

CUBA'S POPULAR MUSIC

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CUBA is a pre-eminently musical country, its folk art is rich in beauty and notable for attractive rhythms. Cuban instrumentalists respond sensitively to leadership and, being accustomed to complex rhythms, they are never puzzled by intricate combinations. The *bongosero lucumí* (a negro drummer), who performs on the sacred drums called *batá*, knows absolutely nothing of musical notation and nothing of the word "rhythm." Yet it would be difficult to find anywhere a professional drummer who could repeat the *bongosero's* diabolic combinations of rhythm. The *güajiros* (white peasants) sing their typical songs with all the mastery of natural musicians. For these reasons, Cuba is one of the most original and valuable storehouses of folk lyricism. Anyone who has heard the impressive rhythms of the *batá* on a night of *iniciación* in the *cabildos* (cult meeting-places) of Havana, who has listened to the stirring prayer of the *babalaó* (Afro-Cuban priest) on a ritual night, who has sensed the overtones of the songs on a fiesta of Batey (Afro-Cuban god), or has heard the *güajira* (a form of instrumentally accompanied song) in the quiet of the fields, will be convinced that Cuba is lavishly musical. These experiences are not always to be met in their pure state in Cuban cabarets, but they are common in the countryside, in the *cabildos*, and wherever the popular spirit survives in its ingenuous and primitive condition.

The Siboneys, the aboriginal Indians of Cuba, were of bland and docile character. They succumbed quickly to the rigors of conquest, leaving behind neither traces of their music nor relics of their other spiritual expressions. The resulting absence of data renders impossible any assessment of Siboney influence in Cuban popular music. The two influences that appear to have affected its present form most have been the Andalusian and the African, the latter being preponderant in both quantity and intensity. Negro rhythm is indeed the substratum of a great part of music in all the Antilles.

Creole popular music, which is of Andalusian descent, is free of this African influence in its contours and rhythms. It has persisted largely in the Cuban countryside. The echoes that vibrate around the *bobio* (thatch-roofed hut) are the *güaracha* and the *güajira* or *punto criollo*. The white Cuban peasant whiles away his nostalgias with the stimulating aroma of coffee and a few songs of sweet monotony and of sad and profound accent. This creole popular music is the result of a general progressive adaptation to environment made by generations of Cubans across the years. What at first reflected Spanish conciseness and vigor, has slowly changed under the influence of surroundings at once suave and sweet, less profound and more sensual.

The *zapateo*, the *güajira*, and the *punto criollo* are the three most genuine forms of Cuban popular peasant music. The *zapateo*, still danced in the countryside, is said to be of Spanish origin. Its name might be related to that of the *zapateado andaluz*, though some think it derives from the *seguidillas* of La Mancha. It is danced by couples standing apart and marking the rhythm with their feet. Others simultaneously sing a melody that alternates with the *zapateo* rhythm. The instruments that accompany this dance are the *triple* and the *tres* (types of guitars) and the *güiro* (a beaded rattle). The rhythm of the *zapateo* is original and exciting because of its unequal combination of 6/8 and 3/4 time.

The *zapateo* alternates in popularity with the *güajira*. The song peculiar to the latter is sad and monotonous. It is accompanied by *claves*, small cylindrical sticks held one in each hand and beaten one against the other. The sound produced by *claves* is that of a remote and unreal anvil, and is in keeping with the character of the *güajira*. Cubans and Spaniards

LA GUAJIRA (Punto Criollo)

(ALLEGRETTO TRANQUILLO.) (♩ = ♩)

A LA PUER- TA DEL BOH- i - O CUAN- DO VEN- GA LA MA- ÑA- NA CUAN- DO

(CLAVE - Two pieces of wood, one held in each hand and rapped one against the other)

do not agree about the origin of this dance. Cubans say it is Andalusian, imported into Cuba by the Spaniards. Spaniards assert that it is Cuban, and was taken back to Andalusia by returning soldiers. Still others say it is of African origin. But to judge by its name (close to the Indian word

güajiro, indicating a white native), it was probably born in the fields of Cuba. The *zapateo*, the *güajira*, and the *punto criollo*, as well as all their variants and derivatives, may be considered as a group of popular peasant forms showing Spanish influence and evolved across the years into typical Cuban forms.

The *habanera* is the most universally known of the forms. Even though it is sung in salons and at concerts, it still shows the distinguishing marks of a popular national style with aspirations to high lyricism. At the same time it retains an atmosphere belonging to Cuba's colonial past. It is exactly because the *habanera* was born during the colonial period that foreign musicians have taken it to be Spanish and have employed it when they wanted to give a Spanish flavor to their music. An example is the famous *habanera* in *Carmen*. Various theories, some of them very far-fetched, have been advanced as to the origin of the *habanera*. Certainly its authentic Cuban character is evident in its unmistakable spirit, its reflection of the tropics.

(TPE DE HABANERA.)

LA HABANERA

¡ QUIEN FU - VIÉ - RACONÓ - LA RI... O, AR...

Along with the forms already mentioned, there have been others that have fallen into disuse or have been eclipsed by stronger ones. Such were the tropical waltz, the *canción* (derived from Italian and Spanish music of the time), the *danza*, and the *contradanza*. The *danza*, of which beautiful examples survive, later gave origin to the *danzón*, a kind of social dance still much in vogue among the people of Havana. Another surviving popular form of the past is the Cuban *bolero*. Its Spanish forbears

EL BOLERO

MODERATO.

f.

may be found in the *tiranas* and gypsy *polos* of Andalusia. The *bolero* has

adapted itself to its new surroundings, and now reflects as no other form does the jocose and optimistic qualities of the Cubans. It is accompanied on the guitar, which performs its rhythms excellently, and it is much sung in Cuba. The boleros written by Cuban popular composers are numbered in the hundreds.

Another current form is the *criolla* which is rapidly growing in popularity. It is now passing through all the social layers, from the metropolitan suburbs to the cabarets. Derived from the *canción* with African rhythmic influences, the *criolla* is eminently Cuban. More than any other popular expression, it has lent itself to vulgar and popularesque arrangements, with the result that an infinity of *criollas* are in execrable taste. There is also the *pregón* which, as its name (cry) indicates, is inherited from itinerant vendors calling out their wares. The *pregones* are often of high musical quality.

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In sharp contrast to this popular creole music of Spanish stamp, but still of strictly Cuban flavor because of constant adaptation, there exists a Cuban popular music of Negroid character. As in the other Antilles, and in Brazil, there remains in Cuba, almost intact, the essence of the magic songs that Negro slaves brought from Africa. This spirit the slaves maintained in pure form for many years. No extraneous contaminations veiled its unmistakable peculiarity, thanks to the happy absence of attempts at conversion during the colonial period. The Spaniards left the slaves at liberty to practice African liturgies in their meeting huts and sanctuaries. Thus their rites were handed down from father to son. So these virgin African essences kept their original nature through all evolutions and imprinted their color on other musical expressions that insensibly responded to their powerful attractions. Spanish music in Cuba often came to be saturated with aromas from Africa's forests. Thus, little by little as the years passed, these Negro rhythms and melodies gained the interest of the white man. They made him feel their irresistible influence and enrolled him as one more participant in the popular cooperation that was transforming the primitive and lending it the restlessness of the moment without separating it from its original purity.

Nothing is more difficult, after actually visiting the sanctuaries of the Afro-Cuban rites, than to determine the origin of these antiphonal hymns, verses dim with emotion, mythological allegories, priestly explanations

of the mystery of Ecué (spirit of noise or sound), fables, sacred canticles, African languages, and supplications and invocations to the lesser deities. The point of departure for all these African religious-musical survivals appears to have been magic, the cult of spirits, an ancestral practice reflecting the sense of mystery which filled the life of African Negroes. These rituals the slaves in Cuba carried on ardently, until the Negroid music of their rites came to the surface in the whirlpool of tendencies and styles in Cuban music. The Negro essences, with the cloudy atmosphere of their fiery rhythms, have asserted their innate rule. Forest lyricism has given sap to many forms of popular Cuban music. In the dualism of the two current divisions of that music, its law has been the stronger. The songs of the *lucumí* (a division of Negroes), the vibrant rhythm of the *congas*, of the drums called *okónkolo* and *itótele*, the music of the Yorubá Negroes have won out.

From the cult and religious meeting-places, the Negro rhythms have passed to the people, to the streets, and finally to the theatres, cabarets and social festivities. The typical instrumental ensembles called *sones* allow the listener to hear the exciting beat of the *bongó*, the delirious rhythms of the *conga*, and the sharp singing of the Negro. The *son* appeared in 1917, and quickly won out with its strong Negro flavor. Simple in its form – an authentic popular form – it is a type of the classical rondo, an introduction alternating with a couplet. It is a concatenation of convulsive, expressive force. Its instrumental composition is exotic, purely African: *bongós*, *maracas* (gourd rattles filled with pebbles), *claves*, a *botija*, a *marimbula*, bass violins played pizzicato, strident muted trumpets, and the sharp, persistent Negro singing. What characterizes the *son* is the syncopated rhythm of the typically Cuban *cinquillo* (group of five notes). It has sent its original echoes all over the world, to France and Spain first, then North America.

The *tango congo* is another popular musical manifestation derived from Africa. It has been used in the theatre and also by some composers as symphonic material. The rhythm of the *tango congo* is much like that of the *habanera*, which has made it seem to some that the *habanera* may be of African origin. The *conga* is certainly of remote African origin, and was introduced into Cuba by slaves imported from western Africa. It takes its name from the instrument that marks the rhythm of the dance – the *conga* (huge drum), and expresses enthusiasm in its most primitive

and unfettered state. From the meeting-place it passed to the street, where it was danced in the *comparsas* that, on the Day of the Kings, (January 6), paraded before the colonial authorities. The *conga* has achieved wide popularity in our own day, and is danced in all the cabarets and night clubs



of both hemispheres. The *rumba* is also of African origin, and is one of the most popular forms. As in the *zapateo*, the couples dance apart, marking the rhythm with the heel and knees, and giving the shoulders an exciting motion. It is closely related to the *conga*.

As we have seen, the popular music of present-day Cuba has two aspects derived from the two influences – Spanish and Negro – that determined the course of its development. This decisive fact divides the current panorama of popular Cuban music into two clearly defined sectors: the typically creole and the Negroid. In both there are beauty, force, and life. The creole music has evolved in a sensual, bland, sentimental, and seductive manner, a manner growing out of the circumambient medium. The Negroid music has preserved the strong, primitive, and invigorating accents of the virgin forest.