidly in the dining-room of the Hotel Nacional, where American tourists, unaware of the arrival of the new chic, still want to hear an occasional rumba or conga.

Havana:—Or do I exaggerate? This evening on the Muelle de Luz, waiting for the launch that carries late merrymakers across the harbor to Regla (where because of last night's murders there is a state of martial law), I came on a group of Negroes inventing an old-fashioned song with choral *estribillo*, the first I have heard since I arrived three weeks ago. Lacking drums they used the wooden bench; in place of *claves* they used the palms of their hands. And being pleasantly drunk they did not stop when they saw me.

*Santiago de Cuba*:—The Provincia de Oriente, they say, produces the finest music of Cuba. Here I am; where is it? I remember a group called El Cuarteto de Caney. El Caney lies just inland, half an hour above Santiago. I take a bus. There is a corner cantina at the intersection of two dusty roads. People ride up on horseback. Inside, a monstrous jukebox is roaring. The pieces are all from Hollywood's 1943 crop of musical films, with a few Agustin Lara and Maria Grever ballads sandwiched in. I inquire about the famous quartet and discover the sad secret of Cuba's popular music. As soon as a *conjunto* is at all well known it is exported to one of the hundred corners of the earth. "Aren't you sorry about that?" "No, it gives us fame out in the world, and anyway we like your music better, the *suin*."

*Camagüey*:—Having missed the plane for Haiti in Santiago, I am waiting to go shipside here. This is the triumph of visual  *cursilería* : every other store seems to be a gift shop dealing in glazed pottery figurines and poufs covered in rayon satin. Today is a holiday: the inauguration of the *fiesta guaracha*. The entire juvenile population, masked and attired in unimaginative approximations of Cuban rustic costume, storms screaming through the streets. And unexpectedly enough, out in a muddy suburb I found some music. A gang of white kids wandered from alley to alley, singing. In front of them, walking backwards in the manner of the Soudanese exhorters in the religious processions of North Africa, was a very young Negro. He extemporized the typical florid line of the verse while his flock provided the recurrent choral refrain: "Ah, eh, cómo va quedar?" The circumspect complexity of syncopation in the accompanying hand-clapping rhythms would have been the despair of a notating musicologist. This song continued a quarter of an hour as the impromptu procession moved from house to house, and then, the leader having apparently exhausted his ideas thereon, another was begun.

*Havana*:—Today some of the Grupo de la Renovación came to lunch: Ardévol, and with him his young disciples, the bland Cuban, Harold Gramates, and the fanatical looking Spaniard, Julian Orbon. Ardévol himself is from Spain; the idea of "reform" in his movement is pro-neo-classicism, and is directed principally against the Cuban-Impressionist influences of Caturla and Roldán. That such a group should be functioning in Cuba is a healthy sign; it would be more convincing if Ardévol were a Cuban. A similar state of affairs would exist here if Schönberg were to announce the twelve-tone system as the new, true, American idiom. We sadly discussed the decline of Afro-Cuban folk music, and they all agreed that it was no

longer to be found save on the gramophone recordings of a decade or two ago. I still am unable to believe this.

*Havana*:—Each day my trip to witness a Lucumí rite, promised me by Lydia Cabrera, has had to be put off. Señorita Cabrera has collected and published a good many Afro-Cuban folk tales and claims to have influence with various practising *babalaos* of the cult. I finally went to Guanabacoa with her and spent the afternoon in a pink shack with the fetishes, but because we arrived there in a very large Rolls, and since a good many people seemed to be expecting us, I am inclined to discount the seriousness of the baffling proceedings which followed. Inasmuch as the drumming begins only after the sacrifices, and Señorita Cabrera preferred to leave just as the first victim, a white kid, was being dragged to the altar, I was obliged to miss that part of the rite which had promised to hold the greatest interest: the music. And so the young goat's outraged bleating mingled with the sound of the automobile horn and repeated farewells as we were hustled away; the drums were left to my imagination. The painter Wifredo Lam assured me that I had missed little of interest, since only the rival cult, the *ñáñigos*, have really good ritual music.

*Havana*:—That part of Marianao where the dancehalls are is a long, sad boulevard lined with one-story shanties. The roofs continue to the street to form a shelter over the sidewalk; you have to weave your way around the tables and chairs as you walk down the street. Here are professional singers armed with guitars, demanding that you listen to them perform their *guarachas*, rural ballads which somehow have until now escaped the wretched musical metamorphosis that has set in. The songs are distinctly Spanish in flavor; it is hard to find any trace of African elements there. Vocalizing is often reminiscent of *cante jondo*. Like the Mexican *corrido* the subject-matter is eclectic, sometimes deriving from the events and circumstances of the day. Behind the singers you can hear the insistent *claves* clicking inside the dancehalls, and an occasional ecstatic trumpet phrase climbing above the confusion. Each dancehall has a jukebox and on Saturday nights an orchestra. These little bands make the nearest attempt I have heard so far to provide Afro-Cuban dance music. Many have retained the flute, all have trumpets and piano, a few (alas!) a saxophone, and most of them sport two drummers at least. They all play a great amount of international Latin-American trash, but in between, if you wait long enough, you can hear some real Cuban music. Nothing, however, like the percussive orchestras that used to enliven certain nightclubs in Paris fifteen years ago. That day is apparently gone for good.

*San Salvador*:—It is beautifully cool and clear here after Belize. There is great excitement over the fact that in a recent marimba contest between Guatemala and Salvador, the Salvadoreans came out ahead. My informant modestly added that perhaps the victory was "conceded as a courtesy; who knows?" Here, as in other parts of Central America, the marimba is the national instrument, one might even say the national pastime. Boys of eight can be seen pounding away (generally at the bass end) on the same instrument along with old hands who show their prowess at trilling the melody up at the treble end. I have been in villages where the practising kept up all night in some butcher's or cobbler's shop, because a fiesta was approaching and the *marimberos* (by day tailors or barbers or students), wanted to perfect their new repertory. When a village develops a really good marimba, the players are very much in demand throughout the region, and can bring in more cash by going "on the road" as musicians than by remaining at their original professions.

I once stayed on a ranch in Costa Rica, where my room, in the manner of the houses of hot lands, was separated from the adjacent rooms only by eight-foot partitions. In the next cubicle lived a foreman named Maúl, who spent all his leisure time fashioning a marimba. Each bamboo key had to be razor-pared down to its proper size, and each resonating gourd had to be hung below its corresponding note, tested, and cut away or replaced to insure the attainment of a maximum vibration when the bar above it was struck. Raúl had an excellent ear, and before I left he had completed a perfectly-tuned, three-octave chromatic marimba, which he promptly sold to an admiring *vaquero* from a neighboring ranch up the river. "I used to make a great many," he said casually, "but now the fever is past, and I hope to learn soon how to make radios."

*Guatemala*:—The marimbas here are objects of luxury, with cases enhanced by marquetry and box-shaped resonating chambers of varnished wood. Their visual aspect bespeaks a certain degree of mass-production, and as a consequence they are less attractive to the eye. Performing ability, however, reaches its technical zenith here. Beside the capital, the larger towns like Quetzaltenango, Antigua and Huehuetenango have impressive marimbas—the term is used to mean the band as well as the single instrument—in which several dozen men play, and there is always a drummer as well. The music itself is of scant interest, consisting of hackneyed numbers from the international popular repertory, new Mexican song hits, and examples of the so-called "native" form, the *son chapín*, which is quite as undistinguished as the rest, and whose name implies simply that it has been written by a Guatemalan.

*Chichicastenango*:—The dubious meaning our culture holds for the members of less evolved groups: this village, where during Holy Week in 1938 I heard some of the best autochthonous Indian music it had been my luck to encounter, has recently been presented with a loud but not very good radio, which is set up in the central *zocalo* opposite the temple with its famous steps containing the sacrificial ovens. Naturally the Indians from the neighboring countryside remain crowded around it for hours on end listening to a barbarous mélange of tropical static and soap operas in Spanish, a language which a few of them have learned. I stopped and pretended to listen a while this afternoon; a record of American swing was being broadcast. From time to time a blurred riff peeked out from among the howls and crashing explosions of static. Feigning bewilderment, I asked the most sophisticated looking group: "What is it?"

"A gift from the government," they said.

"Yes, but what's that noise?"

"A fight in the capital."