

**Sounds, Space and Socioeconomics: Changes in Cuban Music  
in Havana and London (2010 – 2022)**

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In conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

## **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Snezhina Gulubova, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

**Signed:** Snezhina Gulubova

**Date:** 27<sup>th</sup> October 2022

*Dedicated to Cuban musicians in Havana and London*

*A special tribute to Malcoms Junco Duffay*

*Your legacy lives on*

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## Abstract

The study of Cuba's rich musical legacy may be divided into three distinct periods: pre-1959 Revolution, post-1959, and the Special Period (following the collapse of the Soviet Union, 1990-). Characterised by shifts in government policies and its détente with the US post-2010, Cuba entered a new era of socio-economic transformation in the early 2010s, prompting a new phase in its music scholarship. Legalisation of private property ownership, the launch and growth of internet access, and substantial increase in travel from and to the island led to the introduction and proliferation of private music venues across Havana and the island's entry into international flows of culture through digital platforms. *Sounds, Space and Socioeconomics* examines the role of Cuban musicians at the forefront of change during this new stage of "sociocapitalism," and the restructuring of Havana's music scenes, profession, and performance spaces. By scrutinising the relationship between place and sound, the project uncovers the friction between the romanticisation of the "the street" and the *solar* as the home of Cuban music versus the relocation of sound from public places and the periphery to the private bars of central Havana, altering the scene's socio-spatial characteristics and creating valorisation of recorded music. Driven by the new entrepreneurial ideals, musicians seek to commercialise and internationalise their careers, looking deeper into their roots for authenticity, and becoming simultaneously more local and global. Building upon Cuba's recent internationalisation, a second aspect of this study is its twin-city focus, examining the emerging Havana–London axis and documenting the formation and growth of a Cuban music scene in London, distinct from the broader Latin scene and from Cuban diasporic communities in other locations. The salsa dance industry has encouraged new connections between the two capitals while impeding the creation of Cuban dance music in the UK, leading some musicians to re-focus on other genres, most prominently fusion.

## Acronyms

ACRap – Cuban Rap Agency (Agencia Cubana de Rap)

ACRock – Cuban Rock Agency (Agencia Cubana de Rock)

AHS – Association Hermanos Saíz (Asociación Hermanos Saíz)

CDR – Committee for the Defence of the Revolution

CIDMUC – Centre for the Research and Development of Cuban Music (Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Música Cubana)

Comecon – The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (Совет Экономической Взаимопомощи)

CTC – Centre of the Cuban Workers

CUC – Cuban Convertible Peso

CUP – Cuban Peso (the same as National Currency)

EGREM – Recording and Music Production Company (Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales)

ENA – National Art School (Escuela Nacional de Arte)

FAC – Cuban Art Factory (Fábrica de Arte Cubano)

FMC – Cuban Women's Federation (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas)

GBP – Great British Pound

GDZ – Gente de Zona

HDP – Havana D'Primera

ICM – Cuban Music Institute (Instituto Cubano de la Música)

ICRT – Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (Instituto Cubano del Radio y Televisión)

ISA – Higher Institute of Arts (Instituto Superior de Arte)

MINCULT – Cuban Ministry of Culture

MININT – Interior Ministry

MN – National Currency (the same as Cuban Peso) (Moneda Nacional)

UNEAC – Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba)

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States

USD – US Dollar

WAM – Western Art Music

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Brief History of Change .....	20
1. <i>SocCap201</i> .....	20
2. Travel.....	24
3. Digitalisation .....	27
4. Covid19 .....	28
Music in Havana in the Obama Era (2010 – 2022).....	31
1. Redefining Place-Space.....	32
2. In-between Worlds .....	35
3. The Havana-London Axis .....	40
Structure of the Thesis.....	45
Positionality and Methodology – or The Art of Encounters .....	46
<b>Chapter 1: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk</b> .....	<b>63</b>
La Calle .....	64
The Home of Cuban Music .....	70
From the Margins .....	71
1. Afro-Cuban .....	61
2. Dance Music (Música Bailable) .....	78
3. Urban Music .....	79
Shifting Geographies of Sound .....	82
4. Fusion .....	82
5. Rap.....	88
From the Street to the Studio: El Sentimiento de la Música Cubana.....	93
The Vacuum in Music Education.....	101
Conclusion.....	106
<b>Chapter 2: The Spaces and Sounds In-between</b> .....	<b>109</b>
El Malecón .....	110
Havana’s Private Music Venues .....	112
Hearing the Change: Wealth in a “Classless Society” .....	115
From Cooking Oil to Cosmopolitan Culture: All Arts under the Same Roof .....	124
The Sound of FAC .....	126



Fuerza Habana: Music and Social Responsibility .....	131
Cultural Entrepreneurship .....	139
The Sociocapitalist Musician.....	139
The Role of Music Agencies.....	143
Collaborations and Cultural Production .....	147
Home Recording Studios .....	149
“Tunturuntu pa’tu Casa”: Pulling the Iron Curtain Open .....	153
Conclusion.....	160
<b>Chapter 3: Cuban London .....</b>	<b>163</b>
From Latin to Cuban: The Formation of a Cuban Music Scene in London.....	166
Cuban and Londoner .....	178
“Mira Me... from Havana to London” .....	184
The Cuban Dance Industry.....	192
Conclusion.....	206
<b>Chapter 4: “Our Ancestors Live On through Us”: London’s Cuban Sound.....</b>	<b>208</b>
A Brief History.....	208
Cuban Dance Music .....	211
Fusion in Inclusion .....	215
Rumbeando in London .....	220
Conclusion.....	229
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>231</b>
The 2020s .....	237
Further Research .....	244
<b>Appendix 1: List of Artists.....</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>Interviews by Author .....</b>	<b>325</b>

## List of Images

<b>Figure 1:</b> Gran Hotel and Shopping Gallery Manzana Kempinski and Hotel Paseo del Prado	..... p. 65
<b>Figure 2:</b> The Neighbourhood of <i>Centro Habana</i>	..... p. 66
<b>Figure 3:</b> <i>Solar</i> in Central Havana	..... p. 73
<b>Figure 4:</b> MTV Recording “De la Calle, Rooftop, Guampara Music	..... p. 92
<b>Figure 5:</b> Rubén Bulnes, Adonis Panter Calderon, Alain Pérez, Church Studio, Old Havana	..... p. 95
<b>Figure 6:</b> Fábrica de Arte Cubano	..... p. 124
<b>Figure 7:</b> FAC Relief Work during 2019 Tornado	..... p. 135
<b>Figure 8:</b> El Micha, His Wife and Team Handing Out Supplies in Regla	..... p. 136
<b>Figure 9:</b> Line-up of Events at Tunturuntu pa’tu Casa Festival	..... p. 157
<b>Figure 10:</b> Bar Floridita, London	..... p. 171
<b>Figure 11:</b> The Cuban Jam at The Forge	..... p.174
<b>Figure 12:</b> Salsero Melvyn Burns at The Cuban Jam, The Forge in Camden Town	..... p. 192

## INTRODUCTION

“Havana is only 90 miles from Florida, but to get here we had to travel a great distance - over barriers of history and ideology; barriers of pain and separation... Like so many people in both of our countries, my lifetime has spanned a time of isolation between us...

In a world that remade itself time and again, one constant was the conflict between the United States and Cuba... I have come here to bury the last remnant of the Cold War in the

Americas. I have come here to extend the hand of friendship to the Cuban people...

Because in many ways, the United States and Cuba are like two brothers who've been estranged for many years, even as we share the same blood.”

(Excerpt from Barack Obama's speech, Cuba, Gran Teatro de la Habana, 2016)<sup>1</sup>

United States (US) President Barak Obama's policies towards re-establishing relations with Cuba started from the first year of his presidency when in 2009 he allowed Cuban Americans to visit families on the island as often and for as long as they like. As a result, flights between Miami and Havana rapidly increased and reached about 50 per week in December of the same year (Peters 2010). In December 2014 both President Obama and President Raul Castro simultaneously announced a new course in relations between the US and Cuba.<sup>2</sup> In May 2015 President Obama rescinded Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism in May 2015. In July of the same year, he re-established official diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba, which had been severed in January 1961 by the Eisenhower administration, with embassies re-opening respectively in Havana and Washington, and he

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<sup>1</sup>Full transcription of the speech is available by The White House (2016) at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/22/remarks-president-obama-people-cuba> [retrieved Nov. 2021] and a live recording is available by C-Span on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEw3H0C-Lj8> [retrieved Sept. 2022]

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed timeline of actions taken by the administration of President Obama, please visit the White House archives on <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/cuba?fbclid=IwAR002YkWqiVRH8j2stjRBQQww9jvDXYtrrdBID7ltGtYvNuTIWTKF8SwDO4>

further took steps to increase travel, commerce, and the flow of information to Cuba (CSR 2021: 22 – 23). Obama was the first US president to visit the island in nearly a century in 2016, when taking the words of Cuba’s national figure, the poet José Martí, he offered a white rose to the Cuban people as an offering of peace.

Cubans began to feel the winds of change were coming swift and strong. This was a different change compared to the one which had been anticipated many a time before, starting with the 1961 Bay of Pigs failed invasion,<sup>3</sup> the 638 assassination attempts on Fidel Castro’s life,<sup>4</sup> years of covert operations by the US and decades of punitive economic sanctions following the US embargo on Cuba<sup>5</sup> described by Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson in 2015 as “harsher than on any other country in the world” (Pérez 2016). These measures and interventions were meant to end the island’s revolutionary regime and overthrow Castro’s government by deepening the discontent of Cubans through economic privation and marginalisation. Cuba’s revolutionary leader Fidel Castro died on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016, only a few months after President Obama’s visit to the island, and the presidency of the Castro family ended with the appointment of President Miguel Díaz-Canel in April 2018, yet the political framework established by Castro’s regime remains (Sweig 2013; Augustin 2018). Nevertheless, the openness which resulted from Obama’s policy of “engagement”, which intended to empower the Cuban people themselves to act as “agents of change” (*ibid.*) pulled

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<sup>3</sup> On 17<sup>th</sup> April 1961 1,400 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-trained Cuban exiles launched what became a failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs (province of Matanzas) on the south coast of Cuba (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum). For further information on the Bay of Pigs invasion see Jim Rasenberg (2011), James G. Blight and Peter Kornbluh (1997), Peter Wyden (1980), and Irving Janis (1972).

<sup>4</sup> For further information on assassination attempts see documentary *638 Ways to Kill Castro* (2006) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-vhPL\\_Pmg0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-vhPL_Pmg0).

<sup>5</sup> The US first imposed an economic embargo on Cuba in 1958 banning the sale of arms to the island, which at the time was under the regime of Fulgencio Batista. In 1960 after the deposition of the Batista regime by the Cuban revolution, the US government extended the ban to all exports to Cuba except for food and medicine. Subsequently, the embargo was made comprehensive under the administration of John F. Kennedy in 1962, banning all US businesses from trading with Cuba (for more details on the embargo visit State Department on <https://www.state.gov/cuba-sanctions/>).

the iron curtain open for travel to and from the island and gave rise to internet access and the use of social media, permeating Cuba's physical and cultural borders.

My first visit to Havana was during April and May 2015 with the objective to get an initial understanding of the city's music scene and start building relationships with artists from various genres some of which I had approached on social media. I visited key public and private music venues, introduced myself to musicians performing different genres, and visited UNEAC (The Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) where I met with Lázaro Castillo (Adviser to UNEAC's President Miguel Barnet) due to my interest in Afro-Cuban culture and music.<sup>6</sup> The impression I got from my meetings and trip was that Cuba's future was already "in the air" and "could be felt everywhere", especially in the spirits and attitudes of Cubans. They were visiting the new private bars and clubs in Havana, and the hotels previously reserved only for tourists or a very small proportion of the country's elite. The average *habanero* (resident of Havana) was thinking about and financially planning for a holiday. Some were hoping for few days in the sea-side resort of Varadero with their partner or family while others researched trips abroad. Musicians were speaking about foreign tours and festivals as the new points on their agenda. Increasing number of foreign bands and celebrities were beginning to visit Havana. Social dance teachers were frequenting the famous music houses with large groups of international students from Japan and India to the US Rapper Milton McDonald who was imprisoned in 2014 for the consumption of marijuana, told me that when he was out of prison for an annual time-out in November 2015, he could not recognise his own city. Smartphones had arrived in Havana on a massive scale for the first time. Gyms had opened across the city

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<sup>6</sup> Miguel Barnet is a writer, novelist and ethnographer recognised as an expert on Afro-Cuban culture (González Echevarría 2022). He studies sociology at the University of Havana under Fernando Ortiz (an ethnomusicologist, anthologist, essayist, and scholar of Afro-Cuban culture who formulated the term "transculturation" – the notion of converging cultures). Barnet is best known for his book *Biografía de Un Cimarrón* (Biography of a Runaway Enslaved Person, 1966). *Cimarrons* were African enslaved people who had escaped captivity and lived together as maroons. Barnet's style of testimonials became a standard for ethnography in Latin America (*ibid.*).

copying international trends and the girls from the barrio were looking at international fashion to change their own styles. There was confidence that the new economic opportunities resulting from President Obama's policies on Cuba marked a new era for the country, taking it out of isolation and bringing it closer to the globalised world. There was an overwhelming feeling of hope and even the ruined houses and streets filled with potholes seemed less ominous in the sun and optimism of this new Havana. As the historian Louis Pérez Jr. (2015) observed that the "Special Period"<sup>7</sup> was a rare profound change in the history of Cuba, demarcating and defining the life of a generation, leaving a before and an after, so I felt the impact of Obama's policies would lead to its own before and after.

I shared in the sentiment that there were significant changes happening on the island. My own experience of the trip supported this feeling. I did not resort to using the toilet roll which I had stuffed in my suitcase having been told about the lack of basic goods by friends who had visited Cuba before. I had been warned about the challenges that foreign visitors face in Havana – from the hasslers to the cockroaches and the lack of food and sanitary products. By contrast, I experienced none of it in the room I rented in Vedado (besides the occasional cockroach scare, which is still ever-present in my life in the city). There were always sufficient food and toiletries available. I visited modern bars and clubs which resembled European and US establishments in their interior and while there were the few hasslers, the venues were frequented by well-dressed Cubans who attended for their weekend entertainment and paid their own bills which were much higher than what I could afford as a student. Musicians were equipped with newer iPhone models than my own and earned an income as full-time

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<sup>7</sup> "The Special Period" was an extended period of economic crisis in Cuba, which started in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Comecon (The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance founded in 1949 by the Soviet Union, comprised the countries of the Eastern Bloc and a number of socialist states around the world), and ended in 2000 (Brooks 2019). The collapse of the U.S.S.R. meant the end of subsidies to Cuba, which included fuel, food, machinery, and various investments. Cuba had had 72% of its trade with and imported up to 98 per cent of the oil it needed from the U.S.S.R. (*ibid.*). This drove the Caribbean island into severe economic crisis, especially in the first half of the decade of the 1990s, which was the most impactful event the country has faced since the 1959 Revolution.

performers which allowed them to sustain a comfortable lifestyle in Havana. We exchanged emails as there was now access to the internet via Wi-Fi locations. While it was expensive and slow, it was a ground-breaking new form of connection to what was happening beyond the borders of the island, which gave Cubans a new sense of belonging to the rest of the world.

While sharing in the music scene and life of Havana, I could not help but compare it to my own background. I was born in the former Soviet Union and grew up in Bulgaria, having lived through the collapse of the Soviet bloc and Soviet-style communism in Eastern Europe. Such dramatic socio-political changes happen once in a lifetime and they always invoke emotions, positive and negative. I remembered both the alleviated spirits about a new future and the nostalgia about the past that Bulgarians held immediately in the post-1989 years. I felt the same mixed sensations of anticipation and anxiety on the streets of Havana. The enthusiasm about new business opportunities, the possibility of international travel, the inflow of tourists, the ability to visit the same places as foreigners, juxtaposed with the fear of the unknown, of losing the security provided by the state and the identity which gives Cubans such strong sense of belonging, roots, and national pride. Cuba felt like a relic from a past long forgotten, it was the last stronghold behind an iron curtain hanging by a thread that was now being torn open. It was these mixed sensations and emotions, the uncertainty which times of change bring, that drove me to undertake my study.

Listening to people's stories and enthusiasm about the innovations that were happening in Cuba, I had the sense that these were among the most significant changes the island had experienced since its 1959 Revolution, which in turn necessitated a new study into their impact on and relationship to Havana's music scene (Pérez Cassola int.). Scholarship on Cuban music may be divided into three distinctive periods: the first is the pre-1959 period (e.g. Moore 1997; Robinson 2004; Sublette 2004; Garcia 2006; Madrid and Moore 2013); the second is the period from the 1959 Revolution until the fall of the Soviet Union (e.g. Kirk and Padura Fuentes 2001;

Moore 2003, 2006; Quevedo 2018, 2019, 2021; Bustamante 2019); and the third is the post-Soviet Special Period (e.g. Perna 2005; Fernandes 2006; Hernández-Reguant 2009; Baker 2011a; Perry 2015; Bodenheimer 2015). If there were something like “ethnomusicological laws for the thermodynamics of musical change”, one would surely state that when cultural, social, political, or economic systems change, then some aspects of musical practices, styles, scenes, and industries undergo alterations as well (Rice 2002: 25). My argument is that the post-2010 Obama period has seen precisely such transformations, and that they are sufficiently profound that Cuban music – and its associated scholarship – may be considered to have entered a new phase.

For example, a key topic of research on Cuban music during the three main periods has been race and the country’s relationship with its African heritage. Following the fall of the regime of President Fulgencio Batista, the early years of the Revolution were characterised by religious censorship, including of Cuba’s Afro-Cuban Santería religion (Gil 2015).<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, there was a change in policy and Afro-Cuban folklore, its culture, and music, were heavily promoted as the “most authentic manifestation of traditional popular culture, as opposed to the ‘official’ culture” in the context of Cuba’s 1959 Revolution (Schweitz 2013: 13). They were viewed as the “genuine creation” of the masses, and as a toll for people in struggle against “cultural penetration by foreign-inspired national oligarchies serving imperial interests.” This affinity to Afro-Cuban culture became even more prominent when President Fidel Castro himself became practitioner of the Santería religion, while racism persevered within society (Gil 2015). The decade of the 1990s and the Special Period were also marked

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<sup>8</sup> Santería (also known as Regla de Ocha) emerged in repose to the prohibitions of enslaved persons to practice their native African religions (Aróstegui 2014: 29). As an Afro-Cuban syncretic animist religion created in Cuba by the fusion of West African Yoruba traditions and Roman Catholic saints (BBC 2009). It entails a worship of the Orishas (anthropomorphic deities), the perceivable forms of the spirits sent by the supreme creator Olodumare at the dawn of time and tasked to guide human beings throughout life. Afro-Cuban enslaved people circumvented Catholicism, the new religion imposed upon them, by substituting the names of their Orishas with those of Catholic saints giving the appearance of having assimilated Catholicism (Gil 2015).



by the “persistence of racial prejudice and discrimination” (De La Fuente 2008: 697) and by “paradoxical developments” in relations to race in Cuba (Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 2000: 6). While Afro-Cuban culture was celebrated, racial divides increased because of the economic restructuring process. The primarily Hispano-Cuban tourism and foreign exchange sector and dollar remittances from the predominantly white Hispano-Cuban American community stood in contrast to the second economy that accompanied the downsizing of the manufacturing and public sectors where many Afro-Cubans had been employed. This was accompanied by a bolstering of Hispano-Cuban historical and cultural hegemony and a commercialisation of Afro-Cuban folklore for the tourist market (*ibid.* 7). However, as a result of the socio-economic changes which have been impacting the island since the early 2010s, new factors (such as socio-economic class and new technologies) have been shaping the island’s music scene, in some ways displacing the prominence of race, marking the beginning of a new fourth period of scholarship on Cuban music.

Another characteristic of Cuban music scholarship during the three main periods has been about genre. For instance, researchers have focused on studying the emergence, evolution, and development of specific genres such as timba (e.g., Perna 2005), Afro-Cuban music (e.g., Daniel 1995; Schweitzer 2013; Bodenheimer 2015), jazz (e.g., Acosta 2003; Washburne 2012; Blumenfeld 2017), urban music (e.g., Baker 2011a; Perry 2016; Zamora Montes 2017a; Hernández Bager and Junco Duffay 2017) or *música alternativa* (e.g., Borges-Triana 2015a, 2017). As the purpose of my research is to analyse the impact of the contextual socio-economic changes taking place between 2010 and 2022 on the music scene, profession, industry, and the places of performance and recording of music in Havana, I study a broader spectre of genres (e.g., jazz, rap, folklore, timba, and different fusions). By tying my project to the particular historical period, I apply the same genre non-specific approach to the analysis of London’s Cuban music scene and its relationship to Havana.

A key study on Cuban music in this new period of scholarship since 2010, has been Timothy Storhoff's work on the changing US – Cuba relationship during the Obama era as reflected through the Havana Jazz Plaza Festival (2020a) and the role of musical diplomacy as a means of normalising US – Cuban relations (2020b). In the former, Storhoff studies how after President Obama's 2009 inauguration and change of US policy towards Cuba from one of isolation to one of engagement and the subsequent ease on travel restrictions, US artists increasingly began performing at music festivals in Cuba. Such events fostered a liminal atmosphere in which the normalisation of US – Cuban had seemingly already happened but also had yet to occur (Storhoff 2020a: 70). In the latter, the author notes how Obama's administration represented a game changer as US rules for visiting the island relaxed, internet access in Cuba improved, and Washington began a full "normalization" drive. He sets the election year of 2009 as the date for what he sees as "a new beginning" for US – Cuban relations (Storhoff 2020b: 30). Not undertaking a genre-specific approach, Storhoff sees the festivals and performance of artists from both sides of the Florida straits as the sounds of this new relationship – whether it is Arturo O'Farrill's jazz, the reggaetón of Jacob Forever or the timba of Los Van Van (for details see p.270). Simultaneously, the author acknowledges the asymmetries that remain a part of Obama-era policies such as fact that it is easier for US performers and fans to visit Cuba than for Cubans to visit the United States.

Beyond Storhoff's research, there have been publications on the changing economic environment of the country (see Mesa-Lago and Pérez-Lopez 2022; Espina and Echevarria 2015; Pérez Villanueva and Torres Pérez 2013) as well as journalistic publications on Havana's new social scene and private music venues (Cooke 2014, 2015, 2016). Written in the form of *crónica*, a genre popular across Latin America which blends reportage, narrative non-fiction and novelistic forms, "The Tribe" by Carlos Manuel Álvarez (2022) focuses on the same new period in Cuban history, from the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the US, to the

death of Fidel Castro and the activities of the San Isidro Movement.<sup>9</sup> There has been no research to date, however, examining the relationship between the new sounds, places, spaces, and the socioeconomics of Havana resulting from the new internal and external policies since the inauguration ceremony of President Obama in 2009. While studies of the new period focus on the new US – Cuba musical connections, there is little historical and current research studying the other emergent cultural connections and scenes such as that of London. In this context, my research aims to contribute innovative aspects to the field of study of music in Cuba and in the diaspora by examining and analysing previously unstudied themes and geographies.

Ethnomusicological theories of change do not predict (Rice 2002: 25); however, we can examine whether existing musical forms diminish or rise in impact, or whether new forms of musical or industry practices will be required to meet the new needs of the transforming society. The end of the Soviet-run system in Bulgaria in 1989 led to the fusion of popular, modern, traditional, and ethnic elements to serve the need of a society in transition (*ibid.* 26). Beyond the roles it played in the new political and economic era, this new music participated in a reconsideration of the nature of Bulgarian national identity looking to establish itself in a world much bigger and more versatile than the one it previously belonged to. Thinking about the relationship between political, socio-economic change and music, it then became my inspiration to understand how the post-2010 socio-economic changes affected Havana's music scene, industry, profession, and the places and spaces of music, and how these changes crossed borders to infuse the formation of a Cuban cultural scenes overseas, and most specifically in

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<sup>9</sup> The San Isidro Movement was founded in 2018 by a group of Cuban artists, journalists, and academics as a reaction to Decree 349 (available to view at [https://www.ministeriodecultura.gob.cu/images/jdownloads/pol%C3%ADticas\\_p%C3%BAblicas/marco\\_normativo/decreto349.pdf](https://www.ministeriodecultura.gob.cu/images/jdownloads/pol%C3%ADticas_p%C3%BAblicas/marco_normativo/decreto349.pdf)), which required artistic activity in Cuba to be authorised in advance by the Cuban Ministry of Culture. The group took the name of the area of Havana where it was founded and has since held several protests. Notable members include rapper Denis Solís and performance artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara (for more details see (for more details visit [www.movimientosanisidro.com](http://www.movimientosanisidro.com))).

London, which traditionally have not been associated with either the Cuban diaspora abroad or as a Cuban music scene location.<sup>10</sup>

## **Brief History of Change**

There are four major sets of socio-economic, legislative, and technological changes, which have taken place in Cuba since the early 2010s, leading to the restructuring of Havana's music scene, deepening its entrepreneurialism, digitalisation, and internationalisation. The first is the introduction of private property ownership and self-employment; the second is significant increase in travel from and to the island; the third is the launch and growth of internet access; and finally, the most recent, driven by the impact of the Covid19 pandemic.

### ***1. SocCap201***

As a sunny Caribbean island, Cuba had flourished as a tourist destination in the pre-revolutionary era. This, however, was accompanied with social distortions such as gambling, prostitution, and money laundering (Guriérrez Castillo and Cancedo Gazpar 2002; Franta 2013). Following the 1959 Revolution and the nationalisation of property, tourism practically disappeared from the island (Schreiner 2008). The US embargo on trade banished American citizens from visiting the island while Cuba's strategy for economic and social development did not consider tourist activity as pivotal to the future of the country. This resulted in limited building activities connected to the tourist industry. It was not until the 1990s that Cuba began

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<sup>10</sup> I take the date 2010 instead of the inauguration date of 2009 as the impact of changes is rarely felt overnight and timelines are often loose ended. I also use the terms Obama era and post-2010 interchangeably to mean the same historical period to which my study is tied. I further use the term "Obama era" as a general reference encompassing the post-2010 period, which has been characterised by the outlined changes in policy by the US towards Cuba, as well as the undergoing socio-economic changes in Cuba. While Obama left office in 2017, the impact of the changes introduced during his Presidency continued, hence, I use the term as a general concept to over the entire period of my study until 2022. Authors such as Timothy Storhoff use the term similarly in his study of the importance of music festivals and US - Cuban musical diplomacy (2020a; 2020b).

to adopt tourism as one of the “basic pillars in the definition of its economic strategy”, which gave new impetus to restoration and construction projects across the capital (Guriérrez Castillo and Cancedo Gazpar 2002).

The most significant event following 1959 which impacted Cuba socially and economically was in the early 1990s. It followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and its subsidies to the country, driving it into, what Fidel Castro called a “Special Period in Times of Peace” (*el Periodo Especial*). The Special Period was characterised by economic privation and the legalisation of the private possession of dollars which made the island seem more accessible to foreign consumers. In an attempt to mitigate the shocks caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba searched for an economic transformation that was less dependent on its exports of sugar cane, and more reliant on a sector with higher structural competitiveness, based on the island’s existing social and cultural resources. This new paradigm entailed the blending of socialism and capitalism and was based on a tourist-driven economy, joint ventures with foreign companies for the construction of infrastructure, catering for foreigners and a small Cuban elite, and limited private enterprise. In 1993, Law 141 allowed self-employment in several areas of services. This was the first time that Cuba began to court the capitalist world since 1959 and the first period of transformation and transition on the island from a Soviet socialist to a “sociocapitalist” economic model (Whitfield 2008; Baker 2011a: 164).

These government policies, however, were not to be understood as a conscious decision by the state to transit to a capitalist economic model (Bloodworth 2015). As the Secretary of the Cuban Council of Ministers declared in 1995 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, “the disappearance of the socialist bloc and the U.S.S.R., along with the strengthening of the US economic blockade... abruptly threw Cuba into the most complex moment in its [socialist] history.... The steps that we have been taking for the sake of the country’s economic recovery are part of an integral concept and not the result of isolated measures.... We’re not trying to

fool anyone. We are not offering our foreign partners a transition to capitalism. Cuba is and will continue to be a socialist country...” (cited in Scarpaci, 2005: 194). This shift to a more capitalist economic model was driven out of necessity and developed in the process.

By the end of 2010 Cuba became a producer of services. Its economy no longer relied as much on “agricultural or industrial products, but rather on a wide range of professional services including medical care, tourism, music, and art” (Cuban Research Institute FIU 2011: 14). Cuba found “ways to ‘sell’ many of these services under the aegis of international cooperation and solidarity or through barter... [for instance] oil in exchange for services”. It was also the first time that Cuba tried to “normalise” relations with its diaspora and to “reclaim [its] emigrant population” (*ibid.* 26). By the end of the decade Cuba had formed alliances with China and Venezuela, which lent greater stability to its economy and political establishment, reducing the isolationism, which had characterised the island since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. It had engaged economic globalisation on its own terms (Catá Backer 2013: 287; Brundenius and Torres Pérez 2014). Borrowing from university economics curriculum terminology, I conceptualise these policies as *Introduction to Sociocapitalism (SocCap101)*, articulating the initial steps a country takes in a transition from a highly centralised to a semi-state-run economic model, including the commodification of cultural resources.

The subsequent strategies implemented by the government entailed greater break-away from the state-run economic model of the post-1959 period and deeper monetisation of Cuban culture and heritage. In addition to the relaxation of restrictions on travel, beginning in 2011, the government of Raúl Castro “embarked upon the most profound economic restructuring” since the 1959 Revolution (LeoGrande 2017a: 235). Called the “update” (*actualización*) of the economy, it involved a transition from the “hyper-centralised model of socialist planning” that Cuba adopted from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, to a “Cuban version of market socialism” modelled roughly on the transitions experienced by Vietnam and China. It introduced new

economic policies, including expansion of the private sector through small businesses and legalisation of the purchase and sale of properties for the first time since 1959 (Nolen 2017). Some argued that these reforms marked “the start of a slow but irreversible dismantling” of Cuba’s political-economic system (Reid 2012).

The non-state sector of the Cuban economy has increased substantially since the update, and it is estimated that over half a million Cubans were self-employed as of 2017 (Mesa-Lago 2017) and over 600,000 in 2019 (On Cuba News 2019).<sup>11</sup> These new entrepreneurs have been engaged in activities from running clubs, bars, and restaurants, to beauty and hair salons, to locksmiths, construction, tattoo parlours and others (Nolen 2017). Engaging in these new occupations, millennials have been seen to be pushing Cuba forward (Coldwell 2016). The number of registered self-employed professionals on the island rose to 600,000 in early 2021 when the Cuban government increased the list of permitted trades to practice in the private sector from 127 to 2,100 (Fole 2021). This next stage in the transformation of the semi-state-run economic model, entailing the incorporation of key liberal economic principles such as private property ownership and entrepreneurship, would be what I term as *Intermediate Sociocapitalism (SocCap201)*: Cuba’s further endorsement of a capitalist economic model.

Both periods have been characterised by a swift and steady increase of the black-market economy in Cuba, which boomed during the Special Period, continued to grow in the post-2010 era, and is now considered to be multiple times the volume of the official economy. While there are no official statistics due to its illicit nature, the black market is regarded as “a web without proportion” and “the entire population operates in it to different degrees, from the homeless man on the street, right up to highest officials of the Communist government” (Corbett 2004: 101). The black market is not viewed as “a matter of choice for Cubans” but as

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<sup>11</sup> There are no published international statistics on self-employment in Cuba. The latest Statistics by the World Bank were published in 2011 showing an increase from 16% to almost 23% from 2010 to 2011 (World Bank 2017).

“a matter of survival”. This dependency further increased since early 2021 when shopping for food (for example, cooking oil, eggs, powdered milk, and meat), medicine and basic goods became predominantly an activity of the informal economy (Mesa-Lago 2021), driving an inflation of 6,900 % over the course of the year (EFE 2021), and a continuous upward curve during 2022.<sup>12</sup> As such, the black market also underpins various economic relations within the cultural sector. Such activities include cash payments for various services: performances, especially in private venues; participation in album recordings; any payments to musicians who do not belong to music agencies; renting rehearsal spaces; and for recording and video production. Other activities include cash sales of CDs outside night clubs, concert venues, on the streets and in garages across Havana, and cash sales of musical instruments and equipment.

## ***2. Travel***

Though the diplomatic climate between the US and Cuba continues to suggest uncertainty for the foreseeable future, the ripple effects of the possibility of a thawed relationship went beyond the two countries with an unexpected surge in international travellers looking to experience Cuba before it was opened to US travellers (Morris 2017). This represented a significant group of investments that could generate hard currency, which formed part of the national economic growth agenda. In addition to its picturesque nature, Cuba has to offer historical and cultural patrimony, which transformed the island into a popular tourist destination. Under the slogan of “Visit Cuba, Before It Changes!” and drawn by nostalgic representations of “Cuba’s charming time warp” atmosphere, tourists from around the world poured to Cuba (Pérez Jr. 2016; Moss 2016). As Havana became fashionable – “La Habana

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<sup>12</sup> Having run a double currency system – the CUC (Cuban Convertible Peso) and the CUP (Cuban Peso, also known as Moneda Nacional – the National Currency) – the CUC was abolished in January 2021. This made it almost impossible to buy food and medicine with the CUP, which developed a disproportionately large black market with continuously increasing prices (Mesa-Lago 2021; EFE 2021). Inflation has further multiplied following the onset of the Russia – Ukraine war due to diminishing imports of fuel and goods. This led to further shortages, power cuts and a non-functional public transportation system (Franc 2022).



está de moda,” in the words of timba band Azúcar Negra<sup>13</sup> (for details see p.25e) – visitors flooded the island, leading to significant increase not only in traditional tourism, but in activity-based music, dance, and cultural holidays, bringing new cultural connections and forms of internationalisation to Cuba.

International celebrities such as Will Smith, Madonna, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Usher began visiting the island, sharing positive feedback, and encouraging travellers to seek Cuba for its energy, music, and culture (Marr 2019). *Fast and Furious* chose the streets of Havana as a partial set for its eighth sequel film (released in 2017). In 2016 British rock band The Rolling Stones, which music was previously deemed and “ideological deviation”, gave their first concert in the country the same week of the visit of President Obama (Bliss 2016).<sup>14</sup> The band which had “rocked everywhere” finally arrived to the “one place” they had not rocked before (Havana Moon 2016). The Scorpions started planning a visit to the island during the same year (Juana 2016).<sup>15</sup> The first ever international music market on Cuban ground called *Primera Linea* (First Line), which is part of the WOMEX World Tour, was organised the same year (Bräuer 2017). The Havana Jazz Plaza Festival was added to the itinerary of US holidaymakers. The easing of restrictions by President Obama also made possible the 2017 International Jazz Day (presented by UNESCO and the Washington, D.C.-based Thelonious Monk Institute), which was held for the first time ever in Cuba (Newman 2017). Diaspora jazz

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<sup>13</sup> The song “La Habana Está De Fiesta” by Azúcar Negra is available on [https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR2hsAzf2YOTf41qa8CxrCGpjaeOkXvhF1sV7J9Od\\_edhHczRb0Xsl60p14&v=5FEGVYPe\\_8M&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR2hsAzf2YOTf41qa8CxrCGpjaeOkXvhF1sV7J9Od_edhHczRb0Xsl60p14&v=5FEGVYPe_8M&feature=youtu.be) [retrieved Sep. 2019].

<sup>14</sup> The Rolling Stones gave a free open-air concert at Ciudad Deportiva (a massive sports complex) in Havana, becoming the first British rock group to perform on the island. There was an estimated audience of over 500,000 Cubans (by modest estimates, some argue there were over one million visitors), making it the largest rock concert to-date in the country, breaking the record of Zuccherio Fornaciari who performed in front of a crowd of nearly 70,000 visitors in 2012 (Bliss 2016). The event was captured and made into a film called “Havana Moon” (directed by Paul Dugdale), which shows how music can act as a tool of social improvement (trailer available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hE-FYOt0jmo>).

<sup>15</sup> The Scorpions are a hard rock and heavy metal German band, founded in 1965. Their song “Wind of Change”, released in 1991, was written about the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The song became “an anthem for German unification” and “the soundtrack of the fall of the Iron Curtain, a hymn for peaceful revolution” (DW 2011). Song available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4RjJKxsamQ>

musicians which participated in the festival such as Gonzalo Rubalcaba had already been performing in Cuba for some time (Borges-Triana int.). However, the political openness of the Obama era brought musical and cultural internationalisation to Havana which gave new impetus to its jazz scene with international musicians returning to play on the island for the first time for over half a century. Quincy Jones shared this was his first time in Cuba since 1952 when he was an 18-year-old upstart in Lionel Hampton's band and dated Cuban singer La Lupe. The Cuban government issued no restrictions on which artists should be invited, including musicians that had defected, transforming Havana into an international musical and cultural centre (Newman 2017).

During the same period as President Obama's policies were bringing international attention to the island and raising significant hopes about the anticipated growth of Havana's cultural scene, the Cuban government removed restrictions on travel, making it easier for Cubans to travel abroad (Nolen 2017). Exit permits were removed and Cubans could now stay abroad up to 24 months, as opposed to the earlier 11 months, without having to return to Cuba to renew paperwork (BBC 2012). This was a major change to the lifestyle of Cubans (Borges-Triana int.). A larger proportion of musicians began to travel abroad with a greater ease and frequency than ever before. The participation of Cuban artists in international events and international tours for popular bands increased rapidly in the second decade of the new millennia. This easing of travel restrictions also saw the return of prominent Cuban musicians such as Alain Pérez and Luis Barbería (both former Habana Abierta members) back to the island while other artists found it much easier to visit for inspiration or to record their new projects in Cuba (Hernández 2015). Cuban musicians began to experience more transnational careers than they have had over the past sixty years.

### 3. *Digitalisation*

The third sector beyond economic policies and travel which has been transforming Havana's music scene during the same period has been technology, a major factor affecting the country on its path to change. Cuba's first official internet site was launched in 1995 through a Canadian server; but it was in 1997 that the country opened its own gateway through the newly established National Centre for Automated Interchange of Information (CENIAI) and Cuba went online (Corbett 2004: 145). In the year 2000 only an estimated 36,000 Cubans had access to internet and the first cybercafé opened in Havana. By the mid-2000s CENIAI operated four internet providers and dozens of sites, but for most of the Cuban population internet technology was inaccessible. Lack of funding, tight government restrictions and the Torricelli Act introduced during the peak of the Special Period in 1992, which forbade foreign-based subsidiaries of US companies from trading with Cuba, travel to Cuba by US citizens, and family remittances to the island (Cuban Democracy Act), all contributed to the stagnation of internet access on the island in the years to follow its introduction.<sup>16</sup>

It was not until 2009 that Obama announced the US would allow American companies to provide internet services to Cuba and US regulations were modified to encourage communication links with the island. The Cuban government, however, rejected the offer and preferred to work with Venezuela. Built on dilapidated or almost non-existent telecommunications infrastructure, using old Russian satellites, internet in Cuba remained slow and prohibitively expensive until 2013. Shortly after introducing private property ownership to the country, the Cuban government also greatly expanded internet access with the completion of the undersea cable between the island and Venezuela (Grant 2015). Internet hotspots in public locations were also introduced in the country in 2015. ETECSA granted the artist Kcho approval to open the country's first wireless hub at his cultural centre (Matamoros 2019). As

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<sup>16</sup> Act is available at Congress <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/5323>

internet consumption grew in the country, mobile phones gained 3G connectivity for the first time in December 2018 and in July 2019 Cubans were allowed legally to import routers, register their equipment, and create private Wi-Fi networks connected to signals from state-owned operator ETECSA (*ibid.*). These two policies meant that Cubans no longer needed to go to public sites to connect to the internet.

In 2019 there were 1,400 Wi-Fi hotspots, nearly 80,000 households had internet access at home, and over 2,5 million Cubans had 3G networks. According to the Vice-minister of Communications, this move by the Cuban government was motivated by the desire to provide “wider and wider internet access to the entire population” and to “position the truth about Cuba, not to manipulate things” in its ideological battle with the US (*ibid.*). Aside from government agendas, the increase in internet access, especially since the introduction of mobile data with now 4.2 million Cubans surfing the internet on their smart phones, brought some of the characteristics of technological globalisation to Cuba. Mobile internet access made a major difference to the functioning of Cuban society; some claim it “revolutionised” the island (France24 2019).

#### **4. Covid19**

While I had completed most of my fieldwork within dance music and jazz when the pandemic started, a major part of my research on Havana’s hip-hop scene was still pending. The closure of Cuba and limitations on international travel delayed my visit to the island from the spring to the autumn of 2020 and subsequent arrangements on how to organise my research on hip-hop in a fruitful manner. As there were no live performances, I had to identify alternative ways to participate in Havana’s hip-hop scene. I was also very anxious to understand how the pandemic was impacting my earlier findings and if the changes of the Obama era were still

characterising Havana's music scene. As a result, I ended up working and living on the island during the pandemic, gauging a first-hand experience of its impact.

Cuba has been facing a new set of challenges in its processes of socio-economic change posed by the global Covid19 pandemic. With the closure of the country's borders in March 2020, there has been talk of a second Special Period resulting from the lack of import of goods and foreign currency. Its tourist-based economy shrunk by 11% in 2020 under the weight of the pandemic, in addition to harsher US sanctions introduced by the administration of President Donald Trump and a Soviet-style economic system at home (Acosta and Frank 2021). Hours-long shopping queues for basic goods such as food and toiletries filled the streets of Havana (Reuters 2021). Like the times of the Special Period, the black market began to flourish with extortionate prices, multiple of the official shop prices of the same goods. The new digital currency MLC (*Moneda Librementemente Convertible* – Freely Convertible Currency)<sup>17</sup> shops which first opened in Cuba at the end of October 2019 to offer home appliances, hardware, furniture, and electric transport vehicles proliferated significantly in numbers and began selling food, toiletries, alcohol, cigarettes, and clothing during 2020 and 2021 (Today in 24 2021).<sup>18</sup> As there is no official way to buy foreign currency in Cuba (besides when exiting the country at the airport), this created an active and disproportionate black market, primarily in Euro, British Pounds (as the US Dollar was banned once again from circulation in June 2021) and

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<sup>17</sup> MLC is a purely digital currency which replaced the former CUC and is circulated through bank transfers and card purchases. This currency is generated by direct payments of international hard currencies, such as the Euro and Pound Sterling, into Cuban bank accounts, or through international transfers (which are currently almost non-existent). The MLC currency system was introduced by the Cuban government to mitigate the shortage of hard currency earnings as a result of the collapse of the tourist industry during the pandemic.

<sup>18</sup> The MLC shops stock both local and international brands. Cuban cigarettes, tobacco and rum are now almost exclusively sold at MLC shops. They are sold on occasion at peso shops, where Cubans buy their monthly food allowance through the coupon system, or on the black market. MLC shops are not a new concept utilised by centrally planned economies strapped for hard currency. As a Bulgarian, I remember the *corecom* (*кореком*) hard-currency shops during the 1980s, which offered foreign goods such as technology, cosmetics, clothing, alcohol, cigarettes, and foods such as Toblerone chocolate bars, which made the shops popular amongst us children, especially closer to birthdays and the winter holidays. These shops remained inaccessible to most Bulgarians who had little or no access to hard currency, which was also officially illegal to buy. Beyond the *corecoms*, Czechoslovakian Tuzex, Polish Pewex and East German Intershops operated on the same principle (Zatlin 2007: 245). Such goods are now available in the Cuban MLC shops and Cuban children as just as excited to get a small pot of Nutella at the equivalent of almost GBP8 (9USD).

bank transfers of the MLC currency, with exchange rates multiple the official government rates. The polemic began reminding once again of the early 1990s.

Driven by the necessity to import goods, hard currency and foreign direct investments, the island began to dip more of its toes in the international streams of economic globalisation. Beyond the twenty-fold increase in sectors in which one can operate as self-employed, the Cuban government announced a portfolio of 503 projects with a value of \$12.7billion for investment in the country for the 2020 – 2021 period (CAN 2021). It also made a major policy turn where the Cuban government will no longer be required to be a majority shareholder in joint ventures in the tourism, biotechnology and the wholesale trade sectors (Cubatrade 2020).

Besides the size and openness of investment opportunities now introduced by the Cuban government for private sector initiatives both for Cuban and foreign nationals, the factor which differentiates the pandemic period most significantly to the Special Period of the 1990s is internet access. Beyond allowing citizens on the island to maintain connection with family and friends abroad, social media became the platform for black-market operations. Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram groups are the digital domains for the purchase and sale of basic products – from food and fuel to medicines, clothes, and milk for children – amidst the crippling shortages. This has been an irreversible change on the life of Cubans. Online stores which accept international payment methods were introduced for the first time and even MLC stores are now opening online purchase options. These platforms are nothing like what European and North American customers are accustomed to in terms of variety of products and quality of surface. Prices for local goods and delivery costs are higher than the UK and food deliveries in scrap packaging can take over two weeks; however, the option is a novelty to the island.

Internet access also impacted the experience and work paradigms of artists with music venues having been closed between March 2020 and November 2021. While the pandemic reduced physical tourism and cultural collaborations, it made the digital world even more

prominent to the work of musicians (pers. comm. Marín Maning, for biographical notes see p.277). Digital festivals were introduced for the first time for Cuban artists from all genres. Musicians focused on developing and maintaining a strong digital footprint, creating social media profiles, uploading their music on global digital platforms, and gaining the maximum virtual public. Having retained Havana's music scene alive throughout the pandemic and made possible international collaborations, digitalisation has become an even more impactful factor for the city's musicians and music industry.

### **Music in Havana in the Obama Era (2010 – 2022)**

Many Cubans I speak to argue that President Obama concerned himself too late with Cuba and if he had done a bigger push earlier in his presidential time even greater changes would have happened on the island (Hechavarria Sarret int., Junco Duffay int., Marín Maning int., Borges-Triana int.). Nevertheless, the legacy of his approach remains influential despite the re-introduction of even harsher policies by the administration of President Donald Trump (CSR 2021: 24 – 32). My research aims to understand the impact of the Obama era and the simultaneous socio-economic changes on Havana's music scene, by exploring the shifts taking place within three distinct areas. Firstly, I scrutinise the transformation of the physical and socio-cultural characteristics of the places and spaces of music in Havana. I explore the privatisation of public locations such as “the street” and the growing exclusivity of the new music and entertainment places versus traditional locations of communal belonging and inclusivity. Secondly, I examine the legal and socio-economic “grey area” within which musical entrepreneurs are navigating the duality of the revolutionary socio-political structures of the music industry (such as the state-run music agencies and venues) and the new capitalist ideals characterising Havana. Thirdly, as I think about the new ways in which Cuban culture

has been globalising since the 2010s, I document and study the formation of a Cuban cultural scene in London and music-making in the diaspora. As a musician and dancer of Cuban genres in London, I realised there is a scene which has been growing, characterised by the production and consumption of specific sounds, and which has increased interactions with Cuba. While Cuba's relationship to other international scenes such as the broader Caribbean (e.g., Madrid & Moore 2013), Spain (e.g., Thomas 2005, 2012; Sánchez Fuarros 2012) and the US (e.g., Behar 1995; Acosta 2003; Garcia 2006; Borges-Triana 2013) had been documented and studies, London's Cuban diaspora and cultural scene had not been researched, which prompted me to undertake the study of it.

### ***1. Redefining Place–Space***

Exploring the relationship between place and music is not new to academic research on Cuba in general and Havana more specifically. Susan Thomas (2010) studies how Cuban singer-songwriters have composed a worldview that has come to represent Cuba and Cubanness internationally, where Havana figures centrally, serving as a site, both real and metaphoric, for the construction of this identity. The song repertoire produced by musicians who were born in the years following the Revolution is characterised by an “almost obsessive focus on the city, regardless of whether their careers developed on or off the island”. These songs were grounded in “the physical, taking listeners down specific streets, traversing particular neighbourhoods, sitting on curbs and park benches, and visiting local landmarks”. Collectively, these songs form “an aural map, with each retelling redrawing the city - and its meaning - for listeners”, creating a more diverse variety of Cuban identities associated with these places (*ibid.* 211 – 212).

Thomas Astley (2016: 65) views these “abundant references to place in Cuban music” as “symptomatic of the ‘obsession’ with constructing and defining a national identity.” The



author points out how “in the rhetoric of constructing and defining” Cubanness, which occupies such a central space in Cuban culture, place, identity, and music intertwine. “Musical genres, as well as the great musicians that play them, are not just found in ‘authentic places’ on the Cuban map; they are born there, even defined by geographical place.” Astley examines three case studies on the trialectic of music, place, and identity. The “rural remembrance” of the Buena Vista Social Club song “Chan Chan” and the “urban reclamation” of Habana Abierta’s “Arrollando Bien” both exhibit something of a “mutually beneficial ‘feedback loop’ of authentication in referencing specific places”. By referencing places, Cuban musicians propagate a notion of authentically Cuban places, and in so doing, they tie themselves to place, “garnering for themselves something of a legitimacy to speak of and/or to a Cuban sensibility, and the authenticity to claim for themselves the term Cuban musician”. By contrast, in the work “Vámonos pa G” of punk band Porno Para Ricardo, “a marginalised *bête noire* of the Cuban government making self-recorded CDs from a home studio in Havana... the collocation of place and identity, and the conception of place as the innate breeding ground of Cuban identity, is questioned” (*ibid.* 66). Though musically, culturally, and spatially isolated, there is “an archipelagic link among the three case studies..., namely the personification of place as a means to construct, reflect, and claim ownership over a sense of Cuban identity”. These songs not only map the geography of Cuba and its musical genres but also serve “to map the synecdoches of Cuban identity”, including race, class, gender, political affiliations, sexuality, weaving them into a fabric of what is considered an “authentic” Cuban archetype.

Drawing another connection between music, place, and identity, Bodenheimer (2015), who studies regional cultural divisions, argues that there is not a “unified notion of *cubanidad*”, because the different provinces in the country embody different meanings to what it means to be Cuban. Music and place are interconnected and “constitute each other and ... musical practices often inform the construction of local identities” across the island (*ibid.* 11). Internal

fragmentation has historically defined musical identities in Cuba. The author focuses regional discourses on the dialectic of race and place in Cuba, articulating the musical expressions through performance of the internal east – west divide. The *oriente* (east) has been regarded as predominantly black, local, and pure, while Havana and the *occidente* (west) are *mulato*, international and hybrid.

Focusing on Havana, Geoffrey Baker studies the relationship between urban music and alternative social spaces (2011a: 186 – 191). During the Special Period, Havana’s music venues became focused on tourists and a local elite, which made them less available to most *habaneros*. Adapting to the changes in the framework of music consumption, timba groups shifted their emphasis on performing for predominantly foreign audiences and economically successful Cubans. This transformed the consumption of music into a clear expression of the “new social divisions”. Live music became reduced to the city centre, and young people ended up socialising mostly on the Malecón (the sea-side esplanade). In this context, argues Baker, hip-hop provided “a precious opportunity for young *habaneros* of limited means to participate in a cultural and social scene” (186). Through some of the regular house parties which sprung across the city and the street jams organised at 19 y 10 in Vedado, “hip-hop transformed private spaces into cultural hotspots” (187). The more official venues were used to create “alternative social spaces, claiming and adapting these locations through ... music and associated practice... transforming public spaces into private”.

Connecting the above literature with my study, I analyse the streets and barrios of Havana as locations, which embody the spirit of Cubanness, thus, act as sites for the construction of the identity of Cubans. They authenticate the socio-cultural and spiritual experience of being Cuban, retaining certain ownership over Cuban identity. As music and place constitute each other, certain genres emerged from, embody the characteristics of or are performed in the streets and barrios of Havana. Music occupies public and private locations

through production, performance, and consumption, embodying them with different meaning for the participants. In this context, at times occurs a privatisation of public locations, altering their socio-spatial characteristics and values.

Building on this literature, my study aims to consider the impact of the Obama era and simultaneous socio-economic changes happening in the island on Havana's music scene between 2010 and 2022. I explore how social life is being altered because of its relocation to the private new venues of Havana. I further study the role of "the street" as a physical place and an abstract space in the life of Cubans in general and musicians more specifically, and the impact of its privatisation (from a communal inclusive space to a more exclusive location) on the idiosyncrasies of life in Havana. When thinking about place, I further explore how musical genres are flourishing or declining due to the socio-spatial transformation of Havana.

## ***2. In-between Worlds***

"Havana... is the nation's soul and beating heart. It is a complicated, contradictory place, a combination of capitalism, communism, Third World, First World and Other World, all at the same time. It is a ... wounded city."

(Dubinsky 2016: 148)

Fidel Castro embarked on what he termed as Process for the Rectification of Mistakes and Negative Tendencies, where he reinforced the nationalisation of the economy in the late 1980s (Mesa-Lago 1991: 498). Thus, after the collapse of what was known as the "Second World" formed by the U.S.S.R. and its allies, Cuba remained the last stronghold of an extinct Soviet reality in a world dominated by neoliberal capitalist ideals and policies. It no longer belonged to a political and economic bloc run by what was recognised as a global superpower, and it had no military and economic power to pursue its own international interests from a

position of strength. Despite the decriminalisation of the personal possession of dollars and increase in tourism as an economic growth pursuit, participation in cross-border communities did not increase with the globalisation of the Special Period and Cuba became even more isolated from imports which previously came from the Soviet bloc (Whitfield 2008: 15). Nevertheless, the growth in tourism drove changes in cultural policy, which made working as a musician or entertainer a lucrative and desirable occupation (Marín Maning int.). With the emergence and growth of the *jinetera*<sup>19</sup> culture, the music scene also became one of the most promising spaces for Cubans to meet tourists and gain possible access to much-needed hard currency (Fairley 2006: 472).

Propelled by the crisis, the expansion of tourism revived nightlife in Havana, benefiting particularly musicians from the Cuban dance music scene, and putting their music at the centre of the city's tourist stage (Perna 2005: 54). As the providers of entertainment for the "tourism-driven renaissance" of Havana, *timberos* "rose to an unprecedented level of mass popularity and economic power" (*ibid.* 54). The emergence and success of timba in the early and mid-1990s was due to its ability to negotiate between a series of opposite tensions. Musically, timba represented a convergence of the artistic aspirations of the 1980s with the economic opportunities of the 1990s, when musical innovators were able to exploit the fissures opened by the crisis, navigating between art music and barrio culture, the legal and the submerged economy. For many young habaneros, timba became both a subculture and a "practical means to gain access, via tourist dance clubs, to a world of sophistication and plenty" (*ibid.* 54 – 55).

This rethinking of the role of music was a novelty and one of the key changes which took place in Havana's cultural scene during the Special Period, argues Borges-Triana (int.). The journalist feels that before the early 1990s the Cuban government viewed music more as a

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<sup>19</sup> *Jinetero* (masculine) and *jinetera* (feminine) are terms, which emerged during the Special Period to describe a Cubans (male and female) living off foreigners (Hodge 2014: 443). Literally "riders", these individuals make their living by selling black-market items, making friends, and asking for "gifts", or by prostitution (Moore 2006: 289). *Jineterar* is the verb form for enacting these scams.

cultural initiative, ignoring the fact that it is also an industry driven by the basic rule of the market of demand and supply. It was the first time Cuban music was commodified. As a result, Bis Music came into existence as the second record label on the island (EGREM, which was founded in 1964 after the nationalisation of the Cuban music industry, had been the only one until then). Publisher ARTex was also founded in 1989, which permitted Cuban musicians to negotiate foreign tours and with foreign record labels directly (Moore 2006; Perna 2005). Until the Special Period, no Cuban musician could sign a contract with an international label. If it were not for these changes of the Special Period, phenomena such as the Buena Vista Social Club (BVSC, for details see p.254) would have not been possible. The cross-border project produced by the UK label World Circuit was not permitted by the legal framework in Cuba before the Special Period (Borges-Triana int.). Most timba during the period was also produced by non-Cuban labels such as Magic Music and Caribe Productions, which started operating on the island.

Structurally, the music industry retained the requirement that musicians need to belong to a music agency to be able to legally charge for services. The first state agencies for artistic representation in Havana were founded prior to the Special Period in the 1980s and included Beny Moré, Ignacio Piñero (1978), Adolfo Guzmán (1978), and Antonio María Romeu (founded in 1978 and enabled to represent artists internationally in 1993). Since the Special Period, the main additional agencies operating in Havana include the National Centre for Popular Music (Centro Nacional de Música Popular), Musicalia (1993), Agencia Clave Cubana de ARTex (1998), the genre specific Cuban Rap Agency (2002) and Cuban Rock Agency (2004), which both belong to the Cuban Music Institute. As of 2022, there are over ten agencies in Havana, which constitute the formal infrastructure of the city's musical profession.

Entry into these agencies has been the priority of who are considered “professional musicians” with either years of formal training in the national educational institutions or

through apprenticeship in traditional music and relevant sponsorship by an established group (Baker 2011a: 131). This definition of who is considered a “professional musician” posed challenges to the established economic system of the music industry as many popular musicians on the island did not fall into the above categories, leaving them unable join a music agency. However, as only professional musicians can legally be paid to perform, cultural institutions had to either allow “non-musicians” to join professional music agencies or to deny them membership and thereby feed the booming underground music economy. Overall, the latter approach has predominated, especially with the boom of genres such as rap and reggaetón where musicians required little formal training (*ibid.*).

Musically, two genres dominated the Special Period: timba and rap. The former was a polyrhythmic dance music, associated with the culture of Cuba’s black, urban population (Fairley 2004). It grew in popularity, argues Borges-Triana (int.), due to the happiness it brought to the Cuban people through dance in a period of difficulty and challenges. As Cubans are natural dancers, argues the journalist, timba gave them an outlet in a very extraordinary moment in history. Depicting stories and characters of marginalised Afrocubans, timba became a chronicle of the Special Period, referring to money, prostitution, racism, Santería, and everyday life in the barrio (Perna 2015: 64). More marginalised as a genre and away from the tourist orbit, rap took the place that the nueva trova had occupied in the 1980s, as protest music tackling social issues of class, race, and politics in Havana, argues Borges-Triana (int.). Through its lyrics, rap became another social chronicle of the Special Period, speaking from the edges (Baker 2011a). During the 1990s, Cuba also witnessed the highest number of bands within the rock and metal spaces, performing the widest variety of styles within each genre (Borges-Triana int.).

During the subsequent period of major changes in the post-2010 period, there has been a deeper commercialisation of the music industry and its further internationalisation (Borges-

Triana int.). Freddy Monasterio Barsó at Queen's University in Canada completed his doctoral research on the role of musical and cultural production and entrepreneurship in Havana's contemporary scene as a means for socioeconomic development in the context of neoliberal globalisation (2018).<sup>20</sup> He focuses on the initiatives, musicians and music professionals operating in the informal economy that has emerged because of major contradictions and legal gaps stemming from an outdated cultural policy and ambiguous regulations on the island and case studies of cultural producers/entrepreneurs that operate at the margins of the state institutions are presented. His research further privileges the analysis of alternative music scenes such as hip-hop, electronic dance music, rock and reggaetón. The study demonstrates the importance of recognising the new models of cultural management that have emerged in Havana as legitimate economic actors. Monasterio Barsó acknowledges the potential of partnerships between private and state actors. His analysis puts an emphasis on understanding the functionality of these partnerships, concluding most of these new models would have a larger positive impact by operating from a properly regulated non-state sector, where the most important incentives for artists and cultural entrepreneurs are currently located.

My own research prioritises the analysis of the shifting geographies of sound, both physical and abstract, the transformation of dualities such as public-private and foreign-local, and the changing consciousness of musicians as socio-economic actors in Havana's evolving sociocapitalist system. My study continuously returns to the question of whether there is an "authenticity of place" (Relph 1976; Massey 1997), by scrutinising the friction between the imaginary of what is local and authentic, the pre-capitalist experience of the city and its architecture, and the actual practice and experience of the musical profession and the locations across Havana where musicians live and practice in the *sociocapitalist* world. I study the

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<sup>20</sup> The title of Monasterio Barsó's thesis is "Musical Production and Cultural Entrepreneurship in Today's Havana: Elephants in the Room" submitted to the Department of Cultural Studies at Queen's University Canada (Sept. 2018).

binaries between old and new, revolutionary and sociocapitalist, public and private, local and foreign. I examine how musicians are negotiating their identities in the new commercialisation of the music industry within the anachronistic system of the music agencies. My research employs a genre-agnostic analysis.

### **3. *The Havana-London Axis***

“...*crossing the border* – somewhere. It made no difference which one, because what was important was not the destination, the goal, but the almost mystical and transcendent act. *Crossing the border.*” (Kapuściński 2007: 10). This intense desire and experience of the action of crossing borders was expressed by Poland’s journalist of the twentieth century Ryszard Kapuściński. His experience was brought about by restrictions on the physical movements of the peoples of the former Soviet bloc resulting from the Cold War East – West ideological and political divide. The same conflict, in addition to the US embargo and limited economic means in the revolutionary period, reduced the ability of Cubans to travel outside the country or beyond the states of the Soviet bloc, whose members were located at the far end of Europe. Such travel was also mostly organised for official purposes, cultural exchanges or work rather than personal holidays and the mere enjoyment of travel. These limitations to international travel outlived the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and communism in Central and Eastern Europe, further reducing the ability of Cubans to travel internationally in the post 1989-period.

These limitations to international travel had further affected cultural collaborations between Cuban and international artists by making these occurrences more sporadic and often the result of political or historical connections rather than spontaneous partnerships, formed in the pursuit of personal interests and career plans. The international success of Cuban music in the years of the Special Period indicates that the US restrictive policies did not entirely prevent Cubans musicians from signing with foreign record companies and touring abroad (including



in the US). Nevertheless, the confusing legal situation and the potential economic risks created by the legal requirements of the U. S. embargo laws on Cuba appear to have largely discouraged record transnationals from investing in Cuban music (Perna 2005: 74 – 75). Even with the 1988 Berman Amendment to the Cuban embargo which allowed US and other foreign labels to release Cuban music in the US, there was no huge development in cross-border collaborations in the period which followed.

In the context of Cuba's new internationalisation, my study further sets out to examine the changing geographies of sound by documenting the London Cuban music scene, the role of music in the diaspora and the growth of cultural collaborations between Havana and London. The opening up and relaxation of restrictions of physical borders inadvertently impacts the movement and circulation of culture through human migrations. A decade before Obama had won the US Presidency, Tony Blair was on his second term as Prime Minister of the UK His re-entry into power in 1997 continued the relaxation of migration policies to the country which his labour government was championing. The UK started witnessing an increase in the number of Cubans moving to the country. In the same year British label World Circuit released the famous album by Buena Vista Social Club with the same name, bringing awareness of certain genres of Cuban music to UK audiences.

Over a decade later Obama's policies and the relaxation of travel restrictions from and to Cuba introduced by the Raúl Castro government led to the further growth of the Cuban population in London with more regular visits by a bigger variety of Cuban artists visiting the UK and an increase in the flow of British tourists to the Caribbean island more than ever before. British people learnt that Cuban music is more versatile and offers a larger artistic and stylistic variety beyond than the BVSC collective. A Cuban music and cultural scene started forming in London. Performance of Cuban styles became more common beyond the historical bands formed and led primarily by British musicians. Cuban musicians began to form and lead

personal projects, while also getting involved with the broader musical and diaspora community, composing, and performing non-Cuban genres. Cuban musicians and dancers based in other European countries also started looking at London as a potential new destination to relocate or perform. UK's capital became a city where a recognised Cuban music and dance scene emerged alongside a Cuban diasporic community.

Meaning “to scatter” in Greek, the term “diaspora” had traditionally been used exclusively to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people following their expulsion from the Holy Land and the displacement of millions of Africans during the transatlantic trade of enslaved persons (Cuban Research Institute FIU: 40). This forced displacement of people was associated with loss, exile, conflict, persecution, or discrimination. Most recently, however, the term has entered academic vernacular to often describe a community of people, including both immigrants and their descendants, who live outside their shared country of origin or ancestry but maintain active connections with it. The use of the term has become “more flexible and has grown to include individuals in search of a better life and opportunities they believe do not exist in their country of origin, but who continue to sustain a relationship with that country”. Nowadays, the members of a diaspora can have many reasons for leaving their birth country and settling abroad, temporarily, or permanently. “The common denominator is a desire to maintain the various ties that bind them to their country of origin, despite their belief that it could not meet their aspirations—whether personal or collective—at the time they decided to emigrate” (*ibid.*).

Defining the Cuban population in the UK as a part of the larger Cuban diaspora across the globe automatically underlines forced displacement and a diasporic relationship, real or imaginary, with the “homeland”. Some contemporary scholars (Brubaker 2005) argue that everyone nowadays is a diaspora; hence, the term is losing its discriminating power. In my research, I use the term “diaspora” to define the Cuban population in the UK due to the strong

socio-cultural connection, which is maintained with the island, and the growth of the number of migrants, which has now become an identifiable community. In this context, I also utilise the term “Cuban community” to refer to Cuban nationals involved in the music and dance industry in London or other locations studied. Even if all the members of this community do not necessarily have active or regular interaction with each other, they do participate in the different aspects of the creation of a Cuban music and dance scenes; hence, they are still part of the actual overall Cuban community.

Significant research has been published on the formation and impact of the Cuban diaspora in Spain and the US due to the socio-cultural, linguistic, geographical, or historical connections between Cuba and these countries. In his study “Cubano Be, Cubano Bop”, Cuban musicologist Leonardo Acosta goes back to investigate the participation of musicians from Cuban descent in the first jazz bands in New Orleans (2003). Susan Thomas studies how for “musicians who have left the island for other shores, Havana remains the destination of a discursive migration, which may be reached in song, if not in person” (2011). Musical re-mappings of the city “position new identities in Cuban diasporic communities around the world, celebrating and authenticating the local at the same time that they redraw and superimpose the boundaries of neighbourhood, region, and nation”. The author further analyses the impact of Cuban musicians abroad in forming and defining a form of transnational Cuban citizenship (2016). The concept is further developed in her upcoming book “The Musical Mangrove: The Transnationalization of Cuban Alternative Music” (due for publication in 2023). Another study on the Cuban diaspora in Spain by Iñigo Sanchez studies the role and importance of music in the production of social spaces by the Cuban diaspora in Barcelona in three different locations frequented by Cubans in the city (2012). His analysis delves into the ways in which music serves in maintaining a feeling of belonging in a diasporic existence of migrations, loss, and displacement.

There has been however no thorough documentation of the Cuban community in London. In her study on the making of Latin London, Patria Román-Velázquez lists some of the music venues in London which were decorated with Cuban symbols or offered Cuban food for the purpose of marketing themselves as Cuban or with Cuban signifiers (2017: 89). She also notes down the individually developed Cuban dance style of London's first Cuban prolific salsa teacher Nelson Batista, known as "el cubanísimo" (1, 117 – 118) (for biographical notes see p. 272). First published in 1999 Román-Velázquez's book reflects an earlier period of the growth of Latin and salsa scenes in the UK. However, the recent formation and growth of a Cuban cultural scene, albeit a fragile one, in London necessitates its study, the first step of which is documenting the existence of a Cuban diasporic community and its relationship to music and dance.

Beyond the formation of a Cuban cultural scene in London, traffic across the Havana-London axis became more active and two-directional since 2010. The growth in the number and regularity of visiting bands and increase in cultural tourism from the UK to Cuba were supplemented by a growing number of collaborations. In 2008 British DJ and producer Gilles Peterson (for biographical data see p.263) was approached by Havana Cultura, an initiative to showcase and support Cuban creativity by rum maker Havana Club, inviting him to Cuba to investigate Havana's underground music scene with a view to making an album (Havana Club 2014). The British Manana Cuba independent festival, production company and label organised the first electronic Afro-Cuban-jazz fusion music festival in Santiago de Cuba in 2016 bringing London-based Cuban musicians to perform back to the island. The second festival was held at the Barbican in London in 2017, followed by a Jazz Re:freshed event by visiting Cuban and London-based Cuban and British musicians in 2019, held at the Milton Court Concert Hall. Eliane Correa (for biographical notes see. 260) performed at the 2019 Havana Jazz Plaza Festival bringing a singer from London, in collaboration with the then Oslo-based Cuban

musician Alejandro Gispert and the percussion section by three musicians from Adonis Y Osain del Monte (for biographical notes see p.249). Cultural collaborations and exchanges between the two countries have become more regular and taken on different parameters than previously in history. This ability to travel and form partnerships between artists from different genres and various stages of their professional development has only been possible due to the changes introduced by the Obama and Raúl Castro administrations. Cuba's alternative form of globalisation has also translated into establishing new encounters and relationships across the Havana – London cultural axis.

Overall, my research prioritises the analysis of the shifting geographies of sound, both physical and abstract, in Havana and London; the transformation of dualities such as public-private and foreign-local; and the changing consciousness of musicians as socio-economic actors in Havana's evolving sociocapitalist system.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

My thesis is divided into two main parts: the first focuses on the study of Havana (two chapters) and the second on London (two chapters).

### ***Part 1: Havana***

In Chapter 1, I investigate the transformation of place through the transformation of “the street” from a public domain, a key geography in the life of *habaneros* and “a home” of Cuban music, to a private exclusive place with strict parameters for entry and participation defined by neoliberal ethics. In Chapter 2, I study the impact of the socio-economic changes on the ways in which the musical profession, the traditional system of music houses, music agencies and cultural centres has transformed, disintegrated, or exists in friction with the factors of Havana's new stage of *SocCap201*. I develop my analysis of the symbolic versus the actual,

where I problematise the continuous conflict in the temporal and spatial cohesiveness of Havana's music scene, where musicians are navigating inconsistent periods of transition, oscillating between a past revolutionary *modus operandi* and post-socialist economic and cultural aspirations they can see and feel but not quite fully experience.

## ***Part 2: London***

In chapter 3, I document the formation of Cuban music and dance scenes in London as independent from the larger Latin scene and at times in conflict with it stylistically, and the places these scenes occupy. In chapter 4, I examine the changes in the making of Cuban music and culture in London, driven by the formation of the Cuban diasporic community in the country and of an identifiable scene. I investigate how Cubans and foreigners cooperate and compete, while conferring key characteristics of what is considered socially and culturally Cuban. In both chapters I delve into how the Cuban music and dance scenes in London interact with Havana, articulating the traffic across the Havana-London axis.

## **Positionality and Methodology – or The Art of Encounters**

### **Positionality:**

My first experience with Latin and Cuban culture was in Bulgaria in 1990, just after the Berlin Wall had fallen and the country was entering a period of socio-economic, political, and cultural transition characterised by dramatic changes. Moving away from the genres promoted by the former socialist government, which included arranged folkloric music, a specific style of Bulgarian popular music and western classical music (Rice 2002: 26), Latin and Cuban music and dance were becoming popular in the country (alongside the home-grown style of

*popfolk*).<sup>21</sup> I joined the Plovdiv<sup>22</sup> Latin Dance Academy (based in the city's Youth Centre) where I began studying Ballroom dance to diversify my traditional training in Bulgarian folkloric dancing and singing and ballet. I failed the exam at the end of the first year as I was told I used too much of my hips when dancing, which is a detriment to Ballroom styles. I was advised to join the social dance group as hip movements formed part of salsa dancing. It was the first time I encountered Cuban culture, I listened and danced to “Chan-Chan”, “El Cuarto de Tula”, and “Veinte Años” (all three songs by Buena Vista Social Club [BVSC] which were gaining rapid popularity in the period), and where I first developed my interest in Cuban culture.

It was paradoxical that while the Soviet socialist system was coming to an end in Bulgaria and the country was looking to North America as a paradigm to develop its democratic political and capitalist economic systems, Cuban music was gaining popularity and audience which it never had before. Partly due to the global success of BVSC, partly as a result of the newly found freedom Bulgarians were experiencing in relation to their cultural and entertainment choices post-1989 (Rice 2002: 25), Latin- and Cuban-style bars were also proliferating across Plovdiv and other major cities in the country. Throughout the 1990s, they were offering tropical cocktails and had tropical interior designs including palm trees, rattan and bamboo furniture and cane motifs, alongside playing Latin music. Being underage I had little exposure to the establishments but was freely able to consume the music. It was a rebellious experience because it belonged to the new time, the post-Soviet era.

I spent few months joining the social dance classes before they were stopped, and I continued consuming Cuban music as a listener. Music performance as a career became less desirable choice for girls in Bulgaria and I moved to the UK in 2000 where I completed an

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<sup>21</sup> *Popfolk* (also known as *chalga*) became the genre associated with the period of transition in the post-1989 Bulgaria, which developed as a fusion of pop, folkloric, ethnic, and rock music (Rice 2002: 31).

<sup>22</sup> Plovdiv is the second largest city in Bulgaria and where I completed my education from primary school until the final year of secondary school, prior to moving to study at university in the UK in 2000.

undergraduate and post graduate degrees in International Studies and Diplomacy with a focus on human rights, post-conflict resolution and cultural heritage, remaining involved in music and dance on part-time basis focusing on the performance of Indian spiritual music – chants, mantras, and devotional singing. During an internship I did in the Council of Europe Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights in Strasbourg in early 2007 I joined salsa dance classes, which subsequently got me introduced to the Cuban community in the city. I became more interested in the Cuban diaspora in Europe and in 2012 I joined the salsa dance classes of Nelson Batista (for biographical details see p.274) at Danceworks<sup>23</sup> in London, which was my first experience of the Cuban cultural scene in city, and what got me involved in the community.<sup>24</sup>

As Batista began asking me for help with his dance classes where I would assist with warm-ups and teaching, I quickly became more engrossed in the Cuban dance scene. I started frequenting social dance venues across London, which is where I met Cuban musicians and promoters. Following my initial focus on the Cuban dance scene, I steadily got more actively involved in the broader Cuban cultural scene of London. I started learning Afro-Cuban rhythms with singer and percussionist Gerardo De Armas Sarria (for biographical data see p.262) to later form an all-female Afro-Cuban percussion and singing project.<sup>25</sup> I began helping promoter and musician Oreste “Sambroso” Noda with live videorecording, creating promotional materials, and running campaigns for his events. I did live videorecording and photography for various Cuban musicians and groups and promoted their work across social media, forming relationships and building knowledge of London’s Cuban cultural scene.

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<sup>23</sup> Danceworks is a dance school in London, which offers a variety of dance and singing classes

<sup>24</sup> At the same time as I took on classes with Nelson Batista, I also joined the Lucia Caruso Baile y Flamenco company where I performed dance and played castanets and the Thomas Bishop Pop and Soul Choir (both based in London).

<sup>25</sup> The project was called *Alma de Tambor* (Soul of the Drum) and was founded in 2019. It was put on hold in 2020 following the Covid19 pandemic and lockdown in the UK



The desire to connect the knowledge of music, with musical experience and society was the reason I wanted to undertake doctoral research. This desire was present for some years before I got involved with the Cuban community in London. Having spent ten years performing and teaching Indian spiritual music, chants, mantras, and meditative practices, I was contemplating writing a thesis on the role of India's spirituality and its sounds in shaping the country's international political aspirations, especially following the appointment of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014.<sup>26</sup> Getting involved in the Cuban cultural scene in London and subsequently in Havana, however, I felt deeply connected to the changes that were taking place in the country. Cuba was opening to the world and the Iron Curtain which had been there for over 50 years at the time was being slowly lifted, and the country was venturing in post-socialist economics. This new international visibility which Cuba and its cultural scene were gaining, was also raising the popularity of Cuban music and dance in London. I met people of various ages and backgrounds who were joining dance classes in preparation for their holidays to Cuba or who were attending concerts after having visited Cuba for the first time and heard its music. These connections between Havana and London were not previously studied and drew my attention as a topic of research.

I shared my idea about pursuing doctoral research on Cuban music with anthropologist Martin Tsang.<sup>27</sup> He gave me the reassurance that ethnomusicology was the correct discipline

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<sup>26</sup> Modi was the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) and lifelong member of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a paramilitary Hindu nationalist organisation inspired by the fascist movements of Europe. The RSS' founder belief that Nazi Germany had manifested "race pride at its highest" by purging the Jews is a common perception among the votaries of Hindutva, or "Hinduness". In 1948, a former member of the RSS murdered Mahatma Gandhi for being "too soft on Muslims". The organisation, traditionally dominated by upper-caste Hindus, has led numerous violent assaults on minorities (Mishra 2014). Modi had two priorities after coming to power: the promotion of international trade and the recognition of India as a spiritual power of the world.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Tsang is an anthropologist who has researched, taught, and published on Asian ethnicity, culture, healthcare, and religion in the Caribbean and in great depth with respect to Cuba. Martin is the Cuban Heritage Collection Librarian at the University of Miami Library overseeing print and digital resources for the largest collection of materials on Cuba and its people located outside of the island. He is also Curator of Latin American Collections at the university and has a secondary teaching appointment with the Department of Anthropology. Martin serves on the review panel for CLIR's (Council of Library and Information Resources) Digitising Hidden Collections programme, and he is a Mellon Fellow at the Rare Book School (RBS) and sits on the advisory board for the RBS Mellon Fellowship in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Martin is an initiated

to write my PhD on as it leverages my versatile background in socioeconomics, music, and dance. Dr. Tsang also thought that studying the relationship between socioeconomic change and sound was a very current and interesting topic, not previously studied for the post-2010 period. Subsequently, I was encouraged by Professor Geoffrey Baker to do a Master's degree focused on Advanced Musical Studies (with a focus on Ethnomusicology, 2016 – 2017), during which I began my initial fieldwork in both London (studying the places of Cuban music and culture in the city) and Havana (studying the impact of the new private music venues on the city's music scene).

### **Methodology:**

When I set out to study the changing music scene of Havana, I had various anxieties about which artists I should and will be able to collaborate with. My idea was to work with partners from across as many genres as possible with the view to understand the impact of the Obama era and ongoing socio-economic changes on as broad a segment as possible from Havana's music scene, keeping in mind my own time and physical limitations. I aimed to undertake fieldwork, which would differ from previously performed research by academics in the city, yielding new perspectives to the existing studies of Cuban music. To achieve this objective, I had to gauge a deep understanding of Havana's music scene, which is the reason most of my fieldwork has been participatory. I have taken part in projects as a producer (recording videos for promotional activities, music videos, documentaries, and for specific events, creating and managing social media platforms, helping with organisational tasks for studio recording and events). I further took semi-formal interviews and attended various cultural and religious gatherings as an observer. I worked with musicians, promoters,

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priest (*obá*) in the Afro-Cuban Lucumí tradition and specialises in the beaded material culture of the religion. His beadwork has been displayed in several exhibitions.

producers, and dance teachers, attended festivals, private events, and religious ceremonies. I journeyed across different epochs; places (colonial and traditional, contemporary, and fashionable, touristic, and local); social strata (international embassy guests, the nouveau rich of Havana, fashion designers, and Buena Vista's housewives); and musical genres (classical music, jazz, tumba, rumba, hip-hop, reggaetón, nueva trova, and various fusions).

While I opened conversations with musicians I knew from my earlier role as a dancer and musician, I did not limit myself to my former contacts and approached numerous musicians in Havana on social media before embarking on my fieldwork. I started with a broad approach of contacting musicians from popular music as this was the biggest scene in the city and the most well-known abroad as well as jazz musicians who were often involved in both scenes. I presented my new role to both former and newly established contacts and openly asked for collaborations offering help in return in the form of video recording, social media management, upload music to digital platforms such as Apple Music, iTunes, YouTube, Amazon Music, and Spotify, and translations. Collaboration to me meant giving back to the community, which has been a key objective throughout my PhD and another reason I took a more participatory approach to fieldwork.

Overall, I spent over two years altogether in the capital since commencing my doctoral research. Initially I would make trips which lasted two to three months and were often with the view to complete a specific task such as be part of the recording of an album or attend specific events, such as festivals (for instance, the 2018 Havana World Music Festival and the 2019 Havana Jazz Plaza fest). These trips were on tourist visas which I had to renew monthly often having challenges with the bureaucratic machine at the immigration office, which seemed to change the rules every time I went. It reminded me of scholars working in Bulgaria pre-1989 who were faced with similar daunting bureaucracy in obtaining researcher status which aimed to discourage significant long-term contacts and relationships between Bulgarians and their

foreign visitors as well as shape the studies undertaken to be aligned with national cultural policies (Rice 1994: 34). Such fields require academics to identify methods of completing meaningful research, while maintaining the well-being of their research partners. Rice's strategy involved working with a well-respected musical family and their artistic circle. My approach was based on a contrasting method to that of Timothy Rice – I moved between different circles and scenes and when I worked more continuously with an artist, I had always a role beyond that of a researcher. This helped me to achieve my objective and collaborate (rather than only shadow and observe) in different ways with a broad spectrum of artists from various styles.

As such, amongst conversations about music, Cuba and projects with various musicians, I formed my first key collaboration in Havana with trombone player Eduardo Sandoval (for biographical notes see p. 259). While Sandoval identifies himself as a jazz musician, his work spans from the performance of classical music to playing timba. I commenced cooperating with him in July 2017 while working on my MMus special study dissertation researching the impact of private ownership of music venues in Havana. Subsequently, I followed Sandoval's work in Havana over three weeks in December 2017 and over further twelve weeks between March and June 2018. I observed his work as part of the international tour of the musical theatre "Carmen la Cubana" (Carmen, the Cuban Woman), an international collaboration between Cuba, the UK, Germany, and France, which was at London's Saddle's Wells for three weeks during August 2018 as part of a world tour. Some examples of the events I attended working alongside him include his collaboration with the all-female orchestra Camerata Romeu, playing as part of the timba bands of Alain Pérez and Issac Delgado, and recording with percussion-fusion initiative *Más con Menos*.

While this collaboration gave me access to some of the key projects and artists and helped me embed myself in Havana's music scene, I wanted to extend my research by both

attempting to live for longer in the capital and try different music scenes. Following January and February 2019 trip which concluded most of my work with jazz and popular musicians, I was planning to return to Havana in the spring of 2020 to research the city's urban music scene and finalise any remaining parts of pending fieldwork. With the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic and the closure of international borders, I only managed to return to Havana during the pandemic in November 2020. Besides the challenges posed by the pandemic on the city and its music industry, I managed to settle living and working in the city [and continue to do so], which gave me the opportunity I was looking for – to fully participate in life and work in Havana.

Timothy Rice shares about his initial fascination with and romanticisation of Bulgaria and its music which started in 1969 and the subsequent experience of the reality of every-day life living in the country for over a year in 1972 – 1973, which de-mystified the field (1994: 237 – 238). Faced with the hardening reality of Havana, which included long queues for basic goods and constant shortages of food and sanitary products, social media and internet blackouts, failing transportation system, power cuts which culminated in five days without electricity and running water in the autumn of 2022 (following the passing of storm Ian), and having to again start bringing toilet paper from Europe in mid-2022, gave me a very different experience of the city and its entertainment scene. Besides the fact that Havana was put on mute for over eighteen months with no music events, big social gatherings, or religious ceremonies since the onset of the pandemic, and a 9p.m. curfew for most of the duration of the period, I became aware of my attitude towards the city's dysfunctional infrastructure and cultural scene, allowing me for a deeper analysis and understanding of the controversies it holds between the old and the new, the socialist and the post-socialist, the local and the international.

This understanding was further deepened by my experience of working in Havana since June 2021 as an artistic and event producer at The Cuban Rap Agency (Agencia Cubana de Rap, ACRap). The reason I was able to live and work in Havana was due to my collaboration with the only institution of its kind in the world, a state-run musical company dedicated to rap. ACRap's director Rubén Marín Maning (for biographical details see p.278) applied for a cultural visa to allow me to work for the Agency. The Ministry of Culture and the Cuban Institute of Music (ICM) approved the request and gave me a provisional identity card for foreigners. I had an initial anxiety of any implications working for a state-run music agency might have for my research and official position as a researcher. Marín Maning's focus on hip-hop and getting the work done meant that I can focus on the artistic and creative tasks, taking an active part in Havana's hip-hop scene, which meant that most of the challenges I faced were lack of funding and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

I work on various projects alongside Marín Maning [and continue to do so]. I co-organised and co-produced the XIV International Symposium of Cuban Hip-Hop, which took place online in October 2021. My role included drafting the Call for Participation, developing the programme, recording performances, debates, and interviews, and promoting the event. I further co-directed and co-produced a documentary called "Prohibido Olvidar" ("Forbidden to Forget") in memory of Cuba's emblematic rapper and producer Malcoms Junco Duffay (a.k.a. Malcoms Justicia and OndaliVre, for biographical data see p.271)<sup>28</sup>, which was premiered during the Symposium. I worked on the production of the ninth edition (2022) of the festival "Creciendo en Hip Hop" ("Growing Up in Hop-Hop"), a project dedicated to youth for the ages of eight to 18.

Malcoms Junco Duffay passed away on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2021 in the process of our own collaboration as I was beginning to help him with a project dedicated to organising the first

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<sup>28</sup> Documentary is available to view at [https://youtu.be/M9\\_AWqwt7po](https://youtu.be/M9_AWqwt7po)

comprehensive archive of Cuban rap (ARACU). Beyond ARACU and semi-formal interviews which I have taken with Junco Duffay for my doctoral research, my work with him immediately prior to his death included supporting the recording of two videos for his latest and now last album as an artist (remains unreleased) and recording the percussion section for an album of all-female rappers which Malcoms was producing called *Empoderadas* (Empowered).<sup>29</sup> The death of Malcoms was a very impactful moment in my fieldwork; one that made it very difficult to separate the personal experience of grief from the professional collaboration. It also gave me the further impetus to attempt to give back to the community I am partnering with through the work I undertake, and in this context trying to maintain the legacy and memory of Junco Duffay.

Whether involved with jazz, timba, or rap, one of the most exciting parts of my fieldwork in Havana and where I was able to contribute most, was studio ethnography. I spent time in recording studios across Havana in December 2017, between March and June 2018 and again in November 2020. During my field trip to Cuba in Spring 2018, a significant proportion of my fieldwork took place at various studios observing or helping recordings in which Sandoval participated as a hired musician, as well as the recording of his latest album *Más Trombón Que Nunca: Homenaje (More Trombone Than Ever: Tribute)*, which took place in Studios Abdala in Miramar. The album was produced by Alain Pérez (for biographical notes see p.250) and featured original compositions, re-workings of pieces by Arsenio Rodríguez and Juan Formell, and compositions by Alain Pérez, pianist-composer Yusef Díaz, singer Rubén Bulnes from the Afro-Cuban collective Adonis y Osain del Monte, and by Sandoval himself. I worked as an assistant to Sandoval during the recordings he participated in and during the recording of his album, filming almost all activities and conversations which took

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<sup>29</sup> I continue to work on the production of the album *Empoderadas* in Malcom's home studio Producciones 18A16 in the neighbourhood of San Miguel de Padrón; however, it is becoming more challenging to complete it and release with the worsening of the socioeconomic environment in Cuba.

place in the studio. This was a part of my own fieldwork as well as in help of Sandoval's own promotional activities, where I developed behind-the-scenes videos for him.<sup>30</sup> Other studio ethnography which I completed with Sandoval as part of his hired work was for recordings by Adonis y Osain Del Monte, Panamanian Rubén Blades produced by pianist, singer and producer Andy Rubal who lives between Ontario and Havana, a new piece by singer Carlos Paz, and a recording for the singer Shiina (formerly at the iconic all female Orchestra Anacaona).

Altogether I spent over four weeks in the recording studio Abdala, over a week in EGREM in Miramar, and days in the private studios Scorpio, D'Bega, the Church and Ultrasonic. I produced behind-the-scenes for the recording of the first reggae song "El Lunar" ("The Birthmark") by Primera Base in Ultrasonic in Cerro (July 2021), for the recording of the debut album *El Mio es Otra Cosa (Mine is a Different Thing)* by timba band Maichel y Combinación Cubana (November 2020), and for the recording of the timba-rumba song "Sin Comentario" ("No Comment") by Adonis y Osain del Monte (April 2018).

Studio ethnography lifted a curtain, not unlike the iron curtain still curtailing the country, about the creation of sound in Havana's contemporary music scene and interactions in the recording studio. It gave me an opening to the type of sound sought after, the way new sound is constructed (Greene and Porcello 2005), and the conversations which happen in the safe space of the studio within sound-proofed walls, forming new communities (Stobart 2008). It also helped achieve practical applicability of my ethnographic research, feeding directly back into the community, which I have as key objective of my doctoral work.

The fieldwork I completed in London has also been participatory as an active member of the London Cuban music and dance scenes. I attended events (concerts, festivals such the

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<sup>30</sup> Beyond videorecording and promotional help, I established a connection between Sandoval and British custom trombone maker Rath Trombones, where I negotiated the endorsement of Sandoval as a Rath Trombones artist and a largely discounted price for a custom-made trombone for him ([www.rathtrombones.com](http://www.rathtrombones.com)).



2017 Manana Festival – a Cuba – UK collaboration; dance and music classes; and religious ceremonies) and worked on projects with promoters, musicians, and dancers, including Oreste “Sambroso” Noda, Nelson Batista, and Gerardo De Armas Sarria. I took semi-formal interviews with Cuban artists in London as well as non-Cubans involved actively in the Cuban cultural scene in the capital as performers, organisers, and audiences. I co-organised live events, assisted in the teaching of dance classes, performed as a singer and percussionist, and helped with the individual promotion of musicians. Completing fieldwork in London raises the question of whether I have been performing ethnographic research “at home”.

I find it an alien perception that ethnomusicologists visit far-away places to research disappearing and forgotten cultures, and one I do not associate with, nor propagate as an image of my work as an ethnomusicologist. I also do not adhere to any distinctions such as urban and rural ethnomusicology (Nettl 2005: 185); neither am I a supporter of the “outsider - insider” dichotomy employed in the analysis of the work of ethnomusicologists. While there are some valid critiques on moral grounds of the cross-cultural work of ethnomusicologists (*ibid.* 150), for the purposes of this project, I will not focus on further critically evaluating such issues. Rather I will adhere to a basic definition of ethnomusicology as the study of music in and as culture with the use of fieldwork (*ibid.* 13), which is also the reason I define myself as an ethnomusicologist. As a naturalized British citizen and someone who has lived and worked (and continues to do so) in Havana for two years altogether, I consider both locations homes. Without entering disciplinary debates and comparative analysis of the work, research techniques and scope of musicology, ethnomusicology, anthropology, comparative and historical musicology, and folklore studies (for further reading see Stobart 2008), I have been known within my research communities in Havana and London as a musician and dancer of Cuban music. Upon the course of my MMus and Doctoral research, I further added academic research and production to the work which characterises me.

Like the current period of socio-economic transitions, opportunity and uncertainty in Cuba's music industry and the fragility of the Cuban cultural scene in London, my own entry into the streams of ethnographic research in both capitals has been a whirlwind. As Timothy Rice describes his fieldwork in still communist Bulgaria during the 1970s, "to claim that I selected the individuals who form the centre of this study already suggests a kind of freedom that never exists in fieldwork" (1994: 33 – 34). The author sums up his experience of discovering his fieldwork partners as a "serendipitous combination of personal histories and values, ... with the social conditions of music making in Bulgaria at the time", including the framework set by the official cultural policy in the country (*ibid.* 34). Considering the difficulties posed Such freedom did not exist for me in the study of the Cuban music scenes of Havana and London. The relationships I formed in both cities were often *ad hoc* and transient, for the purposes of specific projects or work. Regardless of their longevity, however, my work collaborations provided me with material for my study. I had contacted certain artists who never responded and got by chance to know others. Artists who had initially confirmed an interest to work with me, subsequently cancelled and refused to collaborate for reasons connected to availability, lack of interest, lack of payment for their work or other factors unknown to me. It was then that through continuous search on my part and at times the stroke of destiny that I ended up working with artists I never sought in projects I never knew existed, which ended up more fruitful than anticipated. My ethnographic encounters continuously remind me of the words of the late Bruno Nettl that research partners often select themselves; they appear in the fieldworker's life fortuitously (2005: 144).

Beyond adapting to changes in collaborations, my fieldwork has often brought me anxieties, because of the very nature of the period I am researching. Studying Cuba's unique globalisation in real time transformed my own fieldwork experience into often an "intensified life", but part of a "life-flow" none-the-less, and as "inseparable" from who I am (Kisliuk 2008,

184). [Not having the benefit of a hindsight mirror and navigating the continuously changing local and international environment, not least,] the shocks caused by the Covid19 pandemic have significantly intensified my own anxieties about performing my tasks as a researcher. As an unmarried female researcher in a predominantly male industry characterised by the often-shared characteristic of *machismo* (sexism), I also had to learn to establish my own voice and visibility as an academic.

This position of an unmarried female researcher has also been the primary reason behind the more functional and transient nature of my fieldwork relationships in both Havana and London. Timothy Rice, like numerous other ethnomusicologists on fieldwork around the world, transformed his research partners into “a family” (1994: 34). Working with predominantly male research partners, I put a strong emphasis on maintaining clearly defined parameters on my collaborations both in Havana and London. My closest friendship had been with Malcoms Junco Duffay prior to his death. Subsequently, I developed an effective working relationship with the director of the ACRap Rubén Marín Maning. The shared grief of losing a friend, Marín Maning had known Malcoms Junco Duffay for over 25 years, working closely on the documentary in tribute of his memory and the various events with small to non-existent budgets while tackling daily administrative inefficiencies, we developed an efficient working collaboration to be able to achieve our goals. We also shared a religious family as practitioners of the Santería religion, which gave us the opportunity to interact beyond our working partnership. It is this social circle based on the practice of Santería, that is the closest I built to a family in Cuba. Yet, even though my religious house is a musically prominent family – that of Teresa “Teté” García Catúrla (for biographical notes see p.280), often called the Lady of Son and the only remaining living child of Cuba’s twentieth century emblematic composer Alejandro García Catúrla (for biographical notes see p.251) – they do not feature as research partners in my study. Another working friendship which I developed had been with Nelson

Batista in London who helped me organise the accommodation and transportation during my initial trips in Cuba in 2015. Nevertheless, my professional collaborations and exchanges remain the key fieldwork informing my analysis.

Brazilian poet, essayist and playwright Vinicius de Moraes proclaims life to be “the art of encounters” (Vinicius de Moraes). The field of an ethnographic researcher is indeed one loaded with multiple encounters, where we build and fail in various relationships and continuously form connections, some temporary and other more permanent. Ruth Hellier-Tinoco articulates how “at the heart of all fieldwork contexts there is a fundamental norm, an integral ‘feature’, straightforward in its normality yet infinitely complex in its day-to-day workings. It involves experiencing people and revolves around human relationships and one-to-one encounters” (2003: 19). The author raises the importance of reflecting on “our own fieldwork contexts, the faces and voices of individuals with whom we spent time flood the halls of our memories in an instant: individuals who shared with us their expertise, knowledge, music, food, homes, secrets, joys and sorrows”. She reminds how our experience of the field is “enmeshed in a web of human relationships, more or less intimate, more or less personal” (*ibid.*). Through these encounters and my own work as a practicing musician and dancer, I am part of the community which I study, having developed various forms of partnerships, closer or more distant, purely professional or friendships. This has raised my own anxieties about fulfilling the objectives of my research while not objectifying my own encounters with research partners.

Ethical issues have always taken high priority in my ethnomusicological journey, both through my field research as well as during the writing stage of my project. A key consideration in my work has been the ethics of representation in writing (Stock and Chiener 2008: 109), “the ethics of representation” and “providing a platform for musicians to deny any cultural stereotypes” (Hemetek 2006: 53). Recognising my own involvement in the cultural scenes of

Havana and London, I aim to provide applicability to my work offering a deeper understanding of this dynamic period of change and transition and its impact on the music industry and life of musicians in Havana. I further raise awareness to the challenges and struggles faced by participants in the cultural scenes of Havana and London. My ambition is to offer the London Cuban diaspora visibility for its contributions to the formation of the cultural complex of the city. Beyond the distributed tourism and retailing of lifestyle choice, driven by unconscious consumption (Kassabian 2004: 209), *Sounds, Space and Socioeconomics* takes a journey from the sidewalks of the Caribbean's capital to the sacred *bembés* of London.

## **PART 1: HAVANA**

## Chapter 1: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk

We were in an afternoon recording session at Abdala in April 2018 for the recording of Eduardo Sandoval's album *More Trombone than Ever: Tribute*. The session usually starts at 5pm, but on this day was delayed due to an interview which TV journalist Claudia Lugo from Canal Habana was taking an interview with the album's producer Alain Pérez. Her questions focused on Alain's work on the specific project as well as generally on Havana's music scene. Whether he was tired of constant interviews, questions on the history and future of Cuban music, navigating between producing the album and performing his own projects, or just because it was another afternoon-evening session at Abdala, which no one liked, Pérez closed the interview abruptly with the following statement:

“... porque Cuba es grande verdad musicalmente, es grande musicalmente... tenemos mucha historia bonita y mucha música cubana, mucho sabor, mucha calle, siempre hemos tenido. Que no se confundan ahora que los cubanos son negros na' ma'. No, esto siempre ha sido urbano. ¿Porqué de dónde viene la música? ¡De la calle! ¡Gracias!”

“... because Cuba is truly great musically, it is great musically... we have a lot of good history and a lot of Cuban music, a lot of flavour, a lot of street, we have always had it. Do not get confused now that Cubans are just black. No, it has always been urban. Because where does music come from? From the street! Thank you!”<sup>31</sup>

Everyone in the studio was in stitches of laughter. At the same time Pérez's words echoed as a revelation on the roots and characteristics of Cuban music. The statement came as

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<sup>31</sup> Interview available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb9-MbdYoZk>.

a surprise to me and made me think which music Pérez was referring to and what did having “street” in the music mean. Pérez is a musician trained in classical music in the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) who later developed as a jazz composer and performer; he had only recently returned to Cuba after living for twenty years abroad and was currently working on the production of a jazz album; I could see no reason why he would consider the street as the home of all Cuban music. Moreover, I had never seen Pérez performing, nor taking walks on the streets of Havana. The only time I had seen him struggling for few moments on the street was when we had to push the car of sound engineer Carlos de Vega one evening after recording as the engine would not start. To understand Pérez’s statement better, I examine firstly, the image of the street as a physical location and as an abstract in the national cultural imaginary of Cuba; secondly, I study the genres of Cuban music which have emerged from the street and their relationship to the street and the *solar* during the current period of *SocCap201* (Cuba’s deeper involvement into capitalist economics); thirdly, I examine how the street as an abstract is taken from its actual physical location and transported to the studio and the concert hall.

### ***La Calle***

To anyone who has visited Havana, the image of the street which comes to mind is often of the colourful and overwhelming streets of Habana Vieja (Old Havana) where most tourists venture during their visits to the island’s capital. The scenery varies from sixteenth century churches and colonial houses to luxury hotels and modern bars. The streets of Old Havana are bustling with Cuba’s iconic old cars, tourists, sellers of cheap souvenirs, food and drink, hasslers, and *habaneros* going about their daily business. Cuban son and bolero classics sound from the cafes and bars trying to attract the passing-by tourists on the main touristic street Obispo. Following several restoration projects since the Special Period of the 1990s, certain parts of Old Havana have been renovated and improved significantly. This has been



coupled with the building of new luxury hotels such as the Manzana Kempinski and Hotel Paseo del Prado (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Gran Hotel and Shopping Gallery Manzana Kempinski (above)*

*Hotel Paseo del Prado (below)*



*Photo credit: www.kempinski.com, 2022*



*Photo credit: On Cuba News, 2022*

The borough neighbouring Old Havana is Centro Habana (Central Havana), the most densely populated neighbourhood in Cuba's capital, with an atmosphere contrasting the restoration and romanticism which accompany the capital's tourist-friendly areas (Hollander

2010). Populated with *solares*,<sup>32</sup> Centro Habana is characterised primarily by buildings falling apart from neglect and overflowing rubbish bins (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Neighbourhood of *Centro Habana*



*Photos by author, April 2015*

Whether well-maintained or decrepit, for most habaneros, the street is where many children have their first experiences with music and dance (Baker 2011b). It is also where they find happiness and pride in their African heritage. The street is where social interaction and

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<sup>32</sup> *Solares* are huge, multifamily buildings built in the 1950s that extend deep into the middle of the block with inner patios, labyrinthine passages and twisting stairways (Hollander 2010).

gatherings have traditionally taken place and continue to be the home of entertainment for many young Cubans today. Havana fully epitomises Walter Benjamin's description of streets as "the dwelling places of the collective" (Thomas 2010: 211). Avenida de Los Presidentes (G street) hosts free concerts for popular Cuban artists such as X Alfonso and Silvio Rodriguez. Many young Cubans with limited financial means continue to socialise along the Malecón, Havana's five-mile seaside boulevard and esplanade. National celebrations such as Labour Day or Revolution Day are also celebrated on the streets of Havana. Building upon Setha Low's definition of the social construction of space as "the actual transformation of space - through people's social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of material setting - into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning" (1999b: 12, cited in Baker 2011a: 183), the streets of Havana are constructed as the orbit for the social life of *habaneros*. They embody personal and communal interactions, experiences, and memories, and carry shared and unique symbolism for Havana's residents.

As a topic the street also features in Cuban songs across various genres. Beyond Susan Thomas's (2010) study of the obsession of Cuban songwriters with actual physical locations, walking down particular streets and neighbourhoods, the street figures as a social construct. In their international hit "La Gozadera" (a Cuban slang translating into "The Party")<sup>33</sup>, the popular reggaetón duo Gente de Zona (GDZ, for details see p.261) portray the street as the home of Cuban music and culture, a shared communal space, privatised in the context of the fiestas. Filmed mostly in Havana, the video opens with a dialogue between the two members of GDZ (Alexander Delgado and Randy Malcom) sitting on the front seats of an iconic old car, which had broken down. As the musicians cannot continue with their journey, there is only one thing left to do, start a party there and then on the streets of Havana. In the idiosyncrasy of *a lo cubano* (the Cuban way), whenever there is a problem that cannot be resolved, which happens

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<sup>33</sup> Video available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMp55KH\\_3wo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMp55KH_3wo).

daily in the challenging socio-economic climate of the country, the best solution is to have a party. The singers jump out of the car, open the boot up from where huge loudspeakers pop out, climb onto the car's roof, and start the *gozadera*. The choreography by Cuban choreographer Roclan González Chavez features some fifty dancers, dancing on the streets of Old Havana with passers-by join in the street party.

The video constructs a lively, exciting, and alluring image of the street as a communal social geography where everyone is welcomed, participates, belongs, and shares in the enjoyment. It is a place where problems are forgotten, and all residents partakes in the shared experience. The audio-visual and lyrical aspects of the song underline the celebratory spirit which fills the streets of Havana. There is music and dance, and Cuba's capital is hosting the hottest and most exciting parties (... la cosa está bien dura, la cosa está divina... / ...is a very hot thing, it is a divine thing...), about which the world is learning (...yo canto desde Cuba y el mundo se entera... /...I sing from Cuba, and the world learns about it...).

The atmosphere of the street party in Cuba is incomparable, says London-based Cuban promoter and musician Oreste “Sambroso” Noda (int). It is “the place we all feel like we belong... where an elderly woman who cannot walk can still dance all night, knowing she belongs to the party and the community”. “Before we can walk as children, we learn to dance on the streets of the barrio”, shares the founder of salsa in London, Nelson Batista (2017). Celebrations through music and dance form an integral part of Cuban culture, creating social spaces where all members of society participate regardless of any perceived external distinctions of ethnicity, gender, age, or social status. “Cubans are natural dancers, and dancing brings happiness to our otherwise challenging lives” (Borges-Triana int). Even linguistically, Cuban Spanish is rich in terms which denote a really good party – *fiesta*, *gozadera*, *shorcito* (also the title of a popular song by Alain Pérez)<sup>34</sup>, *bembe*, *rumbón*, *vacilón*, *sandunga* and

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<sup>34</sup> Song available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MkdBjd7BWI>.

*bakosó* (now also the name of a musical genre) are only few of the terms used in daily conversations. The verb *gozar* further means to enjoy anything that a person is doing. A social asset of Cuban society is the more communal and socialist value of belonging; of sharing an experience and being part of the group versus the individualism praised by capitalist and liberal systems.

The street is not only where there is fiesta, but also where life happens. The street is “life itself; it teaches you what the school cannot”, says Rubén Marín, founder of first and still active Havana rap group Primera Base. He writes in their 1997 hit “La Calle”:

...

Para aprender de vivir hay que jugar en la calle

...

Desde el chico ando en ella [la calle] caminando en muchos rumbos

Aprendiendo, gozando, porque ese es mi mundo

*To learn to live you must play on the street*

...

*Since I was a boy, I have been going on it [the street], walking in many directions*

*Leaning, having a good time, because this is my world*

...

The street is not only a social space; it is also where art belongs, argues Cuban rapper Malcoms Junco Duffay in “Sin Permiso” (“Without Permission”),<sup>35</sup> his last song released after his death. It is also a place for socio-political expression, claims the late producer and rapper. In his other song called “No Hay Miedo” (“There is No Fear”), he constructs the street as the space of social protest where citizens should express their discontent and demands (“... Cubans

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<sup>35</sup> Song available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pn48ufbrUI> .

on our feet... there is no fear”). It was only ten days after his death, when on the 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021 the streets of Cuba saw the largest anti-government protests in decades (Frank and Marsh 2021). His lyrics extend the shared experience of the street as a community space, where both art is expressed, and social issues addressed. The street is “real life”, says Duffay, it embodies the experiences of “life and death, of individual and social rise and demise, the search for justice” (int.).

The above examples construct the street as an emotive location, fulfilling the three main themes in the meanings associated with place which Gustafson identifies (2001: 5 - 16). Firstly, through their presence in the streets, their dress styles, and the use of specific language (jargon), Cubans express themselves, their emotions and self-identity. Second, the street is an environment, it has physical features and events are experienced on it, whether it is a fiesta or a protest. Thirdly, there is us and there are others on the street, referring to the behaviours and characteristics of other people who share the place and our interactions with one another on the street. The street as a physical location and public domain is the place where social interactions, cultural, musical, and political expressions in the life of *habaneros* take place. It is where life happens and where Cubans enact their identities as social actors.

## **The Home of Cuban Music**

Pérez’s statement about the relationship between Cuban music and the street outlined a few possible connections: that Cuban music emerged from the street, that it is performed on the streets and that it has the characteristic defining the streets of Havana represented in it. When I asked him which connection he referred to after the interview with Canal Habana, his answer was short and clear: “all of them” (2018). In this section I scrutinise Pérez’s response by firstly overviewing some of the most popular genres, which are associated with the street; secondly, I review the places these genres can be found today; and thirdly, I examine the

characteristics of the street as the prime source for the production of personal and cultural identity.

### *From the Margins*

#### *1. Afro-Cuban:*

“Rumba is the mother of urban music in Cuba”, shares Pablo Hererra as we discuss urban genres and their relationship to the street (pers. comm. 2021).<sup>36</sup> Rumba was the secular music of the enclaves of enslaved persons, and impoverished Afro-Cuban areas where the *cajón* (literally meaning a box) emerged as an instrument made from cargo boxes due to prohibitions of enslaved people to use musical instruments; and the rumba singing emerged as a conversation between the enslaved persons on the different plantations (Inman 2015). It became the main musical accompaniment for parties and secular festivities in poor black and racially mixed communities in western Cuba in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (Bodenheimer 2013: 178). Singer of popular Afro-Cuban orchestra Adonis y Osain del Monte, Rubén Bulnes points out that “rumba existed on the streets, it was marginalised, associated with the poor Afro-Cuban neighbourhoods and *solares* of Havana and Matanzas” (Inman 2015). In a short video by *Cibercuba* (2018) news site, the writing across the screen summarises the roots and evolution of rumba music and dance:

“La rumba nació en las plantaciones de azúcar, en las barracas de esclavos negros de Cuba. Aunque viajó hasta los grandes salones de baile en Europa, su esencia se conserva en las calles de la Isla. Fue considerada patrimonio cultural inmaterial de la humanidad... La rumba nació en solares en La Habana ..., en Matanzas”.

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<sup>36</sup> Pablo Hererra is one of Cuba’s first and most influential beat-makers and a pioneer of the Afro-Cuban hip-hop sound, currently a doctoral researcher on Acoustemology of Afro-Cuban Rap at the University of Edinburgh.

*“Rumba was born in the sugar plantations, in the barracks of the black enslaved people of Cuba. Although it travelled to the great saloons of Europe, its essence is conserved on the streets of the island. It was declared an immaterial cultural heritage of humanity in 2016. Rumba was born in solares in Havana and Matanzas”.*

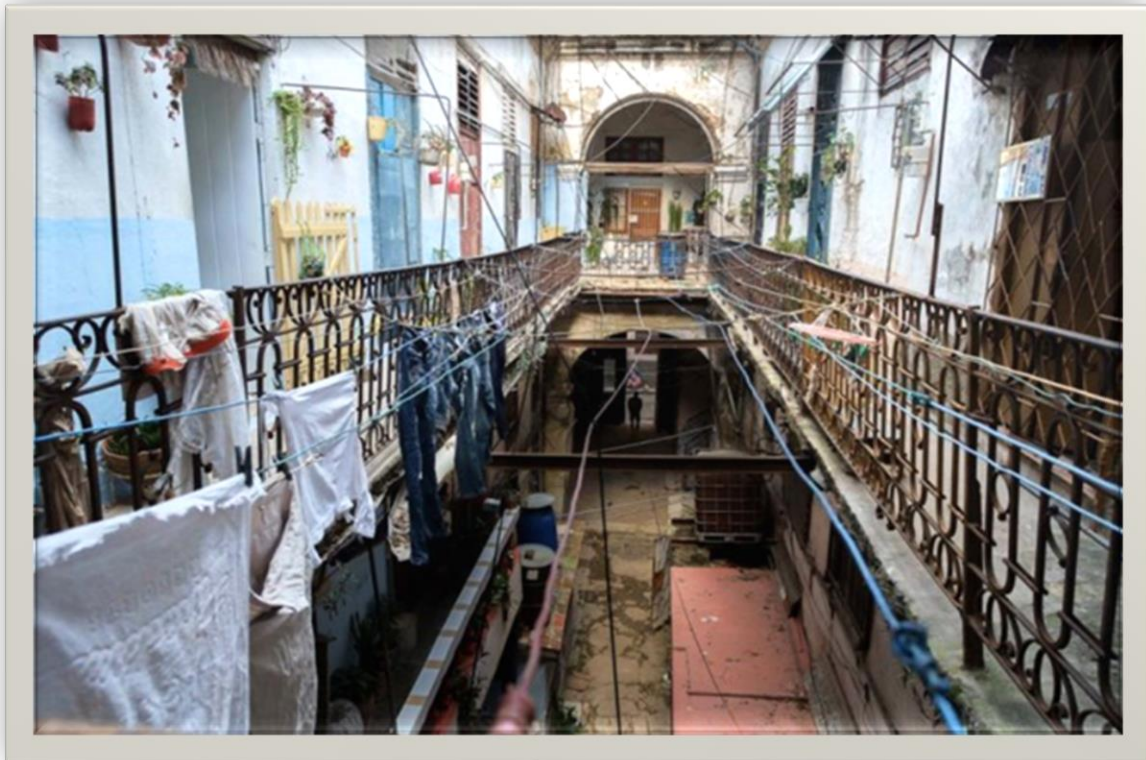
Stylistically different to the pop “rhumba” of Fred Astaire dance members, the “driving brassy big band rumba” of Tito Puentes, the “lifting guitar” rhumba of Congolese soukous, or the son and boleros of Buena Vista Social Club, it is the “kinetic sound of “spluttering, snapping percussion with voices arching over the beat, propelling dancer” (Pareles 2000). Rumba is vibrant and lively, “the heartbeat of Cuban music”. It was born on the streets of neighbourhoods in the periphery, created and performed by musicians and dancers with no formal education.

Rumba’s place in the Cuban cultural pantheon followed an uneven trajectory during the twentieth century. In the first two decades, it was a marginalised and criminalised cultural practice owing to its associations with drunkenness, poverty, and low-income black Cubans many of whom had migrated from the countryside to Havana to search for employment as dockworkers after emancipation (Crook 1992). The nation-building decades of the 1920s and 1930s were characterised by the “rumba craze”, when the genre was appropriated and stylised by nationalist composers such as Amadeo Roldán and reinterpreted as a national music practice (Moore 1997). Following the Revolution, the Cuban government developed initiatives to institutionalise Afro-Cuban culture to demonstrate the regime’s dedication to eliminate class and racial inequalities (Bodenheimer 2013: 179). Rumba’s roots served the ideological roots of the institution as the genre was a contribution to national culture by the most marginalised part of Cuban society: “los humildes [the humble], los jíbaros [the savages], los negros pobres [the poor blacks], los trabajadores [the workers]” (Daniel 1995: 114). This discursive elevation of rumba, however, was not accompanied by specific policies to encourage its practice and



performance on a national level, neither its entry into the curricula of the music academies. As such, rumba remained largely in the domain of the street and the *solares*, the homes of the poorest, predominantly Afro-Cuban residents of Havana (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Solar, Centro Habana*



*Photo credit: Memorias de Un Cubano, 2018*

The *solar* has featured as a place of social life and interactions in Cuban lyrics since the 1920s. Rita Montaner’s praise of the “urban slum”, recreating the “ambience of a *solar*’s central courtyard” as “notes of colour ... rich and vibrant... defects” of Cuban culture (Moore 1997: 175). More recently, in their song “In My *Solar*”, “Timbalive”, featuring Mayito Rivera

and Adonis y Osain del Monte,<sup>37</sup> praise the *solar* as the birthplace and still the best location to learn to play and dance rumba. The video is partly filmed in a *solar* and partly in a less marginalised residential area. Participants dance to the rumba rhythm of *guaguancó*, forming a tremendous party, with an enticing atmosphere. The *solar* is represented as “the authentic home” of Cuba’s rumba rhythms, a place of inspiration to musicians on the island. There is a feeling, which is generated through the musical expression of the every-day life of marginalised communities in the big city, creating the sensory experience of earthiness, grounding, purity, something that is real (Massey 2007: 5). This feeling embodies the street and the *solar* with the experience of what is local and authentic.

Rumberos are “ordinary people as well as extraordinary artists” who regardless of their economic poverty and social marginalisation, are some of the most gifted musicians in the country (Daniel 1995: 57). This contradiction between economic poverty and musical talent is often regarded as the essence of Cuban creativity and musical culture (Bodenheimer 2013). Regardless of having grown up in richer neighbourhoods (e.g., Playa) and educated in Cuba’s music academies, Mario “Mayito” Rivera (for biographical notes see p.272) told me that it is his mastery of the rumba clave<sup>38</sup> and knowledge of rumba rhythms that give the unique timing and flavours of his singing (int.). Those he learnt on the streets of Havana and at the neighbourhood parties where his brother’s rumba band performed. Rivera’s use of the clave connects his singing to the musical culture and essence of the streets.

It is the first week of January in 2022 and as I am walking through Old Havana and Vedado, I see numerous sacrificial offerings on the corners of where two streets cross (offered by *santeros* [practitioner of the Santería religion]). The prophecy for the year was announced on the 1<sup>st</sup> January and all priests in the religion (*babalaos*) are making offerings for prosperity

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<sup>37</sup> Video available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HfSNX\\_Czik](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HfSNX_Czik).

<sup>38</sup> The clave is a rhythmic percussion instrument referred to as “the soul of Afro-Cuban music” (Inman 2015).

and protection. While rumba was gaining prominence at least through a discursive valorisation following 1959, public displays of belonging to Santería were discouraged as religion was seen as contradictory to the ideological perspectives of the Revolution (Bodenheimer 2013; Moore 1997, 2006). Santería was considered “primitive and incompatible with the revolutionary ideal of an educated people” (UiO 2022). In the schools and in official publications the state advocated “scientific atheism” and beginning in the late 1960s the government did not allow anyone professing a religious belief to be a member of the Communist party or a trade union (Moore 2006: 208). Wearing a necklace or a bracelet associated with the religion could result in job losses and marginalisation from colleagues and neighbours. Some more vicious acts were also recorded, including throwing statues or the homes of the Orishas on the street (symbols associated with Santería practice). It was during the Special Period when religious freedom was introduced and Santería became not only acceptable but a fashion nourishing a large proportion of cultural tourism in the country (Sawyer 2006: 110).

Santería is now a visible part of the street scene (UiO 2022). Beyond the visual, which includes clothing and accessories, the audible aspects of Santería permeate the streets of the various barrios. When strolling down the streets of Havana, whether in Guanabacoa, Marianao or the centre of Vedado, one can often be reached by the echoes of drums and songs and eventually run into the house which they come from (Baiano 2014). A religious ceremony would be taking place offering music, dance, animal sacrifice and divination, which could evoke fear or charm in the passers-by. These sounds of chanting, drumming, laughing and the prophetic talk of a dancer possessed by an Orisha during a ceremony form part of the soundscapes characterising the streets of Havana. Nowadays, the visibility of Santería on the streets of Havana can be compared only to that of Hinduism on the streets of Mumbai – it is colourful, loud, and can be overwhelming.

Another Afro-Cuban rhythm, conga is carnival music associated with the *comparsas* - large ensembles of musicians, singers and dancers with a specific costume and choreography which perform in the street carnivals. The name is said to emerge from the term congo, which used to refer to the enslaved people brought from the Congo region in Africa (Ortiz 1924; Barnet 1997). While the exact roots of the conga are unclear and cannot be found in written sources, it is said to date back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Brea and Millet 1993). Historically, it was only during the conga carnivals that Afro-Cuban *cabildos* (social clubs) were permitted to form street processions with drumming and dancing (Aróstegui 2014: 29). The genre was associated with illiterate working Afro-Cubans and was considered to “contaminate” the culture of Cubans from Hispanic descent (Pérez 1988). A newspaper article from 1925 published the following:

“I refer to the ‘*conga*,’ that strident group of drums, frying pans and shrieks, to whose sounds epileptic, ragged, semi-nude crowds run about the streets of our metropolis, and who, between lubricious contortions and abrupt movements, show a lack of respect to society, offend morality, discredit our customs, lower us in the eyes of people from other countries and, what is worse, by their example, contaminate schoolchildren, who I have seen carried away by the heat of the lesson, panting and sweaty, engaging in frenetic competitions in corporal flexibility in those shameful tourneys of licentiousness.” (Pérez 1988: 337).

Beyond being visible, Afro-Cuban culture has also been commercialised over the years. Since the reorientation of the Cuban economy towards tourism and foreign investment in the 1990s, the study and performance of Afro-Cuban music had also flourished to levels higher than previously (Moore 2006: 193). This was the result of the new more liberalised policies towards music making (as discussed in Introduction), a growing interest in such repertoire by foreigners, and attempts on the part of the Afro-Cuban community to promote their traditions. Subsequently, dance bands which had never previously produced music with significant

folkloric content suddenly began to do so. An example is the “Appapas del Calabar” (“The Communities of Calabar”) song by Los Van Van (released in 1999)<sup>39</sup> that includes ritual Abakuá language and based upon narratives of Abakuá’s foundation documented by Lydia Cabrera.<sup>40</sup> While the song became a popular hit, Van Van refrained from performing it regularly in Cuba, still uncertain about the limits of Afro-Cuban expressions (Miller 2012: 89). Nevertheless, with the changing socio-economic environment, artists saw an opportunity in Afro-Cuban culture, music, and language, making their expressions more viable to capitalise on. Whether working on street corners or hotels, musicians were able to generate income and establish vital professional contacts (*ibid.* 194).

On the negative side, this widespread commercialisation of Afro-Cuban expression led to a phenomenon often referred to as “pseudo-folklorism”, “autoexotocism” and “*jineterismo cultural*” (*ibid.*). Cubans who had never had interest in Afro-Cuban expression began to do so for financial gains, performing stereotypes connected to the different aspects of the culture such as the possession by an Orisha or a spirit during religious ceremonies. I have often witnessed dancers on the Callejón de Hamel, simulating possession through convulsion and drooling while performing for foreigners or Cubans who wear the symbolic Santería bracelet and necklace without practicing the religion. In this context, Rogelio Martínez Furé notes that “folklore is being converted into tourist merchandise” (quoted in Moore *ibid.*). These expressions have been increasing substantially in the post-2010 period following the further socio-economic liberalisation implemented by the Cuban government, the significant growth in tourism resulting from President Obama’s engagement with Cuba, and the shortening of

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<sup>39</sup> Song available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSuhgBG8iXQ> [retrieved Oct. 2022]

<sup>40</sup> Lydia Cabrera was born in May 1899 in Havana and died in 1991 in Miami. She was a Cuban independent ethnographer, writer, and literary activist. She was an authority on Santería and other afro-Cuban religious and spiritual practices. Cabrera wrote over 100 books (little available in English) of which her most important is “EL Monte” (“The Wilderness”), which was the first ethnographic study of Afro-Cuban traditions, herbalism, and religion. Her papers and research were donated to the Cuban Heritage Collection – the largest depository of materials on or about Cuba located outside of Cuba – forming part of the library of the University of Miami (Tsang pers. comm).

cultural distances through digitalisation. Afro-Cuban culture and subsequently the street as its host domain have been transformed into key *sociocapitalist* commodities, removing almost entirely the fear of their expression. The symbols of the streets of Cuba, of the marginalised and underprivileged had further developed their earning potential and become a viable financial currency of the new post-2010 period.

## **2. Dance Music (*Música Bailable*):**

More recently, the genre which grew exponentially as one of the musical representations of the Special Period, timba is also intricately connected to street culture through “poetics of marginality aimed at challenging racial prejudice by fusing street rumba with African American popular music” and as a representation of marginalised Afro-Cuban youth (Perna 2005: 13). There is “a lot of street” in timba, says musician Raúl Frometa (quoted in Perna 2015: 141), in line with what Pérez claims to be true for Cuban music.<sup>41</sup> Through its lyrics, musical style, models of behaviour, and closeness to Afro-Cuban street culture, timba articulated the values of a largely black youth subculture. The taxonomy of the name itself is considered to have originated on the street. Opinions differ whether it came from the expression of *pan con timba* (bread with guayaba jelly), refers to the barrio of La Timba (a black neighbourhood in Havana), or is emerged from the English word timber, printed on wooden boxes used by rumberos as cajónes (*ibid.* 104).

Some of the iconic bands of the period include Los Van Van and NG La Banda (for details see p.275). NG’s first album released in 1990 was aptly title *En La Calle (On the Street)*. The later song “La Bruja” (“The Witch”) raised issues about sexual tourism, prostitution and *jineterismo* during the Special Period, which were taboo topics and addressed by the authorities only at a later stage (*ibid.* 192). Cubans narrate a story about the late Juan Formell (founder of

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<sup>41</sup> Raúl Frometa is a bass player, composer, and arranger of Havana Mambo.

Los Van Van) who used to walk around the marginal barrios of Havana listening to the problems people spoke about. He took on both the issues as well as the expressions of the local slang, which he then wrote into his song lyrics (Nelson Batista pers. comm. 2019). One example is the song “No Es Fácil, Que No, Que No” (“It Is Not Easy, It Is Not, It Is Not”)<sup>42</sup>, which speaks about the difficulty of life in Cuba in the 1980s (released in 1986). Formell had to drop a line which explicitly stated, “it is not easy to live like that”.

Unlike nueva trova, the youth music of the previous generation, which was written primarily by college-educated performers, “timba is written in the direct parlance of the street”, of the less educated (Moore 2006: 128). Timba does not often allude to themes discussed in nueva trova songs such as socialist struggles, international politics, and existential issues. Its lyrics are grounded much more on daily experience of local life, using slang and phrases from poor Afro-Cuban neighbourhoods, and are often “ironic, humorous, bawdy, and irreverent” (*ibid.*). Timba is a rhythmically dense energetic music with lyrics that draw from and become part of the language of the streets. As such, emanating from life on and the language of the street, timba lyrics and themes are fundamental to the popularity of the genre. Singing about illegal business dealings, the black market, the detrimental effects of tourism, and the lack of basic consumer goods, timba lyrics speak about the severe social problems of daily life. It what made timba so popular on the island, and struggling to find audiences abroad, argues Robin Moore (*ibid.* 129). Yet, 15 years later and the most popular timba bands have regular international tours and foreigners around the world are partaking in the culture, life, and language of the street dancing to the latest timba songs. Through the export of timba, the cultural symbols and life on the street had also been exported, making the street a valuable commodity in the new period of *SocCap201*.

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<sup>42</sup> Song available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dVqlluO45o>.

### ***3. Urban Music:***

Another important sound documenting the Special Period was that of hip-hop, which emerged on the streets of Havana in the 1980s, initially as a dance scene, and over the following decade as a “support network for the marginalised youths cut adrift by the dislocations of the crisis years of the Special Period” (Baker 2011a: 3). Unlike the first two sections discussing Afro-Cuban and dance music, which are originally Cuban musical styles (even if with foreign influence), hip-hop is an international genre with Afro-American roots, which much like in the US in its beginning was associated with marginalisation, blackness, the people on the street and the *barrio*. Like Afro-Cuban genres, rap was initially viewed as the music of the lower classes and rappers as people from the *bajo mundo* (rapper Silvito El Libre quoted by Zamora Montes 2017a: 91). Many Cubans would argue that rap was not even a musical genre.

At the same time, it was no surprise that rap emerged during the worst socio-economic crisis Cuba has witnessed in its history, argues poet and essayist Victor Fowler (Zamora Montes 2017b: 218). It gave voice to those who did not have the chance to express themselves on issues such as class and racial inequality, the difference between the city and the countryside, and favouritism of certain neighbourhoods in Havana versus the peripheral areas. Cuban intellectual Tomás Hernández Robaina argues that it was due to the songs of rappers that in Cuba rose a consciousness and pride in being black, in speaking about black aesthetics and against racism (Zamora Montes 2017a: 341). The genre offered a biting critique of racialised hardships faced by black Cubans in their everyday life experiences (Perry 2016). While not considered a black movement or a black community in Cuba and having provoked no consistent anti-racial cultural policy in the country (Baker 2011a: 276, 283), the hip-hop provided space for racial expression and dialogue. Hip-hop is the culture from where most critique of racial prejudice in the form of lyrics emerged on the island (Borges-Triana int.).



Hip-hop is more than just about black culture and race. As a representation of the underrepresented “hip-hop is created in the streets, not in universities”, sings Jessel Saladriga “El Huevo” from Los Paisanos (Baker 2011a: 24). The genre is viewed as a “street thing” in its native US as well. DJ Charlie Chase confronts notions of rap as black music, “... it came from the street and I’m from the street. I’m a product of the environment... It ain’t no Black, White or nothing thing, man” (quoted in Baker 2011a: 181). The idea that rap is not just a black thing but also a street thing, makes the genre both racial and spatial music (*ibid.* 182).

With the concertation of the live music circuit in the city centre of Havana, rap peñas held in cultural centres, parks and the homes of persons provided alternative spaces for socialising for young habaneros with limited means, which was excluded from the expensive social life of the touristic heart of Havana (Baker 2011a: 187). As journalist Ariel Fernández revealed, “música americana parties acted as social glue” for the marginalised generation of the Special Period. It provided safe and affordable spaces for youth to socialise on weekends, without conflict and fights, dancing to the music they liked. Hip-hop is associated with the street as both music, which emerged from and is connected to marginalised areas such as the peripheral barrio of Alamar and as expression of everyday life on the street.

With roots, which can be traced “behind enemy’s line”, rap was neither promoted nor supported by the Cuban government as it did not align with its ideological stance at its onset. It was therefore that it was not only music by the marginalised for the marginalised, but it also became music on the periphery of the Cuban cultural pyramid. “La Calle” by Primera Base gave the first signs of what subsequently categorised the genre as “critical” and “marginal” in the context of Cuban music, argues artist and writer Rodolfo Rensoli Medina (2017: 28). It was after 1999 when cultural minister Abel Prieto declared rap an authentic expression of *cubanidad* and began nominally funding the annual festival, and later the creation of the

ACRap in 2002 that gave some recognition to the genre and cubanised it in an attempt to nationalise it (Perry 2016: 189).

All of the above-discussed genres are associated with the street as a physical location, either having stylistically emerged and been performed at neighbourhood gatherings, having the language of the street, being performed by musicians with no formal education, or being present on the street through visual and audible displays, constituting part of the soundscape of the street. Their diversity indicates the richness of audio-visual characteristics of the streets of Havana as well as the social contradictions which characterise them – on one hand, they are associated with marginality, with blackness, the socially disadvantaged; on the other they are also culturally rich. The connections these genres have had with the street are also changing as their production, performance and consumption is moving to new locations, shifting the focus from the street as a physical location to making it more about the street as a socio-cultural construct.

### *Shifting Geographies of Sound*

#### *1. Fusion:*

The location was Paseo del Prado in Old Havana (2016) and smooth piano played few chords, followed immediately by singing in Yoruba by the Paris-based Cuban – French twin sisters Ibeyi (for biographical data see p.266).<sup>43</sup> The chant is in honour of the Orisha Odduduwa, the primordial ancestor, founder of the Yoruba dynasty from which all humanity sprang (Lovejoy and Olatunii 2015). The music did not follow the original chant. The voices were deeper with a vibe which reminded of a Cuban version of the fusion sound of lounge bar series such as Café del Mar and Buddha Bar. Naomi wore a chic shiny silver jacket accessorised

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<sup>43</sup> Lisa-Kaindé and Naomi are daughters of iconic percussionist Miguel “Angá” Díaz. The name of the group Ibeyi means twins in the Lucumí language and refers to the twin Orishas (Carroll 2015).

with four necklaces for different Orishas. Lisa-Kainde wore the very classical Chanel double-breasted soft pink coat, known to women around the world from advertisements since the 1950s. I am studying the video where the duo opened Chanel's first catwalk in Cuba on Avenida Prado on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2016.<sup>44</sup> The piano was joined by a jazzy drum, and a seventeen-piece orchestra followed. The collection reflected the influence of Cuban silhouettes and motifs. Touches of stereotypes, including models smoking cigars, shirts that read "Viva Coco Libre!" and a few berets "irreverently evoking 'Commander' Che Guevara" were also present (Fernández 2016). The event closed with Chanel's iconic designer Karl Lagerfeld walking down the catwalk along the rhythm of Cuba's festival conga. The singing was accompanied by a large Afro-Cuban band, all dressed in the traditional white clothing, playing the percussion, and dancing to the conga rhythms. All the models, which were non-Cubans, also danced along the rhythm of the conga, following the basic steps and hand movements.

Chanel had flown 700 people in for the event, including celebrities such Tilda Swinton, Vanessa Paradis, Gisele Bündchen, Alice Dellal, Caroline de Maigret and Langley Fox Hemingway (*ibid.*). No Cuban celebrities were honoured with tickets to the show. Local crowds lined up to watch but were separated from the Paseo runaway by a line-up of colourful vintage Cuban cars, which were transporting the guests. One could easily feel disoriented about where the event was taking place. Considering Havana's history as a Spanish colony and the area's remaining architecture from the period, the exclusive designer wear, audience composition, and the lounge bar sound, looking at the show one could not immediately guess it was staged in Havana. Paseo del Prado became the first street in Havana which hosted an exclusive evening for one of the world's most elitist fashion designers. The event opened with an interpretation of an Afro-Cuban religious gathering and ended with a version of a *cabildo* procession, which maintained the image of the street as communal space for social gatherings.

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<sup>44</sup> Show available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6PEVrQNk4w>.

At the same time this was not a neighbourhood gathering, where all participants were welcomed and shared the space and the experience. It was not an open access event where the poorest of Cuban society could participate. The street did not represent the periphery and the marginalised. It was a symbol of the changing aesthetics and aspirations of *sociocapitalist* Havana during the new period of *SocCap 201*.

With the changing socio-economic landscape in Cuba's capital, the streets of Havana are also transforming. The socio-economic and cultural characteristic of the street as a place of what is authentically Cuban are being altered. While it still holds true that life in Cuba happens on the street, the experience of socialising at the event was very different compared to evenings spent on the Malecón amongst friends and passers-by who join in spontaneously to drink some cheap rum and move to some timba. "It looks so chic", comments London-based salsa aficionado Sophia Savvopolou (pers. comm. 2017). It is not a description one would have traditionally attributed to the streets of Havana, which have been the dwelling places of bustling social life of any participant regardless of their credentials. Watching white European models dancing to the rhythms of conga played by Afro-Cuban percussionists of Rumberos de Cuba, can give the impression of belonging. The street had transformed from being inclusive to becoming not only commercialised but also exclusive. While on the surface there were no gender, ethnic, age, or national differentiations; it looked almost utopian and yet highly controversial that a new transnational community connected through the experience of Afro-Cuban culture and music and exclusive global fashion was formed. Still photographs of Prado that evening resembled a cover of an edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, not of the marginalised streets and Afro-Cuban neighbourhoods of Havana.

It was not just the physical space and its participants that were brushed off from the characteristics of everyday life on the streets of Havana, the sound of the event also differed to the Afro-Cuban sounds of the barrio. The main musical author of the evening was Cuban

pianist Aldo López-Gavilán who is known for his fusions of jazz and classical music, and his unique interpretation of spirituality. López-Gavilán does not utilise much percussion, if any, as he shares one of the goals of his career is “to try to not impose my culture over the true message you want to send, which is the beauty and deepness of emotional and spiritual language” (Kaliss 2021). The basis of Afro-Cuban rhythms is their percussive instrumentation, which the chosen music author does not prioritise; thus, removing the core sound of the street from the music that was being performed on the street.

Even the choice of Ibeyi as the singers to accompany López-Gavilán gives emphasis on fusion and the global. In a brief conversation with Maya Dagnino (mother and manager of the twins) after a concert in Brixton Academy in London (2018), I had requested if I could interview them for my doctoral research on Cuban music. Ms. Dagnino firmly responded that they do not perform Cuban music, it is not how their art should be marketed as they are fusion artists. I immediately referred to their song “River” as one of many examples, which is inspired by the Cuban patron saint Ochún and about the strong Afro-Cuban percussion influence in their music but received no answer.<sup>45</sup> She refused any further conversation. It was another obvious controversy that while Ibeyi used Afro-Cuban and street symbols through their appearances and musical compositions, their sound was not to be identified as a local Afro-Cuban folkloric genre but as an international style. The core sound of the street had been both commercialised and “purified” to suit an international audience. The choice of a band which does not identify itself as performers of Cuban music, confirmed the artistic focus on fusion, on what would aesthetically be more pleasing to a Chanel catwalk for foreign celebrity audiences even if it were held on the streets of Havana (Marín Maning int.).

Fusion and hybrid music is often associated with socio-cultural and economic globalisation and cosmopolitanism (Chou 2020; Maresh 2021). Cosmopolitanism - understood

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<sup>45</sup> Song available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHRAPIwsS5I>.

to mean that all people are citizens of the world - is viewed both as a challenge and a solution to the sustainability of non-western cultures (Appiah 2015: 9). Cultural “McDonaldization” driven by neoliberal economic globalisation is viewed as a threat to cultural plurality in favour of a hegemonic western based culture (Schiller 1976; Ritzer 1993). The positive view of cosmopolitanism challenges unreal loyalties to nation, city, gender, and any other artificial constructs, and promotes the sharing of the world and its cultural resources as global citizens (Appiah 2015: 9). In this context, there is an obligation to respect all human life, including the cultural practices and beliefs that lend it significance. Speaking about cosmopolitanism in Cuba has its challenges. The Obama era gave Cuba a strong sense of optimism and many Cubans saw the event on Paseo del Prado that evening as a glimpse of Cuba’s nearing future. Some musicians currently have more transnational existence than previously in history. These, however, are more the exceptions than the rule.

Besides López-Gavilán’s aptitude towards fusion music and lack of it towards Afro-Cuban rhythms, the author chose conga for the grand finale. The Chinese horn, frying pans and bombos of the final conga sounded more like the streets of Havana, standing in contrast to the previous repertory. Rather than acting as an ending of an event, the conga gave the feeling that the party was about to start. It seems rather paradoxical to see Chanel’s leading designer Karl Lagerfeld and European models and celebrities swaying to what is viewed as music of the *mundo bajo* in Cuba. There was a certain romanticisation of place and even the fashion content announced by the label focused on “a mysterious, musical Havana high life still associated with pre-revolutionary exuberance, with some military elements thrown in” (Fernández 2016). This further exaggerated the paradox where the street as a physical location and an abstract space represented both a glimpse of Cuba’s future and a memory of its past. As historian Karen Dubinsky (2016) points out, Cuba is a mix of many worlds, it is of the “other world” and so are its streets as spaces for socio-cultural and economic interactions.

Krims conceives of space and place as mutually constitutive and articulates that in the current economic climate of neoliberal capitalism the romanticisation of place as intimate and culturally authentic is a successful tourism marketing strategy (Krimms 2007: 36). The “symbolic value of place helps sell it to tourists”; hence, place becomes integral to the “economic restructuring of cities into tourist/ service hubs” (Bodenheimer 2015: 9). The transformation of Prado as a runway for Chanel gave the streets of Havana a brand-new image and experience, transforming them from places of communal gatherings and sharing of Cubans of any socio-cultural or economic background, where foreigners were invited as guests to partake in the life of Cubans, to places of fashion, exclusivity, where foreigners were invited, and Cubans left out. Unlike the expensive bars and clubs of Havana which usually leave Cubans out due to economic challenges, the street as the communal dwelling of habaneros was now becoming exclusive to its own inhabitants.

This gentrification of the touristic parts of Havana which had started during the Special Period (I will discuss in more detail in chapter 2) is now affecting the public spaces of the capital, privatising them for the use of few privileged cosmopolitans. For example, the Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana and its luxury mall, based around the corner from where the Chanel show took place, opened in 2017, shortly after the fashion venture. With a roof swimming pool and dishes at USD30 for a main course (equal to the monthly salary of many government employees), the hotel brings more luxury to Havana’s streets. Its shopping mall offers perfumes at USD73, the national salary of a well-paid professional, the mall remains prohibitive to most habaneros (The Guardian 2017). The reality of the post-2010 era has been different. While Cuba has been getting deeper into capitalism despite the stricter blockade rules of the last two US administrations, official inflation at 70% and an unofficial rate of consumer price inflation estimated at 740% in 2021 have led to further economic marginalisation (EIU 2021). “Now is much worse than what was before Obama” (Marín Maning int.). Afro-Cuban

percussionist Roberto Hernández confirms he needs to work with foreign students and search for opportunities such as Chanel's show or he will not be able to pay for his daughter's fifteenth birthday party (pers. comm. 2021). Getting called to play for free in the neighbourhood has always been great fun and an inspiration but not at a time when a carton of eggs costs 600MN (equivalent to USD24 at official exchange rate). Cuba's entry into *SocCap 201* is changing the physical characteristics of the streets of Havana as well as the sound and the rules of participation.

## **2. Rap:**

“Rumba and other Afro-Cuban rhythms have been commercialised and have come out of the streets and the margins of society”, argues DJ Reymel (pers. comm., for biographical notes see p.277) as we are filming a debate for the 2021 International Symposium of Cuban Hip-Hop. “It is only us rappers that are behind everyone else and still dwindling on the outskirts of Cuban music”. “The rapper does not want to change his thinking, he does not want to innovate”, says producer Jhoan Baez, “he needs to look to the reggaetoneros and learn about how to commercialise his music to make sound better and to get to perform into better venues” (pers. comm.). We are in Baez's studio in Miramar, one of the leading private studios and producers in Havana today. “I need to be realistic, we are still bound to the streets”, says Milton McDonald, “how many bars in Havana will have a rapper for the night...”, he asks rhetorically (pers. comm.).

While some authors point to the government's attempt to institutionalise and nationalise rap through the ACRap (Baker 2011a; Perry 2016; David 2021), the genre remains connected to the streets of Havana physically and stylistically. “Rap does not belong to the ACRap, it belongs to the street” (Marín Maning pers. comm.). The only street parties I have been to in the past two years have been rap and basketball get-togethers called *Pa' Bajo* (Go Down) in



the park Mariana Grajales on 23 between C and D (Nov. 2021) and the school yard of Linea and 12 street (Dec. 2021), both in Vedado. The latter event started at around 3pm in the afternoon. Rappers and visitors are both playing basketball while DJ Lino on the decks is alternating between American hip-hop classics and Cuban rap from the 1990s until today. The events are organised by rapper Etian Arnau Lizaire (known artistically as Brebaje Man) and under the patronage of the ACRap and its director is responsible for delivering the audio system and speakers. At around 6pm a selection of young rappers began to perform live with background music by the DJ. The audience is mixed, including other rappers, youth playing basketball, passers-by, mothers with prams, which have entered to take a rest and listen. They are dressed rather modestly; three of them wear the same Lakers vest. There are no chains hanging down their necks and no flashy iPhones in their hands. A police car passes by but quickly moves on. “Cuban rap is very healthy”, says Marín. There is little drink, a bottle of rum goes round many mouths, no drugs, and no fights; the police do not need to be here unless they want to enjoy the music. The street in rap might be economically marginalised, but it does not belong to delinquents. It continues to provide the earlier discussed alternative spaces for the less well-off Cubans (Baker 2011a). The event finishes at 8.30pm not to disturb the neighbours with the loud music. I feel almost as if I am in London.

Other weekly events in open places are held at the park John Lennon in Vedado and the Callejón de Hamel in Cayo Hueso, Central Havana. The latter is a symbolic place for Sunday performances of rumba and Santería music and dance. The Callejón’s aesthetics are “colourfully awash with Afro-Cuban religious motifs and murals as well as a few ritual altars” (Perry 2016: 42). There is no actual stage, the stage area is at the same level as the limited chairs available and the rest of the public crowds standing. In this context, rap shares the same socio-cultural place and space as Afro-Cuban folklore. This search by rap artists for open places to perform, further resembles the dancehall sessions held every night of the week on streets,

schoolyards, beach fronts, recreational complexes, and private homes in Cuba's neighbour Jamaica (Stolzoff 2000: 193 – 194). Another Caribbean culture associated with the street, public spaces and marginalised communities, dancehall parties have had to look for alternative spaces, because of police interventions. Like Cuban rap, dancehall rules stand against drugs, guns, alcohol, nakedness or other dangerous, criminal, or obscene behaviours.

In mid-December 2021 I went to another event organised under the patronage of the ACRap and held on its premises. It is a concert called Legada, organised by Milton McDonald.<sup>46</sup> The event showcases the new generation of Cuban rappers, some of which were on an official concert stage for the first time, and neither of which pertains to the ACRap. Besides Milton, these were only white rappers. The entrance is 50MN, which is the cheapest in Havana and the rate the Agency maintains. I am accompanied by Ernesto Hernández, a 34-year-old Cuban friend of mine who is an engineer-turned-masseurs as a state job in engineering paid him very little. He is impressed by the lyrics, topics vary from love to social issues, which use street language but are “poetic, deep and clean”, no vulgarisms can be heard. WNF are coming on stage and Ernesto exclaims confused: “que cosa más rara, tiene la pinta de rockero y está cantando rap” (“how very weird, looks like a rocker but sings rap”). Ernesto is referring to the fact that almost all rappers were white, middle-class from the areas of Vedado and New Vedado, most of them university students, dressed in casual clothing, some with long hair and beards, physical features usually attributed to the stereotype of rockers. “And look at this one”, he continues pointing at rapper EIDI with long hair and glasses coming on stage, “it is like I am looking at John Lennon rapping”. “I am not interested to fit in the image of the “authentic” Cuban” says Milton McDonald even though he is black and has long dreadlocks, “I am a rapper, not a *santero* [practitioner of the Santería religion]!” (pers. comm.). He certainly cannot put

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<sup>46</sup> Milton McDonald does not belong the catalogue of artist of the Cuban Rap Agency, he is part of the cultural organisation Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHSIa). Nevertheless, Marín Maning opens the space to rappers who are not part of his catalogue with the view to maintain the Havana hip-hop scene as active as possible.

two feet together when dancing salsa or timba, another characteristic attributed to the Cuban stereotype where all Cubans are supposed to love dancing timba and be naturally outstanding dancers. Audiences are also predominantly white and from the same neighbourhoods as the artists. They consume more at the bar than any other rap audience I have come across, and it was the highest bar bill the ACRap has had from an in-house event, confirms Marín Maning.

There are two distinctive rap scenes that I am identifying in Havana: one connected to the street through the places of performance and economic marginalisation, and the other serving the consumption preferences of Havana's middle-class youth who would visit events indoors and even pay for consumption at Havana's new modern bars should they invite a rapper for the night. The former is evidently blacker and more connected to the older generation of artists and the second whiter and connected to youth artists. While rap is still connected to the street stylistically, it is also looking for commercialisation to sustain itself. "We are the only musicians who have to pay to perform", complains Milton McDonald, "we are the poor cousins of everyone" (pers. comm.). Demarginalization and relocation of rap from the street to places which bring higher economic benefits becomes a necessity in the new period of *SocCap 201*. Instead of remaining poorly paid and often performing at run-down and small locations, rappers are looking to enter the circuit of more modern venues, associate with an audience, which has higher purchasing power.

Simultaneously, due to its perceived independent spirit and marginalised underground image, recently rap became the bridge between musicians in Cuba, Latin America, and the US, through the MTV (Music Television) series "De la Calle" ("From the Street"). In August 2022, the US cable entertainment network filmed a chapter of the new series on the rooftop of DJ Jigüe's Guampara Music independent label, created to promote hip-hop and fusion music in Cuba and located in *Centro Habana* (see Figure 4). This is the first programme of this character filmed by MTV in Cuba with the participation of Cuban musicians (to be released in 2023).

The event was a concert which participants included variety of rappers from different ages and belonging to the different rap scenes of Havana. McDonald tells me that “it was a really good event... it was the first time I felt Cuban rap was really visible internationally” (pers. comm). Other episodes will be filmed in the US, Puerto Rico, Panama, and Spain. Through this programme MTV seeks to reconnect with its free underground spirit, which characterised its creation in the early 1980s (Cuba Noticias 360 2022).

Figure 4: *MTV Recording “De la Calle”, Rooftop, Guampara Music (2022)*



*Photo credit: Cuba Noticias 360, 2022*

While Cuban rappers seek to commercialise themselves to sustain their lives and careers, it was rap’s association with marginalisation and the street and the feeling of authenticity this generates, which transformed the Cuban rap scene into an internationally

desirable commodity. The run-down streets and buildings of the overpopulated and underprivileged barrio of Central Havana and the sound of a scene not supported by the government became the selling points for a US programme, which sought an underground non-commercial spirit and sound to give itself authenticity. At the same time connection for the programme was made by a DJ who is very entrepreneurial and has worked on numerous international collaborations following the socio-economic changes implemented in Cuba and relaxation in travel post-2010. In this context the street became simultaneously run-down and commercialised, local and global, connecting Cuba with other locations across Latin America and the US and with global audiences. The sound of rap became what internationally is regarded as the real and authentic sound of Havana, an image usually prescribed to Afro-Cuban rhythms, dance music or the traditional music of Buena Vista Social Club.

### **From the Street to the Studio: *El Sentimiento de la Música Cubana***

In his chapter on “The Disc Is Not the Avenue”, Fred Moehn underlines the differences between music making on the street during Rio de Janeiro’s famed samba carnival and the recording of carnival music in the studio. The carnival is a four-day annual competition among large samba “schools” which parade up a specially built avenue popularly referred to as the *sambadrome* (Moehn 2005: 47). These schools are community-centred organisations based around large percussion ensembles. The bigger schools may have more than 300 percussionists on the avenue, along with a lead singer and limited harmonic accompaniment (*ibid.*). The production of the festival includes many participants, both professionals and amateurs, including the singing crowds, sound and mechanical technicians, drivers, as well as visual aesthetics driven by the costumes worn by performers. By contrast, Moehn points out that the producers of the albums, which are released after each festival to include the music that was

performed at the event, continuously reiterated that the studio is not the avenue. Subsequently, the producer controlled the recorded sound, which is the marketable and reproducible product, which they wanted to sound “clean” in comparison to the sound of the avenue, which they perceived as “dirty, rough, or cluttered” (*ibid.* 48).

There were no such power relations which took place in the studio recording sessions I attended in Havana. In 2018 I attended the recording of the parts by Alain Pérez on bass and Eduardo Sandoval on trombone for the song *Sin Comentarios* by Adonis y Osain del Monte. Adonis Panter kept dancing rumba the entire day aiming to explain to the recording musicians that this is his vision as to how audiences will dance to the music, which meant they needed to record their parts in a way to invoke such dancing. He continuously repeated “maybe, I am dancing too much”, but this is how he know we are achieving the correct sound (see Figure 5).<sup>47</sup> Everyone was singing the chorus line “sin comentarios, timba cerrada”, while dancing to the rhythm and re-filling plastic cups from a bottle of Havana Club rum. There was surely no need for any further comments, since the musicians all knew how to re-create the rumba sentiment, the *manana* in the studio, as well as in the recording.<sup>48</sup> *Sin Comentarios* is what Rubén Bulnes calls a *guaguancó* (a style of rumba) influenced by timba music. I would argue that the piece is a timba in the format of *guaguancó*.<sup>49</sup> The most important guidance Panter and Bulnes gave to the recording musicians was through dance, how the song is meant to be danced on the street because of the feeling it gives to listeners. Swaying romantically, they were joking with Sandoval that they need a strong impactful Afro-Cuban and *guaguancó* sound and not the sweet sound of the salsa of Issac Delgado in whose band Sandoval was performing at the time.

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<sup>47</sup> See video of recording session at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhQ9QkHQqgA>.

<sup>48</sup> *Manana* is a slang word of the street, etymologically coming from the Yoruba language of the West African enslaved persons which were transported to Cuba; it is the feeling that musicians transmit through their play to capture their audiences (Manana Cuba). See Pérez on the importance of “el sentimiento” in music and the high calibre of Cuban music in an interview with German gig bag brand Soundwear (2018). It is this sentiment that kept Cuba and its music alive in him while he was living abroad (Planells 2017).

<sup>49</sup> Song available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH1WWyhwM0s>.

Both Panter and Bulnes were determined that listeners should immediately feel the boom of the rumba on the street and start dancing to their music as soon as they hear the song on CD, radio, or other media. There was no digital correction of the sound or notation, and they were determined to recreate the street as closely as possible on the recording.

Figure 5: *Rubén Bulnes, Adonis Panter, Alain Pérez (from left to right)*

*Church Studio, Old Havana*



*Photo by author, April 2018*

In a similar manner, Adonis y Osain del Monte are always determined to transform each locale they play at to recreate a party on the streets of Havana. Watching them perform at piano bar *Diablo Tun Tun*, the band was reproducing the atmosphere of Afro-Cuban *bembes* and *tambores* (additional terms for parties and get-togethers in Havana, borrowed from Afro-Cuban religions ceremonies) on the streets and in the homes of habaneros. Even at the 2017 New Orleans Jazz Festival, they wanted to recreate the atmosphere of the street, of the fiesta on the streets of Havana (Rubén Bulnes pers. comm. 2018). He put his hands up and requested

audiences to put their hands up, to clap to the rhythm and dance to the moves, to hum along to Yoruba lyrics, even though they did not understand them. Bulnes thought that audiences would get bored, even somewhat lost, if they continuously listen to the virtuosity of musicians such as Chucho Valdés and Irakere (see p. 267) without being able to express the feeling through bodily movement. Feeling the music in Cuba is just as important as playing it; it is through the sentiment that a listener, an audience relates to the music. Adonis y Osain del Monte are less concerned about acoustics and more focused on recreating the celebratory atmosphere, the *manana* sentiment of the Cuban street, whether they are performing in Cuba or abroad.

The relationship between Sandoval and Pérez in the studio during the recording of his album *More Trombone than Ever: Tribute* also differed from the power struggles on issues of creating and performing sound in the case of the Rio Festival album recordings (Moehn 2005). Besides the great respect which Sandoval has for Pérez as an internationally recognised musician, composer, and arranger, which made him take on board his producer's guidance, he was very much in charge of what was taking place with his album. When Sandoval disagreed with a particular way the recording was done, he shared his views and discussed it with Pérez and the sound engineer Carlos de Vega. Producer and sound engineer did not impose their individual views on Sandoval. There were no discussions on how to make the album more marketable by differentiating it from the street. Sound was not determined by racial conflict and aesthetical practice was not determined by a political ideology as in the case of South Africa in the early 1990s during its transition from apartheid to democratic rule (Meintjes 2003). The focus was on good play by the musicians, where notes and phrases will be re-recorded repeatedly because they were not played correctly, or at the right tempo, or with the correct feeling. But none of the pieces were changed to sound differently on the CD in comparison to the street. On the contrary, Pérez, Sandoval, as well as the musicians were



thinking of how a piece would be played at an event, and how would audiences connect to it through bodily movement, when searching for the correct sound to be recorded in the studio.

There was no serious technical manipulation altering the sound. If one note was not in place it was retaken as many times as necessary until the musician got it exactly right. I noticed that in all recordings I attended, which included the work of different musicians, from various genres, generations and in different studios. The job of the sound engineer did not involve many corrections for notes played out of tune or not entered at the correct time. The reason for this could be in the strict education, whether in the academy or on the street of Cuban musicians. As early as the 1920s American jazz band leaders noted it was much better to hire Cuban musicians in their ensembles, not only because they were cheaper, but because they could read the music excellently, better than US musicians themselves (Acosta 2003: 20). It could be due to the high standards of performance for which Cuban musicians continuously aim. It could also be because it is part of their musical culture or consciousness. I am unsure of the reason behind it, but there was not even the concept of digitally altering the original sounds. The final arrangements of the CD included changing the volumes on each instrument so the different instruments can be heard properly during their solos, and that one instrument does not overpower other instruments. This is of course a major difference between recording and live performance. However, not any alteration to the level of musical capabilities through manipulation of their play. If Cuban musicians can perform live, then they can certainly perform in the studio to the required levels. Such emphasis on authenticity recreated the street in the studio, to probably the best possible level.

Besides the already set elements of the recording there was an evolution in the creative development of Sandoval's album which took place because of interactions in the studio and when reviewing the product during the process of its creation. This creative development stemmed from conversations, from listening to the music. For instance, it was during the

recording of “Trombone for Orula” (lyrics and music composed by Rubén Bulnes), when Sandoval decided to add the listing of the names of what he considered to be the great trombone players of Cuba (a list approved by Pérez). As he was coining the title of his album to be *More Trombone Than Ever: Tribute*, he built in the verbal tribute to what he considers to be his lineage. This very much carries the culture of the jazz jamming sessions, but also the Afro-Cuban religion culture of Santería, in which tribute to predecessors, blood relatives or other figures or authority, is an integral part. It also created the feeling of a street, the path he was walking in his career and individual development, from his roots to his current stage as one of the most prominent trombone players in Cuba, searching for international stages and recognition.

For the same recording, Sandoval also requested Adonis to record a solo with a quinto (the smallest and the highest pitched of the conga set of drums), because “playing the quinto, it is all heart” (pers. comm.). In the *guaguancó* style of rumba, the quinto is played for *sabor*, almost entirely through improvisation. Visitors and the crew in the studio were in awe of his play and repeatedly asked about his background and training. Shrugging his shoulders, Adonis responded he has no training, it is all in the blood, it is in him, it is how he grew up on the streets. The quinto player constantly switches phrases in response to the changing steps of the dancers. During the recording of “Trombon a Orula”, Adonis was playing the quinto as he would to the dancers on the streets of Havana, in the Callejón de Hamel, El Palacio de La Rumba, or at *bembes*, *rumbons* or *tambores* at the houses of habaneros. He recreated the street in the recording studio, as part of Sandoval’s CD, without any technical changes to the purity or clarity of the sound, and with the intention to create such a piece that consumers want to dance to it, whether they are listening to it at home, in a public place, in a music venue, or in their car in Cuba or anywhere else in the world. In this context, the recorded music of Sandoval

is also de-territorialising the streets of Havana by transporting them around the world through music distribution.

The studio as a social space itself incarnated the social life on the streets of Havana. With all the buzz, excitement, and responsibilities it was difficult to note down exactly how many people visited the studio during the recording of Sandoval's album; however, I can confidently estimate it was more than fifty visitors. These included friends, foes and family, the director from EGREM who organised the sponsorship for his album, musicians curious to see what his latest album will look like, musicians working with him on other projects, music students, producers and promoters of other musicians, friends and family of other musicians recording with Sandoval, even a South Korean friend of mine who was learning jazz piano over two months in a private school in Havana. Conversations and music were accompanied by food and drink. Lunch and dinner were always organised by Sandoval's executive producer Susu Selim for all participants in the recording as well as for guests which stayed longer in the studio rather than just stop by. Payment for the food was all taken care of by Sandoval despite the limited funds he had available for his project. Towards the end of each recording, achievements were celebrated by listening to the track, dancing to it, and sharing a drink by the participating musicians and guests alike.

Within its safe, sound-proof architecture, the studio further offered a space for the enjoyment of Cuban music through listening and dance, for the sharing of intimate stories and reliving memories. It encouraged passionate discussions on the historical and current significant and importance of Cuban music and musicians, examining tradition and the latest innovations in different genres. Pérez was sharing a wealth of stories about his international experiences with great musicians such as the late Spanish flamenco virtuoso Paco de Lucia, Brazilian cajón master Rubem Dantes, important jazz figures such as Chick Corea and Winston Marshall, and Spanish jazz-flamenco fusion singer Diego el Cigala who has long history with

Cuban music and musicians. Some of his stories included the less glamorous but more intriguing side of studio recording, including fights and problems in the recording studio in Spain. Pérez's recollections during these moments became *patakínes*, meaning "story" or "legend" in the Yoruba language (Aróstegui 2014: 40). Pérez undertook the persona of a *babalao* sharing stories with his godchildren. Sandoval also often called him a *babalao* of musical knowledge and a creative genius.

Simultaneously the studio transformed into an open forum and atmosphere for sharing the experience of recording Sandoval's album as well as for communication and discussions between musicians and other practitioners in the music industry. Conversations were focused as much on the creative processes as on the challenges Cuban musicians currently face in producing and promoting their own projects in Cuba, as well as the overall difficulties of life on the island. More than the street, the physical attributes of the studio offered a safe space for discourses on the changing socio-economic reality of Havana and its impact on habaneros and musicians. Like the street, the studio was also a safe space for musicians to share their dreams and hopes. Conversations spread from their more material desires of purchasing a better instrument to a new iPhone, to sharing their immediate and general career goals and aspirations. Pérez spoke about his ambition to be able to have a career schedule of alternating a year of creating and recording his own projects, and a year of performing globally and producing the projects of other musicians. Sandoval was joking that he stole the name Eduardo wanted for his album. Pérez's CD's name *Blanco y Negro (White and Black)*, a name Sandoval really wanted for his own project. He referred to the balance and unity the title carries, bringing different and even opposing assets together, such as different races, realities, day and night, home and abroad, the good and the bad, struggles and successes. By providing a safe space for open communication and the intimate sharing of personal hopes and dreams, the studio became

more than the street, it also became a place of identity and belonging, recreating a home environment.

Discussions on the challenges musicians face today in Cuba were a significant part of the social aspects of the studio. This transformed the atmosphere into one similar to the streets of Havana where Cubans share about the problems, they face on daily basis existing in the city, especially in the current period of deepening economic and socio-special inequalities between a small Cuban elite and a large proportion of cash-stricken citizens. With the building of modern hotels, bars and clubs, traditional social structures and values are breaking down. An example of this collapse is the old correlation between education and status, which no longer exists in Havana. In the sociocapitalist city waitresses working at the newly established private music venues and bars can afford foreign holidays, while heads of academic departments at the reputable national universities need to work privately, getting paid “under-the-table”, to cover their basic needs (Manuel int.). Engineers and accountants are picking up new jobs as taxi drivers because of the increasing demand of the tourist industry and the many-fold higher earning potential. The earning pressure on habaneros is rapidly increasing and they are continuously searching for new ways to adapt to the changing socio-economic reality of the capital.

## **The Vacuum in Music Education**

“There were no mobile phones when I was learning to sing rumba. You had to go to the old rumbero, make sure he is in a good mood, bring him a bottle of rum, ask him to sing the song and hopefully slowly enough so you can write down the lyrics in a little notebook. And then go again at another time to make sure you learn the melody correctly.” (Gerardo De Armas pers. comm. 2020). Currently based between London and Rome, Gerardo De Armas Sarria is the first Cuban rumbero to extensively perform and teach the genre in the UK. Growing up in

the neighbourhood of Párraga on the periphery of Havana, De Armas Sarria learnt singing from the rumberos in the barrio. He spent a great deal of his career performing with the iconic Yoruba Andabo and Irosso Obbá, regular at Callejón de Hamel, before moving to London, where he performed with the London Lucumi Choir, Acosta Danza and on numerous occasions at venues such as Ronnie Scott's, Jazz Café, and Pizza Express Jazz Club. His trajectory of learning in a poor barrio in Havana to performing at leading London music venues, demonstrates the value of music education on the streets of Cuba's capital.

“Of course, in the academy we were trained in classical music, but jazz and timba we learnt to play on the streets” (Dayramir Gonzalez int.). A Cuban piano player living in Los Angeles, a former scholarship holder from Berkeley college of music, Gonzalez confirmed that despite his own background as a graduate from ENA and el ISA, he learnt a lot of his musical performance practices on the streets of Havana. It is not only rumberos who have no formal education that improve their skills on the streets but musicians from Cuba's top academies are also mastering their skills through informal pedagogy. However, with the changing social structures of the island's capital, the opportunities to learn are also being altered. Rumberos need to pay bills and buy food like everyone else and teaching and performing freely does not provide the necessary income to cover these expenses in the exponentially rising prices of Havana.

Formal learning is often described as that which occurs in a traditional pedagogic environment where clarity of goals and procedures are clearly defined in advance and where learning results in certification or assessment. Informal, or at times referred to as non-formal learning, occurs outside traditional learning environments such as the school, academy, conservatoire, or university, is not the result of deliberation and does not generally result in certification (Wright and Kanellopoulos 2010: 72 – 73). Informal learning is often connected to specific musical genres, which in the case of Cuba is almost all genres outside classical

music – rumba, orishas (and other folklore styles), rap, timba, son, guajiras (and other traditional genres), and even jazz are all domains of informal learning. The methods of learning of the informal pedagogy of the different genres differ. While some instruments are almost entirely learnt on the streets such as the congas and batá to perform folkloric music, jazz musicians often come with their instrument knowledge attained in the academy and it is the rhythms and rules of the genre, which they learn informally.

The street is not just the physical location where children learn music and dance through informal education; it is life itself as sung by Primera Base, it is also personal and collective history. The documentary “In the Blood, In the Home, In the School, In the Street: Growing into Music in Cuba” (Baker 2011b) documents and analyses the learning processes of children studying oral traditions such as Afro-Cuban rumba and religious music. The street in Cuba carries some of the saddest world history, that of slavery, but also some of the deepest and most emotional songs, argues Cuban musicologist Cary Díez. Children “breathe” their African traditions and “find their happiness” in the street. The street then becomes more than just the site for learning music and dance. It transforms into an education on the person, a site for expression of one’s roots, providing participants with a “rich inheritance”, emotional and spiritual belonging.

On the streets where children learn rumba and religious music, poverty becomes a lesser factor in the educational process and in their self-identification. Neighbourhood gatherings and parties are frequent and free. Watching the musicians and copying their play, asking them to explain does not require financial resources. A musician does not even need instruments to start playing; having two spoons is enough to play the clave. Moreover, growing up into Afro-Cuban music and culture “is a privilege”, argues a female protagonist in the documentary (*ibid.*). All educated on the street are continuously growing into the music and culture regardless of their age and how they have played for. It is a continuous process of becoming part of the culture

where a musician learns with each party and religious ceremony they attend. It is regarded as good career progress to grow into music on the street and subsequently continue one's education in an academic institution, which would make it easier to enter a music agency and work officially in the country. One can also be a musician their entire career having only studied on the street. However, there is always something lacking if a musician has only studied in the academy, argues the director of folkloric ensemble "Clave y Guaguancó" Amado Dedéu García (*ibid.*). There are intransient skills one grows into in the street, such as the flavour, the "badness" with which a musician performs. A good musician can do without formal education, but they cannot do without the experience of the street. There is a valorisation of the immaterial skills one develops in the street.

While both the street and the academy have been responsible for the strong education and development of skills and virtuosity of Cuban musicians (*ibid.*), changes in the social construction of the street are slowly creating a distinctive gap in the music education of current and future generations. Traditionally, popular, and folkloric music were the genres with which children grew up and learnt on the streets and in the social gatherings and environment of their neighbourhood. The academy has been the place where students have been and continue to be educated primarily in classical music. There are limited classes now at ISA on Afro-Cuban percussion; however, learning to play salsa, rumba and Orishas has been a skill developed on the streets and poorer boroughs of Havana within a cultural setting. Hence, learning Afro-Cuban music and dance was part of a way of life more than an educational endeavour. At its core, it took place outside the realm of the academy regardless of the social or economic background of the student. With the popularisation of Afro-Cuban music, classes on its specific genres were also introduced to organised education; however, the development of deep knowledge within the genres remained the domain of the informal, the street and the *solar*. Even styles such as jazz have not been taught as part of ISA's curriculum and are mostly learnt



outside the class schedule. In December 2021 Marín received a call from one of the governors of ISA requesting him to prepare some talks and teaching. He was informed that the university recognises the limitations of its own curricula by teaching only classical music. They have a new initiative in which Mayito Rivera will be giving some classes on timba and they would like to invite Marín to give some classes on rap. The winds of change could be also making some ways into changing the established formal educational system.

With the changing socio-economic structure of Havana's society and the gentrification of the capital's streets due to the country's move towards a more *sociocapitalist* economic system, the social structure of neighbourhoods is also transforming (Yepe 2017). Rising prices and the high cost of imported goods is prioritising the need for survival or to earn higher income for a significant proportion of the population. Growth in tourism and the emerging class of Havana's nouveau riche have also led to deeper distinctions between the richer and poorer boroughs of the island's capital. As a result, social life has also significantly lessened for the poorer or relocated for the richer to the new music venues and clubs.

The romanticisation of the street fiestas represents an emerging nostalgia of a disappearing social structure as the traditional forms of neighbourhood gatherings is rapidly changing. While large social festivities around religious ceremonies still take place, they are also very much driven by financial resources and are happening indoors. This is creating a gap in the educational structure of Cuba's youth with the transformation of the street as a social space and its lessening role as an educational facility for marginal communities. Informal education is reducing, and conservatories and the university remain the main forms of education. Percussionist Roberto Hernández told me that while the results of this are not entirely felt yet, its impact will become more visible within the coming five to ten years, where a gap will exist within the world of rumberos y bataleros (pers. comm.). Borges-Triana on the other hand argues that eventually rumberos will always find at least some time to teach the

children in the solar and the barrio (int.). Observing the rising prices in Havana, I am more aligned with the former and feel some concern about the future.

## **Conclusion**

Afro-Cuban music and dance are being de-marginalised and relocated from Cuba's impoverished streets and areas to places of significance on the island and abroad. The culture which emerged from the island's history of colonialism and slavery is currently receiving a status of national pride and international recognition. Post-colonial social processes and the emergence of post-socialist economics on the island are also transforming the significance of place and memory in the consciousness of Cubans. The symbolism of the street is changing in response to the changing socio-economic environment of the country. On the one hand, it is maintaining the sense of authenticity and belonging to a rich and successful musical profession, and as a space remains the symbolic home of Cuban music and culture. On the other hand, the reality of the street is changing; the most popular and successful musicians are performing less often on the street and are instead relocating to Havana's newly established private venues and to international concert halls. As commercialism and economic pursuit are no longer denigrated by former socialist views in Cuban society but rather accepted as the necessity of the day, Cuban musicians of various genres are following the changes and adapting to the demands of the post-2010 Obama era.

“To have street in your music”, explains Marín, “means that people can relate to the language and sound of the song, that it represents their everyday life” (int.). Thus, transferring the essence and symbolism of the street to the studio and the CD, or to an international festival, Cuban musicians are de-territorialising Cuban culture and identity, the experiences of everyday life, and re-constructing the social identity of the street in the new locales. In this way, through music and dance movements which are not inherently, or overtly political, Cuban

musicians are exporting immaterial Cuban culture and social values without government control or direction, and to geographies in opposition of the Cuban government such as the US. Such paradoxes are currently permeating Havana's music profession and environment, shifting social scene, and the role musicians play at the forefront of Cuba's socio-economic changes and internationalisation.

During Cuba's socialist past as part of Soviet bloc of socialist countries, the island has always had a partial European consciousness, considering itself second world and more developed than the formerly categorised third world<sup>50</sup>. This is due to high levels of literacy, education, low crime rates, low rates of infant mortality, universal healthcare and education, and low unemployment rates which have characterised the country since its 1959 Socialist Revolution. It is therefore that to many Cubans, especially habaneros, it is natural that now the country is in fashion and that foreigners are interested in being part of the changing world of Cuba. On the other hand, it is also possible that the Chanel catwalk is a glimpse of Cuba's future, one divided between a wealthy minority enjoying the most exclusive international products and services, and a more underprivileged larger proportion of the population. This can come to pass especially should Cuba follow a more Russian model of post-socialist economic development (Morris 2015). This future, while de-marginalising Afro-Cuban rhythms from *solares* and poor neighbourhoods, is simultaneously re-marginalising its less privileged population, moving from distinctions based on race and ethnicity to ones based on economic factors and class. This has been becoming especially evident with the hyperinflation rates of basic goods such as food, medicines, and clothes during 2021 and 2022. This transformation of the social qualities of space is shifting both sound and people. While the essence of the street

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<sup>50</sup> While the classifications of countries as first, second and third are colonial in nature and outdated, I am using them here for the purposes of defining past existing categories within international politics, economics, and development, which describe Cuba's place in international relations.

remains as constitutive in the national cultural imaginary, Cubans are physically moving further away from it in the post-2010 era and the new period of *SocCap 201*.

## Chapter 2: The Spaces and Sounds In-between

Scholars on the dynamics of change have recognised that major policy changes are hard to make, and that terminating longstanding, well-entrenched policies and programmes is even harder (LeoGrande 2015: 473). US policies towards Cuba and socio-economic and cultural programmes in Cuba have been natural laboratories for this theory. While changes, some of them revolutionary in nature, have been taking place both internally and in its relationship with the US since the early 2010s, Cuba is still operating in a limbo between socialism and capitalism, local and foreign, old and new, isolationism and globalisation. As periods of transition are always characterised by uncertainty, Cuba's socio-economic changes have followed unique processes, different to the rest of the countries of the former Soviet bloc, China, and Vietnam, even if based on some of their policies (LeoGrande 2017b). Thus, if we are to place Cuba's changes in the context of globalisation, which is to be understood as the largely deregulated movement of products, people and culture across national borders, Cuba came reluctantly into the phenomenon and mostly due to the economic necessities of the Special Period and subsequent periods of deepening economic needs (Whitfield 2008: 15). This continues to be the rationale behind Cuba's entry into globalisation: as a last-resort solution to issues of supply from basic goods to culture, embodying the island's processes of change with unique characteristics.

In the current chapter I study how this period of transition is impacting Havana's music scene, profession, and industry in ways which challenge the established *modus operandi* but do not simply mimic other developing economies. Firstly, I examine the relocation of social life from the home and public spaces to the new private venues of Cuba's capital; subsequently I move on to investigate the entrepreneurial consciousness of music industry practitioners in this new period of *SocCap 201*; and finally, I examine how the introduction and growth of internet access is impacting Havana's music scene.

## El Malecón

Puerto Rican Ismael Miranda sings<sup>51</sup>:

El Malecón en la Habana es el sitio popular  
El Malecón, si usted quiere divertirse vaya allá  
Alla se formará un tremendo cumban  
Tata Güines y Arsenio allí estarán  
Y todos como hermanos gozaremos  
Guajiras y comparsas y boleros

...

Siempre me quedaré, caballero, en el Malecón

...

Ven, yo quiero demostrarte, la verdad

...

Allí se baila la rumba buena

Y también el cha cha cha

The Malecón of Havana is a popular site  
The Malecón, if you want to have fun, go there  
A great party also forms there  
Tata Güines and Arsenio are there<sup>52</sup>  
And we all enjoy like brothers  
Guajiras and comparsas and boleros

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<sup>51</sup> Song available to listen to at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIhG57FTnxA>.

<sup>52</sup> Referring to Cuban percussionist Tata Güines and composer and musician Arsenio Rodriguez.

.....

I will always stay in the Malecón, gentlemen

.....

Come, I want to show you the truth

.....

Here is danced good rumba

And also the cha cha cha

“En el Malecón hay de todo” (“there is everything on the Malecón”), says my twenty-six-year-old neighbour Massiel, living few blocks away from it in Vedado. Fishermen, couples, friends, parties, religious ceremonies, peanut sellers, alcohol, dancing, flower sellers, “the whole of Havana can be found on the Malecón”. It “has been an emblematic place for all Cubans for many years, it is the traditional place for culture and outings”, says Rubén Marín. “Like all Cubans, I have been on many occasions on the Malecón of Havana; whoever has not done that, is not Cuban”, he continues. Having spent many moments of partying and enjoyment with friends and acquaintances, Rubén views Havana’s longest street, the Malecón, as a key outing place for “love, relaxation and thought”, embodying a deep spiritual meaning for all *habaneros*.

As discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to the street, in the post-1959 period, social life in Havana took place primarily in the public domain or when privately, in the homes of Cubans. It was “cheap, spontaneous and far from the tourist orbit” (Cooke 2016). Even during the emergent capitalism and consumerism of Special Period Havana, public spaces and the Malecón remained the place for young Cubans with limited means to socialise, away from the music venues, which were reserved for tourists and a small number of well-off Cubans (Baker 2011: 186). The sea-side boulevard has been an emblematic place and a key location in the

social life of *habaneros* where interactions and exchanges take place and social relations are formed. It is also a location of inspiration for artists and musicians. Some of the artists I work with remember fondly their own experiences of parties on the Malecón in their late teenage years and while at university (1990s – 2000s). They would take their instruments to play all night and listen to the waves crashing against the stones. Playing on the Malecón has been a spiritual and almost transcendental experience for many musicians I have met in Havana.

DJ Yasel Berroa shared that on the 15<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the first night when Havana reopened after the Covid19 lockdown that had been in place since March (which also made the seaside esplanade unavailable to visitors at nights and during most days as well), he and a couple of friends went immediately to the Malecón (pers. comm.). They started as a small group of three and ended up as a crowd of fifteen people. Every so often someone would run to get a bottle of rum so the night could keep going, listening to music on their phones, chatting and dancing until 5a.m. The Malecon is the party, the afterparty and the one constant location where everyone is welcomed regardless of looks or social status. Yet, says DJ Yasel, he and his friends rarely go to the Malecón these days. It just happens that when the Fábrica de Arte Cubano (FAC) closes for the night, partygoers might go down to finish the party on the Malecón; but the key part has become to enjoy an evening in one of Havana's most modern venues.

## **Havana's Private Music Venues**

With the introduction of private property ownership in 2011, a new phenomenon emerged on Havana's music and social scene – the private music venue. While private restaurants, called *paladares*<sup>53</sup>, emerged during the Special Period to cater for the growing tourist industry, it was the first time since 1959 that private music venues opened on the island.

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<sup>53</sup> A name used for private establishments which offer food.



As a result, a significant proportion of Havana's night life now takes place in the new private venues, which have proliferated across the capital since 2012 (Cooke 2012). To understand their impact on the city's social life, I will examine what these places are, where are they located, and what socio-cultural programmes they offer.

The restaurants which opened during the Special Period were fewer in numbers compared to *paladares* in the post-2010 era; they targeted primarily tourists and a small Cuban elite, had a similar interior, and offered similar menu options (*ibid.*). The new private initiatives, which include clubs, bars, and restaurants, have modern interiors which vary from place to place, versatile menus, and are open to anyone who consumes on the premises. For instance, Mío y Tuyo is furnished with leather sofas, low tables which accommodate only drinks, and has a dimmed atmosphere created by deep red lights (reminding me of a *chalga* bar in a post-Soviet Bulgaria). By contrast, Bar Tatagua is designed with wooden tables and chairs comfortable for food consumption, high ceilings, and walls covered in art and photography by Cuban and international artists. It resembles the small art venues of London and New York. The music repertoire also corresponds with reggaetón<sup>54</sup> videos shining off big screens in the former and small live jazz sessions accompanying private art exhibitions serving canapes and wine at the latter.

The introduction and growth in tourism during the Special Period brought renovation and new construction projects to the old city and the upmarket areas of Vedado and Miramar (Baker 2011: 185). The introduction of private property ownership and the first boom in tourism in the Obama period with more than 2.7 million visitors to the island in 2011<sup>55</sup> led to the further renovation of properties and massive new building projects within the same locations (Franta 2013). With tourism up nearly 20 percent between 2014 and 2016, Cubans

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<sup>54</sup> Reggaetón is a Spanish-language hybrid of Dancehall reggae, and US rap, with roots in Panama and Jamaica but produced primarily in Puerto Rico (Baker 2011a: 14). The cubanised version of reggaetón is called cubatón or timbatón (Borges-Triana 2015b).

<sup>55</sup> For details on growth in tourism visit <https://www.worlddata.info/america/cuba/tourism.php>.

with wealthy friends or family abroad began funnelling millions of dollars into a real estate market, which became highly desirable and with multiplying prices (Armario 2016). They are buying up properties in historic Old Havana and transforming them into immaculate restored rental properties and trendy bars and restaurants. In some touristic neighbourhoods, the redistribution of wealth that transformed Cuba after its Revolution appears to be rewinding before people's eyes (*ibid.*). Wealthy Cubans who left to live abroad decades ago are buying buildings once confiscated and residents who had been living on low incomes are selling deteriorating properties, taking their new fortunes, and moving to less sought-after areas or leaving the country entirely. To utilise the commercial places of Havana, such as UNESCO heritage sites and iconic locations, the Cuban government has also been relocating citizens to more peripheral areas such as San Agustín and El Cotorro to implement new construction projects of five-star hotels or modern venues in the sought-after locations (Rodriguez 2019).

Most private venues are situated across these areas, including Vedado, Old Havana, Playa and Miramar, maintaining the live music and entertainment circuit in the centre of Havana. While certain venues are opening in locations such as Central Havana, the periphery remains less serviced by the new private initiatives of the Obama era. There needs to be more of them across the different neighbourhoods of the capital, argues Borges-Triana (*int.*). One should not have to always come to the centre of Havana to listen to the music they like or enjoy the atmosphere of the venue. Borges-Triana fears that such further social marginalisation of the periphery will lead to further gentrification of the “richer and whiter” parts of Havana, making the disparity between core and margins even deeper (*int.*).

The new private entertainment venues of Havana have also become an epicentre of social life in the island's capital. It is where musicians, D.J.s, Havana's emerging class of higher income-earners and the young aim to spend their evenings. With this relocation from public spaces to private venues, the rules of participation in social life now also differ extensively.

Previously “Cubans used to party five days a week, because social life was cheap”, says Marín. Now, shares the rapper with a sad face, it takes a lot of preparation and finances to go out just on a weekend night. Dressing in a way that engenders confidence in the eyes of bouncers, managing the face control<sup>56</sup> of a venue, and having the ability to pay for consumption is key. Having to save cash and dress up to visit any of these venues reduces spontaneity for Cubans, characterising these places are by new aesthetics, both cultural and personal.

At the same time, the same venues are now frequented by tourists and Cubans of any means for the same entry and consumption prices, unlike the entry fees of the Casas de la Música (music houses), which are multiple when a foreigner attends. The separation of shared spaces between Cubans and foreigners is removed and now participation in these locales of entertainment is based on financial means rather than national or ethnic belonging. The distinction between Cubans and foreigners as potential worthy customers is diminished. Havana’s new private venues are symbolic of Cuba’s emerging forms of cosmopolitanism and globalisation.

### ***Hearing the Change: Wealth in a “Classless” Society***

In the summer of 2017, I was on fieldwork in Havana for my special study dissertation for my master’s degree in Music at Royal Holloway University of London. I was with four Cuban friends at a bar called Up and Down, one of the new private venues in Vedado, which played recorded reggaetón (both Cuban and foreign), a popular timba song every hour, and the music videos were shown on screens. Audiences consisted of local Cubans, a few Americans from Cuban heritage whose Spanish was not native, and a few foreigners. The locals were looking for foreigners to start relationships with and the Cuban-Americans were chasing after

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<sup>56</sup> “Face control” refers to the restrictions of entry to nightclubs in Russia and other former socialist countries in Eastern Europe, based on the bouncer’s quick judgment of the customer’s look and wealth and suitability to the public “face” of the establishment (Yaffa 2009).

my Cuban landlady, asking if she could accompany them for the evening. As I was dancing, a gentleman who had been watching me for some time approached me with the question, “Cuánto cobra usted?” (“How much do you charge?”). A little confused by his sudden approach and unexpected question, I asked him for clarification and whether he wanted me to buy him a drink. He then asked me how much money I would charge to spend few days with him in his flat, which was located very nearby the venue we were at, and besides the intimate services he would appreciate it if I could dance for him. I wanted to check his nationality, which he confirmed to be Cuban; he also knew I was foreigner and said that I was exactly what he was looking for. The gentlemen also reassured me his flat was spacious and luxurious, he had sufficient and high-quality food for both of us, and that he was comfortable covering any fees I would request for the period.

Besides my initial shock of being taken as a sex worker, I was more surprised by how perceptions of Cubans were challenged through this exchange in that very moment. Traditionally, Cubans, both men and women, have been known to look for foreign partners to either supplement the gap in their financial resources or to get access to a foreign passport. Prostitution had returned to Cuba with the Special Period and continued with the opening-up of the island to a greater inflow of foreigners post-2012. Beyond prostitution, the new type of Cuban that had emerged in the Special Period, the *jinetero/jinetera*, continued to flourish in the Obama era (and through the period of the Covid pandemic). While the rest of the Cubans were chasing foreigners and the Cuban-Americans were looking to relive stories told by their parents, it was enlightening to find out that in this scenario I was perceived as a *jinetera* or a sex worker, or at least that I would succumb to the economic habits of certain number of Havana’s population, and the Cuban national was the one with the power to meet what he perceived were my financial needs. The situation certainly aligned with the sound of reggaetón music and video being shown in this moment, where Puerto Rican reggaetoneros Wisin and

Ozuna were asking a girl to escape with them.<sup>57</sup> Part of the video setting was in a bar and then an expensive house, which showed the desired girl dancing provokingly. It seemed as if reggaetón had become symbolic of the new wealth of Havana, which also marked a key difference in the Cuban-foreigner power relations, which were in this case were inverted.

The relaxation of travel restrictions to Cuba during the Obama administration, and the resulting growth in tourism, gave some habaneros an opportunity to earn an income that compared to international standards, especially with the entry of Airbnb to the island. My own host in 2017 shared that her life completely transformed since she started offering her house through Airbnb rather than just the traditional *casa particular* model, where people would arrive in Havana and seek for a room to rent (Maria del Carmen Álvarez Alejo pers. comm.). Airbnb's marketing strategy and access had improved the ability of Cubans to extend their client base and charge much higher prices than previously for accommodation in Havana. It also allowed them to have regular bookings and protected earnings in the case of last-minute cancelations. A room in Vedado or Old Havana could easily reach fees of CUC60<sup>58</sup> per night, twice the national monthly salary of a public-sector professional at the time.

With the improved relationship and increased transport connections between the US and Cuba following the Obama era, diaspora Cubans had also started visiting the island more regularly than previously, enjoying a cosmopolitan life between the two countries and frequenting the new bars and music venues across Havana. The latest iPhones and designer clothes could be spotted on the different tables at Up and Down. One evening, while at Bar Sarao in July 2017, I spoke to a Cuban national living between Havana and Miami about the changes that were materialising in Cuba. He shared he had given up his work in Miami for the moment focusing on renting his two flats in Vedado to tourists, happy with the income which

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<sup>57</sup> Video available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X9wEwulYhk>.

<sup>58</sup> CUC1 was equivalent to USD1 at the time. The CUC was abolished in January 2021 to be replaced with the digital MLC currency.

afforded him a good lifestyle in Havana. He was running a dinner and drinks bill of over CUC60 for himself and his son at the time I left the place, which was long before the end of his own evening. The bar staff greeted him like a regular, having reserved the only available seat for him at the bar. Tables, which require a minimum consumption of CUC150, were predominantly occupied by Cubans. A group of American tourists and myself were the foreigners, holding our drinks in hand, while standing crammed next to each other, swaying to the singing of Kelvis Ochoa. A similar scenario happened at another evening when Alain Pérez managed to fit his thirteen-piece band on the tiny stage of Bar Sarao and the tables near the stage were all booked by Cubans who lived between Havana and Florida and were consuming bottles of foreign spirits costing over CUC160 per bottle.

This new aesthetics of Havana is based on material wealth and the emerging new class of wealthy Cubans. With the move towards a more post-socialist economic model, the growing earning possibilities available due to the introduction of *cuenta propia* and private ownership, and the ability of diaspora Cubans to travel to and from the island with greater ease, a new class of Cubans able to afford a “middle-income” lifestyle has been rapidly emerging over the past few years. These Cubans have also become consumers and clients for Havana’s new private businesses, from bars and restaurants to beauty salons and clothes shops. These changes also indicate a shift in the power relations amongst habaneros, now determined largely by their purchasing power in a society traditionally deemed “classless”.

While the new private venues in Vedado are a statement of Cuba’s new spirit of modernity, consumerism, and internationalism, in places such as Corner Café and Bar Sarao, which offer live entertainment in comparison to the recorded music of most other venues, live music still plays a secondary role to cocktails and ambience. Most other venues such as Up and Down, Mio y Tuyo and King Bar do not even offer live performances or a significant music variety. While these new venues form part of the new social scene of Havana, they often

represent little opportunity for musicians. Van Van's iconic singer Mayito Rivera argues that these new venues are not in any way supportive of the careers of popular musicians, because they never invite timba bands to perform (int.). Bar Sarao was an exception until its new incarnation, where recorded reggaetón and trap are played. Yoel Martínez from Buena Fe (for details see p.253) told me that the band had a policy of not performing at any venue with a capacity of less than one thousand audience, which meant that none of the new private venues of Havana served the band regardless of the genres they focused on (int.). Rubén Marín Maning suggests that the new private venues have become the *modus operandi* of Havana's social scene, taking as a reference the aesthetics of bars worldwide. Some of these bars have included limited formats of Cuban music, especially urban music and reggaetón, with the objective to increase their profits and popularity amongst the so-called *farándula habanera* (Havana's entertainment circuit).

The repertoire of these venues includes primarily recorded music, mostly reggaetón, and these clubs are more focused on generating bar consumption rather than musical repertoire. Even the venues that offered live music such as Bar Sarao and Corner Café, usually invited bands to play at a reduced size of up to five-six musicians due to the size of their stage. In these cases, music repertoire is partly determined by the actual physical structure of the space and a more gentrified approach to clubbing. Audiences are another indicator of this perception, more concerned with enjoying a club night with good cocktails and any music, without necessarily seeking an artistic experience. As part of the new private venue scene in Havana, these clubs reflect social changes in Cuban society, including the emerging class of wealthy Cubans who can afford to frequent these places, a move towards more economic classifications, and a more

unified social life scene in Havana where Cubans and tourists share the same spaces for the same prices.<sup>59</sup>

This focus on consumption has often been attributed to Havana's new value system focused on material wealth and consumerism. Acquiring wealth is considered to have become a leading value and aspiration in the capital, bringing its spirit closer to neoliberal economic ideals. In April 2015 I visited a performance by "Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son" in the Casa de la Música in Old Habana (for biographical details on band see p.249). At the end of the evening, I went on conversing and dancing with the musicians. The percussionist, an Afro-Cuban from Santiago de Cuba, spoke about how much he did not like Havana and *habaneros*, because of their focus on money as a main goal in life. He thought *habaneros* did not care about each other, about nature, or about anything else except money. While this is a view often associated with capital cities, which tend to also be financial centres, the musician was outspoken about Havana's ever-growing consumerist values. Pérez Chang argues that the *habanero's* greatest ease comes from knowing how to survive in a city and society with so much uncertainty (Pérez Chang 2015). He argues that poverty in Havana is both spiritual and material; that family and social values have cracked, and a mentality has emerged of a "new man" who does not believe in any value except money (*ibid*). Non-*habaneros* argue the occupation of the *jinetero* is most often found in Havana rather than outside the island's capital.

There is no hard evidence to confirm that seeking wealth has become a leading value in Cuba's capital; however, expressions of wealth are becoming more obvious throughout the city and especially in the private music venues and bars across Havana. These expressions are

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<sup>59</sup> Cubans were limited in their movements across internal regional borders since the 1997 Decree 217, which renders relocation from one province of the country to another illegal unless there is a prior official authorisation. With the opening of the country to tourism in the early 1990s, the Cuban government simultaneously imposed a restriction where Cubans could not enter the hotels frequented by foreigners (Frank 2008). The rule was officially in place until 2008; however, the mindset of Cubans took some years to accept the removal of this rule. Coupled with the high prices of restaurants frequented by tourists, Cubans and foreigners occupied different social spaces in Havana in the post-1959 period.



also the perceptions that tourists are increasingly experiencing about *habaneros*, as they share the spaces of social and cultural life with locals. Social geographies are redrawn through the experience of night life in bars and clubs in Havana. Whether they play recorded music or host live groups, these venues are shared spaces of the national and international, pushing Cuba's entry into global cultural and social streams forward through the communications and exchanges foreigners experience in these new private venues. At the same time, to many these new bars and clubs are selling no more than an illusion: that they are representative of the "real" Cuba. With prices prohibitive to most Cubans, young people must save for some time to be able to afford an entry to or a small consumption at these new places. Many shared with me that it is their "once-a-month treat" at best to go out with friends to FAC or any of the new bars, which usually happens the weekend after they receive their salaries. Dance teachers are considered fortunate, because their foreign students pay for their entry and consumption at the venues. At the same time, the outings are often too focused on the music houses, where the students can practice dance with their teachers and are in control of the entire outing. *Habaneros* need to further invest in clothing due to the face control at most of the new venues. At the end of the night, it can take hours to get back home using buses or *almendrones* (shared taxis), have a shower from a bucket, and get to sleep on a bed across from one's parents in the one-room flat where a family of four lives. These new clubbing habits take the spontaneity out of social life and remove the spiritual experience of partying on the street as a shared, inclusive, communal place.

There is also a sound associated with these new venues. While there is a variety of genres on the surface, the one underlying music connected to Havana's new private bars is reggaetón. Some authors argue that reggaetón is connected to the emergent values of a Cuban underclass and the rising consumerism in the country (Gámez Torres 2012: 228). These values emerge on the margins of society and are connected to the rearticulation of class and the

increasing role of financial means as an indicator of social status in contemporary Havana. Through its focus on money, conspicuous consumption, and class distinction, reggaetón is seen to contradict the socialist ethics underlining the ideology of Cuba's revolutionary society. On the other hand, reggaetón attracts more than just one age group and it is more than just a generational phenomenon, argues Borges-Triana (2015b). This music journalist sees it as a mistake to associate the genre with marginality or to view it simply as paradigmatic of a new kind of wealth. Reggaetón circulates popularly because it fits into the practices of *resolver* (in this case meaning to buy affordable pirated copies of music on the street), which are intrinsic to Cuban's contemporary psychology. In the context of Havana's new private bars and clubs, both views seem to be partially true and relevant. The sound of reggaetón is symbolic of Havana's new wealth and consumerism, it crosses gender, age, and ethnic distinctions, and it challenges any ideological integrity remaining of the Revolution, indicating the city's shift towards sociocapitalist economics and aesthetics.

Other genres associated with Havana's new private bars such as El del Frente, O'Reilly 304, Flauta Mágica, Malecón 663, Infanta 1057, and Casona 17 y M include electronic, jazz, fusion, and more recently hip-hop. While all these genres can include elements of Afro-Cuban or Cuban dance music, the sound of Havana's new private bars is primarily that of international genres. Live performances are also not a priority and while the city's musicians are seeing more sporadic and limited benefits from some of these venues, DJs are benefiting more from Havana's new nightlife.

Depending on opening days and hours, bars in Havana can have either a resident DJ or hire various DJs even if they focus on one or two genres of music. For instance, Bar Encuentros in Vedado has different DJs playing dance fusions. The bars which tend to have one resident DJ at times invite guest DJs or a live musician to accompany the DJ for the night. For instance, electronic DJ Ryan Cub is the resident DJ at Bar Restaurant Mes Amis in Miramar and on

occasion he invites DJ Wichy de Vedado (electronic – Afro-Cuban – hip-hop fusion DJ and producer, see p.281) to share the evening. As a producer, Wichy de Vedado has a project called Manicato, which includes ongoing collaborations with different musicians and DJs (including Yasek Manzano [for more details see p.282], Cami Laye Okun, Bolo SM, Roger Rizo, Kike Wolf, and Eduardo Sandoval). On certain evenings, he invites one of the musicians, for instance, Yasek Manzano to play live jazz trumpet alongside his recorded sound. This combination of recorded fusion and live tunes makes Wichy de Vedado one of the most sought-after DJs in Havana by the more exclusive private venues, which look to create eclectic ambiences through fusion and electronic music.

This picture of the capital's nightlife is both real and surreal. What tourists often see are the well-dressed and -groomed, confident, young Cubans who are dancing to any music from timba and reggaetón to US pop, electronic music and hip-hop in a modern setting. There are also the nouveau riche of Havana sitting at tables with expensive consumption requirements which further draws a picture of a country that is now capitalist. While the country has certainly developed post-socialist market consumption habits, these new attitudes and socio-economic relations are still representative of specific circles of the island's capital. As pointed out by Marín, few can afford regular consumption at these music venues. While Cubans and foreigners now occupy the same social spaces for the same prices, the need to fulfil the visual requirements to entry limits the ability for most *habaneros* to participate in the new social life of the city. Both Cubans and tourists are consuming an illusion about social life in Havana. Cubans forget the fragility of their entry to these new social circuits and foreigners often misjudge the rules of participation for Cubans. Meanwhile, music repertory – historically so central to Cuban identity and social life – becomes a by-product of consumption attitudes towards the new, fashionable, eclectic, and cosmopolitan.

## **From Cooking Oil to Cosmopolitan Culture: All Arts under the Same Roof**

“I think it is unique in the world. It is a Mecca for art lovers,” claims DJ Yasel Berroa about Fábrica de Arte Cubano (FAC), the arts venue he considers his “second home” and where he never gets bored (pers. comm.). Rubén Marín Maning says it is the place most frequented in recent years by the Havana and foreign public and which has captivated the attention of an audience that has the need to consume good music and good art. Their views were not surprising to me since as soon as I arrived in Havana in April 2015, I was told I need to visit the place, arguably the capital’s most modern arts and music venue, which had opened the previous year. The first and only one of its kind in the field of music and arts, FAC is a public-private partnership (PPP), run by the Alfonso family, the founders of the Afro-Rock fusion band Síntesis (for biographical notes see p.279), but situated in a government building (a former cooking oil factory). Considered as a warehouse arts space loaded with “dazzling contemporary visual arts, live music, food and drink” (Murph 2017) and declared as one of the hundred best entertainment venues in the world for 2019 by Time Magazine<sup>60</sup>, FAC has become symbolic of Havana’s new music and cultural scene, an aspiration to what Cuba’s future can look like. In an interview in 2015, X Alfonso (for biographical notes see p.282) communicated that the FAC project aims to give Cubans a meeting place where the best of the island’s “avant-garde arts” can be enjoyed, with all the artistic manifestations under the same roof and with prices making it accessible to many Cubans (La Habana 2015). It can be argued that X Alfonso’s aspirations have materialised in the eyes of local and international audiences and artists. FAC is the one location where all Cuban musicians are keen to perform as they view the place as the best, most modern venue in Havana, with the largest access to wealthy audiences and the sector of tourists with an interest in and understanding of art, culture, and

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<sup>60</sup> Listing can be viewed at <https://time.com/collection/worlds-greatest-places-2019/5654125/fabrica-de-arte-cubano-havana-cuba/>.

music. FAC is where tourists go to see a “younger, edgier, emerging Cuba” (Miroff and Voisin 2015).

The big stage was closed during one of my first visits in 2015 and Los Kent were playing on the small stage. Listening to the band’s 1960s and ‘70s rock covers, I felt a little confused as to where I was, considering that I had spent the previous three nights in a row in Havana’s music houses dancing to son and timba. Still a little too shy when speaking, because I lacked understanding of some of the slang in Cuba, I was also listening to the English lyrics and was happy thinking I could have a good conversation with the band members, assuming they were fluent in the language. I could not have been more wrong, as I discovered that they did not even have communicative skills in English. Around me were some US tourists, who had dined at the club’s restaurant earlier and were accompanied by their Cuban tour guide, and several Cubans from various ages and ethnicities. We were all dancing and singing along to the music.

I also walked around enjoying the art and fashion exhibitions, which were not that common to find in Havana. The art was contemporary, by both Cuban and international artists who were expressing their world views and creativity through their work. This stood in contrast to the Cuban commercial art reproducing stereotypes of the island, its culture and inhabitants and targeted at tourists, which is so common in galleries and street fairs across Havana. At that moment I was experiencing space through sound, images, ambiance, and bodily movements that I would not automatically associate with social life in Havana. FAC could have been in Soho, Brick Lane, or Stock Newington, in Berlin, Paris or New York, and I would have not for a moment doubted its location. Even the slightly snobby security and face control reminded me of the fashionable clubs of London and New York, where everyone gets the “one-over” look determining our suitability as customers and our spending potential on entering the venue.

Figure 6: *Fábrica de Arte Cubano*



*Photo Credit: Pinterest*

### ***The Sound of FAC***

I visited the venue on numerous occasions over the years, listening to Cuban and foreign artists as part of the Havana Jazz Festival; for an interview with Eduardo Ramos, the co-founder of Mas con Menos and for the band's subsequent launch at the venue; to see concerts by Havana D'Primera (for details see p.265) and Issac Delgado (for details see p.268); to watch a documentary in English on Formula 1 racing; and listen to visiting Brazilian and Argentinian musicians perform. As the only private venue which held events for the International Jazz Day held for the first time ever in Havana in 2017 due to Obama's eased restrictions (Newman 2017), FAC was one of the places which transformed Havana into what Herbie Hancock

defined “without a doubt the most vibrant, alive and the most spirited place on the planet” (Murph 2017). All the rest of the performances took place in state locations such as the Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso (where the All-Star Global Concert was performed), the Pabellón Cuba in Vedado, ISA on the grounds of the former Habanero Country Club, El Tablao, jazz club La Zorra y El Cuervo, and the amphitheatre in Guanabacoa. Esperanza Spalding and Cameroonian bassist Richard Bona were but two of the global names which performed at the venue as part of the festival.

It has also been the main private venue, hosting events for the annual Havana Jazz Plaza Festival. Besides an occasional event in other private locations, such as an evening dedicated to Cuba’s legendary percussionist Tata Güines at Bar Paparazzi in Miramar for the 2019 edition, all the jazz festival concerts take place in state locations such as Teatro Mella, Teatro Nacional, Teatro Bertolt Brecht, Casa de la Cultura Plaza Revolución, and Pabellón Cuba. FAC remains the only private venue to host regular events for the festival, which in its 2019 edition offered shows by Jan de Cosmo and Mike Lewis, The Common Taters, David Liebman, Samy Thiebault, and DJ Joe Claussell amongst other international and Cuban artists.

The variety of performances and events at the venue does not tire. FAC offers opportunities simultaneously for all types of music and art, both Cuban and foreign, and including styles which are traditionally spatially and aesthetically exclusive, such as underground and alternative, under the same roof and for the same entry and consumption prices. In comparison to the traditional music houses and other government venues in Havana, FAC is a space of musical and cultural inclusivity, as it is not genre specific. It offers alternative, underground, popular, traditional, and classical music, which are styles usually performed at different state-owned locations. The music houses, 1830 or Café Habana offer only popular dance music such as timba and salsa. La Zorra y el Cuervo and Jazz Café are the places to listen to jazz. El Pabellón Cuba and the cultural houses are the only locations which

host different genres; however, this happens for a limited period during the capital's festivals as these are not dedicated full-time music venues.

Beyond inclusivity in terms of style and nationality (through its inclusion of Cuban and foreign artists), FAC is also associated with high quality of performance and the selection of artists considered “famous”, “successful” and part of the popular *farándula*. Rubén Marín speaks with respect that FAC has helped disseminate what the venue considers to be the most established hip-hop artists and with great success it has achieved that these rap concerts have had the standard and quality of what is consumed in other countries. The selections within jazz, timba, rock, and classical music follow the same principle of established and popular musicians from Havana's *farándula*. The names to be seen at the venue are Los Kent, Havana D'Primera, Issac Delgado, Alain Pérez, Zenaida Romeu (see p.283), Daymé Arocena (see p. 257), Roberto Fonseca (see p.277), Chucho Valdés (see p.255), Interactivo, Telmary Díaz y Habana Sana (see p.280) and other traditionally iconic names or currently popular musicians living on the island and abroad.

Some “up-and-coming” projects are also selectively showcased at the venue. Examples include jazz trio the Real Project (winners of 2021 Anthology Cubadisco award), female rap duo La Reyna y La Real, the personal jazz project of female drummer Yissy Garcia, and the percussion-fusion project by Eduardo Ramos, Más con Menos. Nevertheless, while Más con Menos is relatively new, the musicians who form the initiative area already known in Havana's music scene through their performance with internationally established names such as Issac Delgado, Alain Pérez, and Roberto Fonseca. Making to the stage of FAC as an emerging project symbolises recognition, acceptance, and success. The venue denotes musical achievement, which makes the spot a desirable place for musicians to perform.

While considering it a “spiritual home” and a musical and art “Mecca”, DJ Berroa recognises that there are also sounds missing from the repertoire of FAC While there are



versatile live performances, he feels that there is not enough Cuban music being played by the DJs at the venue. In contrast to other private bars across Havana, FAC offers a place for live music. However, like other private venues, its recorded repertoire tends to focus on international styles. The feedback he received from tourists was that while Cuba is “la isla de la música” (“the island of music”), it must focus on selling its own roots more. For instance, he feels that a billboard song can be fused with Cuban conga rhythms, always leaving the Cuban stamp on the international music. As a primarily electronic music DJ, Yasel is planning a project of fusing the music of Arsenio Rodríguez with contemporary club music, making fusion the channel of communication with audiences.

What else is missing from the sound of FAC and can be heard only on specific occasions and during specific festivals such as Noche Blanca de la Rumba (White Night of Rumba) are folkloric genres such as rumba, Orishas, conga, makuta, mozambique, and palo. It can be argued that the aesthetics and ambience of the venue does not correlate the physical characteristics of where one traditionally finds a rumba party. It is as far removed from the socio-economic and physical characteristics of the street, the *solar*, the cultural centres, Callejón de Hamel, or the Palacio de la Rumba, that it could be difficult for the imagination to recreate the atmosphere of rumba parties into the halls of FAC. At the same time, batá drums and *guaguancó* can be heard at the venue on regular basis as part of the numerous fusions, which Afro-Cuban rhythms inspire.

Whether in Telmary Díaz’s hip-hop (to which Joaquín Borges-Triana refers to as *música alternativa* rather than hip-hop, int.), in Chucho Valdés’ jazz or in Alexander Abreu’s “Lamento Yoruba”, Afro-Cuban rhythms, lyrics, instruments and stories underpin sound-creation in Havana, leading to the emergence of various fusions. “Fusion is definitely the sound of FAC”, says adamantly DJ Yasel Berroa, not because there are no performances of styles as traditionally played, but because most sound at the venue has some fusion in it. Even the

internal design, the ambience and most of the food offered at the restaurants of FAC have fusion in them.

While FAC is a home to both alternative music (for instance, jazz and fusion viewed as eclectic and local genres) and underground music, associated with purity and international styles such rock, hip-hop, rap and reggaetón (Baker 2012: 2), fusion is the intersection, which connects all these genres with the place of performance and consumption. Fusion is the strategy, the pathway and the connection creating a place where traditionally contrasting aesthetics and spaces of music in Havana interact and coexist. As a private initiative based in a state building, the sound of FAC further bridges the disconnect between the government and the private sector, uniquely creating multiple links between previously separate spheres within Cuba. The fusion of the venue goes beyond sound to include economic and policy hybridisation.

These fusions identified at FAC challenge former musical, socio-cultural, spatial, and political binaries. They shift spatial distinctions between underground and alternative, indicating the changing characteristics of the newly emerged private places of Havana. Traditionally the real differences between underground and alternative are found in musical aesthetics, geographical location, and audience composition. In Havana the two live side by side, reflecting the fact that the city is experiencing socialism and post-socialism simultaneously, and that its temporality is confused (Baker 2012: 2). FAC further reduces the separateness of foreign and local by showcasing Cuban and foreign artists for the same entry and consumption prices for Cuban and foreign audiences simultaneously. FAC does not exist below or above the government regime, but within it, an ambassador for the country's ongoing socio-economic changes of private ownership and internationalisation, which have led to the reshaping of the traditional forms of protest and sentiment expressed through art, which reflected the revolutionary and Special periods. FAC is a physical place and a cultural spiritual

sanctuary where the public and the private, the traditional and the novel, the local and the international co-exist. The venue is reshaping Havana's post-1959 socialist reality where polarities had been the norm, where venues, social relationships and music were either local or foreign, socialist or capitalist, private or public. FAC breaks down traditional entertainment structures of music venues across Havana and represents what is anticipated as Havana's future art and music venues and social life.

Having become an institution where performing, especially repeatedly, equates to success and fame, what happens at the venue impacts the broader socio-cultural aesthetics of Havana. As picture in the image on Figure 6, FAC is unique, shiny, bright, impactful, a golden light in the gloomy greyness of physically and emotionally run-down Havana. It signifies hope for what the capital might look like in the future.

### ***Fuerza Habana: Music and Social Responsibility***

Havana offers various entertainment options on Saturday night, but the concert which took place at the private photography studio Estudio 50 in Central Havana on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2019 had a different objective to the usual Saturday night parties.<sup>61</sup> It was six days after a rare and deadly tornado devastated Havana's boroughs of Regla, Guanabacoa, and 10 de Octubre on the 27<sup>th</sup> January and Estudio 50 was hosting a fund-raising concert called Habana de Pie (Havana Stands). Fifteen musicians performed, including well-known artists such as Alain Pérez, Telmary Díaz, Interactivo, David Blanco, Raúl Paz, David Torrens, Polito Ibañez, Idania Valdés and Nassiry Lugo, and up-and-coming musicians such as Real Project, Daymé Arocena and Yissi Bandancha (Hernández 2019). The music included jazz, Afro-Cuban rhythms, pop rock, trova, and dance music. Raúl Paz sang that he was "in love with this new Havana, which

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<sup>61</sup> Estudio 50 is the first studio in Cuba which runs on own solar energy and is considered a pioneer of the country's new circuit of modern art institutions (Rivero 2021).

speaks what it was thinks and does what it wants”. The event was organised with the help of the I.C.M. Despite the small size of the venue visitors kept arriving throughout the night, and so did donations. The public donated clothes, food, water, and other necessities. There were also raffles to make extra donations for the victims of the tornado. The initiative was viewed as successful, both as a very musically rich and vibrant event as well as an original way of organising support for the devastated communities of Havana (Vistar Magazine 2019). It gave impetus to the slogan “Fuerza Habana” (“Strength Havana”), which came to characterise the post-tornado relief efforts. The donations were passed on to FAC to be handed out to the victims.

On the next day, Sunday, 3rd February 2019, I joined a group of volunteers at FAC to work on the relief effort. Following the tornado, the venue set itself up as a relief centre, organising and distributing food, water, and clothes to the victims across the different boroughs. We gathered from 10am onwards in the yard of FAC Volunteers (identifiable by a “Fuerza Habana” sticker given upon arrival) were primarily young but also some more senior *habaneros*, from various ethnic and social backgrounds.<sup>62</sup> We were managing the classification of donations, including clothes, food, water, bed linens, and toiletries. The yard at FAC was packed with bags of clothes and we were separating them by gender, age, bottoms, tops, and undergarments. The atmosphere caught me off-guard. There was mostly silence besides brief conversations related to the tasks we were doing. All volunteers were working calmly and with great efficiency, focused only on what needed to be done. There were no cameras, no social media tagging, no selfies, no phones, besides rare calls to manage the shipments. We were all focused on our tasks, strictly following the instructions of the few organisers, without much ado. Another group of volunteers were organising the articles in packages according to the

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<sup>62</sup> I was one of two foreigners. The other was Spanish photographer Larisa López who lived in Havana and worked at F.A.C. and was one of the lead organisers of the work.

needs of each family whose details were collected in advance. We formed a human chain, passing one to the next the bags arranged by numbers, loading them onto old Russian trucks lent by the government. The same vehicles had only a couple of weeks earlier shipped staff and merchandise to the January international Havana Jazz Plaza Festival. A few taxis were also offering free services to take people and goods to the locations where we were distributing supplies. A group of volunteers mounted the trucks and headed to Regla, one of Havana's most marginalised boroughs, devastated by the tornado.

We reached a house, which was centrally located in the neighbourhood, and offloaded all packages in its yard. The owners of the house, a couple in their sixties, were bustling around, partly content that there was help coming to their borough, and partly surprised by the high efficiency with which the work was managed, and goods were swiftly reaching the target families. The husband kept marvelling at the strict management under which the articles were distributed. The wife moved around the volunteers, nodding her head, repeating *se hace como se hace* ("it is done the way it is done"). Two Afro-Cuban teenagers were showing off reggaetón moves on an open terrace across the street. They were trying to impress the staff of FAC and hoping for an invitation to visit the venue. The shipments were sent to the families carried by musicians, actors, photographers, writers, volunteers from various occupations and backgrounds. They were distributed by an ethnic and cultural fusion of a *rubio* (blonde man), a *trigueño* (a man with dark/ olive skin and straw-like hair), and a *mulata* (mixed heritage girl) to families of various ages and ethnicities. An elderly lady cried silently and blessed the young man passing her the bags of supplies. A mother rushed to pour water for her young children.

We were getting ready to head back to FAC as another truck arrived full of supplies and followed by several cars with volunteers. Short distance behind it, I saw the bus of the Cuban Rap Agency also arriving in the barrio. Artists had donated clothes, water, and tinned food, and Rubén Marín Maning with a group of rappers had gone to distribute it to the affected families.

I was looking around from the top of the truck we had mounted to return to Vedado. Houses were missing roofs and stairs; some had completely collapsed, and broken furniture and personal possession could be seen amongst the ruins. “It was heart-breaking to see how people had lost everything, not only the roof over their heads, but all their possessions as well. Their memories”, Marín told me as we discuss the tornado (pers. comm.). At the same time, there were no homeless people sleeping on the streets, and the residents of Regla were celebrating. They had taken the Virgin of Regla (the syncretised equivalent of the Yoruba Orisha Yemaya) to the streets of the borough, asking for her blessings and strength to rebuild. Lucumí chanting was heard in the distance: “Yemaya, ashere ibolere” (Yemaya, bless your children) as we were exiting the barrio.

We dismounted back at FAC, finalising a few chores, and wrapping up at 5pm. There was no trace left from the work done at the venue as the club was opening for its evening audiences. No phones, no selfies, no videos, no pictures had appeared yet. It was surprising for what constituted a crowd of mostly members of Havana’s *farándula*. It did not in any manner utilise its relief work to promote itself as a venue or for any other marketing purposes. A single photo of the work undertaken by and at FAC appeared on the anniversary of the tornado on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020, accompanying a post where the venue was giving thanks to all who participated in the relief effort. There is no promotional capture of individuals on the photograph; it is a collage of the different moments of the process (Figure 7).<sup>63</sup> The Cuban Rap Agency did not publicise any part of its work either.

On the other hand, publicity appeared from the world of reggaetón, primarily from Miami-based artists. El Micha posted photographs distributing water and other supplies in Regla on his social media platforms (see Figure 8).<sup>64</sup> His team was dressed in T-shirts branded

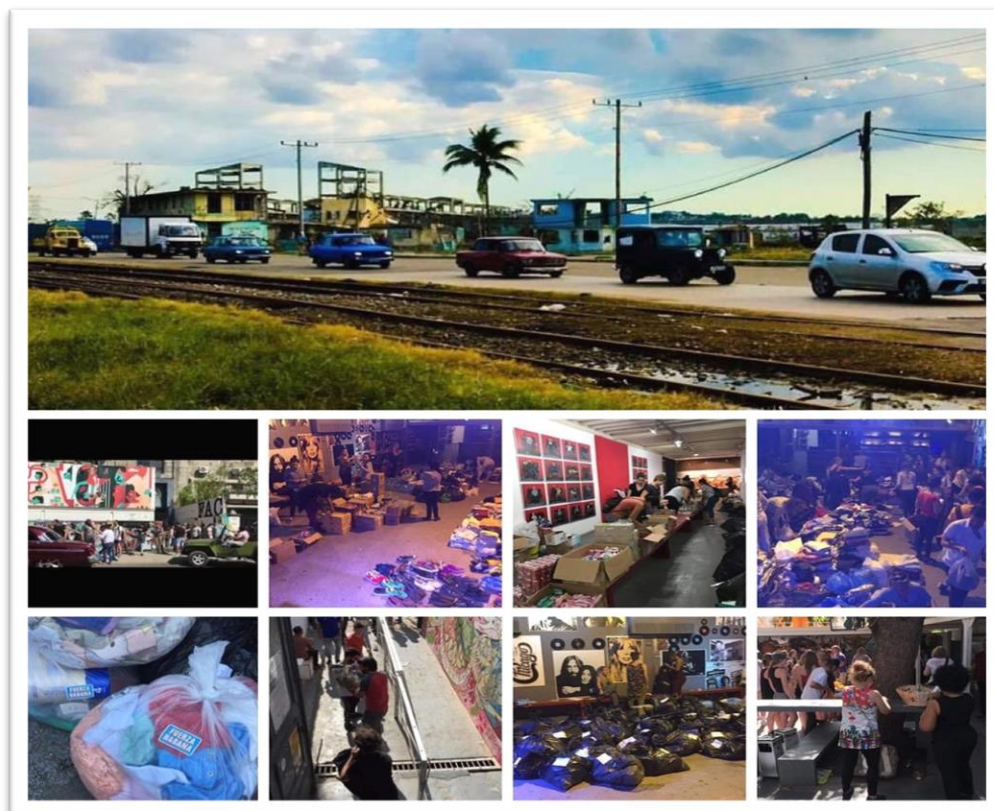
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<sup>63</sup> Photo and post are available to view at <https://www.facebook.com/fabricadeartecubano.cu/photos/y-aparecieron-manos-de-todos-los-rincones-para-apoyarnos-para-ayudarnos-a-resist/3461012080638013>.

<sup>64</sup> Facebook posts available to view at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=413392896072576&set=a.175813526497182&type=3>.

with his name and logo. His publicity received a lot of positive responses from fans and followers (Cibercuba 2019). El Micha's effort was not centrally organised as the activities of FAC where details of families were noted down, but a more sporadic personal initiative, handing out supplies to anyone who came to his trucks (Marín Maning int.). A few days later a collaboration of reggaetoneros, including Chacal, Baby Lores, El Micha, Chocolate, Divan, Lenier, JP, Srta. Dayana, Yakarta, Yulien Oviedo, El Chulo, El Único and Rey Chavez, released the song "Por Cuba, La Que Me Vio Nacer" ("For Cuba, the Land Where I was Born"), which became the most popular piece released about the tornado with over 2.2 million views.<sup>65</sup> As a result, reggaetón became the main sound by which the tornado and the subsequent relief effort were recorded and are remembered, especially by those who were not present and only followed the events through social media platform.

Figure 7: *FAC Relief Work During 2019 Tornado*



*Photo Credit: FAC Facebook Account*

<sup>65</sup> Song is available to view at [cuPor Cuba, la que me vio nacer 🇨🇺 \(Video Oficial\) - YouTube](#).

Figure 8: *El Micha, His Wife and Team Handing Out Supplies in Regla*



*Photo Credit: Cibercuba 2019*

Other musicians from various genres also offered help to the affected families in different areas. Pictures taken by *habaneros* appeared on social media of various famous musicians such as the late Cesar “Pupy” Pedroso (for details see p.276) and the Maestra Zenaida Romeu visiting the affected areas to assist the population. Zenaida Romeu had loaded her car with food supplies and went to 10 de Octubre to distribute it. Singer Haydée Milanés (daughter of singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés), Athanai (rock, rap, reggae, and pop musician), reggaetón duo Gente de Zona, and musician and composer Descemer Bueno had also extended help to the affected communities. Trovador Silvio Rodríguez, together with Pablo Milanés and Noel Nicola, held concerts at different barrios to console and sooth the spirits and souls of the people who had lost so much (Canciones 2019).

Despite the different musical sounds, which were emerging in the weeks following the tornado, I was most affected by the silence, characterising most of the relief work. I felt quiet, introspective, thinking about the day I had spent helping the team at FAC Maybe it was because of the efficient silence and organisation of the work, maybe I was tired from the sun, the



journey, and the physical labour. My mind kept going back to the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the US government and civil society to respond adequately to the humanitarian crisis in New Orleans (Denzin 2006). Many argue it is because the city is a home of primarily African American population. All three barrios of Regla, Guanabacoa and 10 de Octubre are largely inhabited by poor Afro-Cubans, not many of whom would have visited live concert of the musicians who performed at Estudio 50 or FAC due to their economic marginalisation. This made no difference to the distribution or provision of supplies. Social, class and ethnic differences did not affect the work of organisers and volunteers working at FAC. On the contrary, defiant of the US economic embargo and without pleading the international community for help, the *habaneros* proved they can take care of their own without international intervention. The response was quick, swift, and efficient, most likely not in the way that the international community thinks it should be done, but in the manner of Havana, its people, and its social conventions.

The government had been trying to organise subsidies and cheap funding for victims to rebuild their homes, and citizens were helping their neighbours. However, what has been the largest-scale and most organised relief focusing on catering to the daily needs of the affected families was not offered by the government, local community, or not-for-profit organisations, but by musicians and FAC as an arts centre and institution. This response indicates the inklings of an emergence of a civil society in Cuba different to traditional binary forms: the first approach considered civil society as oppositional and thus generative of a “transition” based on an implied need to change the government and the socialist system; the second, which resulted from the economic downturn of the Special Period coupled with increased hostile pressure from the United States, led to the acceptance of foreign NGOs and a decentralisation of state power through neighbourhood People's Councils which worked with these NGOs (Gray and Kapcia 2009: 1 – 4). Official discourse in Cuba since the 1990s has presented a socialist

civil society composed of mass organisations such as the Cuban Women Federation (FMC), the Centre of the Cuban Workers (CTC), and the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) (Chaguaceda and López 2018).

The new approach was independent from state-sponsored youth and civil organisations and foreign actors. It was instigated by musicians through the concerts, donation requests, personal initiatives and through the cultural space of FAC, whose social activities and impact extend beyond the music and cultural world. It seemed to point towards an incipient shift from the traditional government-sponsored social initiatives to the building of the country's civil society through music communities, privately-run music and arts venues and the artistic community associated with them. Even though the ACRap is a state institution, the initiative was instigated and run by the Director Rubén Marín Maning, and it was not handed down as a directive from the ICM or MINCULT. Donations were also made privately by rappers. This new form of Havana's civil society has also been developing independently of any intervention from international charities and other non-governmental organisations, and in a manner particular to the island. It lived up to the maxim that ultimately actions speak louder than words showing the strength of Havana and its citizens. The world of music and art and the introduction of privately-owned music and art venues have inadvertently laid a foundation for the emergence of a new form of civil society in Cuba, one driven by the music and arts community, responding to the needs of the population in times of serious humanitarian crisis.

It is noteworthy that one of the first expressions of an emergence of an independent civil society in Cuba was driven by the music and arts community in the country. At the forefront of the socio-economic changes characterising the decade of the 2010s, musicians have become not only more entrepreneurial, but also more actively involved social actors. Utilising the benefits granted by the introduction of private property ownership, increased internet access and international travel from and to the island, musicians, and arts venues such as FAC have

gained a significant status, which they are using to also benefit the broader community. However, despite its glamour and popularity, FAC remains inaccessible to some audiences and even musicians. Havana is not equal for everyone. Reymel Hernández, a former singer of Oderquis Revé y Su Changüi and Maichel y Combinación Cubana (the project of Maykel Blanco's younger brother) and currently living in Europe, told me that the only time he goes to music venues is when he performs or when his cousin visits from Canada and takes him out. Born and still living in Guanabacoa, Hernández is physically and economically marginalised from the private venues of Havana. He has never visited FAC yet. Many rappers also told me that they hardly ever visit any private venues in Havana, because of the costs involved. While the venue does not discriminate the recipients of its social activities, attending FAC is still a privilege denied to many *habaneros*, pointing to class distinctions in Havana's new social circuit and embryonic civil society.

## **Cultural Entrepreneurship**

### ***The Sociocapitalist Musician***

The high cupola and massive stone walls of the sixteenth century church of Saint Francis of Assisi in Old Havana echoed the cheer of Christmas carols, the sweetness of smooth jazz and the swing of traditional son during the Christmas concert by Camerata Romeu and guests which took place in December 2017. I attended the event as a guest of Eduardo Sandoval, who performed a classical piece with the orchestra and the jazz theme "Cinema Paradiso" by US singer Chris Botti. The evening took form in an interactive format where Zenaida Romeu played the part of an orchestra director searching for good musicians or wanting to listen to specific musical pieces. It was how the repertory was performed, and she kept inviting guest musicians to join the orchestra. Requests by certain audience guests were also met. This included the demands of an Italian producer who at the end of the evening

offered a contract to one of the string performers of Zenaida Romeu's orchestra. In the spirit of Christmas, one of the greatest wishes of Cuban musicians, to be signed up and produced by a foreign label, was fulfilled.

A few days later I followed Sandoval to an evening at the modern club Bar Sarao, situated in the heart of Vedado, where he played with the thirteen-piece timba band of Alain Pérez. I was amazed how a stage, that usually looks it is about to explode with a band of five, fitted the entire crew and even a guest performance by Pérez's friend, the Spanish flamenco and jazz singer Diego el Cigala, a long-term participant in Cuba's music scene. The atmosphere fully enticed guests from Cuba and abroad dancing to the rhythms of timba, rumba, jazz, and flamenco fusions. The same week I also went with Sandoval to a Santería ceremony where he did not perform but joined as the son of the *babalao* leading the ceremony (and a *babalao* himself). Coming from a family of active Santería practitioners, Sandoval's parents were engaged in religious ceremonies across Havana on weekly basis.

Following the work of independent trombone player Eduardo Sandoval for a period of three weeks, I journeyed across different epochs and places – from the colonial and traditional to the contemporary and fashionable, from the touristic to the very local, from the secular to the strictly religious. I also moved across social strata: I sat next to international embassy guests, emergent wealthy *habaneros* and Cuba's top arts and fashion icons, but also cut up cakes with Buena Vista's housewives. Beyond the variety of social scenes and people, Sandoval also performed a wide range of musical genres on almost daily basis. He describes himself as a *jazzista*, yet he performed everything from classical music and jazz to timba, timbatón and various fusions. Within the same week he recorded a timba song with Adonis y Osain del Monte in a small recording studio based in a church in Old Havana, played at a private party in Varadero with Issac Delgado, performed at a military event, and took part in the recording of the new Cuban All Stars project (a US production) and of a piece by Mas con

Menos. Sandoval's jazz trombone further filled Bar Tatagüa on Paseo del Prado during a private arts and fashion event serving wine and canapés. The ambience made me feel as if I was at an event in the West End of London.

The physical, historical, social, and musical trajectory of the professional world of Sandoval tracked across Cuba's capital and other provinces, continuously navigating multiple musical and social identities. The versatile sound of his trombone mapped a unique image of Havana, one of challenges, hopes, creativity, survival, exclusivity, tradition, fashion, novelty, entertainment, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and tourism. Camerata Romeu held a second Christmas concert at FAC the following week. Both venue ambience and audiences differed significantly from their first event at the church of San Francisco in the ancient Basilica Menor, where spectators included primarily family and friends of the performers, local Cuban families, some embassy guests, and a group of American tourists. Unlike the ancient convent building in old Havana, a relic of Cuba's colonial past, FAC represented Havana's cosmopolitanism as a modern, fashionable arts club with strict entry policies, and indicative of the aspiration of Havana as a glimpse of Cuba's modern cosmopolitan future. The concert was held at the cinema gallery with audiences from all ages, social and ethnic backgrounds and including a large proportion of tourists. The repertoire once again journeyed across epochs and political systems, changing from the classical music and religious songs of the European colonial past to emancipatory jazz from the US, Cuba's friend and foe, to the traditional Cuban rhythms of son and danzón.

This wide variety of Sandoval's sound is indicative of more than just his skills as a talented and versatile musician. It also speaks of the professional life of artists in Havana's *farándula* today. Cuban musicians have traditionally had versatile training and experience of musical genres. Their current associations with multiple projects, however, are often driven by their desire to earn a higher income to manage the rising prices of Havana or to have a better

life, to be connected to the motors of Havana's music scene and to have the possibility to be part of a project which tours internationally. In addition, Sandoval told me, getting sponsorship from EGREM to produce an album requires visibility and connections, to be seen as successful and wanted by various projects. With the growing sociocapitalist system of Havana, the capital's music scene has also developed some of its core characteristics such as growing competitiveness, aspirations for national and international popularity, and the desire to earn like international stars of the entertainment business.

Havana is indeed a city of contrasts, controversies, and contradictions (Dubinsky 2016), existing simultaneously in the past, present and future, and its music scene reflects the nature of Cuba's capital, its versatile history, and sociocapitalist aspirations. A mix of first world, third world and other world, the capital's social and music life swings like a pendulum between extremes. The sound of Sandoval's trombone travelled from the wealthy and stylish to the marginalised, from national to international, from public to private, from traditional to cutting edge and innovative, from Christmas carols to timba. Sandoval's background and career further reflect these contrasting aspects of Havana. An independent Afro-Cuban musician who has performed across Cuba, Europe, South America, China and the US, Sandoval is trained in classical music. He keeps pushing his professional pendulum to the more exclusive venues and wealthier audiences rather than the barrio and his neighbourhood.

Sandoval is not unique in the career path he pursues. Few musicians who have achieved success in their individual projects focus on a single genre or have a single project. The previously mentioned Eduardo Ramos and his new project Más con Menos, the Real Project, Irakere drummer Rodney Bareto, pianist Harold Lopez-Nussa, bassist Yuniel Zumeta (a.k.a. Tito Bass), even icons such as Chucho Valdés are only few of the examples of Havana's popular musicians who play not only in different projects of the same genre but also in projects of various genres. Even successful musicians such as the Afro-Cuban project Adonis Y Osain

del Monte continuously participate in the projects of other musicians, locally or internationally, and perform at global festivals and venues. Such an approach of playing music “to pay the rent” in the words of London afro-jazzist Mulele Matondo is not unique to Havana (pers. comm.). It is what musicians elsewhere in the world do as well. Besides working for many projects, musicians in London also often have non-musical jobs which provide them with a regular income. In the context of Havana’s *farándula*, however, musicians are overall solely working in the musical profession and industry, partly because they are generally still not paying rent while living with their parents or in an inherited accommodation but rather earning for their personal or family expenses. The musical profession is one of the most respected and can be also one of highest-earning jobs in Cuba, especially in the current period of growing self-employment amongst artists. Musicians have taken advantage of this and grown an entrepreneurial spirit towards their work and profession.

### ***The Role of Music Agencies***

Havana has ten main national musical companies, which are responsible for providing work for musicians and through which artists run their annual accounting. This means that clients pay artists for their work to the agency and then artists receive their earnings through the agency, following tax reductions. The only official way to earn as a musician in Cuba is by belonging to a music agency. Havana’s agencies include La Clave, Benny Moré, Musicalia, Música Popular, Antonio María Romeu, Adolfo Guzmán, Ignacio Piñero and Cubarte. There are also the specialised agencies such as the ACRap and ACRock.

Some artists argue that the agencies such as Benny Moré and La Clave are helpful in providing work opportunities for their artists across Cuba. However, the rest of Havana’s agencies have become of little use to the artists. Most often, artists are searching for their own work or have producers dedicated to the task. Joaquín Borges-Triana characterises these state-

run music agencies, which for many years supported musicians, as having become ineffective as they are unable to respond well to the demands of contemporary music production and the needs of musicians in the changing socio-economic environment of Havana. They have become a sort of warehouse of artists that are, however, unable to promote them or bring them new opportunities at home or abroad. The bureaucratic inefficiency of these agencies and lack of know-how are becoming quickly apparent in their failure to manage and further the careers of artists in contemporary Cuba or maintain their earning capabilities. Entering a music agency does not happen automatically, it is a difficult and lengthy process, and often new artists have their career development slowed down, because of these challenges of joining the official music scene. This is especially relevant for artists from urban and folkloric genres who usually do not come from the music schools. Malcoms Junco Duffay argued that musicians should perform wherever they choose and focus on organising and developing their own careers rather than wait for the state to do it for them (int.).

By managing their own careers, artists can try to hire producers who can connect them with the right projects, which have international tours; even though, most often it is the artists themselves who get such opportunities through their own connections. The competition amongst musicians to be part of the international show *Carmen la Cubana* was described by some of them as “vicious”. This musical theatre production was the highest paid opportunity for artists in 2019, with a promise of further world tours in future. The musicians who were selected for the show were part of the same circuit I have seen playing together in Havana for Alain Pérez and Issac Delgado. New friendships and close links were formed amongst musicians who took part in the project, who hoped to maintain their participation in the production when it comes out for another season in the upcoming years. This mindset of competitiveness stands in contrast to the traditional cultural structures of socialism, community and sharing, and is indicative of the emergent sociocapitalist consciousness of Havana, where



artists are competing for the few most lucrative opportunities. In this context, musicians are availing of the opportunities presented by the socio-economic changes in the country while further driving this sociocapitalist model forward within Cuba's still state-run framework. This has often rendered the music agencies paralytic and incapable to meet the demands of Havana's music entrepreneurs.

Cuban music is not listened to sufficiently even in Cuba, argues Malcoms Junco Duffay, considered all the potential it has (int.). Only few artists are promoted across venues and media. And this is a key issue in Havana's music industry, argues Antonio Martinez, Cuban music expert and co-organiser of the first international music market in Cuba *Primera Linea* (Bräuer 2017). What is currently "under-developed is the distribution, promotion, and marketing of the music. And on the creative side the exchange with musicians abroad and other genres also still has a lot more untapped potential it's a goldmine really." It is therefore that while the music agencies overall offer administrative infrastructure, they add little value to the career prospects of artists.

The ACRap shares both similarities and difference to the other music agencies. It has a record label, which produces artists, however, very sporadically due to funding issues. The Agency has its own magazine and represents artists nationally and internationally. While there is not much that the Agency can do to create job opportunities or promote its artists, at least rap musicians, who mostly have no formal musical education, can officially earn by being part of its catalogue (Marín Maning int.).

The hiring of Rubén Marín Maning as a Director of the Agency in October 2016 was with the view to revitalise the way it is run. Marín Maning developed some strategies where artists get paid for participating in events and peñas organised by the Agency. However, its catalogue of artists remains small due to continuous underfunding (35 artists at present), which many rappers claim is because hip-hop is not a genre promoted by the Cuban government

(Junco Duffay int.; McDonald pers. comm.). Papá Humbertico shares that the Agency has given him six or seven events across other provinces, but he keeps doing endless auditions with no results as he feels there is no jury in Cuba that is able to evaluate rap properly (Lechuga 2020). He was a member of the Agency between 2010 and 2013 and then having returned to form part of its catalogue on the request of Rubén Marín after he joined in 2016, Papá Humbertico sees only one benefit of the organisation, which is helping with the collection of payments, as it is difficult in Cuba to charge clients cash and payments can have delays at times of up to five months.

“When the Cuban Rap Agency has to make a decision, whose interests are they going to protect? The government’s or hip-hop’s?” (Rohrlich 2015) The Agency is focused on promoting the artists from its own catalogue, clarifies Marín Maning, when I bring the question to him. With limited funds and resources to put events together, he needs to ensure that the artists he produces generate sufficient returns, so that the ICM and MINCULT consider ACRap a viable company to invest more funds in. This will further help the Agency extend its catalogue of artists and abilities to organise events. As Marín Maning’s view is that rap belongs to the streets of Havana and not to the Agency, his role is to ensure that ACRap protects the interests of its artists. At the same time, he ensures that he assists youth in marginalised communities enter the rap scene instead of focusing on crime. Visiting a small group of aspiring rappers in Campo Florida (a peripheral barrio of Havana), Marín Maning spoke about the benefits of choosing a musical career instead of delinquency (Sept. 2021). He further does auditions for young rappers outside of Havana and offers the venue for performers who do not belong to the Agency. While he has a *sociocapitalist* view of running the music company, Marín Maning’s approach to it has also a strong social aspect, bringing his communal and social values together with the needs of a commercialising Havana. His way of running the Cuban Rap Agency,

transforms it into a space in-between the government bureaucracy and the hip-hop scene, between making a living and upholding hip-hop culture.

While most artists argue that music agency system needs a serious reform, if these institutions are to remain viable structures of Havana's music scene, the reliance on these companies remains. Since the beginning of the Covid19 pandemic and the closure of live music events in March 2020, the music agencies have been paying their artists a monthly salary to supplement their loss of income. The initial payment was CUC60 per month, which was increased to between MN3,000 and MN4,000, equivalent of CUC120 to CUC160, in January 2021 following the economic reforms in the country which abolished the CUC as a currency. This socialist aspect of the national music industry was well received by Havana's music entrepreneurs. While focused on becoming more capitalist, earning higher fees, and developing international careers, musicians remain dependent on and avail of the traditional socialist welfare system. In between the comforts of the paternalistic social structures of revolutionary Cuba and the opportunities presented by globalisation and capitalism, musicians are operating within both facets of life on the island.

### ***Collaborations and Cultural Production***

Another aspect of Havana's cultural sociocapitalism have been musical collaborations in album recordings. The 2018 album *Gourmet* by Los Orishas had guest participation in half of their songs, as did Sandoval's and Pérez's new albums. Carlos Paz sent me a link to his latest album advising me immediately that a lot of currently popular Cuban musicians participated. Having guest participation had obviously become a fashion in Havana as well as a marketing tool. As almost every new album produced in Havana now, regardless of the genre, had a rumba piece in it, London-based rumbero Gerardo De Armas saw these collaborations as a recognition of the value of Afro-Cuban music (March 2020). Others claim that up-and-coming musicians

need to have the participation of already popular Cuban musicians in their productions to increase interest from audiences in their albums. Sandoval also thought he needs to have such participations to popularise his own work. Regardless of the specific reasoning of the artist, this pattern indicates a shift in the mindset of artists on the island where market demands are now driving the production of music and culture in Havana. A thinking more aligned with the sociocapitalist model that has been developing in the country, music collaborations have become an expression of the growing neoliberal entrepreneurship of Havana's music scene.

According to Szemere, cultural production in the expanding marketplace is regulated more and more by popular demand rather the “ideological dictum” of revolutionary Cuba. An unpredictable but increasingly permissive government now allows for a limited yet vigorous public sphere for alternative movements and ideas to thrive, where an informal contract is made between “state officialdom” and professional artists (Szemere 2010: 245). The musicians within the jazz and popular music scenes I worked with in Havana were seldomly interested in challenging the government and its modus operandi even if they complained about certain rules and regulations. Instead, they were trying to make the most of the situation by utilising the resources on offer and exploring the opportunities available – from ensuring that they get the funding which EGREM offers to produce their albums, to getting involved in projects that will entail international tours where the earning is much higher, to making sure that they get to participate in the new exclusive private parties in Havana.

This popular demand has also ensured that beyond Afro-Cuban rhythms, reggaetón has now entered in numerous collaborations. “Reggaetón is a force, musicians now need to reckon with it”, argues Reymel Hernández, claiming the genre will not leave the life and music scene of Cuba (pers. comm). Los Orishas had collaborations with Yomil y El Dany and Jacob Forever in *Gourmet*. El Niño y La Verdad did a timba-reggaetón remix with El Kimiko y Yordy on their 2020 hit “Mi Negrita.” Even iconic bands such as Los Van Van, considered the

powerhouse of Cuban music (*el tren de la musica cubana*) had a collaboration with El Micha in 2021. Pop musician Leoni Torres also has few collaborations with El Micha. “I want to capture the young generation, I want them to remember me when they grow up”, says Maichel Blanco (for biographical data see p.271), “and they listen to reggaetón” (pers. com).

Reggaetón, like rumba, has become another way for musicians to reinvent themselves and offer something different in their productions. Both genres emerged from the street, from the socially and economically marginalised barrios and the periphery and are connected to Cuba’s Africanness. Rumba gives tribute to the past and the richness of Cuban culture. It brings out the heritage, the African roots of Cuban society. It is also a marketing tool to attract international consumers. Reggaetón looks to the future, representing the new generation of Cuban youth and appealing to a growing international reggaetón market. Havana’s new music entrepreneurs are catering to the demands of the current market borrowing from the audiences of artists from different genres, which traditionally have been separated through the places of performance and production. Consumerism is driving cultural production, where artists seek what is more commercially viable. “This is the biggest change in Cuban music since 2010”, argues Borges-Triana; “it is becoming more commercial than ever before” (int.). Reggaetón, in this context, becomes a tool through which artists from other genres are becoming more commercial, thinking about market trends, supply, and demand.

### ***Home Recording Studios***

Beyond participation in multiple projects and a growing involvement in self-marketing and promotion, Cuban musicians and industry practitioners continue to grow a tenet which emerged during the Special Period – building home recording studios. Initially the phenomenon emerged primarily amongst reggaetón, hip-hop and electronic musicians to fill in the gap left by the state because of its lacking support of the genres. Official discourses labelled reggaetón

as “pseudo-culture”, “a foreign form of expression associated with mass consumption that “unfortunately” entered Cuba because of globalisation” (Boudreault-Fornier 2008: 337). Like party music, but unlike trova and rap, reggaetón lyrics are about love, sex, and consumerism, rather than issues of social concern, hardly reflecting any of the ideological tenets promoted by the revolutionary leadership. However, despite these criticisms and some period discussions by government officials and ministers about limiting reggaetón, no official action was taken to censor the genre, and little was done to limit the diffusion of the music. Reggaetón musicians were also not recognised as musicians, which meant they could not sign contracts nor earn for the production and performance of their music. This meant that producers had to rely heavily on their involvement in informal networks, illicit activities, such as recording music in unauthorised homemade studios, copying, and distributing CDs in the street without copyright considerations, and performing illegally in exchange for undeclared payments (*ibid.* pp. 337 – 338). Overall, this existence of the genre in the grey area between official government policies and the lack of pursuing active censorship by the authorities, led to the emergence of the new phenomena of private studios.

Taking advantage of the idea, of government change in policy allowing small private businesses to operate and fulfilling the demand for recording spaces, a variety of home and private studios sprung across Havana in more recent years. Sound engineer Alfonso Peña claims that the number of recording studios operating now in the capital is “incalculable” (2019). Some of the most popular and well-equipped ones are dBega Estudio de Grabacion<sup>66</sup>, which opened in 2012 and is based in the house of sound engineer Carlos de la Vega in Arroyo Naranjo in the outskirts of Havana. The studio has two recording rooms and a sound cabin. One room has a recording cabin and there is a 1917 New York model acoustic Steinway & Sons piano in the other, which was added in 2019. All rooms are maintained at the right

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<sup>66</sup> More details on studio available at <https://conocecuba.com/dbega>.

temperature. Despite its small size, the studio allows for the recording of small bands or larger orchestras. The studio began its sessions with the recording of the Oddara jazz quartet project followed by Bamboleo, Alain Pérez, Maria del Mar Bonet, and Afro-Peruvian singer Susana Baca (*ibid.*). Variety of genres, from the timba of Alexander Abreu and Havana D'Primera to the hip-hop fusion of Telmary, have been recorded in the studio. The quality of equipment and professional services have transformed the studio into a sought-after location, providing De Vega with continuous flow of work. It also offers food and beverages on the terrace of the house, which allows for long hours of recording without the need to leave the premises. The only challenge to dBega Estudio is being in La Víbora, some 9km away from the heart of Havana.

Vedado, on the other hand, has several recording studios, with PM Records, Scorpio, and Trabuco Music amongst the most popular and often frequented. Because of its convenient location, the barrio is arguably also most convenient for studios, like it is for most of the new music venues and bars of Havana. Trabuco Music is the studio of famous Cuban musician Manolito Simonet and while it is a fully private place, it is also one of the few recording studios approved by the Cuban state. It has an emphasis on acoustic productions of large formats, three recording suites with different settings, and a comfortable control room, equipped with high-end digital technology. The studio further offers the presence of well-experienced resident technicians and producers such as German Velasco and Emilio Vega, beside Simonet himself, and works with international artists and companies. Simonet's mission statement describes the location as "A studio to make our cultural patrimony known and valued", giving its work socio-cultural aspirations beyond the commercial drive of private enterprises.<sup>67</sup>

PM Records was established in 1998 by another iconic Cuban musician, Pablo Milanés. Over the past decade it has recorded some of Cuba's most popular names across various genres,

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<sup>67</sup> Quote taken from studio website [www.trabucomusic.com](http://www.trabucomusic.com).

from the popular music icons of Los Van Van, Elito Revé y Su Charangón and Orquesta Aragón, to reggaetón stars Gente de Zona and Baby Lores and rocker David Blanco. Unlike the network of music production and home studios of reggaetoneros who operated at the margins of state infrastructure (*ibid.* 346), the above-mentioned studios, like FAC, have become commercial and sound powerhouses, operating alongside state establishments, and acting as alternatives filling a gap in the demand for recording spaces. The home studios which sprung across Havana since the 1990s due to the reggaetón boom, creating alternative networks and narratives, laid the foundation for the further commercialisation of private recording places. These studios emerged because of changes in economic policy but also with the capitalist ideal of offering supply where there is demand.

While the large studios have become the spaces in-between filling the gap of supply and demand of recording locations and contemporary technologies, some of the smaller studios have become the spaces in-between filling the gaps in sound. We are at 8 Production, the studio of DJ and producer Ultrasonic, located in Cerro (not a prime location in Havana). I go there with Rubén Marín, who is recording a new piece with his band Primera Base. The song is called “El Lunar” (“The Birthmark”) and it tackles issues of racism (with lyrics by Marín Maning). The music is written and composed by Ultrasonic, and it is a reggae number. Both lyricist and producer explain that certain themes require a new sound; it cannot be the same hip-hop of Primera Base as it has been for almost 30 years; reggae provides that sound, and 8 Productions provides the space for the creation and recording of that sound.

I had certainly not come across a reggae recording in any of the leading state or private studios in Havana. Hiring a place at PM Record, Scorpio or d’Bega is costly and often there is a queue of popular artists who are willing to pay good fees to use these spaces and their sound technologies. Many hip-hop artists, including the ones who do not belong to the ACRap, and performers of new genres such as Bakosó (a fusion between Afro-Cuban rhythms, afrobeat,



afro-house and Angolan kuduro which emerged during the 2010s in Santiago de Cuba)<sup>68</sup>, also get produced in alternative spaces such as Papá Humbertico's Real 70 for the former and DJ Jigüe's Guampara Productions for the latter (Du Graf 2018). Like the alternative social spaces which were provided by the hip-hop scene in the Special Period (Baker 2011), the small private studios provide alternative spaces for producing sounds that are often not considered mainstream, popular, or commercial in Havana's music industry.

Some jazz musicians are also considering the idea of opening their own recording places (Sandoval 2018). They see the initiative as an excellent source of income in Havana. At the same time, finding the space to dedicate, equipment to furnish the studio and the material to create the sound insulation are neither easy nor affordable tasks. While the idea is one many are keen on, few manage to realise it. Nevertheless, this entrepreneurial mindset, even if constrained by the socio-economic framework of Havana, is another example of the ways in which Cuba's musical entrepreneurs are finding ways to avail of the changes and demands of a sociocapitalist Havana and the new possibilities created due to the shift towards a more market-driven economic model.

### **“Tunturuntu pa’ tu Casa”: Pulling the Iron Curtain Open**

These new sociocapitalist ways of life and work are even more intricately connected with the foreign through the increased access to internet and the participation in international digital music flows by artists on the island, further redefining the places of Cuban music, from the home to the concert hall and the studio, which are now also taking part in the globalised

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<sup>68</sup> There is no literature on the genre and the only source of knowledge on its origins and history is a documentary called “Bakosó: Afrobeats of Cuba” (2019). The film is produced by Afro-Puerto Rican Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi and the story is traced and told by Cuban DJ and producer Isnay Rodríguez, a.k.a. D.J. Jigüe, founder of independent label Guampara Music, originally from Santiago de Cuba and now living in Havana. The documentary outlines that since the mid-2000s, when Cuba incorporated a second campus in Santiago de Cuba for its world-renowned medical school programme, large numbers of African students arrived in the city. They had to adapt to a culture that seemed both alien and familiar at the same time and music became the means to adapt to Santiago. It can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdxypCt9om0>.

world. “The thing that changed Cuba more than anything is the internet. They [the government] can no longer lie to us because we can see the truth on the internet”, argues Alberto Mier, my trusted taxi driver in Havana. I arrived for fieldwork in Havana in late December 2018. Earlier that month the national telecommunications operator ETECSA introduced mobile data, which for the first time in history gave Cubans internet access on their mobile phones without the need for them to walk to a Wi-Fi point to connect wirelessly. I was so used to the internet fast I was obliged to take when I was in Cuba that receiving regular updates via WhatsApp and social networks felt almost unnatural. I remembered my first trips to the country in 2015 when I was entering the island’s music and dance scene were characterise by a CUC2-per-hour dial-up connection in a hotel once a fortnight which was so slow, I could not even connect on Facebook messenger. My focus while in Cuba was on life there and I had little contact with what was happening outside the island. Such limited internet access and infrastructure in the country, and the high costs associated with its use, had also limited the opportunities for Cuban artists to participate in international musical and cultural flows in real time. Cuba remained an outsider to the on-the-spot digital cultural collaborations and exchanges which have been commonplace amongst artists and between artists and audiences elsewhere for more than twenty years now.

After 2017, internet access on the island expanded and improved, and usage prices went down to a CUC1 per hour. Despite the constant search for internet cards, and street corners and parks offering wireless connection under the scorching sun which made the effort straining and constrained, the internet had quickly become part of the life of Cubans in general and specifically of artists. One needed to make time to search for and buy a card and then find a spot with good enough connection to load and use most phone applications, which often limited usage to what was necessary and required rather than a spur-of-the-moment decision to do a google search on a random topic or have leisurely conversations with friends around the globe.

Nevertheless, musicians had begun to actively use the time and money they could invest on an internet connection to upload videos and photographs of their work, events, and CDs. International awareness of what was going on in Cuba's music scene from Havana to Santiago was rapidly spreading. Cubans were also learning about the work of artists and musicians from other locations, receiving the news faster than before.

The next stage, which caused an even bigger change in the life of musicians, was the introduction of mobile data. Even if still at costs prohibitive to most of the population, the desire for connectivity prevailed, and artists and musicians became regular users of mobile internet to promote their projects and learn about the work of artists in other locations. Livestreaming of events, even if only short parts of a concert, was becoming more common, allowing international audiences to partake in what was happening on the island in real time. One could even see even previously highly secret Santería, Palo and other spiritual ceremonies being live streamed on Facebook. Beyond this improved ease of connectivity and the introduction of livestreaming, the changes driven by access to mobile data became most significantly obvious some fifteen months later, during the spring of 2020 and the lockdown caused by the global Covid19 pandemic.

I came across the Tunturuntu pa' tu Casa festival (loosely translated as "off you go home") on Facebook. The oxymoron connects with the Covid19 lockdown guidelines urging citizens across the globe to stay at home rather than mingle in public places. Set up in June 2019, Tunturuntu is a solely online platform, dedicated to promoting Cuban culture, with teams based in Spain and Cuba. Inspired by the Quédate en Casa ("Stay at Home") festival run on national TV by the Cuban Music Institute, Tunturuntu pa' tu Casa is the first purely digital festival dedicated to Cuban culture (Treto int.). Even though the online concerts lasted for only four weeks, the festival brought Cuban music to the currents of international cultural flows spurred by the pandemic and lockdown in real time. It showcased performances of up-and-

coming as well as popular Cuban musicians and DJs, primarily from the island, though also a few from abroad. It also included some non-Cuban artists connected to the music scene in Havana. The selection included musicians and DJs focusing on various styles, from traditional Cuban to jazz and electronic music (see Figure 9). The festival further had cooking and cocktail-making classes offered by gourmet chefs and bartenders in Havana as well as photography expositions.

Cuba already has established festivals. Festival International Jazz Plaza has been taking place for decades and is considered a recurring reunion for jazz lovers. Its 2021 edition also took place online. Other festivals such as the Havana World Music Festival, Festival de la Salsa and Fiesta del Tambor have also achieved great attendance and continuity. All these events have become institutionalised in Cuba's music scene. At the same time, foreign attendance of the events remains somewhat limited. In the 2019 Jazz Plaza Fest, the foreign audiences who I came across consisted of retired North Americans coming to one concert as part of their Cuba trip itinerary, and a university group of jazz students from the US. While foreign artists perform at the festivals, audiences remain largely Cuban.

Due to its digital nature, however, Tunturuntu pa' tu Casa had an immediate international exposure and attendance, especially taking into consideration that internet access is easier, faster, and cheaper pretty much anywhere in the world bar Cuba. The festival aimed to bring attention to the work of artists from Cuba to the rest of the world and to the artistic profession, which has been greatly affected by the pandemic. At the same time, the initiative wanted to provide reassurance to audiences that their favourite artists are still there for them during this period of lockdown and social isolation. DJ Yasel Berroa from Havana shared the tremendous happiness he felt when he did his set on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020. He received warm feedback from international listeners who were grateful for the music coming live from the island, transporting them to Cuba and helping them forget about their feelings of imprisonment

(pers. comm.). He also believes that because of the festival, more people will visit Cuba to experience its music and culture. US-based Cuban pianist Dayramir Gonzalez (for biographical notes see p.258) thought the festival was a great success in exposing the work of young and established Cuban musicians to new audiences outside the island, reaching the public in their homes and on mobile devices (pers. comm.).

Figure 9: *Line-up of Events from the Tunturuntu pa'tu Casa Festival, March 2020*

**"TUNTURUNTU PA' TU CASA"**  
<http://tunturuntu.org/agendadeeventos>

**Viernes 20**

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Flor de Loto  
(Instagram Live)  
18:00-18:30

Boomerang  
(Instagram Live)  
18:30-19:00

Back to Back  
Frankyboy-Kuskodejota-Tievodeejay-Ivan lejardi  
(Instagram Live)  
19:00-19:30

Andy García Jazz tú sabes  
(Instagram Live)  
19:30-19:45

Dj Yasel Berroa  
(Instagram Live)  
20:00-20:30

Athanai  
(Facebook Live)  
20:30-21:00

Cassandra  
(Instagram Live)  
21:00-21:30

Rodrigo García y Ceda el Paso  
(Facebook Live)  
21:30-22:00

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En colaboración con  
**fonoma**

*Photo credit: Magazine AM-PM Facebook Account 2020*

Both artists see the introduction of the internet as a transformative moment in the life of Cuban artists. Access to digital music and being up to date with the activities of the rest of the world has become part of the daily life of artists in Cuba. There is no need to bring international music on hard devices into the island anymore as Cubans already have digital access to it at the same time as the rest of us. Audiences abroad are also learning about the work of Cuban artists faster and without having previous knowledge or experience of the island and its culture. Mobile internet access is further bringing Cuban music and artists to the global cultural flows in real time. As musicians from all around the world were livestreaming their performances and Lady Gaga's One World: Together at Home was taking place, so were Cubans performing for the first time in their careers from their own sitting rooms from Playa to Cotorro as a response to the shared experience of the ongoing global Covid19 pandemic.

Another innovative aspect of the festival in line with Cuba's changing socio-economic model is its private sponsorship by Fonoma, a company with professionals based in Europe, South America and the Caribbean. Fonoma is a mobile and internet charging company, and it funded the mobile data required by artists to perform live. Therefore, even musicians who otherwise would have not been able to afford to pay for their own connection could now freely take part in the festival. This model of post-socialist cultural collaborations brought Cuba closer to global cultural flows and the experience of time of international artists, while allowing musicians to maintain their musical and performative uniqueness.

At the same time, an online festival I worked on in 2021 took a very different shape. Organising the 2021 International Symposium of Cuban Hip-Hop entailed prerecording events as it was spread over six days and included live performances, debates, and interviews with more than thirty different participants of various ages and mobilities. The biggest challenges were faced by a small budget, which meant that we had to film with limited crew and cameras, and Cuba's still very slow and unreliable internet, which resulted in spending hours uploading the videos to social media platforms. The best internet was found at the Cuban Music Institute (ICM) and was at its peak at 10mbps, which is significantly less than a UK average of 70mbps. Watching videos using mobile data can also be very costly, thus, while many audiences in Cuba wanted to see the events, they had to pick and choose or make sure they connect through a wireless network, which is more affordable. Nevertheless, through

feedback we received, and views recorded by social media platforms, we noted that the Symposium reached audiences across the country and gave a perception of Cuban hip-hop and the Agency as becoming more aligned with global cultural flows.

In his studies on time, Stephen Hawking (1998) develops an understanding of the space-time continuum as a combined force where both constitutive elements are dynamic forces which affect each other and the structure of which is affected by and in turn affects the how bodies move and forces act. Beyond the physics application of this new understanding of the universe, there is a social and spiritual application of its tenets. The changing forces of society driven by the introduction of the internet and post-socialist models of economic behaviour in Cuba are continuously shaping Havana's music scene. Real-time connectivity and international collaborations in the digital realm only began for Cubans in 2019; however, online performances and presentations, whether real-time or pre-recorded, have become a norm. Cuba's space-time has now shifted from being stuck in a time warp and the shores of the Caribbean to an international space-time of musical and cultural encounters also able to respond to an ongoing global pandemic and lockdown restrictions on live performances and entertainment.

There is a lingering feeling of anticipation after the festival finished about the next events to be organised by Tunturuntu. DJ Yasel Berroa feels all artists who participated in the events should meet in person and perform together as a follow up (pers. comm.). His views are somewhat reminiscent of Live Aid. He says such a gathering and production would be a good continuation of what has already been achieved by the festival. With the introduction of the internet and mobile data, Cuba's Iron Curtain has been pulled even more open. Havana's music scene now forms part of the international flows of culture beyond the circulation of salsa and son music and teachers. Tunturuntu's online approach might just transform the platform into an international digital institution of Cuban culture. As Marín maintains, even though the 2022 International Symposium of Cuban Hip-Hop is expected to take place in person, the digital aspect will remain. He is adamant that one cannot afford to hold live events without utilising their promotional potential and audience reach by sharing them on social media. There is no going back to a pre-internet era for the Director of the ACRap.

## Conclusion

Havana's music scene exists in-between the outdated state-run infrastructure and mindset and struggles to cope and is often in conflict with the constantly changing parameters of the musical profession and industry driven by the *sociocapitalist* changes of the city. Existing within the framework of the relics of Cuba's Revolution defined by the state-run music agencies, venues and recording studios, artists are adapting to the changing socio-economic parameters of the country, including a market-driven approach. They are availing of the benefits given by state actors such as EGREM whenever musicians have access to such benefits, while simultaneously looking for new ways to promote themselves and their projects in line with the demands of a market economy and an internationalising Cuban music scene.

Cuban artists exist in a time frame in-between the past and the future, in an officially state-run music sector, where they are furthering their careers according to the rules of post-socialist market economics of demand and supply. They navigate multiple identities through the performance of various genres to satisfy the demands of the growing market of private venues serving wealthy Cubans and tourists across Havana, and their personal aspirations for higher earnings often to buy new instruments as well as branded clothes and iPhones. This lifestyle creates closer affinity between Cubans and musicians elsewhere through shared consumption habits, driving an existence which is simultaneously at home and abroad. At the same time, Cuban artists remain reliant on the safety net provided by the social benefits of the revolutionary system, which they are not ready to give up.

While the new private venues have become a symbol of Havana's new consumerism, not all musicians are able to avail of the benefits. PPPs such as FAC are considered a success story, however, it is challenging for musicians to get regular performances or residency there. Another successful PPPs, *El Guajirito* in Old Havana, focuses entirely on the image that is considered the most desirable commodity for tourist consumption. It hosts programmes with



groups performing traditional music such as Sierra Maestra, former BVSC stars, and the “Lady of Son” Tete García Catúrla. The venue charges USD60 or EUR60 per night for entry and dinner (USD35/ EUR35 only for entry without dinner); however, it pays its musicians in national currency through their respective music agencies. A PPP in *sociocapitalist* Havana means a private venue, which has an agreement with the state and pays it a fee to be able to operate. While the venue might be earning well, it does not always trickle down to the musicians.

Often musicians do not avail of the benefits of Havana’s private music venues due to genre preferences, and the social life of many *habaneros* is becoming poorer due their limited resources. Simultaneously, while private studios have developed competitive sound technologies, sound itself often comes from the alternative smaller places where market forces and economics are less relevant. Thus, sound itself is created between the advanced technology of state-owned studios and the creative and expressional freedom of alternative private studios. Havana’s music scene and society is operating between the revolutionary benefits of mobile internet access and the crippling speed and still expensive prices of internet on the island. Cuba is entering global cultural streams and entailing a move towards capitalism in its cultural production in ways unique to the island’s socio-economic and political systems.

## **LONDON**

## Chapter 3: Cuban London

“The spirit of internationalism is a traditional quality of the Cubans” (Marquez 2017: 22). Nevertheless, the US Embargo has limited Cuba’s ability to pursue political, economic, or cultural collaborations with countries around the world since 1962. Despite its political and military involvement in Africa and South America during the earlier years of the revolutionary regime and its collaboration with the other members of the socialist bloc until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s international cultural exchanges remained sporadic. Diaspora musicians such as Celia Cruz, Tito Puente and others developed a Cuban music scene in the United States. Habana Abierta brought light to the Cuban diaspora in Spain where a shared heritage, colonial history and language allowed for an easier accommodation of Cuban immigrants into society. However, Cuba’s cultural internationalisation was restricted and inconsistent.

Cultural collaborations between Cuba and the UK remained very limited except for specific projects such as Buena Vista Social Club, recorded in 1996 and released in 1997 by the UK Label World Circuit. The lack of colonial, language or geographical proximity meant the UK did not become a host to many Cuban exiles before or after the Revolution. There was not an established Cuban diaspora in the UK in the twentieth century, which also meant that there were not Cuban music and social dance scenes in the country. Colombian music and salsa clubs can be traced to the 1980s. Other spots across London offered what broadly was considered as “Latin music”, covering styles from Spain to Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. However, knowledge and understanding of Cuban music and social dance remained very limited among the British public.

Following Cuba’s new internationalisation which resulted from the changes in US policy towards the island and new internal socio-economic measures, this situation has been changing over the past decade. The opening of travel from and to Cuba, and the greater inflow

of Cuban musicians into the UK, either to settle in the country or for tours, festivals, and concerts, created new cultural connections characterising the post-2010 period. This movement has also been characterised with a small but rising mode of relocation to the UK by Cubans on artistic and work visas, rather than a relocation driven by the traditional spouse relationship, which remains the largest proportion. With the growing awareness of Cuban culture and the increasing popularity of the island as a tourist destination for British holidaymakers, internationally recognised stars such as the British National Ballet dancer Carlos Acosta, who has been in the UK since 1998, are also getting more visibility and recognition for their work outside their immediate circles. Cuban musicians (e.g., singer and percussionist Gerardo De Armas Sarria; saxophone player Regis Molina) and dancers (e.g., Maykel Fonts, Fredyclan García Batista) settled in other European countries have also been turning to London as a place to search for seasonal work or permanently relocate to, drawn by the opportunities offered by the London jazz and fusion music and salsa dance scenes.

Meaning “to scatter” in Greek, the term “diaspora” had traditionally been used exclusively to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people following their expulsion from Israel (Grossman 2018). From the middle of the twentieth century scholars began to use it to refer to the African diaspora (Encyclopaedia Britannica). This forced displacement of people was associated with loss, exile, and persecution. Over the past two decades, “diaspora” has evolved from a term with a somewhat restricted usage to something considerably more “ubiquitous, simultaneously crossing over from political and academic discourse into the vernacular” (Story and Walker 2015: 135). Some contemporary scholars (e.g., Brubaker 2005) argue that everyone nowadays is a diaspora; hence, the term is losing its discriminating power. In academia, the term has, rightly or wrongly, come to be applied to almost any population or group living outside its homeland, while in popular usage diaspora now seems to be a collective noun used to refer to anyone not at home, describing a community of people, including both

immigrants and their descendants, who live outside their shared country of origin or ancestry but maintain active connections with it (Grossman 2018: 1263).

Nowadays, the term is used when addressing Cuban migrant communities in specific location (e.g., the Cuban diaspora in Miami, in Barcelona, or in Toronto). Defining the Cuban population in the UK as a part of the larger Cuban diaspora across the globe would have previously entailed forced displacement and a diasporic relationship, real or imaginary, with the “homeland”.<sup>69</sup> The reality of the Cuban migratory experience nowadays, however, is different and much more complex than the above definition (Sánchez Fuarros 2011: 31). The Cuban population in the UK includes Cubans of various social backgrounds, from nuclear scientists to filmmakers and manual workers, from those who have defected to those who came on work or marriage visas, from those who are migrating for economic reasons to the ones interested in building careers in international centres, from the children of the political elite to those coming from poor marginalised families. To encompass this diversity, I will refer to the Cuban population in the UK or Europe primarily as either the Cuban diaspora or the Cuban community in the respective country or city I am discussing, using both terms interchangeably. In this context the term “diaspora” embodies the various migratory experiences of displacement of Cubans (*ibid.*).

The use of the term “Cuban community” to define the Cuban population in the UK raises the immediate question of whether there is a sense of “community” amongst the Cubans in London. Besides their country of origin, do Cubans in the UK share social spaces and interests, and can they be defined as a unit? In this section I will examine how Cubans in the UK use music and dance to create a feeling of belonging, to re-invent their professional pursuits and become part of London’s broader music scene. The main purpose of this part of my

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<sup>69</sup> A diasporic relationship examines how migrants sustain connections with people from the homeland (Bakewell & Binaiisa 2015: 282).

research is to record and document the Cuban community in London, which has not been previously identified as one or studied academically, through its relationship with music and social dance. I am analysing how Cuban identity, music and social dance are claiming unique positions, stepping out of their previous amalgamation with the broader Latin identity attributed through salsa clubs and Latin music in London. In the first section of the chapter, I will explore the formation of the places of Cuban music and social dance. I will further examine how the London Cuban music and social dance scenes compare to those of Barcelona as a leading centre of Cuban culture in Europe. In the second part of the chapter, I will also study the complexities of the relationships and hierarchies of the Cuban salsa and social dance industry in London, its participants, and connections to other locations such as Havana, analysing what underpins the connection between the two capitals. Maintaining the overall focus of my research, my study investigates the lives of Cubans occupied, either full- or part-time, in the music and dance world. This includes performers, teachers, DJs, and promoters and not the Cuban diaspora as a whole in the UK. When researching Cubans in other occupations, it is through their relationship to the music and dance community. It is therefore that my understanding of a Cuban community is not of a coherent unit of Cuban nationals, sharing the same living, social, and working spaces, but of the Cuban community connected through culture, music, and dance in the country.

### **From Latin to Cuban: The Formation of a Cuban Music Scene in London**

“There is a Cuban music scene in London now and it is very strong. And the difference from before is that Cuban music followers, they did not want to pay, they wanted to be there for free, and now they follow you, they pay to follow you, now they care. They support you. Now they want to make sure the scene is kept alive.” (Flecha int.). DJ Flecha (Joel Verdecia, for biographical data see p.268) is one of London’s two Cuban nationals who are also leading

popular dance music DJs. He moved to London in 2008 and his career since largely reflects the emergence of the Cuban music and dance scenes in London, and the formation of *cubanidad* as a socio-cultural concept and experience. Simultaneously, Joel's journey as a DJ in London also epitomises the challenges faced by musicians, dance teachers and promoters along the journey.

Literature on the places and formation of *latinidad* and *cubanidad* in London is sparse at best, and largely outdated. Patria Román-Velázquez (2017) attempts to map the routes and routines of the Latin population in the city by examining the opening, closing and relocation of salsa clubs from the 1980s onwards. She looks at *latinidad* as a shared characteristic of immigrants from South America and the Caribbean who consider salsa as a signifying component of their cultural identity (*ibid.* 248). I use the terms *cubanidad* and Cubanness as synonyms referring to the perceived characteristics associated with and specific to Cuban culture, music, and dance. These attributes can be exercised by both Cuban and other nationals to confer their belonging to the Cuban music, social and dance scenes in the UK. Examples include the consumption of Cuban food, listening to and playing Cuban music, dancing salsa and timba through bodily movements associated with Cuban styles of dancing as opposed to, for instance, Colombian salsa dancing techniques. My use of the terms *cubanidad* and Cubanness is not racially, ethnically, or economically charged. While other academics have utilised Cubanness to address discourses on racial bias, *mestizaje* and political agendas in Cuba (Bodenheimer 2016; Perna 2005), my use of the terms is as an identification of what is understood to constitute Cuban culture in London as opposed to what is considered broadly Latin, or in contrast to gestures associated with Colombian, Spanish, or other Latin cultures. In this context, I regard *cubanidad* as entailing both *latinidad* and Africanness<sup>70</sup> as the actual

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<sup>70</sup> For details on Cuba's Africanness read Morejón and Frye (2005).

ethnic, musical and dance compositions of Cuban society and culture.<sup>71</sup> While the friction between these two features of *cubanidad* can vary in different situations, especially with the current emergence of the term “Afro-Cuban” as a signifier of certain folkloric musical and dance styles such as rumba, Orishas, palo and makuta, all these are viewed as different components of the broader identity of Cubanness in London.

Román-Velázquez (2017) explains that her mapping of *latinidad* in London was challenged by the lack of any written records on the development of the salsa scene in London, and complete reliance on oral memories and some limited access to fliers advertising clubs and events. My own constraints lie in the same lack of recorded history of Cuban migrants to the U.K, their participation in the formation of a shared Cuban identity, as well as the places of music and dance associated with the Cuban community in London. Nevertheless, the advancement in technology and the spread of social media have not only strengthened connections between Cuba and the outside world, but also aided my own research into the social construction of spaces of *cubanidad* in London. I aim to both continue and extend Román-Velázquez’s studies by looking at the formation of spaces of Cubanness in London, including their musical, cultural and social characteristics, rather than analysing places of *latinidad* and salsa as general monocultural spaces of the London-based Spanish-speaking migrant communities. I study how the shifts in identities are now connected to specific repertoires of music being played at these venues; the participation of Cuban promoters, dance teachers and DJs in defining what is considered Cuban, i.e., the specific dance moves associated with Cuban social dance; and the ways in which the scene connects to other migrant communities in London.

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<sup>71</sup> There are other components to the ethnic composition of Cuban society, e.g., Native American, and Chinese (e.g., Tsang 2019), which I embrace as parts of *cubanidad* even though I am not analysing as part of this study.



The two venues promoted as Cuban which opened in the 1990s were Bar Cuba and Bar Rumba (Román-Velázquez 2017: 86 – 87). Located in the West End,<sup>72</sup> offering Latin food menus, DJs on decks and live music, the venues gained visibility as Latin spots. The initiative behind the opening of the venues was to create spaces that will be viewed as Latin and Spanish Caribbean instead of Spanish. Puerto Rico was not considered a good inspiration because it was associated with images of street gangs, drugs, and violence. Instead, the owner was looking for a “mysterious image of the Caribbean” (*ibid.* 86). Cuba was selected to construct a very specific Latin identity, attempting to recreate a nostalgic image of 1950s pre-Revolutionary Cuba in an echo of the immigrant community in Little Havana in Miami, rather than a representation of present-day Cuba (*ibid.* 87). Neither the owner, nor the DJs at the two venues were Cuban, nor did they work in collaboration with Cuban musicians. Cuban bands did not perform regularly at the venues. Currently Bar Rumba is advertised as a Disco Club and has the internal decoration of modern discotheques. It does not play Cuban music and has no connection to the island besides the name. The venue does not form part of the places of Cuban music and culture in London.

A partially similar setting driven by marketing purposes can be found today in the chain of bars known as Revolución de Cuba, which are part of the Revolution Bar Group. Run by two British nationals from Manchester, the group started its Cuba-focused brand in 2011, focusing on rum and representations of Cuba. The group sells Havana Club and the story of rum production on the island. It further offers Cuban-inspired food fusions under the banner of “Food around the world *nos trae la vida* – it brings us life.”, promoting itself as a seller of authentic Cuban food (Revolución de Cuba 2022). Revolución de Cuba invites Cuban bands such as The Latin Bridge run by Sergio Marciano, amongst other Spanish and Latin bands, to

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<sup>72</sup> Bar Cuba opened in January 1992 and was in Kensington High Street and Bar Rumba in September 1993 in Shaftsbury Avenue (Román-Velázquez 2017: 86).

perform Cuban classics at its venues across the country. The group has no bars in London yet and it is not viewed as a home to Cuban music, people, or culture by the followers of Cuban music and dance. While financially successful, it has little impact on the construction of Cuban identity and the places of *cubanidad* in London; however, it does offer an occasional income stream to small-size bands such as Marciano's trio.

In 2005, a few years after Román-Velázquez's research, Bar Floridita opened in Soho. Floridita was London's premier venue blending Cuban glamour and decadence of a by-gone era by emulating the 1930s style of the legendary El Floridita in Havana, Hemingway's favourite drinking spot (see figure 10). It offered live music, a mixture of Cuban and Latin American food menu, extensive rum selection, cocktails, and Cuban cigars. Owned by Havana Holdings, a UK registered company, Floridita had also branches in Madrid and Dublin, which opened in 2007, and was planning to launch a fourth venue in Moscow in 2006, though it never opened. Havana Holdings worked in collaboration with Cuban companies such as Casa de la Habana from where it imported its cigars and Havana Club for its rum selection and events. It also collaborated with EGREM to ensure entertainment for its businesses. Floridita's bookers would travel once a year to Cuba to audition bands, such as Los Guanches, Sexteto Santiaguero, Morena Son and Group Floridita, and bring them to Europe for periods of four to six weeks to spend at each venue (Awbi 2011). EGREM provided artists and bands from across Cuba. As the owner of the Casas de la Música, it also offered resident DJs from its venues in Central Havana and Miramar. The DJs took part in a contest to win a contract with Havana Holding and play at its European venues. Flecha was resident DJ at Casa de la Música Habana Centro at the time and was one of the participants in the competition. Even though he did not win the first place, eventually all four contestants were contracted by the company to work across its venues in Europe between 2005 and 2008. Like the selected bands, they were working on rotation between all three Floridita bars where each of them spent 45 days per location. As they

were only four DJs, including Flecha, Mandy, Capitán and Koky, sometimes they stayed longer on location.

Figure 10: *Bar Floridita, London 2015*<sup>73</sup>



Flecha moved permanently from Havana to the UK in 2008 when he was offered a contract as resident DJ at Floridita in Soho and he settled in London. He recalls the venue was packed every night of the week. On Mondays there were 450 to 500 people paying an entry fee of £15. Floridita was open until 2am on weekdays and until 3am over the weekend. Tables required dinner bookings. Floridita marketed itself as a modern vibrant club in the West End

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<sup>73</sup> Photographs downloaded from Floridita's twitter account, <https://twitter.com/floriditalondon?lang=en>. Editing and collage by author.

with a Latin-American inspired menu. Audiences varied from the general public interested in an evening out in the West End, to the salsa community coming to dance to the live music. It was a venue of choice for the lovers of Cuban music and salsa dancers who were only deterred by the high entry fee and consumption prices in comparison to other venues such as Salsa Fusion. Visitors would pay £100 for a song request from the band or DJ. On one occasion Flecha was offered £500 to play a song, which sadly he did not have to hand (int.).

After the 2008 economic recession, Dublin contracted as a market and Floridita suffered significantly leading to its closure in 2010 in Ireland's capital. The recession had also affected the Spanish economy. Located on the ground floor at Hotel Melia, the Madrid branch closed in 2012. Melia already had their hotel business and as the recession was hitting the hospitality industry badly, it refocused on its core services and cut any additional projects. London was not affected as badly, and Floridita in Soho continued to attract visitors throughout the week. However, having one venue was not the idea of the company. Havana Holding had wanted to create a franchise business, which from four had now contracted to one location (Flecha int.). Flecha worked at Floridita in London until early 2012 following the venue's changed management and strategy in 2011. After an eight-year strictly Latin policy, it decided to focus on performers close to home, including both upcoming and established jazz, funk, soul, and rock artists (Awbi 2011). After the venue burned down in 2015, it was sold off to a new owner. The current bar called 100 Wardour Street from its address has no Latin or Cuban theme. Floridita did not re-open in new premises in another location either. Besides the change of company strategy and inability to build a franchise business, there is another version of the reason for which Floridita closed down which circulates in salsa circles in London. Some claim that the Cuban government required a fee of £60,000 per annum payable by Havana Holding to use the brand Floridita. The fee was too high for the earnings of the venue, and it chose not to continue with the business. I have not been able to determine the validity of this claim.

Following his departure from Floridita, Flecha struggled with finding work in London. He refocused on playing more actively in the Midlands and in Europe, including festivals and events in France, Sweden, and Barcelona. Growth of the Cuban music scene in other locations in the UK and the increasing interconnectedness between the Cuban music scenes in London and elsewhere in Europe, helped Flecha in finding opportunities outside London. There were already other established active DJs in London's Cuban music scene in 2012, including the *habanero* DJ La Máquina De Cuba (Javier la Rosa), and the British DJs Dr. Jim (Jim Layne) and Rich (Richard Fallon). This left Flecha with limited opportunities in London: as a substitute for Javier at Salsa Fusion, London's longest-standing salsa social dance party, now reduced to one night per month, or at The Forge in Camden Town. Besides international engagements, Flecha took on non-music related work, which continues to be his main source of income until now.

The Forge was a more recent arrival than the venues discussed so far, yet it was the first to create a strong relationship with the Cuban community. Following a few nights under the banner of "Los Exiles" at Rock Warehouse in Shoreditch in 2013, Cuban promoter and percussionist from Matanzas Oreste "Sambroso" Noda held the first Cuban Jam night at The Forge in the spring of 2014 (Noda int., for biographical data see p.275). It was the first venue in London strongly associated with Cuban music and culture, and specifically with the Cuban community in the UK. Having moved to the UK on a spouse visa in 2004, Noda started his career as a jazz and fusion percussionist for various projects in London, including Ska Cubano, Garry Crosby, New Generation Orchestra, Lokkhi Terra, Dele Sosimi and Cubafrobeat. Following an illness in 2014, while retaining his role as a percussionist in certain projects, Noda refocused a significant proportion of his time on organising Cuban music events across the city, including a night at The Forge. Unlike the exclusive atmosphere of the West End, which Floridita aspired to, the Forge was the place which felt like the home of London's Cuban

social scene and Cubans in the capital. It offered family events on weekends, with Cuban food in addition to the live bands on stage, DJ La Máquina de Cuba on decks playing the latest timba coming from the island, and a large crowd of salsa dancers moving to the rhythms. Noda had started organising events there in 2014 and by 2016 the place was usually packed despite the £8 in advance or £10 at the door entry fee, which were still considered high entry fees. The night was called The Cuban Jam and live Cuban bands from London and around the UK performed weekly. His main objective for The Cuban Jam was to provide a platform for the exposure of Cuban musicians in the UK, to offer them work opportunities, and to spread awareness of Cuban musicians to the broader community. Unlike Floridita, he was not looking to bring Cuban bands from across the ocean. He was focused on promoting the work of Cuban musicians living in London and elsewhere in the UK. Such an initiative differs significantly from previous ideas of recreating a nostalgic by-gone era of Cuba in London. It is a direct representation of the life, creativity, music and needs of Cuban musicians in the UK (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. *The Cuban Jam at The Forge, 2015*



*Photo credit: Deborah Jaffe (downloaded from Facebook Account, Sambroso Noda)*

In the spirit of the cultural and musical diversity of his native Cuba, where all genres of music are consumed, Noda put on non-Cuban bands on occasion at The Forge as well. Those included Colombians such as the popular Roberto Pla, as well as other Latin, African jazz, and fusion projects. While there has been a growing number of Cuban timba, folklore, and jazz artists in London compared to previously, including non-Cuban musicians allowed Noda to have a bigger variety of bands participating in his events rather than repeat the finite number of Cuban projects. He thought of other bands of migrant musicians in the UK as forming part of the same community through the shared experience of migration and displacement. In Noda's view, The Cuban Jam meant living *a lo cubano* in London, not just through the consumption of the island's culture and food, but also by embracing the social values of musical and cultural inclusion and diversity. The Forge became a social place where musicians, dance teachers, dancers, music aficionados and audiences all became part of a community, created through the performance, production, and consumption of Cuban culture.

It was then no surprise that upon closing down in 2017, The Forge was greatly mourned by the participants in the Cuban dance and music scene, and it left a significant gap in the lives of musicians, dancers and audiences. The female Pakistani-British salsa aficionado Sajeela Haas told me that "as a woman who goes out alone, I felt safe at The Forge. It had a good vibe, there were always good dancers to partner with and the live bands and DJs were great." As a place of Cubanness, The Forge had become more than an entertainment venue for the enjoyment of music and its bodily expression through dance moves; it embodied more than the musical spirit of Havana through a repertoire including the latest in Cuban timba. The Forge transported the socio-cultural values of community, diversity, inclusion and belonging from the streets and barrios of Havana to London. It was a social platform where Cubans and non-Cubans participated, forming musical-cultural connections and a safety network for its participants.

The final party took place on 31st March 2017. It was emotional and was full beyond capacity all night. The London Jazz News reported the next day that The Cuban Jam is “evidently a community: people know each other, dance with each other, and are delighted to see each other” (Bergsagel 2017). Due to small consumption, which generated an insufficient bar income to cover expenses, and because visitors were finding ways to avoid payment of the entry fee, The Forge followed the fate of earlier and other places of Latin music in London (Noda int.). However, it remains in the memory of Cuban musicians and the Cuban social dance community as the first socio-cultural space of *cubanidad* in London representative of contemporary Cuban music and communal values. The venue was also the first to be considered a “hang-out” of Cuban migrants in London and of non-Cuban followers of Cuban music and dance. As a project run by a Cuban promoter, The Cuban Jam was the first to focus on promoting the work of Cuban musicians and bands in the UK, including artists from Afro-Cuban and popular dance music to jazz and fusion.

The closure of the venue left a significant gap in London’s Cuban social scene. For the following few years Noda struggled to look for alternatives to set up as a new home of London’s Cuban social scene and The Cuban Jam. He organised live music events at The Old Queen’s Head in Islington, 91 The Living Room at the Old Truman’s Brewery in Brick Lane, Juju’s Bar and Stage (also in Brick Lane), The Hackney Empire, and Roundhouse. Juju’s went through a number of incarnations. The first party at the venue was held in July 2016 and it was a Sunday all-day initiative of live music and social dance, called The Cuban Carnival. Noda invited different Cuban music bands and dance teachers each week. The entry fee was £3. There was only one additional charge for audiences who participated in the dance classes, for which they paid separately per class. Due to its location and architecture, including an internal garden and external seating area, Juju’s received a few visitors who were completely dissociated from the Cuban social scene. Keeping track of who was attending the Cuban events



and needed to pay an entry fee, and who was coming only to get a drink and sit in the garden or move around Shoreditch was becoming challenging. The venue was losing consuming customers while catering for many non-consuming salsa social dancers. As a result, it could not afford to pay for a live band and to continue hosting the night in the same format.

Even though a different concept in comparison to The Forge and Floridita, Juju's was and remained in its subsequent incarnations "the only place salsa dancers feel good", where they can dance and enjoy the latest in Cuban music (Flecha int.). After closing doors to Cuban events in late 2017, Juju's re-opened in September 2018 for one-off gatherings. In March 2019, the Cuban social became a weekly event on Sundays. There was no live music as the venue was not prepared to pay for the hire of a band unless they were ensured certain bar cover, which Noda could not guarantee. The two resident DJs were Flecha and La Maquina De Cuba, alternating every other week. The entry was free and there was only a charge for those who came earlier in the afternoon to join the dance classes, usually run by Havana Londres (non-Cubans who teach salsa) or on occasion by other dance teachers from the UK or ad hoc guests such as Maykel Fonts, Fredyclan García Batista, and Yanet Fuentes (all three are Cubans). The event had additional sponsorship from Havana Club through the provision of few bottles of rum on occasion. There was a plan to start inviting a live band once a month through spring and summer 2020; however, due to the Covid pandemic the plans have been put on hold. Since 2019 Juju's has remained the only venue dedicated to the Cuban social dance scene in London.

Juju's closed its doors in March 2020 due to the pandemic and the Cuban social on Sundays re-opened in August 2021 following the relaxation of Covid restrictions across the UK. This renewal of social activities coincided with a certain politicisation of some of the Cuban community in the country since the late spring and early summer of 2021, where UK-based Cubans have joined in global social media initiatives against the Cuban government. Despite clashes between Cubans in the country based on differing political views, Juju's

remained dedicated to music, culture, dance, diversity, community, and entertainment. Noda maintains the venue open and welcoming to all Cubans, whether they are in favour of or against the current government in Cuba (pers. comm.).

The most recent arrival on the scene is Bar La Rampa nearby Oxford Circus in Soho, which opened in May 2021. The venue is a bar and restaurant inspired, once again, by the decadence of 1950s Havana. The owner, the son of a former Russian diplomat, grew up in Havana during the 1980s. The venue offers rum cocktails, employs some Cubans as staff and offers regular live music. The bands include Cuban diaspora in London such as Sergio Marciano, and non-Cuban/mixed-nationality bands which perform Cuban music such as Sarabanda, as well as other Latin bands. It also held a reading night for the launch of the book “Cuban, Immigrant, and Londoner” (2021) by London-based Cuban diaspora journalist Mario López-Goicoechea.

## **Cuban and Londoner**

The current processes of the construction of Cubanness at the venues associated with Cuban music and dance in London differ significantly to the way *latinidad* was formed in the earlier venues studied by Román-Velázquez (2017) and to diasporic communities and gatherings of Cubans in other locations such as Barcelona (Sánchez Fuarros 2011), Cuban social events in London are not meant to confer a feeling of nostalgia or loss and painful memory of missing the homeland of Cuba. The recreation of the spirit of Havana does not aim to mimic Cuba’s capital, but rather to bring the energy of its social gatherings to the context of a multicultural audience of fans and aficionados of Cuban music in London. When Noda commenced his promotional activities, he was driven by very specific factors. From a personal perspective, Noda needed to earn a living independent from performance fees. From a more communal standpoint, he wanted to provide spaces for Cuban musicians and dance teachers in

London and the UK to showcase their work and supplement their own income. As a cultural and impact initiative, Noda aspired to spread awareness of Cuban music and dance across the country. His approach differentiated from earlier initiatives of Latin clubs in London. Noda had a clear focus on the promotion of Cuban music, from son, bolero, and timba to rumba and Orishas, by defining it as Cuban rather than as broadly Latin. Furthermore, he was not looking to recreate the atmosphere of a by-gone era in Cuba or to bring bands over for single events as an expression of the exoticisation of what remains behind the last stronghold of the “iron curtain”. Juju’s has no Cuban decoration nor portraits of Che Guevara. The only visual representation of the island is through the music videos projected on a wall behind the stage. Noda’s approach entails a belief that Cubanness is transferred and recreated through participation in music and dancing, and the embodiment of the socio-cultural values of the streets of Havana. These include the feeling of safety and belonging through participation in the Cuban music scene at the venues where he organises events. Noda also firmly holds the belief that Cuban musicians, dancers, and DJs in London successfully recreate the energy of social gatherings in Havana even though the overall socio-economic context is different.

While there are groupings and perceived hierarchies – for instance, the students of Havana Londres tend to dance with each other more than with other participants in the scene – the venues of Cuban social dance in London (e.g., Juju’s) have a flat structure on the dance floor (Haak int.). Whether a novice or an advanced dancer, the space is open to everyone who is willing to dance. Juju’s is a location for the enjoyment and expression of music through bodily movement, and participants are of diverse nationalities, backgrounds, ethnicities, and age groups. Gender composition varies on weekly basis, but overall women tend to be slightly more numerous than men, which is not unusual for a salsa space. The venue has several regulars as well as continuous flow of new participants exploring and joining the Cuban social dance scene. It offers a sense of security and belonging to both Cubans and non-Cubans, sharing in

the characteristics of *cubanidad* through the social interactions driven by the dance community and bodily expression of music through dance.

Nelson Batista was the first Cuban national to establish salsa as a dance style in the UK and is regarded as the “Godfather” of salsa in the country. He was also a D.J. playing Cuban and other Latin and Caribbean music at various clubs including the Rheingold and Club Bahía between 1996 and 1999, as well as ad hoc at Ronnie Scott’s Upstairs, and at several locations outside London (int.).<sup>74</sup> Batista was very active in establishing salsa as a dance style, taking it to a few international festivals across Europe and the Middle East and playing music regularly at clubs. He was, however, never involved in the promotion or organisation of Cuban music and social dance events in the country, which targeted the showcasing of Cuban music produced in London.

Noda, on the other hand, was a full-time musician and entertainer in Cuba and he was looking to transit into a career as a promoter when he arrived in London. Besides, his musical aesthetics and selection are connected to his individual taste and experience as a culture-bearer rather than an ambition to recreate any part of Cuba’s past as was the approach of managers and curators at earlier clubs. He does the work himself, as a self-employed professional, with the help of other members from the music and dance community, rather than as an employee of a corporation or a franchise. As a promoter, Noda advertises his events as representative of Cuba’s spirit in London. He told me he aims to recreate the vibe of the streets of Havana and Matanzas (the capital of his home province) where everyone belongs to the party, yet he is doing it within the setting of a multicultural and diverse London.

Both Noda and Batista told me they are not politically driven in any way. Their motivations are cultural, musical, and economic (driven by survival and building a comfortable life rather than a search for riches). Both have also utilised Cuban music and dance to integrate

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<sup>74</sup> For details on club Bahia see Román-Velázquez (2017).

into UK society through developing careers and become Londoners rather than looking back with yearning to a lost past. Íñigo Sánchez Fuarros speaks of the gatherings of the Cuban diaspora in Barcelona as a way of recreating home, sharing memories for Cuba, and curing diasporic blues (2011: 17). This has not been the case of Noda and Batista, nor was it a motivation in their work. By retreating the atmosphere of the streets of Havana in London, promoters, DJs, musicians, and dancers are focused on creating the best party which is enjoyed by everyone and in which everyone participates. Cubans are looking to create work opportunities and to build a life in UK's capital, to become Londoners.

Cuban music and dance events in London are all-denominational in character. They accept participants of any nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, or social class. Everyone is welcomed to participate, whether these are social dance or religious events. Music projects run by British artists such as Coro de Clave (run by David Pattman and Victoria Jassey) and the London Lucumí Choir (run by Daniela Rosselson De Armas) are also meant to be social initiatives prioritising participation and involvement over musical skill (Jassey int.; Rosselson De Armas int.). All are welcomed to play, sing, and dance. Unlike Barcelona, these are not locations where Cubans meet and reminisce of home, forming geographies of nostalgic memory and shared loss. These are places where participants share in the enjoyment of Cuban culture, of which Cubans are immensely proud. Places where participants, regardless of their background, are meant to have good time. As Noda once shared, “everyone dances like they belong, it is the same way as we do it in Cuba; but we are also in London, so it is about the London community, we are immigrants from everywhere, we are all part of it” (int.). In this context, the form becomes that of a shared immigrant identity rather than a shared Cuban identity. Despite the overarching Cuban pride, immigrant connections go beyond those of a broader Caribbean or Latin identity; it is a shared immigrant status, and even more a shared status of love for music and dance, and that could be white British or Indian, or any minority

or immigrant group, “we are all Londoners” (Noda int.). Dance, music, and culture are the overarching factors. As such, it is not conceivable to define the audiences sharing in these spaces as a subculture (Thornton 1995: 15). Even though in the case of salsa, there is a subculture in operation, in the context of Cuban music and dance, this subculture is one creating belonging to rather than in opposition to the dominant culture.

Sánchez Fuarros articulates that the Cuban diaspora in Barcelona is viewed, at least externally, as a coherent diasporic community with specific characteristics and boundaries (2012: 39). Unlike other diasporic communities such as the Jamaican or the Colombian, there is little public knowledge about the existence of a community of Cuban migrants in London. This is not surprising taking into consideration the only recent increase in the number of Cuban migrants to the UK López-Goicoechea writes in his book that: “the lack of a postcode-settled Cuban community in London meant that my only encounters with my fellow country-people when I arrived in Britain happened mainly at big events, like festivals or in salsa venues. Other Latin groups, Colombians, for instance, had long had a base in the British capital... Cubans have never had a similar geographically demarcated presence. The effect on some, therefore, has been like that of being in limbo.” (2021: p.13) It has been through the places of London’s Cuban scene that the Cuban diaspora in the city has been able to meet, build and maintaining relationships, while adapting to the host country. These venues have become more than entertainment locations for the performance and consumption of Cuban music and dance. They have further taken on the role of connectors for the Cuban diaspora regardless of the occupation Cubans have in London.

Another difference between London and Barcelona is that the scene of highly trained or experienced Cuban musicians within the various musical genres has existed in Barcelona in particular, and in Spain in general, for much longer than in the UK It is only in the past few years, as Noda points out, that we can speak of a scene of Cuban musicians in London rather

than the few musicians of Cuban origin who previously constituted the Cuban diaspora of musicians based in the UK (int.). It is with the growth of this scene that its parameters are also being created and currently being established. The sentiment, which is often shared about the Cuban diaspora in Barcelona is that there are too many musicians in the city and that the Cuban music scene is not only mature but saturated, is not shared in London, where bands are continuously searching for more Cuban musicians to join them.

The formation of the spaces of Cuban music and culture is driven both by Cubans and foreigners. Sánchez Fuarros calls this experience *cubaneo*, and the way music constructs a community through participation in *cubaneo* (2012: 43). The terms *cubaneo* and *cubaneando*, when used in the context of London's social scene, carry a moral connotation, and are often associated with the places where Cubans and non-Cubans attend to dance and seek a sexual partner for the night. In Cuba, the term often applies to the community of popular *timberos*, whose lives are often associated with the excessive consumption of alcohol, multiple love affairs and show-off of expensive clothes and gadgets revealing their higher earning capabilities. In Europe, such places are viewed as the locales of drinking, drug use, sexual promiscuity and *jineteando*. *Cubaneando* refers to the execution of all these traits by both Cubans and foreigners. Luis Ferrer Reyes, a Cuban percussionist who relocated from Barcelona to London in 2019, told me that he is surprised by the lack of *cubaneo* in the community in London associated with the consumption of Cuban culture. While there are cases of *cubaneo* in London, the scene overall has not been constructed on such characteristics. I am instead using the term *cubanidad* to refer to the traits associated with the London Cuban cultural scene, which entails the social values of Cuban culture and a broader shared immigrant identity of being a Londoner.

## **“Mira Me.... From Havana to London”**

Beyond the spaces associated with regular Cuban music and dance events in London, the formation of a Cuban music scene has also been driven by the growing cultural exchanges across the Havana-London axis. Like migratory history, the history of cultural and musical connections between Havana and New York, Miami, New Orleans, Kingston, and Spain is long, rich, and versatile. London, however, has never held a status as either a centre for Cuban culture, or a creative collaborator. While the BVSC project, the highest selling World Music album of all times, introduced Cuban music to the UK and gained popularity amongst audiences, Cuban music never took off in a big way in the country.<sup>75</sup> There has been a trickle of popular bands from the island coming to perform in London since the mid-1980s (Durán int.). In the popular music scene, such projects include Septeto Nacional Ignacio Piñero, Celina González, Los Van Van, Orquesta Revé, NG La Banda, Adalberto Álvarez y su Son, folkloric group Los Muñequitos de Matanzas<sup>76</sup> and Afro-Cuban-rock fusion project Síntesis. On the jazz scene, Irakere had a residency at Ronnie Scott’s, continuously renewed over several years. Lucy Durán was a main driver behind the introduction of Cuban music and bands to the UK. She also created connections between UK producers, such as Nick Gold of World Circuit, and Cuban musicians (Durán 2014).

Como No has been one the UK’s most established promoters of music and dance from Latin America since 1986, having organised 829 shows, and other projects as of 2020 (Andy Wood pers. comm.).<sup>77</sup> These include tours organised by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, Great Britain for Cuban bands during the late 1980s and early 1990s, projects for Oxfam’s fiftieth anniversary, shows with all of the Buena Vista Social Club artists in ranging across London’s

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<sup>75</sup> While I consider the use of the term World Music, referring to non-Western Art Music, as archaic and a remnant of a colonialist consciousness, I have used it here as it is the official category of the BVSC album.

<sup>76</sup> Los Muñequitos de Matanzas is a Cuban rumba ensemble established in 1952 as Conjunto Guaguancó Matancero, one of the most successful rumba groups in the history of Cuba.

<sup>77</sup> Andy Wood is Owner at Como No and Director of La Linea – The London Latin Music Festival



major venues, and concerts for Cuban artists from New York such as Celia Cruz. From 2000 Como No also presented a series of dance companies from Cuba, including the National Folkloric Ensemble, the National Ballet, and the Contemporary Dance companies. In 2003 the company produced Carlos Acosta's first show outside of the British Royal Ballet, a cross-border initiative called Tocororo and performed at the Garcia Lorca theatre in Havana, and then subsequently produced all his shows outside of the Royal Ballet until 2015.

The frequency of visits and versatility of bands performing in London has increased significantly since 2010, despite a tightening of UK immigration policies. Beyond the few "Last Goodbye" tours of BVSC and the respective visits with their individual projects of iconic performers such as Omara Portuondo and Eliades Ochoa, Los Van Van and Irakere, several other artists are now performing in the UK on regular basis. These include the currently most famous popular dance groups such as Havana D'Primera, Maykel Blanco y Su Salsa Mayor (for details see p.273), Pupy y Los Que Son, Son (for details see p.276), Mayito Rivera, Issac Delgado, and Lazarito Valdés y Bamboleo (see p.253), as well as up-and-coming jazz singer Daymé Arocena, reggaetón celebrities Gente de Zona, and rising funk and fusion singer CimaFunk. Alain Pérez y Su Orquesta performed at the 2019 Glastonbury Festival. Cuban initiatives based outside the island, representing a variety of genres, are also frequenting London more actively than before, including Omar Sosa, Roberto Fonseca, Havana con Kola, Barbarito Fines y su Mayimbe, Ibeyi, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Dayramir Gonzalez y Havana en Trance, and French-Cuban project Que Volá?. Even though no longer based in London, Jesús Alemany and Cubanísimo also return to perform.<sup>78</sup> It is the first time that London has become a centre for regular tours by a selection of the most popular Cuban artists from various genres, both ones currently living on the island and ones based abroad.

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<sup>78</sup> Los Orishas were scheduled to perform in the Summer of 2020. The event was cancelled because of the Covid19 pandemic and lockdown, and the group has disintegrated since.

DJ and Producer Gilles Peterson commenced his collaboration with Havana Club in 2008 and the first album *Havana Cultura: New Cuba Sound* was released in 2009, including tracks reflecting Cuba's musical diversity: jazz, hip-hop, reggaetón, folkloric and electronic music. The subsequent release was *Havana Cultura: The Search Continues* (2011), which included the participation of London dubstep pioneer Mala (Mark Lawrence). The album brought together UK soundsystem culture and Cuban urban and alternative sound (including artists such as Telmary Díaz, Los Aldeanos, Danay Suárez, Sexto Sentido, El Micha, and Interactivo). Subsequently, Peterson released volumes one and two of the album *Cuba: Music and Revolution – Culture Clash in Havana: Experiments in Latin Music 1975-85*, and most recently *Havana Cultura Anthology*. Directed by Charlie Inman and guided by ethnomusicologist, percussionist and *babalao* Ade Egun Crispin Robinson, Peterson narrated the documentary “La Clave” (accompanied by the singer Daymé Arocena), where he explores the roots of rumba and its significance in Cuba (2015).<sup>79</sup> The release of the documentary was followed by the launch of the Havana Club Rumba Session in 2016, a re-interpretation of rumba's styles of *yambú*, *guaguancó* and *columbia* by a diverse range of producers from around the world. Through her collaboration with Peterson, Arocena has also been produced by Brownswood Recordings, an independent label founded by Peterson in 2006. She collaborates with UK-based musicians for her performances while on tours in London.

Another UK – Cuba collaboration is the Manana Cuba Festival (electronic and Afro-Cuban fusion music), production company and an independent record label, which was founded in 2015. The label produces the London-based electronic-Afro-Cuban-Iranian-jazz fusion project Ariwo (for further details see biographical notes on Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés see p.265), and the Santiago de Cuba-based rumba fusion band Obbatuké. The festival was co-

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<sup>79</sup> Documentary La Clave is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWRWyvr3Tgg&feature=youtu.be>.

founded by London-based Harry Michael Follet and Alain Garcia Artola from Santiago de Cuba.<sup>80</sup> The first festival was held in Santiago de Cuba in 2016 and was the first event of its kind organised in the city under the sponsorship of Havana Cultura and Fania Records. The festival included artists from across the island, North America, and Europe. Havana-based DJ Wichy de Vedado told me it was an excellent event and one that needs to happen more often because of its potential for international cultural collaborations and growth of the alternative music scene in Cuba (int.).<sup>81</sup> Wichy de Vedado feels that while musical collaborations between the UK and Cuba have been growing, there is potential for further growth.

London-based Cuban musicians Noda, Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés and Yelfris Valdés (at the time members of the band Ariwo together with British-Iranian producer Pouya Ehsaei), travelled to Cuba to perform at the festival. It was the first time these musicians performed on the island after having immigrated to the UK (Rencurrell Valdés int.; Noda int.). Noda was very emotional when speaking about his trip and the event. Upon leaving Cuba, many musicians feel they are giving up on one of the greatest, most vibrant, competitive, and dynamic musical scenes globally. A musician needs to live in Cuba to be able to play con “el sentimiento” of the streets of the island, the *manana* which is the essential ingredient of Cuban music and culture. Upon leaving the country, many Cuban musicians fear losing that feeling in their music, concerned that they would not have the vibe and the sound demanded by the music scene in Cuba to perform back there. Performing back home, being accepted, and applauded, feels cathartic to those who manage to do it. Noda told me this was one of the most special moments of his career after leaving the island as he knew he still “had the street” in him.

The subsequent Manana Cuba festival was held in 2017 at the Barbican in London. Rumba band Obbatuké came from Santiago de Cuba and performed with Noda, Hammadi

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<sup>80</sup> Details on the festival can be viewed on <http://www.mananacuba.com/manana-2016>.

<sup>81</sup> Wichy de Vedado is a Havana-based electronic-Afro-Cuban-hip-hop fusion DJ, producer, and event organiser, who participated as a DJ in the Manana Festival. He featured in the 2009 release by Gilles Peterson *Havana Cultura: New Cuban Sound*.

Rencurrell Valdés and Yelfris Valdés. The show was completely sold out and audiences were up on their feet dancing to electronic – jazz interpretations of *guaguancó* and prayers to the Orisha Chango. The spirituality of the Afro-Cuban jazz fusion of the band transferred to audiences (Bandcamp 2017). The sentiment of *manana* and the streets of Cuba had relocated to Central London (Rencurrell Valdés int.).<sup>82</sup> In May 2019 the Manana// Cuba x Jazz Re:reshed collaboration brought together Cuban musicians Feliciano Arango (considered to be one of the creators of the timba bass rhythm) and Adel González Gómez (former Irakere percussionist) and British musicians Yussef Dayes (drummer), Kevin Haynes (saxophone), Sarah Tandy (piano and keyboard), and Seiji (fusion, grime and broken beat DJ and producer). Compositions included Afro-Cuban-African-Jazz rhythms bringing Yoruba traditions from Africa and Cuba together. The events organised by Manana Cuba demonstrate the increased flow of cultural exchanges between the two countries, where Cuban musicians are not simply travelling to perform in London but participate in cross-border collaborations across the Havana – London access, because of which London-based musicians return to perform in Cuba.

Beyond fusion, London-based musicians and promoters from other genres are also traveling to collaborate or perform in Cuba more often than previously. The song “*Mira Me... From Havana to London*” (“Look at Me...”) is part of a collaboration between UK-based promoter Kerry Ribchester and Maykel Blanco, where Ribchester instigated the project and provided funding for the making of the video (int.).<sup>83</sup> The song has dance participation by Maykel Fonts creating a further connection between London, Havana, and Milan. DJ Flecha played at the 2018 Salsa Festival in Havana (organised by Maykel Blanco, funded by the Cuban government). Flecha was very content with the experience as he got the crowds dancing and enjoying the energy of his DJing. “These are my people” (int.). He was referring to the crowds

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<sup>82</sup> Noda organised a rumba session for Obbatuké alongside London-based Cuban musicians such as Gerardo de Armas Sarria and British percussionist David Pattman at the Total Refreshments Centre.

<sup>83</sup> Kerry Ribchester is the owner of Key2Cuba, a company which has been offering dance holidays to Cuba since 2000 (int.). Song available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LdsowMjlow>.

attending the festival which were the same audiences that he had played to more than ten years earlier at Casa de la Música in Central Havana. He knew what music they liked, what sounds they would move to. He played music from the past alongside contemporary hits and kept dancers on their feet all night. London-based pianist Eliane Correa took part in the 2019 Havana Jazz Plaza Festival in collaboration with Oslo-based double bass player Alejandro Gispert, UK singer Sarah Guhe, and percussionists from Adonis y Osain del Monte. It was the first UK participation in the festival in a few years, following the souring of relations between the festival and the London jazz scene. Unlike earlier projects where UK labels were producing projects with musicians from Cuba to bring an often-romanticised idea of traditional music from the island to UK and international audiences, projects between the countries now are more collaborative and traffic across the axis is active in both directions in terms of both creativity and consumption.

Musical theatres are also visiting the UK more regularly than previously and creating new collaborations. Beyond *Danza Contemporánea de Cuba* and the cross-border collaborations driven by Carlos Acosta and *Acosta Danza*, *Viva Cuba* was on at Sadlers Wells on its two international tours and the British-Cuban-German production *Carmen la Cubana* became a successful four- and five-star rated project globally (Jays 2018). Directed by Christopher Renshaw, with an entirely Cuban music and dance cast, signed by German promotion company BB Productions, *Carmen la Cubana* is set in the days of the Cuban Revolution. As part of its global tour, the show was sold out over the three weeks it was on at Saddler's Wells in August 2018. Overall, the tour continued for six months with performances across Europe and China.

While the musical theatre was in London, Sambroso Noda and I organised two independent concerts for musicians from the shows at The Empire in Hackney. Eduardo Sandoval presented music from his latest album *Mas Trombón Que Nunca* for the first time

after the completion of the recording of the album and London audiences were the first to hear the music live. Trumpet player Tommy Lowry Garcia Rojas and pianist Edgar Olivero also shared compositions forming part of their upcoming initiatives. The events were in the format of a jam session, and London-based Cuban musicians joined the events to play alongside their colleagues from back home. Yelfris Valdés is a childhood friend and former co-player with Eduardo Sandoval, but they had not played together for over ten years (Valdés int.). The events were equally attended by Cubans, followers of the Cuban scene in London, jazz lovers and followers of African music who were excited to see Afro-Cuban musicians in London.

Among the established spaces in London, the Barbican, Saddler's Wells and Jazz Café remain the main locales for Cuban dance culture. Saddler's Wells has held only projects coming from Cuba until now as there has been no dance show from London to match its criteria. The Barbican hosts internationally recognised Cuban musicians based in Cuba (e.g., Omara Portuondo) or other locations (e.g., Chucho Valdés, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, and Roberto Fonseca). The only local project including Cuban musicians hosted by the Barbican was as a venue for the Manana Festival. It also had Ariwo on stage as a backing band for Roberto Fonseca's concert in 2018. Jazz Café remains the most active and open venue for Cuban projects and musicians performing jazz, popular music and fusion from London, Cuba and elsewhere. It has a regular Cuban night, showcasing versatile genres from rumba, to dance music, jazz, and fusion. Ronnie Scott's Upstairs continues to regularly hold Cuban dance music bands. Most concerts of visiting bands (except for BVSC), however, are held at different venues depending on budgets and availability.

Finding halls in London has been most challenging for the team of Havana to Londres, currently the main organiser focused solely on bringing Cuban timba bands to the UK. The organisers often struggle with dealing with the paperwork for visas, finding suitable size venues and advertising the events (Burns int.). This forms part of an overall problem with music venues

in London. Some landmark places, such as Coronet and Kensington Roof Garden Terrace have closed down. Many argue that this is related to costs in running music venues, rising property prices and the overall gentrification of London (Pollock 2015). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this research I will not focus on this London issue of music spaces, but rather point out that despite logistical and administrative difficulties, the London Cuban music scene has been continuously growing during the 2010s.

Overall, the variety of styles of Cuban music, beyond the traditional genres performed by BVSC, are gaining greater popularity and social acceptability in the UK, which has further resulted in their more active consumption by wider audiences. Rather than being grouped with World Music, other Latin music, or the general genres within which they perform, for instance jazz, these projects are given recognition as being Cuban and as embodying the nuances and characteristics of Cuban music and culture. Eliane Correa has been the curator of the Pizza Express London Latin Jazz Fest for two consecutive years (2018 and 2019) and for the first post-Covid Fest held in 2021. She was also invited to present her project at Ronnie Scott's main venue in 2020. This indicates a shift in the perception of the social standing of Cuban music and musicians, including locally based ones, in London's music scene. There is a Cuban music scene in the UK Even though fragmented, struggling, and fragile, it is recognised by both its active participants and the wider musical and dance community. The scene has expanded beyond the consumption of one genre of Cuban music and the occasional visit by a touring band from the island. While the scene is heavily influenced and driven, directly or indirectly, by the mechanics of the Cuban popular dance industry in the UK it includes regular events and performances of various musical genres and dance styles, and even though small in number, it has its own venues of Cuban music and dance.

## The Cuban Dance Industry

I had agreed to meet Melvyn Burns at Whitley's on Queensway on a cold January afternoon in 2020. Born in 1939, Melvyn is London Latin scene's longest-standing still active member, formerly a musician, but mostly popular as a social dancer and *ad hoc* salsa teacher (see Figure 12). Despite his advancing age and a recent heart attack, he continues to be a vivid *salsero* frequenting the various Latin clubs in London and is one of the organisers at Havana to Londres events company. Having just found out that Whiteley's was closed down and the building destroyed, we entered a Pret a Manger near Bayswater Station, a cafe neither of us had been to before. As we were ordering coffee one of the staff ladies turned to Melvyn and told him she knew him from elsewhere: from Bar Salsa in Temple. She jokingly deduced he must be a regular there and have a membership card to the venue. London had suddenly shrunk to the size of a barrio in Havana through the places, interactions and *la mecánica* of the salsa world.

Figure 12: *Salsero Melvyn Burns at The Cuban Jam, The Forge in Camden Town (2016)*<sup>84</sup>



*Photo Credit: Deborah Jaffe (downloaded from Facebook)*

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<sup>84</sup> Melvyn Burns is actively involved in the London Latin dance scene and has been since the 1950s. Melvyn was a regular at The Forge attending events on a weekly basis (int.).



New York salsa legend Willie Colón argues that “Salsa is not a rhythm, it’s a concept. It’s a way of thinking. It’s an open concept and the reason that it became so popular is because it was able to evolve and accept all of these other musics” (Oteri 2009). When questioned as to whether salsa is a Cuban musical genre, Colón admits to the influences of Cuban music on it but claims salsa’s roots to be in New York. Debates on the origin and development of the genre and the term “salsa” have exercised academics and salsa fans for years. Whether the term can be attributed to Ignacio Piñeiro’s 1930 song “Échale Salsita”<sup>85</sup> (Acosta 2003), or the development of the genre to its roots in Cuban son or the salsa scene in 1970’s New York, my focus in this section will not be to analyse or examine the musical and etymological heritage of salsa. Instead, I am borrowing Colón’s view of salsa as an “open concept” and applying it to the social spaces and interactions within the salsa industry in London as representative of the broader UK. As such, I will continue to use interchangeably the terms utilised by Londoners, including Cuban salsa, Cuban, Cuban (social) dance, or occasionally casino, mostly when referring to the style of dancing *rueda de casino*.

In this section I study the different parts forming *la mecánica* of the Cuban dance industry in London, the participants involved, their interactions with one another, and their relationships to the spaces occupied by the industry in continuation from the first part of the chapter. I will further explore how these mechanics are creating more active traffic across the Havana-London axis. Rather than analysing these exchanges as simply the movement of people, ideas, and commodities from one island to the other, I study the circulation of cultural processes from one culture to the other and then back and how social dance music creates local meanings for its practitioners in London (Waxer 2002). Observing the complex multi-layered connections between participants, I examine the creation of dynamic abstract geographies,

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<sup>85</sup> “Échale Salsita” performed by Septeto Ignacio Piñeiro can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9QCPb-hrzc>.

adaptation, and transformation, which identify the Cuban social dance industry as a culture of circulation. Circulation has become central to the analysis of the connections and processes pertaining to the relationship between culture, capitalism, and globalisation. Understood to mean more than simply the movement of people, ideas, and commodities from one culture to another, circulation is a cultural process characterised by the formation of its own abstract community (in this case the social dance community), evaluation (the importance this community has for its participants, i.e., salseros, musicians and dance teachers), and constraints (limitations to participation in and growth of the salsa scene) (Lee and LiPuma 2002: 192). These forms are created by the interactions between the specific types of circulating forms (e.g., Cuban music and dance), and the interpretive communities built around them (e.g., Cuban salsa and Afro-Cuban dance communities).

Most bands which visit the UK from Cuba to perform are for the consumption of salsa dancers and fans, who frequent the live music and DJ salsa clubs in London. These participants in the consumption of Cuban music in the UK are also, in many cases, tourists who visit Cuba for music and dance activities, and the rest of Europe for dance festivals. In contrast to the distributed tourism of Putumayo and other “World Music” recording labels, retailing lifestyle to audiences unconsciously listening to music alongside drinking their coffee (Kassabian 2004: 209), this is actual tourism by aficionados who consume Cuban music by dancing to it. As such, cultural geographies of Cuban music in London are strongly defined by the “salsa crowd”, which includes dancers of various ages, nationalities, ethnic and racial belonging, social background, and varying degrees of social dance skills. While redrawing the social geographies of London through social integration through dance, these audiences, who are also active participants in the London Cuban music scene through music and dance consumption, are also altering cultural and economic geographies of Cubans on the island. Firstly, these visitors provide income to dance and music teachers in Havana; and secondly, they bring their

own aesthetics of Cuban dance and music as learnt from Cuban and non-Cuban dance teachers and musicians in London. Therefore, diaspora memories and aesthetics of music and dance are related back to their homeland through foreigners visiting Cuba.

Firstly, salsa has long been a cultural product taking advantage of an international market economy (Calvo Ospina 1992: 1). The Cuban music and dance scenes in the UK are becoming such a cultural product themselves, defined not by their *latinidad* but by their *cubanidad*. Direct participation in and indirect consumption of the scenes are transforming their inner structure and setting up forms of access for musicians, artists, and consumers (Santos Febres 1997: 177). Secondly, the Cuban music scene is growing in several countries across Europe and Asia, creating a map of urban locations linked by communication and cross-pollination of participants, including both performers (musicians, dancers, dance teachers, DJs) and consumers (social dancers, audiences, dance students). For instance, UK salsa dancers travel for various Cuban or salsa dance festivals across Europe. Maykel Fonts, an Afro-Cuban dance teacher based in Italy, visits the UK regularly to teach workshops and classes. Afro-Cuban musician Gerardo De Armas Sarria regularly travels for festivals across Europe and to teach Afro-Cuban music, from Russia and Finland to Greece and Italy. The tentacles of the Cuban dance industry form multi-layered connections between dancers and musicians, between London as a scene and its participants, and other geographies and the participants in these locales. Thirdly, as an abstract geography, the Cuban social dance industry also offers a space for the continuous negotiation of identities through dance aesthetics and consumption habits. It is, therefore, challenging to isolate the Cuban music and salsa world of London from the rest of Europe; however, for the purposes of this section I will focus on the mechanics of the UK and only focus on studying select connections between London and other locations.

It is a statement I have heard many times over the years, but most recently from Bangladeshi-British keyboard player Kishon Khan (for biographical data see p.269): London's

Cuban music scene is entirely driven by the consumption habits of the salsa dancers (int.). Having visited Cuba to study music since the mid-1990s and emerging as the leading Cuban piano player in London, Kishon has been part of the scene of Cuban musicians in London for over 25 years. He argues that the growth of the salsa dance industry has had little impact on encouraging the creation and performance of Cuban music in the UK. Unlike in Cuba, salsa dancers in London do not require live music to dance, have little desire to pay for it and are even less keen on social dance music performed by musicians in London. With the increase in salsa dance holidays, access to social media from where Londoners are aware of the latest timba and salsa bands and songs in Havana, and DJs playing the newest music coming from Cuba, salseros in London want to either see their favourite Cuban bands live or listen to their music played by a DJ at social gatherings, rather than listen to London-based Cuban dance music bands. "I can't afford a live band. Salseros don't consume and venues don't want to pay for a live band". This was one of the biggest predicaments for Noda as the most active organiser of Cuban music events in London. Noda's consumption issues are different to what timba bands in the US are facing, shares Cuban jazz pianist Dayramir Gonzalez (int.). His colleagues playing Cuban salsa and timba in the US are also struggling, but because the sound of timba is perceived as too harsh for the ears of salsa dancers and US salseros are more accustomed to and keener on the sound of Puerto Rican social dance music.

These consumption habits of the salsa crowd have determined the fate of Cuban popular dance musicians and promoters in the UK. From Noda's initiatives, live music only survived at 91 Brick Lane, The Living Room. Nevertheless, it is no longer a Cuban music night. Instead, in 2019 Noda began organising live jazz bands for Friday nights which can play any jazz, whether African, avantgarde, traditional, Latin, or any other form. The venue offers free entry for everyone and retains a seating area in front of the stage only for dining guests with reservations. Audiences are there for the jazz or as an evening out, or to get a drink at the next

place on their way around Brick Lane. The stage is small, even after being recently enlarged by moving the DJ booth to the side. It remains challenging to fit anything larger than a tightly packed eight-piece band. This automatically excludes large orchestral projects and a full salsa band. Some of the groups Noda puts on have Cuban musicians in them or are run by Cubans. For instance, The Roots and Blues Ensemble has a Cuban trumpet player, but it is a project focusing on the music of twentieth century double-bass jazz player Charles Mingus. Omar Puente is a Cuban violinist whose project focuses on classical music. As a result, rather than acting as a promoter and manager who earns as a representative of certain bands and based on how much he can fill a venue with the group he is supplying, Noda is earning his fees as an “entertainment arranger” by booking a weekly band and promoting the events on social media. Sometimes he feels sad that he could not push Cuban groups ahead. On the other hand, Noda is also comfortable with this arrangement, which gives him a regular income and less dependency on earning through performance, which is sporadic and irregular.

Despite the growth of Cuban salsa and timba audiences in London, moving away from the salsa industry has proven a better income provider for both musicians performing popular dance music and promoters of London Cuban social dance projects. Of course, a few have persevered over the years, such as René Álvarez Y Su Cuban Combination, the most active and immediately recognisable name. With the growth and spread of popularity and consumption of Cuban music in the UK, Álvarez has continuous work, including regularly at private events, clubs, and parties, which allows him to sustain himself as a musician. He also manages to record his own projects, even though their popularity is limited. Tres prayer Jesús Cutiño also continues to record his projects in the UK and performs with various musicians. The Latin Bridge is a small initiative run by Sergio Marciano, who brings one or mostly two other performers to live events. Others such as Kalison Orquesta are no longer as active on the scene. Eliane Correa’s project *Eli y la Evolución* (timba – jazz – Afro-Cuban fusion) performed at

Ronnie Scott's downstairs for the first time in late 2019, indicating a new social acceptance of Cuban music in London's music scene. Sambroso All Stars (a project run by Noda) has gained popularity over the last year with six sold out shows at Jazz Café which included performances of traditional music (son, bolero, cha-cha) and two renditions of French-Spanish musician and producer Manu Chao. They were preparing for a tour around the country which has been postponed due to the Covid19 quarantine. Highly trained Cuban musicians in traditional styles such as Javier Ginarte are still in the process of trying to produce their own albums of traditional music such as son; however, their overall careers remain genre-agnostic. Javier performs jazz, salsa and son depending on the work opportunity. Timbero and singer Osvaldo Chacón keeps performing *ad hoc*. Many musicians from the salsa industry are also engaged in non-music day jobs, which cover their monthly expenses. As such, music remains a second job rather than the main source of income. This stands in contrast to the growth of the Cuban social dance industry in London and to the life of salsa and timba musicians in Havana, who are at the higher end of earners and receive regular opportunities for international performances.

These consumption habits in turn impacted venues which used to offer live Cuban music such as the previously discussed The Forge and Juju's. Another club previously called "The Cuban" and also located in Camden Town, was renamed Gabeto and currently plays only recorded music, almost exclusively Latin American reggaetón, with only a very few popular *cubatón* pieces (e.g., GDZ's La Gozadera). Places such as Salsa Bar and Salsa Bar Temple do not invite live music and offer a mixed repertoire of Cuban and other salsa, reggaetón, bachata and merengue pieces throughout the night. They are not in any way viewed as spaces of Cuban rhythms and culture, neither live nor recorded. Besides Juju's, venues outside the popular dance music scene such as Jazz Cafe and Pizza Express Jazz Club are developing a closer association with Cuban musicians and music in the UK than those of salsa and timba. Bar Salsa in Temple plays some Cuban music amongst other Latin styles and the Salsa Fusion initiative, now held

monthly, opened a Cuban room besides its regular Fusion room in 2012. The main Fusion room holds a large stage and high ceilings, and it opens for social dancing as early as 8pm. The Cuban room has about a tenth of the size of the Fusion room, low ceilings, and no air conditioning. It is used initially for dance classes and subsequently, after 10pm, opens for social dancing. The regular DJ is Javier la Rosa, alternating with Jim Layne. Nevertheless, the room is always packed with dancers, sweating heavily and dancing with few breaks until closing time. Monthly Latin party El Grande also offer its smallest and non-air-conditioned room to the lovers of Cuban salsa. Again, audiences are dancing till closure despite the downpour of sweat and difficulty breathing. Culturally this experience relates to the ambience and atmosphere of social dance in Cuba. For anyone who has been to the small, crowded venues of Havana, space is not a requirement to enjoy the music and dance throughout the night.

While salsa and timba musicians continue to struggle and reinvent themselves, dance teachers have proliferated both in London and across the country, including Cuban and non-Cuban nationals. Salsa dance classes can be found across London focusing specifically on Cuban styles rather than general salsa. Some of the most active within Cuban dance are Deakocan Dance (Osbanis and Aneta), Havana Londres (non-Cuban nationals having the regular spot at Juju's), Luanda Pau, DJ Jim Layne, and Susan Hucking (non-Cuban nationals), Oscle and Lizi, Yanet Fuentes, Nelson Batista, Damaris Fares, Idalberto Alcala Rodriguez, Ariel Rios and Leo Henriquez. Many of these teachers have developed a specialist focus on the different genres or teach specific workshops for clearly focused on a single genre. For instance, Luanda Pau is recognised for her focus on Afro-Cuban dance, including rumba, Orishas, yuka, makuta, palo and gagá. Danielle Satsias is known for her workshops and choreographers in reggaetón. Nelson Batista teaches what he describes as social dance which is applicable to all salsa styles (Cuban, other Latin, or US). Jim Lane and Susan teach only Cuban salsa, and Jim also plays music for the social part of the evening which follows the lesson. Other regional and

mixed social dance clubs such as those run by Salsateca London also have teachers which teach Cuban on specific days, alongside teaching other styles of salsa or non-Cuban genres such as bachata. Guest teachers from Europe are frequenting London more often than before, such as Freddyclan Batista, Maykel Fonts (often teaching at festivals when bands from Cuba come to perform in the UK), and Lázaro López (also DJing at El Grande and previously living in London).

A few of the Cuban dance teachers in the UK, both Cubans and non-Cubans, organise dance holidays for their students to Cuba. For instance, Luanda Pau (a Cuban and former dancer at Conjunto Folclórico Nacional de Cuba) takes her students on annual dance holidays to Cuba where they learn with her as well as local teachers such as her father Domingo Pau (one of the oldest dancers at Conjunto Folclórico). When visiting his daughter in London, Domingo Pau also teaches Afro-Cuban dance workshops to Luanda's students. Havana Londres and Osbanis and Aneta also organise dance holidays and take their students to Cuba. Music teachers follow a similar pattern. David Pattman and Victoria Jassey (Bombo Productions) and Sara McGuinness organise annual trips for their students to learn music within their respective genres: popular dance for Sara's students and Afro-Cuban for David's. These cultural holidays have been undertaken over the years by many US and Canadian music and dance academics, performance teachers or tourist agencies (e.g., Blue Note Travel "Cuban Music and Art Tour", organised by Blue Note Entertainment Group (US); guided tours, exploring jazz or Afro-Cuban music, organised by ethnomusicologist Ned Sublette (US); "Backstage Cuba Tours (US); "Putumayo Cuba! Cuba! Tour" (US), "Jazz Cuba" (US); "Cuba Educational Travel" (US); "Come to Cuba with Us" by Toronto Dance Salsa (Canada); salsa dance holidays organised by Sun Tours (Canada)). These holidays have been growing significantly for UK-based organisations and individuals, creating further connections between the two countries. While



the Covid19 pandemic has been catastrophic for these cultural holidays (Ribchester int.), they are gaining new momentum with the relaxation of pandemic restrictions.

These cultural holidays to the Caribbean are connected to the identity of social dancers in London, which comes from the specific style of salsa they dance. “I dance Cuban, I don’t dance other salsa styles,” said Sajeela Haak, and I have heard similar comments on a few occasions from salsa dancers, both male and female, at Salsa Fusion, Juju’s, and other venues. When speaking to one of the regular salsa dancers as to his choice of a dance style, he said it must be Cuban, because of the moves, the feeling, and the bodily expression of the music, which he connected to. He referred to the dancers of Colombian styles at Salsa Fusion as the “ankle kickers” due to the fast footwork accompanied with jumps and kicking of each foot consecutively forward. The aesthetics of performing Cuban salsa dancing are representative of the features considered as constituting *cubanidad*. This includes the feeling of dancing salsa connected with poses and breaks, which are representative of the percussive beats of its musical composition, especially the movement of the campana and the clave which differ from those of Colombian salsa. It further relates to the African roots of Cuban salsa, where even when the rhythm is fast, the percussion swing allows for a smooth and fluid movement bodily expression of the music where the beat is carried by the hips of the performer rather than the legs (Herrera Lage 2013; Liebich 2016). “Caribbean and some Latin cultures, such as Brazil and Venezuela, carry the beat on their hips” (Batista int.). This aesthetics are the main pointer through which Nelson Batista educates his students in understanding the feeling of Cuban social dance. Through their choice of a style, Cuban salsa dancers in the UK also perform the social values of social dance in Cuba, namely the appreciation of the dance as a process and a concept of communication.

Hosting a community of salseros who know each other from the London social dance scene, the home of Cuban social dance, Juju’s, is considered a safe and open place to attend for

an afternoon or early evening (6pm until 11pm) of dancing to Cuban rhythms. It does not require participants to be able to dance to an advanced level and many visitors attend the place weekly for their “dose of salsa dancing” (Haak int.). The venue is regarded as a safe place to attend offering good music, an open atmosphere, and a friendly environment for dancers who go out to enjoy dance. It is therefore that the performance aesthetics of Cuban salsa in London are also connected to the construction of a community, where participants feel safe with each other and in participating in the scene. The Cuban salsa industry, thus, has created a community through the place of Juju’s, the play of recorded sound, and dance moves.

While social dancers in London are keen on and faithful to performing the dance aesthetics of Cuban salsa, some of these dancers often do not speak or understand Spanish and have little understanding of the lyrics or the musical construct of the songs they are listening to. Very often they do not even know the bands beyond the few most popular ones which music they are listening and dancing to (Flecha int.). Coupled with the little interest in live music events, this has led to the separation of the bodily expression of music from its actual sound and meaning. The same applies to the foreign salsa dance teachers who have little knowledge of the musical structures and lyrics of Cuban timba. Hence, while participating in a community through dance moves, the same participation can be characterised by a mere display of moves that are disconnected from their original meaning (Batista int.). Even when names of specific moves are taught, it is separated from the cultural context within which their meaning is derived, and it is accompanied with small or no understanding of this cultural context. Having conversed with different salseros in venues across London, I realised that many do not know the difference between salsa and timba. One of the few more informed ones in the musical culture of the dance, once pointed out to me that it was very helpful that the DJs at Juju’s were showing videos of the songs they were playing on the wall behind the stage, so audiences can become more informed about the artists they are listening and dancing to.

For certain salseros, salsa dancing has become a memory game of moves and sequences. Often, they are felt and performed to high standards; however, disconnected from their origins, from the vibe of the streets of Havana, and are circulated within a community of performers with its own rules and relationships. As a culture of circulation, the Cuban salsa industry in the UK has dissociated sound and lyrics from their roots and original meaning, constrained by the challenges of language, and developed its own abstracts associated with the consumption and performance of Cuban social dance in the UK. Non-Cubans in the UK partake in a form of *cubanidad* which is unconsciously Cuban in certain ways but also in contrast to the Cuban values of appreciation of live music and dancing as an expression of one's appreciation for the music being performed. The Cuban social dance industry has formed a community of dancers which share a sense of belonging to the Cuban dance scene, while lacking belonging to Cuban music and the Cuban music scene in London. This community feels more connected to the music scene in Havana, yet dissociated from the values of the street, where musicians and dancers are part of the same community, like two sides of the same coin. However, with the relocation of music from the streets to the new *sociocapitalist* venues of Havana, salseros in London are coincidentally in line with the changes and processes currently taking place in Cuba as well.

Unlike in Havana, social dance in London has also become about branding, especially amongst the students of non-Cuban teachers. An example is the Havana Londres dance school. Run by Serbian by national Nikola Medic and Cypriot dancer Danielle Satsias, the school offers classes from reggaetón to *rueda de casino* and Afro-Cuban dance. Satsias and Bulgarian dancer Dimitar Kichukov teach the weekly classes at Juju's. They also have a following of students who frequent the venues they attend and stay for more dancing after the classes have finished. The school has strong branding, including T-Shirts and open events on the South Bank over the summer. They do international crowd dances and have student performances in different

locations. At times new entrants to the social dance scenes have complained about feeling excluded from the Havana Londres community, whose members seem to prefer to dance with each other rather than with outsiders. They share an experience and a dance style imparted by their teachers, which body work is at times not known to outsiders and can create discomfort, especially for the less experienced dancers who can lack the confidence even of the beginner students of the Havana Londres school. More experienced and longer-term participants in the salsa scene have complained about the space dancers from Havana Londres occupy on the dance floor to demonstrate their skills in the middle of the evening forming impromptu line-ups or circles to dance *rueda de casino*. These characteristics of participation and performance are specific to the Havana Londres school and are not attributable to the students of other teachers, especially the alumni of Cuban teachers such as Nelson Batista, Osbanis y Aneta, or Luanda Pau. Even though Luanda's students perform choreographies, they mix actively on the dancefloor. Many students also frequent different teachers depending on the genre they would like to learn. For instance, Luanda Pau attracts dancers interested in improving their skills in Afro-Cuban genres.

By defining Afro-Cuban as a separate part of Cuban dance, new cultures of circulation are being formed, performed, and shared. Dance teachers are adding Afro-Cuban styles as an additional product in their offering, bringing them economic advantages, especially if they can teach the "authentic" dance styles. Simultaneously, by making the African in Cuban dance and music visible, they connect Cuban culture with other cultures through the shared component of African heritage. Luanda's husband, Simon Atkins, is a capoeira teacher, and both often organise Caporumba events, bringing the followers of Brazilian and Cuban dance together, as well as musicians from both traditions to co-perform. These events create new abstract geographies of music and dance exchanges between Afro-Latin cultures. Such exchanges also

take place through musical collaborations between Afro-Cuban and African musicians, which I will review in the next chapter.

As an industry, Cuban social dance has become simultaneously a concrete and abstract culture. Concrete in the regular participation of dancers and the earning capabilities which it brings to teachers, who - unlike musicians and DJs - can sustain their livelihood through earnings generated from dance classes. At the same time, besides student performances, dance teachers have no professional dance performances of Afro-Cuban or social dance. As a social dance, Cuban salsa and timba are not viewed as dances that are conducive to performance, due to the spontaneous impromptu nature of the dance and its origin on the streets and in the barrios of Havana. However, to develop professional careers as performers, Cuban dancers such as Carlos Acosta and Miguel Altunaga Verdecia perform international dance styles (ballet, contemporary). Afro-Cuban dance does not form a part of the repertoire of professional dancers in the UK, which leaves Afro-Cuban culture in the domain of the abstract where dance moves are learnt to supplement social dancing rather than to impart an experience of the culture and its roots.

Salsa and its values have permeated London society and formed their own unique cultural patterns. Cuban salsa dancing is not viewed as the dance style of the working-class clubs (apart from the occasional more middle-class venue) visited by Latin audiences as described by Román-Velázquez. Cuban social dance is more agnostic in its consumption and performance, where nationality, age, gender, class are concepts irrelevant to the type of consumer. Nelson Batista has minimum-wage workers attending his public classes (for a fee of £8 for a class of 1 hour followed by 30 minutes of social dancing), while he gives lessons at £120 per hour to his private clients (int.). While salseros frequenting the salsa clubs are not focused on listening to live performances of UK salsa bands, the more popular of these bands such as René Álvarez earn good living from private parties and events, especially in the West

End of London, which can pay a band of four musicians an average of £1,500 to £2,000 for two 45-minute sets.

The UK salsa industry has also formed different connections with the salsa industry back in Cuba. While there is no shared language, unlike with salsa consumers in Barcelona, salsa dancers from the UK are keen to expand their skills learning directly from teachers in Havana, experiencing the local environment, vibe, and seeing live their favourite bands to which music they listen to at Juju's. This movement across the Havana – London axis driven by the Cuban salsa dance industry, creates economic opportunities for musicians and dance teachers in Cuba, while bringing actual experiences and first-hand knowledge to salseros from the UK whose view of Cuban culture was created through social events at Juju's.

## **Conclusion**

There is a recognisable Cuban cultural scene in London, distinct from the broader Latin community. The scene has been constructed based on musical exchanges and the salsa dance industry. The London Cuban scene does not seek to recreate a nostalgic idea of an exiled community yearning for its lost homeland. The Cuban social scene has been the location where Cubans have been able to meet and interact, maintaining the Cuban diaspora in the UK connected. Foreigners are also partaken into the experiencing Cuban culture through the social scene, thus, building connections with Cubans while simultaneously help Cubans integrated into the broader London community. Cuban music and dance have further acted as tools for through which both Cuban and foreigners have been able to earn an income. The Cuban social dance circuit has also strengthened cultural exchanges by making music and dance holidays to Cuba more accessible and active than previously. Musical exchanges and collaborations between Havana and London have also become more regular and active than before, including

Cuban artists performing in London, London-based artists travelling to Cuba to perform and joint projects between artists in both islands.

Recognising the Cuban diaspora as a separate migrant community in the UK has broader academic and social impact. Firstly, it challenges the grouping of all Spanish-speaking migrant communities as Latin and defines socio-cultural parameters which are strictly Cuban. Secondly, it demonstrates the importance of music and dance in creating a diasporic community. Thirdly, it offers an understanding of the building of diasporic communities without shared language or colonial history. Fourthly, it offers a recognition to the contributions Cubans have to London.

## Chapter 4: “Our Ancestors Live On through Us”: London’s Cuban Sound

It was a rainy weekday in November 2018, and I was in a Pret A Manger café in Paternoster Square in the City of London, the capital’s financial services heart. As I was sipping coffee, a familiar sound came on in the background. The soft yet expressive *cajón* and *batá* drumming over jazz saxophone, followed by the words “he said, he said,” were unmistakably Ibeyi’s song “Deathless”.<sup>86</sup> I was surprised to find myself listening to Ibeyi at a café in a social setting that had nothing obvious to do with Cuban music, culture, or the Cuban diaspora. Listening to Afro-Cuban percussion, surrounded by financiers in suits unaware of the sound they were internalising, I thought of the ways that the composition, production, performance, and consumption of Cuban music have filtered into London.

### A Brief History

Cuban sounds are not new to London. Even though there were not as many Cubans and bands in the capital prior to the 2010s, “one could always find Cuban music if you looked for it”, shares ethnomusicologist and producer Lucy Durán (int.).<sup>87</sup> Durán has been one of the most influential actors in creating musical connections between Havana and London since the 1980s. Her role includes presenting Cuban music to producers such as Nick Gold, Joe Boyd, and David Flower, facilitating the history behind BVSC and ¡Cubanismo! which brought Cuban dance music to the UK (Sublette 2001).<sup>88</sup> Durán promoted Orquesta Revé in London in 1987 and 1988, putting together their anthology album “La Explosión del Momento”, released by

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<sup>86</sup> Song available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN8TUgkPnbU> .

<sup>87</sup> Lucy Durán is an ethnomusicologist, producer, and professor at SOAS, specialising in music of Cuba and Mali.

<sup>88</sup> Nick Gold is a British producer, specialising in Cuban and West African music. At the helm of the World Circuit Record label, he produced BVSC. Joe Boyd is an America producer who produced ¡Cubanismo! David Flowers is European agent for BVSC.



RealWorld in 1989. She brought Los Muñequitos de Matanzas for the first time out of Cuba in 1988 and promoted the albums of Ritmo Oriental in the UK “She was the backbone... who gave birth to the whole phenomenon [of Cuban music] – especially in England, which opened the doors worldwide for all of us”, argues trumpet player and founder of ¡Cubanismo! Jesús Alemañy (*ibid.*).

The performance of Cuban sound in London did not start with the growth of the Cuban diaspora in the capital. Melvyn Burns recalls the first Cuban rhythms being performed by the band of Edmundo Ros in the 1950s (int.). Percussionists David Pattman – a sworn ritual batá player (for biographical notes see p. 256) – and Bill Bland began studying and performing Cuban music in the mid-1980s (Pattman int.). Ethnomusicologist, musician and *babalao* Ade Egun Crispin Robinson has been playing Cuban rhythms since the early 1990s (pers. comm.). Alex Wilson, a British-born jazz musician, pianist, and composer, released his album “Anglo Cubano” in 2000. The project was recorded between Havana and London featuring songs from salsa to *guaguancó* and jazz. British musician and godmother in the Santería religion, Daniela Rosselson De Armas founded Salsa Y Aché (subsequently Salsasonica) in 1989 (int.). Pianists Kishon Khan and Sara McGuinness have been performing Cuban music since the 1990s. Professor Sue Miller has focused on performing Cuban flute since the early 2000s. When Cuban musicians began arriving in the U.K more regularly, Cuban sounds were already being performed by non-Cuban musicians in London.

After the entry of Tony Blair’s government into power in 1997, there was a relaxation of immigration policies in the UK, which led to an increase in the number of Cuban artists coming to the country to perform or to live (McGuinness int.). Some of the London’s scene longest-standing musicians, such as Omar Puente, Rey Crespo, Osvaldo Chacón, and Jesús Alemañy, moved to the UK in this period, laying the foundation of a Cuban music scene in London that was not fully reliant on visiting artists. A few years later during the early 2000s,

George Peguero and Sambroso Noda moved to London as well. In 2007, Geoffrey Baker, in collaboration with Latin American events organisation Movimientos, brought Cuban hip-hop groups Obsesión and Los Paisanos to London, diversifying the genres of Cuban music that UK audiences were exposed to. Thus, the relaxation of restrictions of the physical borders of the UK impacted the movement and circulation of culture through human migration. While the scene remained small, more versatile genres of Cuban music became consumed in London and Cuban music began being produced and performed more actively than previously by London-based musicians rather than touring bands.

The subsequent relaxation of travel restrictions by the Cuban government in the early 2010s further increased the number and frequency of Cuban bands visiting the UK in the years to follow, leading to a further growth of Cuban diaspora musicians in the UK. Both established and more recent performers began visiting to play in London. It was in 2015 that timba orchestra Pupy y Los Que Son, Son made it for the first time to a UK stage in London. Popular bands such as Maykel Blanco y Su Salsa Mayor and Havana D'Primera added London to their annual European touring destinations. While the UK government began re-tightening immigration policies in the same period as the Cuban government was relaxing them, Cuban artists continued to move to the UK on marriage or work visas. Musicians such as Sierra Maestra trumpet player Yelfris Valdés, classical guitarist Ahmed Dickinson Cardenas, Irakere drummer Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés, Yoruba Andabo vocalist Gerardo De Armas Sarria and Eastern Symphonic Orchestra trumpet player Victor Hechavarria Sarret (for biographical date see p.281) amongst others moved to London, making the scene more versatile and active.

Simultaneously, the growth of the Cuban music scene in the UK and the international excitement of the Obama era driven by a desire to see Cuba before it changes, further drove a growth in British tourism to the Caribbean island, including growth in music and dance travel. In 2013 more tourists arrived from the UK than anticipated by international monitoring bodies

(Acevedo and Wong 2017). The number increased steadily in the years to follow with 124,000 arrivals from England in 2014 and 204,000 in 2018 (López 2019). Besides Key2Cuba, which has organised over one hundred dance holidays since its inception in 2000, other music and dance teachers began organising regular holidays to Cuba, including percussionist David Pattman and ethnomusicologist Victoria Jassey, pianist and educator Sara McGuinness and Cuban dance teacher Luanda Pau (who moved from Italy to London in 2016).

Driven by personal interests and market forces, Cuban musicians have been focusing on the composition and performance of a variety of genres since the 2010s. Depending on individual backgrounds and circumstances, musicians have either continued along the path of their careers in Cuba or joined in playing and creating other genres, whether Cuban or international. Omar Puente and Ahmed Dickinson Cardenas continue to perform primarily classical music, while Jesús Cutiño maintains his focus on dance music. Jessel Saladriga, who stayed on in the UK after the end of his tour in 2007 as one half of Los Paisanos, shifted his focus from hip-hop to folkloric music, a genre he had never performed previously. Yelfris Valdés began composing his own fusions, and Victor Hechavarria Sarret has focused on Afro-Cuban, Latin, and American jazz. In the following sections I will explore these shifts in sound since the 2010s and consider whether there is an identifiable Cuban sound of London.

## **Cuban Dance Music**

“The essence of timba lives in Cuba”, argues London-based Argentinian-Spanish-Cuban pianist Eliane Correa (pers. comm.). Due to the socio-cultural idiosyncrasies and economic ambience within which the genre emerged, she continues, Cuban dance music can only be created and performed well in Cuba, and musicians outside the island should not even be trying to make timba, as their socio-cultural experiences and life stories are different. However, timba is the sound of the Cuban salsa industry of London, consumed by the largest

number of listeners to Cuban music in the UK It is therefore the most well-known, identifiable, and sought-out sound in London. So why is timba not actively created and performed in the capital?

Oswaldo Chacón came from Bari (Italy) to London in December 1997 and was the first timba musician to form his own project, “Chacón y Su Timba,” a year later (Chacón int.). This group rapidly established the singer as a UK pioneer of the sound of timba, which was seldomly heard live at the time. Chacón had begun his musical career with some of most popular dance music bands in Cuba, including Paulito FG and El Médico de la Salsa, joining Bamboleo as a lead male singer in 1995. Chacón was featured in the performance of the longest son ever played in the world (as registered in the Guinness Book of Records). While developing his own compositions and timba sound in London, the singer was invited to perform alongside the likes of Adalberto Santiago, Azuquita, Tito Allen (Fania All Stars), Roberto Pla, Herman Olivera and Eddie Palmieri (Ronnie Scott’s), Latin percussionist Giovanni Hidalgo (Queen Elizabeth Hall), Chick Corea, Celia Cruz, Oscar D’Leon, Rubén Blades and Alberto “El Canario”. Chacón views the late 1990s and the early 2000s as a good period for live music in the UK Latin music groups had regular gigs and received regular corresponding payments for their performances. The Greater London Council was one of the main promoters and live Latino and Cuban music were well received.

From the various projects which emerged over the years, René Álvarez y Su Cuban Combination has been one of the best established as a dance music sound of the London scene. Creating and performing timba, son, and salsa, often influenced by folkloric rhythms, trombone-player, pianist, composer, and arranger René Álvarez has been the most active in making Cuban dance music in London, and one of the few performing regularly live at salsa dance venues such as Salsa Fusion. Other projects, including those of Jesús Cutiño, Sarabanda and the Latin Bridge, have also established themselves as performers of Cuban dance and

traditional music on the London scene, with the latter two playing primarily popular Cuban classics.

However, overall, the production of timba in the UK has shrunk as the genre is not seen as a good income earner. The positive scenario offered in the late 1990s and early 2000s was short-lived, as illustrated by the fact that twenty years later, the payment on offer has barely changed (Chacón int.). “The main problem,” Chacón argues, “was and still is that musicians in London are unreliable”. He feels that most musicians want to earn money quickly without putting the effort in. They want to participate in many projects to secure their income and are ready to give up an event in the last moment to perform at another which pays them a little extra. After having been let down on numerous occasions by musicians who did not attend rehearsals to prepare or did not turn up to performances, Chacón felt that maintaining a full-sized timba orchestra was an excessively cumbersome task. Thus, running a timba band in London was not challenging simply because of the different socio-cultural context in which the genre was being created and performed, but by practicalities such as lack of commitment on the part of artists. While timba became one of the highest earning genres in Cuba during the Special Period, and musicians from other genres such as jazz would participate in timba projects to earn better income (Perna 2005; Baker 2011), timba did not have the same status in the UK, making it less attractive to musicians. Training to be a timba musician requires significant investment of time, effort, and financial resources, making it less representative of any marginalised communities in London and more aligned with the individual interests of well-trained musicians. Hence, the creation and performance of timba in London is limited by the socio-economic factors of life in the UK, supporting Correa’s statement. UK musicians do not need timba to earn a decent wage. In fact, timba can end up being a costly choice if one needs to maintain a full-sized orchestra and train musicians to perform at the same level as

Cubans on the island. This unattractive earning potential is a key reason due to which the production and performance of the genre has shrunk in the UK.

As Eliane Correa noted, UK audiences that came to know Cuban music from BVSC tend to prefer classic repertoire rather than anything new, created in London (int.). There is then little creative aspiration to compose and produce new timba, as even live audiences often prefer the songs they already know and have listened to. A guest at an event once told me there was no need for Cuban musicians in London to experiment, when there is already excellent music that has been created in Cuba. There are some bands such as Sergio Marciano's trio who focus on interpreting son and salsa classics, but for anyone looking to create new compositions there is limited market to consume them.

This preference for dance music created in Cuba is also the main driver behind the music consumption of the salsa dancers of London. "I want to listen to Havana D'Primera", says Sajeela Haak, "it is like being in Cuba" (int.). It is a view shared by many salseros I have approached. With the growing number of dance holidays and tourism to Cuba, where UK salsa dancers are getting first-hand experience of the Havana dance music scene, the desire to recreate this scene in London lands the task on the DJs rather than Cuban musicians in London. Salsa dancers are searching for an "authenticity" of sound that comes from and is created in Cuba, in order to reach an "authenticity" of their dance experience; and this is achieved better through recorded music of the most popular timba of Havana rather than the live performances and compositions of the Cuban diaspora in London.

This underlying understanding of "authenticity" defines the fundamental role of the performer to be a representative of the culture from which they came (Gilbert and Pearson 1999: 164-165). By virtue of being a diasporic community, Cuban musicians in London already participate and embody the characteristics of more than one culture. While influenced by different Cuban and international genres, timba as subculture is viewed as an authentic

socio-cultural representation of *cubanidad*, which makes it necessary for its sound to emerge from its true home Havana. “Timba belongs to Cuban musicians on the island”, argues Eliane Correa, which is why she says her band Eli y la Evolución focuses more on timba fusion rather than original timba sound and has various other fusion projects (pers. comm.). While timba has been further popularised in London during the 2010s due to growing number of cultural exchanges between the two capitals and has become one of the key sounds of Cuban music in London, the preference is for recorded music and visiting bands rather than sounds created in the UK.

### **Fusion is Inclusion**

It was October 2017, and I was at Shoreditch Town Hall listening to a fusion of the Bulgarian folklore song “Dragana [a traditional female name] and Slavei [nightingale]” by the Mysterious Voices of Bulgaria, juxtaposed with vocals in English by Lisa-Kaindé Díaz, and accompanied by Afro-Cuban batá by Naomi Díaz, the twin sisters which form the duo Ibeyi.<sup>89</sup> It was the opening piece of their concert and the first time I had heard Bulgarian folklore fused with Afro-Cuban music.<sup>90</sup> These were the songs I had grown up with, blended with the music I had chosen to pursue as a career and partly appropriated as my own. The following song was “Deathless”, and the lyrics address police brutality and racism. I remembered a comment I had read on YouTube in reference to “Deathless”: “Our ancestors live on through us. We are deathless.” I recalled the statement as I was listening to the powerful jamming at the onset of the piece, mixing machine drum and Afro-Cuban batá, electronic sound with wood. The song was inspired by Lisa-Kaindé’s wrongful arrest in Paris when she was sixteen years old, where she was questioned without reason by a policeman about whether she smoked, drank, or took

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<sup>89</sup> Video available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAhQkkYrGjk> [retrieved Feb. 2022].

<sup>90</sup> More recently jazz pianist Roberto Fonseca began fusing Afro-Cuban jazz with Bulgarian folkloric singing.

drugs, because of her Afro-Cuban heritage evident in her physical appearance. Both pieces supported the comment intricately, with folkloric rhythms bringing to life the musical, cultural and ethnic heritage of Ibeyi.

The event was fully sold out and besides myself and Yelfris Valdés, I did not see any other members of the usual salsa and Cuban music crowd. Audiences were young British and foreign nationals, with a huge number of French-speakers, connected to the twins' partly French heritage. The evening was replete with political declarations and personal confessions. "No Man Is Big Enough for My Arms" got audiences actively involved in both the music and the messages the twins conveyed through the lyrics. The song was written around the same time Donald Trump was elected president of the US and "grab them by the pussy" was all over the news. While the title is a quote from Jean-Michel Basquiat's partner Suzanne Mallouk, Ibeyi requested Michele Obama's permission to use a statement from her speech in response to Trump's comments in their song lyrics: "The measure of any society is how it treats its women and girls". Anti-racist and anti-misogynist themes were expressed through various fusions, heavily influenced by Afro-Cuban rhythms and percussion. "Valé", a lullaby to Ibeyi's five-year old niece, was sung in English and Lucumí. Singing in Spanish, English, and Lucumí, the twins fused jazz, electronic music, hip-hop, folkloric, and Afro-Cuban rhythms, and instrumentation, including batá, electric piano and cajón. The repertoire included two pieces from their 2014 EP as well: "Oyá", dedicated to the Santería Orisha with the same name who is a force of change in nature and life, and "River", a tribute to the Orisha Ochún. Versatile audiences were consuming Afro-Cuban inspired fusion fused with lyrics tackling the social issues faced by Ibeyi's generation in Europe.

Ibeyi's Afro-Cuban inspired musical fusions, moving through various rhythms, cultures and traditions reminding of their own multicultural and international background, of their diverse experiences as musicians and women. Audiences I spoke to felt the sound and lyrics



made the concert a cathartic and spiritual experience. From the political to the personal, from the problematic to the inspirational, Ibeyi voiced issues shared by many in our contemporary societies.<sup>91</sup> Inherently eclectic as a style, fusion represented the life of cosmopolitan youth such as Ibeyi and their audiences. Through Afro-Cuban fusions the duo maintained what stems from their Afro-Cuban roots – expression of social issues and discontent through music; however, in the cosmopolitan setting of London. Afro-Cuban inspired fusion sound connected represented the stories and struggles of a group of London youth from various nationalities and social backgrounds.

I went to another Ibeyi event in 2018 at Brixton Academy and after the show I approached their manager and mother Maya Dagnino to request an interview for my doctoral thesis on Cuban music, including in the diaspora. Dagnino made it clear that her daughters performer fusion and dance music and are not performers of Cuban music nor had much to do with the Cuban scene in Europe. Her aversity to labelling Ibeyi as “World Music” was not a denial of their Afro-Cuban heritage and musical inspirations, but a marketing strategy. Cuban music might be in fashion in the Obama era, but fusion has a broader audience and more continuity in sales. Although Ibeyi’s fusions are strongly influenced by and often based on Afro-Cuban rhythms, instrumentation, and *pataquínes*, Dagnino was obviously annoyed with my inference that their music should in any way be classified as Cuban. Suddenly I had also become a danger to Dagnino, as if an interview by a researcher on Cuban music might somehow affect the duo’s image and marketing strategy. I received no response to my follow-up emails and requests for a more detailed interview. It was then no surprise that while visiting music events in Havana, the twins are not seen performing often in Cuba and it is mostly at international events such as their participation at the Chanel catwalk. Ibeyi’s fusion might

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<sup>91</sup> The concert included most of the pieces from their recently released album *Ash*, which tackled social issues (Edes 2017).

represent pressing social issues of our societies through Afro-Cuban-inspired sound; nevertheless, their fusion is cosmopolitan, driven by the basic market principle of supply and demand. Their fusion also serves the demands of addressing the “pressing social issues” of cosmopolitan youth like their audience in London, rather than the issues of their peers in Havana.

“I have not come to London to continue playing the same music I did in Cuba. There is so much more to do and learn here. Why repeat the same thing that I already know? Besides, I cannot survive just performing Cuban music.” Noda’s statement was loud and clear, and it further reaffirmed Dagnino’s view. Beyond a marketing tool where fusion offers a better reach and sales than the World Music section, fusion expresses the more complex and multicultural identity of Cuban musicians in London, revealing a search for belonging in the new homeland as diaspora. Having played with several bands from different genres, including jazz, afrobeat, reggae, Bangladeshi-Afro-Cuban and electronic fusions, Noda had not invested in developing a career as a popular dance music percussionist. His priorities have been to integrate himself in the larger London community by establishing musical connections and repertoires outside Cuban music; or by involving foreigners in the performance of Cuban music. There was little space for nostalgia and politics, recreating pre- or revolutionary Cuba, rooting for or against the current government. Instead, Noda was focused on London and the creation of Cuban-inspired London sounds.

Similar statements have been voiced by different Cuban and foreign musicians performing Cuban genres in the London scene. David Pattman argues that there is no point in trying to recreate Havana or Matanzas in London. Instead, the uniqueness of Cuban music in the UK comes from the different fusions, stemming from other immigrant communities or London’s jazz, pop and urban scenes that are fused with Cuban styles (int.). Projects such as Lokkhi Terra (Bangladeshi – Afro-Cuban – jazz fusion) and Cubafrobeat (Afrobeat – Afro-

Cuban – jazz fusion) are two such examples. Omar Puente shares that he is “a classical musician whose heart beats with a Cuban rhythm, whose soul is African, and whose home is Yorkshire” (Cuba50 2009), but one must see Cuban music in the socio-cultural context it is created. He argues that the Cuban music scene is small and it “never stops growing and absorbing whatever is around it, wherever it is... [so we cannot] really call it Cuban music here - it’s different to Cuba... [where] the doors are open, you hear it on the street. But I believe the knowledge of Cuban music is much greater now” (Cuba Solidarity Campaign 2009). His own project “Raices Cubanas” (“Cuban Roots”) articulates his multi-layered histories and consciousness spread between Africa, Cuba, and London, or as the violinist describes it: “my history began in Africa, it was written in Cuba, and developed in the UK” (Cuba50 2009).

This ability of fusion to integrate and represent new personal and cultural dynamics has led many of the Cuban diaspora and foreign musicians performing Cuban music in London to focus on various fusions. Its ability to also encourage the pursuit of career growth and income in a market with different demands than Havana, has made fusion a choice for Cuban musicians in the UK Dele Sosimi’s Cubafrobeat and Kishon Khan’s Lokkhi Terra are two of the longest established projects. René Álvarez has a new Cuban Funk project. Yelfris Valdés and Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés have also chosen fusion as their genres. The Manana Project, in which both musicians participated, and Hamadi Rencurrell Valdés still plays a leading part, was a key project which established physical connections between the UK and Cuba in the 2010s through cultural exchanges and live performances at the Manana Festivals in London and Santiago de Cuba (Rencurrell Valdés int.). Eliane Correa’s jazz fusion also brought her back to perform at the 2019 Havana Jazz Festival.

Fusion has enabled embodied cultural exchanges along the Havana-London axis, contrasting with the recorded sound and holiday connections driven by timba and the salsa dance industry. Fusion has further empowered the Cuban diaspora to connect to their peers in

the cosmopolitan socio-cultural and economic context of London, to form connections with musicians from other genres and backgrounds and to identify new income streams. Through fusion, Cubans have also been able to relate their diasporic life and experiences, or as Eliane Correa points out: “My fusion is my story. The fusions of other artists are what tell their story. We use fusion to express ourselves” (pers. comm.). In this context fusion becomes the sound and narrative of the experiences of being a Cuban and a Londoner.

### ***Rumbeando in London***

It was a Monday night in August 2017 and Gerardo De Armas Sarrias’s emotive voice was filling up Jazz Café in Camden Town with Alain Pérez’s rumba piece “Lloraré”.<sup>92</sup> His vocal interpretation was more traditional than the jazz- and timba-influenced rumba sound of Pérez, which blends with the classic sound of Omara Portuondo.<sup>93</sup> As a folkloric singer trained by the community of elder rumberos in the peripheral barrio of Párraga (part of the Arroyo Naranjo municipality) and a vocalist of Yoruba Andabo and Iroso Obbá, Armas maintained vocal and percussion techniques rooted deeply in the original forms of performance of Afro-Cuban traditions. He was accompanied by Copenhagen-based Cuban conguero Eliel Lazo, whose sound is of funk and jazz Afro-fusions, and a selection of London-based Cuban and foreign musicians on other instruments (David Pattman, Sambroso Noda, Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés, Vince Vella, Kishon Khan and Jimmy Martinez).

As the evening moved between more rumba and jazz fusions, dancer Lazaro López spontaneously joined audiences in front of the stage to dance guaguancó. Two British girls sipping mojitos started dancing through spontaneous improvisation and were trying to mimic rather than respond to the *vacunao* (hip thrusts) which López was attempting on them. The

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<sup>92</sup> Available to view at <https://www.facebook.com/snezhina.gulubova/videos/10159298881285624>.

<sup>93</sup> Available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzoAZ3pqbuc>.

girls were not too bothered to understand the exact steps but more focused on enjoying the music through their own interpretations of how to dance to it. The event was sold out and besides me and a couple of other visitors aware of the world of Cuban music in London, attendees were entirely comprised of Jazz Café's own audiences of various ages and nationalities, moving to the rhythms of rumba.

“I have never seen young people in Europe enjoying rumba and dancing to it so freely. It is very different to Copenhagen where non-Cuban audiences are usually seated and only listen to rumba”, shared Eliel Lazo (int., for biographical date see p.260). He felt there was a Cuban vibe in London as rumba was immediately interpreted through dance like it is in Havana. Even a London-based musician such as David Pattman was surprised when he saw the audience which attended the event, having expected to see the usual salseros or Cuban music students, and their response to the event. Rumba nights were difficult to market as it was not a popular genre amongst salseros. A rumba event sold better when there was an Afro-Cuban dance class before it, which gave salsa dancers the opportunity to learn Afro-Cuban moves, which they could incorporate in the improvised solo sections of their salsa dances. Rumba events included live rumba music, most often performed by Gerardo y Su Rumbache; however, the recorded music played by DJ La Máquina de Cuba was timba, which gave salseros a reason to attend. The audience at Jazz Café that evening was different, dancing spontaneously to music they knew little about in ways unique to how their own bodies interpreted the sound. “Of course, they would dance”, said De Armas Sarria, “rumba is for everyone. It might have come from the *solares* and streets of Havana and Matanzas, but now it is everywhere, in concert halls, jazz clubs and other venues. And people cannot help it, they have to dance to it when they hear it”.

It was not only rumba that had taken off from Havana and come to London. Orisha musical and religious practices had also set foot in the UK with the growing diaspora. It was a warm October Saturday in 2019 and we were celebrating the day of the Orisha Orula, the

master diviner of Santería and a patron Orisha of all *babalaos*. As we entered Pablo's house, a *babalao* in North London, we swiftly joined the cleansing ceremony which he was performing in his garden, ridding participants of bad energies. We then moved to the sitting room where we asked for blessings by making offerings of wine, rum, coconuts, or cash at Orula's altar built specifically for the celebration. Pablo was dressed in the traditional attire of a *babalao*, later changing into white clothes typical for Santería celebrations.

Cubans and foreigners kept joining the *güiro* throughout the evening, many dressed in white and some wearing the symbols of new initiates into the religion.<sup>94</sup> Pablo was educating everyone, whether they were a Cuban or a foreigner, initiated or unfamiliar with the religion, on the protocol of the ceremony, including several African guests who wholeheartedly joined in the celebrations. Pablo's wife and one of his goddaughters danced to the songs played for their crowned Orishas, entering brief states of trance, though without the full possession by the Orisha that usually happens at such events in Cuba. Dancers were prostrating themselves in front of or touching their forehead to the head of the conga while it was played, paying their respect to the spirit of the drums and the celebratory music in praise of the different Orishas. The traditions and customs of the spiritual and religious gatherings in Cuba had also infiltrated London. Everyone was dancing and singing regardless of their age, nationality, ethnicity, gender, whether they knew the lyrics of the chants or were learning them as the song went on. London-based Afro-Cuban dance teacher Luanda Pau and her father Domingo Pau, one of the original dancers of Cuba's National Folkloric Company and on a visit to London at the time, also joined the celebration. The atmosphere of the gathering transported the participants to the *güiros* and *bembés* of Havana. The music, singing, dancing, energy, drink, food, and

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<sup>94</sup> *Güiros* and *bembés* are the most common ceremonies to worship the Orishas in the Santería religion. *Güiro* ceremonies usually feature one or two drums, one of which leads and is responsible for working with the dancer, and three or four shekeres as the main instruments. *Bembés* are played on three or four drums.

constant inflow of guests immersing themselves in the celebration. Sound and spiritual experiences had relocated us to Havana.

Nevertheless, I was in London surrounded by a group of people from various countries of origin, professions, social and ethnic backgrounds. I could not help but notice the passion with which African guests were participating in the dancing and were learning from Pablo about the protocols of what came to Cuba as an African religion. The roots of the tradition are from West Africa, having relocated to the Caribbean through slavery, being partially transformed through syncretisation with Catholicism, having come to London through the recent increased number of Cuban migrants to the UK, to meet recipients from its original homeland of what is present-day Nigeria, Benin, and Congo. These trajectories of displaced and multifaceted cultural, religious, and musical movements across three continents now form significant parts of a globalised diaspora, adding further aspects to Gilroy's understanding of the Black Atlantic (1993) and to López's study of Afro-Cuban diaspora cultures in the Americas (2012). The African diaspora in London was experiencing the displaced memory, movement, and syncretisation of its own culture through its development in Cuba and a subsequent London-adapted practice resulting from a new route of migration from Cuba to the UK

The performers included Gerardo De Armas Sarria and Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés alternating between conga and shekere, and three of Gerardo's students on campana, catá and backing vocals (an Italian lady called Federica, a British-Indian lady called Thulsi and I). Gerardo De Armas Sarria and I are full initiates into Santería (have been crowned with our guardian Orisha), and Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés has the identification initiations (his guardian Orisha has been identified by the hand of Orula), and Federica studied the tradition in Cuba. In contrast, Thulsi has limited knowledge and experience of the underpinning principles and practices of Santería and little interest in religious practices in general, even

though she is a regular player of Orisha rhythms and attends numerous ceremonies as a percussionist. At another religious event where one of the musicians got possessed by a spirit, she looked more disturbed than interested, sharing that she thought that she left “this madness” when she stopped practicing her native Hinduism.

Dissociation of the music from its cultural and religious roots unravels a further relocation of knowledge from the traditional domain of the sacred and exclusive to a broader and less restrictive base of practitioners in terms of gender, ethnicity, or religious interests. The study of Santería music and chants in London is passed on in the traditional oral manner, creating a community of practitioners and participants purely based on music and experiencing the essence of Afro-Cuban culture. While dancing Orishas is viewed as sensual, beautiful and is of great interest to Londoners, the rationale behind learning it is often to supplement solos in salsa dancing rather than as an interest in the religion, its roots or spirituality. There is an underlying tension in London’s Cuban scene between an interest in the sound and movements of Afro-Cuban sacred music and a disinterest in the religious and spiritual practices from which the music and dance emerged and to which they belong.

Later in the evening Pablo took me to a room in his house purely dedicated to his work as *babalao*. It had a richly decorated altar for all the Orishas, in the same manner *babalaos* and *santeros* in Cuba have in their homes. Unlike Cubans on the island, however, most Londoners would use any space they have in their homes for storage, living or to rent out. Pablo had sacrificed a certain degree of income or comfort for his spiritual pursuits and work as *babalao*, building a community based solely on shared spiritual and religious pursuits regardless of the nationality, ethnicity, or any other denominations of the participants. As I am a daughter of the Orisha Ochún, he further requested me to say a prayer for myself and for his family to ensure the saint always brings sweetness and prosperity to his home. His teenage son who was sceptical of the religion, calling it “a mambo-jumbo” and closing his ears to the sound of



percussion and singing, was surprised to see the white girl entering the religious room. Pablo shared that he cannot impose his faith on his son, but he would always maintain the purity of his roots, even though he argued, “Santería is the roots of us all”. For the *babalao*, belonging was not based on ethnicity or nationality but purely on faith.

There are a few Cubans and foreigners in London who have dedicated spaces to their Santería altars in their homes, including Daniel Rosselson De Armas, Nelson Batista, and others who would like to remain anonymous. Like other migrant communities such as the Indian diaspora in London, Cubans are also bringing their most native religion to their new homes. While Hindu temples of any persuasion are built in public spaces, Santería, which does not have temples, is guarded in the personal cultural domains of the practitioners. Each follower has their own Orishas, which embody the unique characteristics of their own experience with Afro-Cuban culture, religion, music, and dance. As Chinese-British Miami-based anthropologist Martin Tsang points out, there are many Ochúns and the Ochún of each practitioner is different and unique in her qualities (2019). The *sopera* (soup tureen where the Orisha lives) has an informing spirit, constructed through the individual journey of the practitioner, and the altar at each house embodies the history, blood, and spiritual ancestry of the individual. By entering the home and alters of *santeros*, we partake in their spiritual and personal journey. Cuban ancestry lives on through the physical space of the altar, the physical representations of the Orishas in their *soperas*, the sounds chanted in their praise, and the bodily movements of multicultural musicians and dancers.

The two communities, one based on spirituality and the other on cultural interests, intersected and interacted through singing, dancing, and participation in the religious rites in celebration of Orula, establishing new forms of transculturation. In this physical and immaterial space where cultures were merging and converging, Pablo persevered in his mission as a *babalao* to uphold and guide into the principles of Santería, and Gerardo in his dedication as a

ceremonial musician to bring the spirit of the Orishas to life through music. The celebration revealed the complex intertwined nature of the global and the local in the Afro-Cuban music and dance community in London. This was not a culture of circulation such as that created by the global salsa circuits (Menet 2020), nor the distinctive feature of capital cities which “have been instrumental not only in imagining their own collective identities, but also in imagining the community of the nation” (King 2007: 10). It was part of the formation of a communal identity based on Afro-Cuban sound, movement, and religious practices where the global experience of the local culture are complementary and interlocking categories.

Like Cuban music in general, Afro-Cuban music, dance and spirituality in London are undergoing an inner transformation of their structure because of their practice, performance and consumption by Cubans and foreigners in London. Hosokawa discusses how outside the Latin community salsa rhythms are expected to be less participatory; “no longer a stream of sound that triggers spontaneous bodily response” (1999: 512). The same assumption cannot be made about Afro-Cuban music in the UK: that outside the Cuban and Santería communities, the music should not evoke spontaneous bodily and emotional responses expressed through dancing and singing. The music and dance at Pablo’s house, Jazz Café, Roundhouse (where other rumba events were held) and other religious gatherings I attended all evoked participation through movement, singing or even experimentation in playing percussion. The gathering at Pablo’s and other religious ceremonies I attended in London started with their focus on the Orisha and closed with a rumba to which everyone was also dancing passionately whether they had training in it or not. The appropriation and consumption of Afro-Cuban music and dance has become largely a matter of entertainment rather than the belonging to and participation in a religious culture. The change in the production and consumption of Afro-Cuban folklore in London stems from a lack of an understanding of or an interest in the underlying history and religious or spiritual roots, leading to a certain disconnect between the practice and the culture.

This distancing of Afro-Cuban music and culture from its roots is also partly due to its transmission practices. In Cuba the primary method of transmission of rumba and Orishas is through oral teaching, listening and observation within the community (Baker 2011b). Gerardo's own experience was of spending time with rumberos and helping them with chores in his barrio Parragah until one would concede to write down the lyrics of a song for him and then return numerous times to teach him the tune. There were no recording devices or smart phones for him to record the performances of rumba masters and learn it by himself as he was studying the traditions during the 1980s. Instead, he had to hang around in their houses, spend time helping musicians with their work, and offer bottles of rum and tobacco until one would offer Gerardo some help with a song. New York-based Cuban percussionist and vocalist Pedrito Martínez learnt percussion on the streets of Havana and through participation in the Lucumí religion. He shares that his own initiation as a *babalao* was to access Afro-Cuban music and rhythms (Schweitzer 2013). Spirituality became the means to learn the music, the chants, and the dances, and subsequently became his lifepath alongside music.

Afro-Cuban folklore is taught in London through organised group or private music and dance classes. While teachers explain the history behind sound and movement, there is no necessity to have an interest or participate in the religious practices. Transmission remains oral, however, supplemented through recording and notation when required. Teachers such as Victoria Jasey adapt their methodology to suit students who have no experience of Afro-Cuban music nor have visited the country. The purpose behind the Lucumí Choir, founded and directed by Daniela Rosselson, is to create a community through sharing music, regardless of the actual musical expertise of the participants. While maintaining the roots of Afro-Cuban culture as community based, Rosselson often adapts her teaching to ensure participants understand the complexities of folkloric singing. Culture-bearers such as Gerardo De Armas are stricter in their teaching methodology and strive to transmit performance styles in their

traditional forms, which are often not even performed in Cuba in the same ways anymore. Having learnt to play and sing *yambú* from him, I often get percussionists in Havana laughing at how old-fashioned my style is. This diasporic practice can be found in other communities, where genres get performed in more traditional forms than in the homeland (Ramnarine 2007).

As transmission has changed, the performance of Afro-Cuban folklore is also changing. The less strict foreign practitioners of Santería at times invite foreign and uninitiated female percussionists to play batá or other percussion to the Orisha at ceremonies, which is strictly forbidden by the religious canon in Cuba. Pablo in his role as a *babalao* maintains the purity of practice and tradition amongst his godchildren. The memories of Cuba are still fresh in his mind practice as a first generation of immigrant to the UK, helping him create a multi-ethnic community based on spiritual and cultural association.

There is a rumba and Orishas sound of London associated with musical and religious communities, one less consumed than timba but based on live performances and cultural exchanges, also often encouraging aspirants to travel to the island in search of deepening their knowledge. This Orisha sound is often adapted to the London environment, which can often mean less instruments due to less musicians participating (e.g., one shekere at the güiro instead of the usual three), less interplay between the different conga drums<sup>95</sup> due to lack of enough experienced musicians or between batá players due to lack of enough sworn sacred players. Even when performed rhythmically and melodically in line with traditions from the island, the Orisha sound of London can often lack the devotional aspect due to the disconnect between the performer and the original cultural – religious context of the performance.

On the other hand, through the work of Coro de Clave and the Lucumí Choir, the rumba and Orishas sounds of London embody the social values of participation, connected to the

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<sup>95</sup> The conga set of drums consists of three basic drums – conga (the middle-sized and often referred to as the female drum), tumba (the largest and often referred to as the male drum) and quinto (the smallest of the three drums and primarily used for improvisation in rumba).

socio-cultural context of their performance in Havana. By prioritising participation over musical virtuosity, these projects recreate the social gatherings in Cuba, where everyone is welcomed to join in.

## **Conclusion**

What is the Cuban sound of London? This remains a difficult question to answer due to the various aspects that need to be unpicked. The most consumed sound is that of timba, yet it is also the music least performed live by Cuban musicians in the UK. Calling the various fusions a Cuban sound of London can be contested, as fusion more generally is a sound of London, whether African, electronic, or jazz. There is, however, a growing number of fusions underpinned by Cuban dance, traditional, folkloric, and jazz music, and thus a proliferation of Cuban sounds. There is also an Afro-Cuban sound of London, that of rumba songs and Orisha chants. Even though it is being adapted for consumption in the UK, it maintains Afro-Cuban cultural and religious heritage alive and evolving.

One thing is for certain: whether it takes the form of the physical tourism of dance and music holidays or the more casual consumption of Afro-Cuban folklore or fusions, London's Cuban sound is much more than just the distributed tourism of Putumayo and other "World Music" recording labels, retailing lifestyle to audiences unconsciously listening to music alongside drinking their coffee (Kassabian 2004: 209). There is also versatility in the Cuban sound in London despite the still relatively small community. There is dance music, folklore, classical music, jazz, funk, and various fusions. DJ Philips Cuba plays Cuban hip-hop and reggae on Radio Zeno FM (an underground platform). He also runs his own The Cuban Hip-Hop Radio and The Real Reggae School on MixCloud. It is a growing sound and one becoming even more diverse with the increasing diaspora and cultural exchanges between Havana and

London. While there is a traditional Afro-Cuban sound in London, Afro-Cuban fusions are wider spread and more popular amongst Londoners of various backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The post-2010 period has been characterised by socio-economic changes, which altered Havana's music scene, industry, and profession, necessitating new research on and approaches to Cuban music. With the socio-spatial and economic transformation of Havana during this period, the traditional position occupied by the street as the home of Cuban music and musicians has been complexified. The spiritual, musical, and cultural essence of the street – its *sabor* – remains a key ingredient of Cuban music. However, as a location, the street sees ever fewer actual performances, and it has become more marginal as a place of socialising and the creation of music. The experience of the street and the characteristics it encapsulates in Cuban music take place on a disembodied level, where sounds and lyrics have “street” in them and transform songs into what is considered “good music”. At the same time, the new private music venues and bars of Havana have become the epicentre of social life and where Havana's musicians aim to perform to better their careers and earning potential.

These private venues are characterised by different aesthetics and sound to the music houses, cultural centres, and the few genre-specific state-run venues. The new bars have modern interior design, resembling bars in international locations, and an atmosphere attuned to the sound characterising each venue. The emphasis is not on live music or artistry but on consumption; thus, class becomes the key factor for entry. This financial ability to consume at a bar is demonstrated primarily through dress style, assessed by the security at the door or the serving staff through their decision to give a visitor access to seating or let them stand. As a result, price variations for foreigners and locals have been erased and Cubans and non-Cubans pay the same entry, which differs significantly to the structure of state-run venues. This focus on class has become the most distinguishing factor of Havana's new private venues.

The rationale behind the selection of music repertoire has also changed. Firstly, from an architectural perspective, the stages of many of the new private venues cannot fit a full-size

timba or jazz orchestra, which often prioritises the size of the band above sound when hiring entertainment for the night. Second, from a cost perspective, live music generally costs more than the salary of a DJ for the night, which makes live music less of a priority and the preferred sound to be that of recorded music. Finally, as consumption is prioritised, these venues focus on marketing themselves as entertainment establishments, focusing on ambience and drink selection, where music provides an ethos for the interior décor of the venue (Krimms 2001: 350). This creates new social circuits associated with place as a status indicator, where sound forms part of the interior design of these venues, thus, determining the selection of specific genres, which are considered more aligned with the architecture and branding of the venue. As a result, while remaining outside of state rhetoric on national cultural ideologies, reggaetón, primarily through the playing of recorded music, has become the most popular sound of Havana's new private venues and social scene. It has also become the sound of the capital's changing wealth and class structures.

While reggaetón is the most popular sound of Havana's new social bars, it is not the only sound. Select venues offer, even if not regularly, live music varying from nueva trova to hip-hop. Other places, such as the Public-Private Partnership FAC, has set itself up as the home of "all arts under the same roof", aiming for large-scale "hipness" (Miroff and Voisin 2015). The venue aspired to become an art centre for Cuban and international art, music, cinema, and fashion, comparable to venues in the international hubs of London, Paris, New York, and Berlin, and competing for global recognition. While consumption and dress style continue to be leading factors, FAC offers live music, theatre, and art exhibitions. Its artistic selection includes the most popular bands, performing varied genres, from timba to jazz and hip-hop, primarily in fusion formats. Thus, FAC is characterised by the sound of fusions of various styles, which also form part of its ambiances of modern, eclectic, and alternative interior décor. Through the organisation of professional workshops aiding artists in their career development



and by acting as a centre for social work outside of state-run activities, FAC has positioned itself as more than just an entertainment establishment, but as the place where elements of a civil society are being formed. The venue has also demonstrated that PPP is a feasible model for music and arts initiative in the country.

In addition to the proliferation of private music venues, there has also been an explosion of private recording studios across Havana. These places have filled the gap both in recording spaces, which are limited at the state level and prioritise the most popular artists and specific genres, as well as in alternative sounds. Genres such as rap, reggae, and electronic music are almost exclusively recorded in private studios, while timba continues to be the main genre produced at EGREM and Abdala. Private studios have also given opportunities to up-and-coming artists to record their work. What these spaces lack are promotional capabilities, which remain in the domain of state-run studios, even if poorly executed.

Beyond the socio-economic and cultural changes, which have transformed Havana's music scene during 2010s, this period has also been characterised by the growth of the Cuban immigrant community in London and the formation of a Cuban music and cultural scene, independent of the already established Latin scene. Most migrant communities have specific neighbourhoods, where they live, have cultural centres, shops, temples, and other amenities, which identify the area with the specific community. Due to a lack of geographical concentration in a single or a few boroughs, the Cuban community in London meets and interacts at Cuban music and dance events. Popular music, therefore, forms the nucleus of the Cuban diaspora in London, and the venues where Cuban music is performed or played become the locations of Cubanness, based on sound and movement rather than on any nostalgic notions of a lost homeland.

The changes in the venues where Cuban music is performed in London makes the community more fluid and the scene more fragile. These places of Cuban culture are also

characterised by the participation of a large number of non-Cubans, who are active consumers of Cuban dance music in the UK. Due to the aesthetic choices of these *salseros* interested in listening to the latest dance music produced in Havana, timba musicians in London have, ironically, had to find alternative genres to focus on. Recorded dance music has become the most highly consumed sound of the Cuban social scene, encouraging the growth of the number of visiting bands from Cuba (to perform the popular recorded hits) while marginalising the career prospects of timba musicians based in the UK.

Cuban musicians in London are focusing on different sounds, from Afro-Cuban folklore to classical music, jazz and hip-hop. The most produced sound by Cubans in London is fusion, serving as an expression of the now mixed migrant consciousness of the diaspora. Fusion is also the means to adapt to the cosmopolitan nature of London and the diversity of the city. Fusion projects, whether run by Cubans or ones in which they participate, include band members from various backgrounds and nationalities, creating cross-cultural connections. At the same time, Afro-Cuban genres have been the most popular Cuban sounds underpinning the various fusions of Cuban musicians in London and of the Cuban fusion most consumed in London. Even artists such as Ibeyi – first-generation European-Cubans, raised in Europe, whose music is consumed by diverse listeners in London, many of whom may have little knowledge of the history of the sound being consumed – continue to maintain a strong connection to their cultural heritage through their music, filled with Afro-Cuban rhythms, chants, and instrumentation.

While being the core of various fusions, Afro-Cuban rhythms are also performed in their traditional forms in London. Most live performances accompany dance classes or are played at religious ceremonies; however, rumba events are also taking place at concert halls and bars. Afro-Cuban rhythms and movements also form active part of the curricula of Cuban music and dance classes. Transmission takes place orally with a lot of video recording for

students to take home; however, sound and movement of the Orishas have been largely disassociated from the historical, religious, and spiritual nature of the culture. While aesthetically pleasing to the large number of non-Cuban performers, the religious aspects of the rhythms and dances are often not only ignored but also negated and even at times ridiculed, displacing the roots of the culture from spirituality to entertainment.

In my study of both Havana and London two key themes reappear – growth of the diversity of fusions and valorisation of recorded music. Fusion music in Havana is connected to the new hipness associated with the city’s private venues such as FAC and few modern bars in the central and wealthier boroughs of the capital. Unlike previous fusions, which led to the emergence of genres such as timba, which are closely connected to street culture, these new fusions are connected to the emerging class of eclectic Cubans in a Havana, which is being gentrified. These fusions are also driven by commercial interests of generating wider and more international audiences.

There is also fusion “from below” which has emerged in the eastern part of the island. Bakosó is a fusion between Afro-Cuban rhythms, afrobeat, afro-house and Angolan kuduro and emerged during the 2010s in Santiago de Cuba because of recent arrivals of African medical students to the city. Connected to street rhythms and culture, the genre never took off in Havana as its musical aesthetics are not aligned with the sound and spatial ethos of the city’s private new venues (Rodriguez int.).

Fusion music in London is characterised by different features. Most prominently, fusion in the UK is becoming more Cuban. Being curated by Eliane Correa, the Latin Jazz Fest in London has become heavily characterised by a Cuban sound through the participation of Cuban musicians. As I am submitting my thesis today on the 9<sup>th</sup> March 2022, Latin Jazz Fest’s host venue Pizza Express Jazz Club, has an event called “Los de Londres” (“The Ones from London”). The night brings together Cuban musicians who live in London to interpret jazz

classics through Cuban sound. The recently established 18-piece “New Regency Orchestra” under the musical directorship of Crispin Robinson and co-founded by Andy Wood (“Como No”) fuses Afro-Cuban rhythms with classical jazz sound (Cornwell 2022). It is therefore that London’s jazz scene is becoming characterised by Cuban sound.

London’s popular music sound is also becoming more Cuban through the consumptions of pop and other fusions, produced by artists such Ibeyi, Ariwo and Yelfris Váldez. The fusion project Ariwo and its festival Manana Cuba further act as bridges between the UK and Cuba, maintaining diasporic relationships through musical collaborations between Cubans in London and in Cuba. Fusion has further become a means of expressing what it means to be Cuban and Londoner and provides income opportunities to Cuban artists.

The second theme of recorded music has also different reasonings in Havana and London during the 2010s. Recorded music has been prioritised in Havana due to spatial features and focus on consumerism, transforming music into part of the ambience and emerging class and status aesthetics of the city’s new private venues. Covid19 has also played a significant role in pushing recorded music to the forefront of entertainment choices versus live performances. London’s valuing on recorded timba sound has been driven due to the value salseros put on consuming the latest music produced in Cuba rather than by the Cuban diaspora in London. As music and place constitute each other (Bodenheimer 2016), this preference for recorded music coming from the island has been driven by a connection salseros create between authenticity, place, and music, i.e., timba coming from Havana is authentic and provides an authentic experience of the Cuban social scene versus dance music created in London produced by diaspora musicians. This has given recorded music an elevated status in the Cuban salsa industry in London.

## The 2020s

When I arrived in Havana in November 2020, it felt like the city felt like the city had been put on mute. It was unrecognisable. The spirit of Havana, the sound of music on the streets, the hasslers, the tourists, the chatter, and the *jineteros* were all gone. All the music venues were closed; restaurants were just reopening, but with caution, and making sure they did not attract too much attention. Music was not heard on the streets and Old Havana felt like a ghost town without the tourists, hasslers and Cubans walking around. However, there were a few sanctuaries to be found, such as the recording studio and the internet. Cuban musicians had moved from the street and the bar to digital spaces. As discussed in Chapter 2, the first online festivals organised for and by Cuban artists started taking place in 2020. Musicians focused on personal performances online and more active digital collaborations with artists internationally. Nevertheless, the reduction of income due to loss of work because of the pandemic and the continued expense of internet access, especially for mobile data, restricted the ability of Cuban artists to perform online and of audiences to consume live streaming and music videos. Uploading music on digital sales platforms is also not feasible from the island due to the US embargo, hence Cubans cannot directly upload their music or earn from it on platforms such as iTunes, Apple Music, Amazon Music, and Spotify. Yet, going back to a pre-internet era is unthinkable to Cuban musicians of any genre today. Cuban music's relationship with the internet is just one example of how the country functions somewhere in-between its past and an anticipated future, between socialism and capitalism, isolationism and globalisation, pre-digitalisation and the circuits of global digital culture.

A few small private locations with limited capacity started reopening in November 2020. The main entertainment of these venues was music played by DJs. It was a struggle to find a live performance in Havana, and the only one I managed to attend was at the hidden garden of Espacios on Calle 10 and Fifth Avenue in Miramar, where jazz pianist Harold López-

Nussa was performing in a small format on a Sunday afternoon. The Covid19 pandemic exacerbated the trend which has been characterising Havana's music scene during the 2010s of prioritising recorded music over live performances. The country closed down again in mid-January 2021 and Havana went back on mute for another ten months.

A few months later, with the worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union and a record surge in Covid19 infections, major protests took place across the country on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021. From Havana to Santiago de Cuba thousands of protesters took to the streets chanting "freedom" and voicing their anger over shortages of basic goods. While the protests were primarily peaceful, violence erupted in some areas where protesters threw stones, breaking the windows of the new digital MLC currency shops, and rolled over an empty police car in Havana. These protests raised questions about the political future of Cuba. Besides their size, the most significant difference to earlier discontent and protests in Cuba was the presence of social media. Viewers abroad were aware of what was happening on the island before many in Cuba knew of the events. Cubans managed to share live footage of the protests before the social media blackout and interrupted internet connections started later that Sunday and lasted for five days. The Cuban government also blamed US-sponsored social media campaigns as instigators of the protests. The transformational effects of widening internet access were therefore felt far beyond the sphere of Cuban music. It was the first time that social unrest in Cuba was broadcasted as it was happening, making Cuba feel more connected to the rest of the world technological globalisation.

While the 2020s had been marked principally by silence in Havana, a song played a significant role in the political protests. Only few weeks earlier, the musicians Gente De Zona, Yotuel, Descemer Bueno, Maykel Osorbo y El Funky had released "Patria y Vida" ("Homeland

and Life”).<sup>96</sup> The song’s title became the slogan of protesters in Cuba and around the world demanding political change on the island. This visually impressive song challenges the Cuban government’s detention of rapper and activist Denis Solis and its attacks on the artistic, social, and political San Isidro Movement, founded in 2018. Using strong language, such as the line “se acabó” (“it’s over”), the song created the impression that major change was about to happen. The song won the 2021 Latin Grammy category for Song of the Year and was represented by the US media as “protest rap”, which “united Cubans on the island and abroad” (The Los Angeles Times 2021). US media claimed that winning the Latin Grammy was also a way to ensure that the “se acabó” was coming.

Several more songs critiquing the Cuban political regime followed, as well as musical responses by artists on the island affirming the love of the Cuban people for their political system and the Revolution. The most popular and contested of the responses was the song “Patria o Muerte por la Vida” (“Homeland or Death for Life”) by Raúl Torres, Annie Garcés, Dayana Divo, Karla Monier and Yisi Calibre.<sup>97</sup> Considered to have a poor composition and “awful” lyrics, the song was more ridiculed than supported, alienating both fans of “Patria y Vida” and many that did not like the rap song or agree with its message. The low musical and lyrical standards of the song became the more important topic of discussions rather than the actual political issues it was addressing. A reggaetón piece called “Patria o Muerte, Venceremos,” performed by police forces from MININT (Interior Ministry),<sup>98</sup> came shortly after as a direct response to “Patria y Vida”. It was a striking choice of genre in defence of Cuba and its Revolution, given the state’s longstanding antipathy to reggaetón.

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<sup>96</sup> “Patria y Vida” was first used by Fidel Castro. In the current context it was used as a contrast to the revolutionary slogan of “Patria o Muerte” (“Homeland or Death”). Song available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP9Bto5IOEQ>.

<sup>97</sup> Song is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xu4Huw3i-IE>

<sup>98</sup> Song is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuy1pE8HY6E>

Despite continuing polemic and artistic expressions, primarily from outside Cuba, the events were short-lived; no further protests or action took place on the island. On the contrary, the Cuban state doubled down on its tough line on political protest. Six months later, *no se ha acabado* [it is not over]. Living in Havana, I also did not feel the same euphoria about the Latin Grammy award of “Patria y Vida”, nor much respect for the artists behind it, as presented by the international press. Living through the difficulties of an economic crisis and hyperinflation, Cubans at home seemed less enthusiastic about the growing popularity and earnings of artists abroad exploiting the conflict their island-based compatriots were living through. This was a position I could sympathise with.

While political change is not visibly underway and remains more of an aspiration shared through artistic expressions, economic change continues to impact the island. With tourism reduced by 97 per cent compared to the pre-pandemic period, a drop in imports and in the flow of foreign currency to Cuba, and inflation rates of over 700 per cent for 2021, the Cuban economic system appears on the verge of collapse. In an attempt to mitigate these effects, the government continues to introduce further economic liberalisation, including more than quadrupling the sectors which allow for self-employment, reducing requirements for foreign direct investments, and making further allowances for private property ownership. Cuba is deepening the characteristics of *SocCap201* while still maintaining the political framework of its 1959 Revolution.

A result, the second half of 2021 saw an increase of authorised private activities from 127 to 2,000, leading to further proliferation of entertainment venues across Havana, despite the simultaneous deepening economic crisis (BBC 2021). When I started my research in 2015, I could name almost all the private venues in Havana. Now it has become an impossible task to keep an up-to-date list, because of the number of new bars opening (and some closing down as well). While their number is making it more challenging to trace the locations of all these



new establishments, bars continue to proliferate in the various barrios across the capital. There is still a higher concentration in the familiar, more exclusive areas of Vedado, Miramar, Playa and Old Havana, but neighbourhoods such as Central Havana and Marianao are seeing a significant number of new bars opening. Musicians are becoming keener to find work in these private bars and looking for ways to enter the live music circuit. Even rappers are getting more opportunities than previously to perform at these new venues, often as part of a programme alongside artists from another genre, most often jazz or fusion musicians.

Inflation has also made Havana's music and entertainment scene even more actively focused on income. Rap artists are not interested in having too many events if they do not get significant remuneration, which is generally lacking. With the reduction of music and dance tourism, timba musicians are more interested in organising international tours rather than focusing on local performances. I have not been able to see Los Van Van or Pupy y Los Que Son, Son live in Havana in the past two years; my colleagues in London will see them before me. Previously disadvantaged by the small number of venues dedicated to the genre, jazz musicians are also emphasizing international tours and collaborations on their agendas.

At the same time, while entrance to a rap performance by a popular artist at the Cuban Rap Agency costs 50MN per person, to see a jazz performer in one of Havana's private bars is usually around 250MN, including a cocktail, while venues which host popular reggaetoneros such as Kimiko y Yordi charge up to 24,000MN for being seated at a table.<sup>99</sup> This popularity of reggaetón and its ability to attract audiences which consume and spend have made it a popular choice for bar entrepreneurs, and even a venue such as Bar Sarao, which used to hold live music by artists such as Leoni Torres, Kelvis Ochoa and Alain Pérez, has reincarnated as a reggaetón temple called Bar IluXion, hosting Kimiko y Yordy live. These changes make

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<sup>99</sup> The price includes two bottles of spirits and four energy drinks called Tigon (produced by the Indian Tata Group multinational company).

reggaetón ever more vividly the sound of the private new venues and emerging class structures of sociocapitalist Havana.

The entrepreneurialism and the proliferation of private music and entertainment venues which started characterising Havana in the early 2010s and has been transforming the socio-spatial structures of the city's music scene continue to do so in the early 2020s. Cuban music and culture are becoming ever more about the *representation* of the street as a socio-cultural space and less about being physically present on the streets and in the *solares*. Desire for career growth and economic pursuits is driving musicians from many genres to seek work opportunities at the new private bars of Havana and international locations. At the same time, the streets of Havana are transforming physically with the renovation of touristic areas and the construction of new five-star hotels. The new private venues of Havana are becoming more and more popular even as the population is getting poorer due to inflation and the economic difficulties caused by the Covid19 pandemic.

These new circuits of private music venues are posing further challenges and questions about the functioning of the musical profession and Havana's music industry. It still operates through the music agencies, which require significant restructuring of their outdated bureaucratic organisational structures, which no longer serve the needs of Havana's musical entrepreneurs. New government policies allow for independent music management and promotional activities; however, to have a formal contract for work, the agencies act as an intermediary. While Havana's new private venues often pay in cash, performances at concert halls and state venues and international tours continue to necessitate the music agencies as an intermediary. Moreover, musicians continue to rely on the socialist backbone of the music agencies which support them through times of difficulties by paying them a regular income, as has been the case during the Covid19 pandemic. These factors are deepening their "in-

between” existence: musicians aspire to capitalist ideals while continuing to be reliant on the Cuban socialist support network.

Simultaneously, musical entrepreneurialism on an individual level has grown. Musicians have become more active in searching for performance and recording opportunities, and in changing genres because of financial needs. “There is very little consumption of hip-hop by audiences in Cuba compared to dance music and even to jazz”, says *Pasión Oscura* singer Javier “El Pana”; “of course, the government will focus on the promotion of timba. It is also why we are making new music, including more salsa, timba, funk, pop, and jazz fusions. Music is music but I am also an entrepreneur”. Artists are often searching to diversify their sound to cater to a larger market at home or abroad. Beyond sound, El Pana feels it is also important to sing in English to give something new to Cuban audiences and to appeal to international consumers as well. Musicians are looking to enter new collaborations, especially with international artists and labels, and to get endorsements by international brands of music instruments and accessories.

While the Covid19 pandemic had stopped international tours of Cuban bands and diaspora musicians returning to perform or record on the island, as soon as there were flights available and live music places were open, musicians were back on the route into and out of Havana. Cultural holidays to Cuba are also coming back, even if still with less frequency than pre-Covid, as Londoners are keen to dance and play music with their groups in Havana. Digital interactions supported the scene and kept connections between participants on both sides active.

The pandemic also made the Cuban salsa dancers in London even keener to get back to dancing and immersing themselves in the sound of timba by their favourite bands. Since the relaxation of Covid19 restrictions in 2021, *Juju’s*, *Salsa Fusion*, and *Bar Temple* have filled up again with dancers enjoying the selection made by DJs. Salsa festivals and events at other

locations have also been reviving. A new venue, Bar La Rampa, opened during the pandemic, offering another Cuban experience and regular work to Cuban music bands in London. The Cuban music scene of London associated with the salsa dance industry remains strong and active in terms of the consumption of Cuban dance music, while still limited when it comes to the live performance of the music by London-based musicians.

While the Cuban cultural scene of London continues to grow and is becoming more defined and engaged than before, it remains fragile and dependent on the work of a few key participants. Erratic consumption habits and fluid places of performance and consumption add further challenges to its commercial viability. This raises questions about the sustainability of the scene and about its growth potential. Considering the music itself, will Cuban culture in London be assimilated and characterised mainly by fusion, or will it retain space for its musical, dance and cultural traditions?

## **Further Research**

These developments are raising new questions about Havana's music scene and industry and scholarship on Cuban music and music in transitory societies. If reggaetón is the new sound of socio-capitalist Havana, how will this impact the development of other genres? (This is a question that has exercised Cuban musicologists and cultural officials for many years now, but it is becoming ever more pressing.) How will it also affect the role of Cuban music and culture as a tool of soft diplomacy with other countries, for instance, its old friend and foe the United States? With the growth of cash payments to musicians in the private new venues, how will the role of music agencies evolve in the coming years? Will they withstand the forces of capitalism, which is growing deeper roots in the music industry? If class is becoming a key factor in Havana's music scene, what is happening at the level of race – a key issue in

scholarship on Cuban music during the twentieth century? What are the changes in the relationship between music and gender in Havana's new music scene?

The new entrepreneurialism of Havana and the growth of genres such as reggaetón, trap and morph are the key reasons why authors such as Joaquín Borges-Triana argue that the music scene of the 2010s has put emphasis more heavily on commercialising its sound, structure, and places, and less on musical and creative innovation (int.). There has been greater focus on producing and performing music because of its economic potential. Nevertheless, alternative, and versatile sounds continue to emerge from Cuba and existing popular genres continue to undergo changes.

With the de-marginalisation of rumba and Orishas and the recognition of rumba as immaterial human heritage by UNESCO in 2018, there has been a new search for identity through Cuba's African roots.<sup>100</sup> In my conversation with Mayito Rivera he told me it was very important to him to practice Orisha chants and that he often sang cantos to the Orisha Chango, because this enriched his creativity when composing timba songs and lyrics (int.). Each Orisha has several songs (composed of vocals and percussion) dedicated to them and these rhythms now form part of popular music, which is why Rivera refers to his own incorporation of religious rhythms and lyrics into his timba. Other musicians besides Rivera are using Lucumí chants and Congo words in non-religious songs and in popular genres such as timba.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> In the current period the display of socio-cultural symbols of AfroCubanness has become exuberant and sought after, and AfroCuban fusions of any genre have become the musical fashion like the city of Havana itself (Borges-Triana int.). Blackness has been commercialised to sell cultural (music, dance) or physical (sports) skill while racism persists within society. Africa is viewed as the cultural mother and creative inspiration yet neither the homeland a Cuban yearns to return to (Marín Maning int.), nor an inspiration of what is really *yuma* [Two possible origins of the popular Cuban term *yuma* are proposed. Often it is believed to derive from the 1957 US western *3:10 To Yuma*, which had received enough recognition in Cuba to come to denote the USA as a country. The second theory proposes that *Yuma* is a mispronunciation of "US man". The original referent of the term is the US Now it also used as a reference to US citizens and most recently to all foreigners from what are perceived as the developed countries of North America and Western Europe (Ryer 2017: 277-278). Being *yuma* signifies that a foreigner comes from a country, which is an aspiration to Cubans to visit or live in, seen as economically developed and politically powerful.] Musical and cultural blackening has become desirable as a sociocapitalist marketing and economic tool even if racial stereotyping and colourisation persist within Cuban society. Perna (2011) points out to the discrepancies of the use of the term *música afrocubana* and the musics it refers to, raising broader issues about black diaspora and African heritage.

<sup>101</sup> For residual Congo vocabulary in Cuba see Díaz Fabelo (1997) and Schwegler and Rojas-Primus (2010).

Religious symbolisms recreating ceremonies or stories have become more common in timba, rap, or fusion songs. There are new folklore-inspired fusions in genres such as hip-hop, which prior to 2010 had moved away from an Afro-Cuban identity to a more Cuban one under the influence of Los Aldeanos (e.g., a study of the album *Fuerza Arará* by Telmary Díaz and the song “Yaokende” by Gallo Miranda).<sup>102</sup>

Rapper, songwriter and beatmaker Lando Lavarra (for biographical notes see p.269) fuses trap with Afro-Cuban folklore having created his own style of music called *changotrap*. Songs such as “Batallando” (“Fighting/ Struggling”, 2019),<sup>103</sup> the 2022 release “Canto Negro” (“Black Song”, which won prizes at several international festivals),<sup>104</sup> and the upcoming 2023 song “Corre Yaya” (“Bloodletting”)<sup>105</sup>, are composed through the symbiosis of trap and drill with Afro-Cuban rhythms such as rumba, bembé and conga. The interconnectedness of the key elements of a DJ, sampling machine, lead singer, and Afro-Cuban percussion where folklore constitutes a key ingredient of the music rather than act as ornamentation (as often used in fusion) require the study of *changotrap* as a potential new genre (sub-genre) emerging on the streets of Havana. Watching the flow of Lavarra dancing the religious dance of the Orisha Chango simultaneously to rapping on pressing social issues and daily life in Cuba, makes it difficult to imagine his music without either of its rhythmic and sound elements.

Other Afro-inspired fusions have evolved to firm the genre bakosó. These new fusions and forms of expressions of Cuba’s African roots and heritage necessitate further study to offer

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<sup>102</sup> The 2018 album by Telmary Díaz, *Fuerza Arará*, fuses hip-hop, folklore and afrobeat and praises to musical potency of the *tambores arará*, the overall power of drums, the importance of the six-eighth rhythms, and the strong impact of African musics on Cuban music and culture (Cuní 2018). *Arará* is a minority group in Cuba based primarily in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas. Its origin can be traced in the Dahomey region of what is present-day Benin. *Arará* music is characterised by specific percussive styles, including drumming, hand clapping and body percussion (Ortiz). Instruments include *ogan* (an iron bell), *guataca* (hoe blade), *cachimbo* (smallest drum, highest pitch), *mula* (medium drum), and *caja* (largest drum, lowest pitch). The lead is played with a stick and a hand, while the others are played with pairs of sticks by seated players.

<sup>103</sup> Song available to view at <https://youtu.be/bm1gSzbDJ24> [retrieved Oct. 2022]

<sup>104</sup> Song available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNMVVMaUSH0>.

<sup>105</sup> The title refers to the removal of blood for medical treatment. Lavarra explains that by letting the blood run/ bleed out, the poison which has entered the body will leave it and not reach the bones (pers. comm.) The song will form part of Lavarra’s upcoming album under the patronage of EGREM.

a deeper understanding of changes in racial discourse on the island. While I addressed the music community in Havana and the venues associated with it as establishing the inklings of a new form of civil society in Cuba, independent from state structures, other authors have looked at the role of Afro-Cuban cultural and artistic production in the formation of a Cuban civil society (Kocur 2013: 229). How is racial inequality addressed through music and in Havana's music industry? How might we interpret the ebb and flow of racial discourse in the city's music scenes? What is the role of race in the construction of Havana's new civil society?

Another topic that is ripe for further exploration is the potential of culture as soft power in Cuba's relationships with the U.S and Europe during 2010s. As soon as President Obama took on his position, Cuban singer Carlos Varela visited Washington D.C. to lobby legislators and White House officials to normalize diplomatic relations (Sehgal 2015). "Music is not going to move governments," he explained, "But it might move people. And people can move governments." Arturo O'Farrill (for biographical notes see p.252) has been traveling to Cuba since the early 1990s and has been urging Americans to contact their respective Congressmen and "tell them to lift the embargo...It's time the politicians catch up with the musicians." The jazz musician started the making of the album *Cuba: The Conversation Continues in December 2014* in Havana as soon as he saw Obama's policies of détente between the US and Cuba enacted. Subsequently, UNESCO and the Thelonious Monk Institute hosted for the first time the International Jazz Day in Cuba in 2017. Has musical and cultural diplomacy worked? Where has it succeeded and where has it failed? Jazz singer Daymé Arocena argues that music is the key factor which will improve relations between Cuba and the US, yet the current state of diplomacy (or lack thereof) between the administration of Presidents Joseph Biden and Miguel Díaz-Canel leaves a lot to be desired. This is an important topic of research, as any proof that cultural diplomacy works could potentially help lessen the harsh impact of what has been a long and persevering conflict between the two nations as well

as provide ideas for new connections between Cuba and the UK or other locations around the world.

A doctoral thesis is by no mean sufficient to outline all the complexities and richness of what has been taking place in Havana and in the Cuban music scene in London during the Obama era and in the subsequent period. The purpose of my work has been to bring to the surface significant changes and uncover contradictions in space and sound since the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century. I have further aimed to identify the places and sounds which characterise this period of socio-economic transition in Cuba, necessitating a new study on the mechanics of Havana's music scene and its connections to London. However, as I bring this research to an end, Havana's music scene is once again in flux, with the impact of Covid and political unrest yet to be clear. I look at videos of salseros dancing to timba at Juju's on Facebook, and London looks more like Havana than Havana does in the current period. With so many unknowns in the social, political, and economic spheres, it may be that the post-2010 phase of music scholarship is also coming to an end and a new chapter of Cuban music research is just beginning.



## Appendix 1: List of Artists

**Adalberto Álvarez:** Adalberto Cecilio Álvarez Zayas was born in 1948 in Camagüey and died in 2021. He was a Cuban pianist, musical director, arranger, and composer. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Álvarez attended the National School of Arts in Havana and also served as professor of Musical Literature at the Provincial School of Art of Camagüey during the 1970s. He started the Cuban band Son 14 in the 1970s and dissolved it a decade later. In 1984, Álvarez founded Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son, which he directed until his death after contracting COVID-19. The genre of his music is son, a style of music that originated in the eastern part of Cuba. He was also deputy to the National Assembly of People's Power between 2013 and 2018 and was elected from Camagüey municipality. In 2008, he was awarded National Music Award. He also received several distinctions which include Distinction for National Culture, Félix Varela Order and the Cubadisco Award several times.

**Notes:** The first concert I saw in Havana in 2015 was by Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son at *Casa de la Musica* in Central Havana. I spoken briefly to a couple of the band members. Subsequently, I have conversed informally in detail in 2019 with the bands two pianist Dhayan Rivera and Álvarez's daughter Diorgelis Álvarez (during the recording of Maichel Blanco's album which was produced by Dhayan Rivera and Diorgelis Álvarez attended socially).

**Adonis y Osain del Monte:** An Afro-Cuban founded in 2012 by percussionist Adonis "Panter" Calderón (long-time musical director of Yoruba Andabo), joined by vocalist Rubén Bulnes, Adonis y Osain del Monte is currently one of the most popular folkloric groups, stretching the limits of traditional performance. The group took on the main stages of Havana and across performing Orishas, palo, abakuá, and rumba, with spectators which included foreign legends

such as Madonna and the Rolling Stones. The group collaborated on albums produced by leading dance music groups such Habana D'Primera, Los Van Van, El Niño y la Verdad, Elio Revé. The band released two albums – “Pa'l Monte” (2017) and “Sin Comentarios” (2021).

**Notes:** I have taken part in various recordings by Adonis y Osain del Monte where I have had a specific support function, including managing administrative tasks or taking short promotional videos and photography (links to some in bibliography). I have seen the band perform on several occasions in Havana, had numerous informal conversations with Adonis Calderón and Rubén Bulnes, have attended neighbourhood religious ceremonies where Bulnes sings and have seen Calderón perform with other projects in London.

**Alain Pérez:** Pérez is a Cuban singer, composer, producer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist (bass, guitar, piano, percussion, saxophone), associated with jazz, timba, and fusion music. He was born in Trinidad, Cuba in 1977 and grew up listening to *guajira* (Cuban country folk music) and *son* (Afro-Cuban popular dance music). In 1996 he graduated in electric and classical guitar, and orchestra conducting from the National Art School (la ENA). While still at school, Pérez began to play with iconic Latin (Afro-Cuban) jazz band Chucho Valdés y Irakere in 1995. Subsequently, he played with other legendary Cuban groups such as Los Van Van, Issac Delgado, Paquito de Rivera, Celia Cruz, and Javier Masó Caramelo. In 1998, he moved to Spain. In 2002 he participated in the Project “Africa – Cuba – Cai”, a meeting of flamenco, Cuban music, and Senegalese rhythms, following which Pérez’s base sound was influenced by flamenco styles such as *bulería*. Subsequently, it was his collaboration as base player of flamenco guitar legend Paco de Lucía which got Pérez global recognition. His other collaborations in Spain include with Enrique Morente, Diego El Cigala, and Niño Joséle.

**Note:** I have attended and worked at numerous recordings and live performances by Alain Pérez or where he was involved, listened to various formal interviews he has given and followed up with specific questions via informal discussions and conversations.

**Alejandro García Catúrla:** Alejandro García Catúrla was born in 1906 in Remedios, Villa Clara, and was a multi-instrumentalist and composer of contemporary music of his period. He began composing at the age of fifteen, while studying music and law, and in 1922 he started playing among the second violins of the new Havana Symphony Orchestra, in which Amadeo Roldán was concertmaster. From 1925 to 1927 he continued his musical studies in Paris, as a student of Nadia Boulanger. At the end of his days as a student, Caturla returned to his hometown, where he began working as a lawyer to support his growing family (he fathered eleven children, whom he recognized and supported). His Three Cuban Dances for Symphony Orchestra premiered in Spain in 1929. *Bembé* premiered that same year in Havana. In 1932 he founded the Caibarién Concert Society, which he would conduct, presenting works by Falla, Ravel and Debussy. His Cuban Overture won a first national in 1938. Caturla is considered, along with Amadeo Roldán, the pioneer of modern Cuban symphonic music. From his youth, Alejandro García Catúrla was interested in Afro-Cuban rhythms, which marked his compositions as he was the first to fuse Afro-Cuban music with symphonic music. He continued his work as a lawyer and later as a judge and was murdered at the young age of 34 in 1940 by a man he was to try that day.

**Notes:** As stories go in the Catúrla family, Alejandro García Catúrla was “incorruptible”, which is why he was shot with a gun by a person he refused to take a bribe from and was going to convict (pers. comm.).

**Arturo O’Farrill:** Arturo O’Farrill was born in 1960 in Mexico City to Cuban jazz trumpeter, arranger and bandleader Chico O’Farrill and Mexican singer Lupe Valero. In 1965 the family moved to New York City. He is a jazz musician, pianist, composer, and director for the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra (ALJO). At the age of six O’Farrill began taking piano lessons, graduating from LaGuardia High School for Music and Art, the Manhattan School of Music, the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College (from which he received the Distinguished Alumnus Medal), and the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College. He is best known for his contributions to contemporary Latin jazz (more specifically Afro-Cuban jazz), having received Grammy Awards and nominations, though he has trained in other forms such as free jazz and experimented briefly with hip-hop. In 1979, O’Farrill was playing in an upstate New York bar when he was noticed by jazz pianist, organist, and composer Carla Bley who recruited him to play with her band in Carnegie Hall. After leaving the Carla Bley Big Band, he found solo work with artists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Howard Johnson, Steve Turre, and Lester Bowie. Subsequently he worked with Harry Belafonte and Andy and Jerry Gonzalez. In December 2010 Arturo O’Farrill travelled to Cuba with his mother, sons, and the Chico O’Farrill Afro Cuban Orchestra to bring his father's music back to the island, headlining the 26th Havana International Jazz Plaza Festival.

**Notes:** I have seen the ALJO perform at the 2019 Havana Jazz Plaza Festival.

**Azúcar Negra:** Azúcar Negra is a timba band established in 1997 when Leonel Limonta, Haila Mompié (no longer with the band; for biographical notes see p.264) and other musicians separated from Bamboleo. All the songs of the group are written by its director Limonta, who has also written for the groups Charanga Habanera and Issac Delgado. Formed by four leading vocalists, the band combines an effective rhythm section and a brass string, with influences of Latin jazz, salsa improvisations and rap. In 2001, after several world tours, they finally released

their first studio album “Andar Andando” (“Walking”). Their second CD, “Sin Mirar Atrás” (“Without Looking Back”) was released in 2004.

**Bamboleo (Lázaro “Lazarito” Valdes Jr.):** Bamboleo is a leading timba group directed by the pianist, composer, and arranger Lázaro Valdes Jr. Lazarito studied at the Alejandro García Catúrla school in the 1970s, from where he left to work with artists such as Pachito Alonso, Bobby Carcasses and Héctor Téllez. In 1995 he created Bamboleo, and the band made its first tour in 1996, promoting its first album, “Te Gusto o Te Caigo” (“You Like Me or You Like Me”). Some of the original singers include timba divas Haila Mompié y Vania Borges. Subsequently, Haila Mompié (singer) and Leonel Limonta (composer) split from Bamboleo in 1998 and became part of Azúcar Negra. Since then, Bamboleo have made several tours, including in the US, Europe, and Japan, and contributed to the Grammy-winning album “Ear-Resistible”, appeared on MTV’s “Road Rules”, and worked with artists such as James Brown, Femi Kuti, and George Benson.

**Notes:** I have seen Bamboleo perform live in London and have spoken informally to several members.

**Buena Fe:** Buena Fe (“Good Will”) is a Cuban pop music band formed in 1999 in the province of Guantánamo by lawyer Israel Rojas Fiel and music student Yoel Martínez Rodríguez. In November 1999 they made their debut with the song “Intimidación” (“Privacy”). As a result, the AHS in Guantánamo invited the duo to join them. In 2001 they moved to Havana to record their first album “Déjame Entrar” (“Let Me In”), joined the agency Musicuba of the label EGREM and adopted a band format. In 2017 the group announced the death of its guitarist Dairon Rodríguez Lobaina, who died at the age of 32 due to a heart attack. The music of Buena Fe has trova influences in all their lyrics, Cuban music, pop and rock.

**Note:** I have seen Buena Fe perform in Havana and interviewed founding member Yoel Martínez Rodríguez.

### **Buena Vista Social Club:**

On the release of the Buena Vista Social Club (BVSC) album in 1997 (released by British label World Circuit), few outside the specialist world music audience initially took much notice of the record. Then the album was spectacularly reviewed by a few discerning critics, and it became one of those rare records that transcended the vagaries of fad and fashion to sound timeless but utterly fresh. BVSC went on to win a Grammy and its crossover success persuaded the acclaimed director Wim Wenders to make an award-winning feature film about the phenomenon. At its peak, BVSC's soundtrack was heard in coffee shops, mojito bars and even department stores and elevators songs and such as Chan Chan, Dos Gardenias and Candela came to accompany daily life. Suddenly, BVSC was not so much a record as a brand, albeit one based on musical quality rather than marketing hype. Today the album's global sales stand at over eight million, making it the biggest-selling Cuban album in history. Veteran musicians assembled in the vintage EGREM studio in Havana in 1996. They were not even a formal group, but a loose collective, spanning several generations and assembled more-or-less spontaneously for the occasion. Indeed, the group that came together was in essence an accident: the original intention had been to make an experimental hybrid record bringing together African and Cuban musicians, but the African musicians failed to turn up because of visa problems. The original idea had been to record not one but two albums. The first was Juan de Marcos González's dream project – an album celebrating the continued vitality of Cuban music's golden age – the 1940's and 1950's. He hand-picked and recruited a multi-generational big band which he called the Afro Cuban All Stars and, in a week, they had recorded their brilliant debut album "A Toda Cuba le Gusta" ("All Of Cuba Likes It"). The following day,

recording of the Mali – Cuba collaboration album was due to start, but as the Africans were unavailable, World Circuit’s Nick Gold, American Producer Ry Cooder and band leader Juan de Marcos were forced to improvise. Following the recordings, the musicians hit the road and extensive tours were undertaken by Rubén González, Ibrahim Ferrer, the Afro Cuban All Stars, Eliades Ochoa, Omara Portuondo and Compay Segundo. The original line up of the BVSC made three triumphant concert appearances: two at Amsterdam’s Carré Theatre and the final legendary show at New York’s Carnegie Hall. The latter was filmed by Wim Wenders as a documentary also named “Buena Vista Social Club”, and the concert recording was released ten years later as “Buena Vista Social Club at Carnegie Hall”. Over the years World Circuit continued to travel to Havana recording acclaimed albums by Ibrahim Ferrer, Omara Portuondo, Rubén González, Cachaíto López, Guajiro Mirabal and Angá Díaz, who had been an integral part of the Afro Cuban All Stars (biographical data from [www.buonavistasocialclub.com](http://www.buonavistasocialclub.com)).

**Notes:** I saw BVSC on their 2016 London tour in the Royal Albert Hall.

**Chucho Valdés:** Jesús Valdés Rodríguez was born in 1941 in Havana. He is a Cuban pianist, bandleader, composer, and arranger whose career spans over 50 years. An original member of the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna, in 1973 he founded the group Irakere. Both his father, Bebo Valdés, and his son, Chuchito, are pianists as well. As a solo artist, he has won seven Grammy Awards. Chucho Valdés's first recorded sessions as a leader took place in late January 1964 in the Areíto Studios of Havana owned by the newly formed EGREM. In 1967, Chucho Valdés and his bandmates became founding members of Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna, together with many other well-known Cuban musicians. This all-star big band would back singers such as Elena Burke and Omara Portuondo. In 1973, Chucho along with other members of the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna founded Irakere, an ensemble that

bridged songo and Afro-Cuban jazz. He would simultaneously continue his solo career, eventually signing with Blue Note Records, which allowed him to get international exposure. Chucho Valdés's father, Bebo, who attained a legendary status as the pianist and director of the Tropicana Club orchestra and Orquesta Sabor de Cuba, fled Cuba in 1960, and did not record music again until the 1990s. In the late 1990s, Chucho Valdés decided to focus on his solo career, and his son Chuchito replaced him as the pianist/director of Irakere. Chucho and Bebo occasionally played together until the latter's death in 2013.

**Notes:** I have seen Chucho Valdés perform in London with Irakere and solo in Havana.

**David Pattman:** David started as a jazz musician playing drums and percussion with Django Bates, Tim Whitehead, Chucho Merchan's Macondo, Loose Tubes, and Dudu Pukwana. He then developed an interest in Latin music which led to being a founder member of British Salsa bands Valdez, El Sonido De Londres, La Clave and Roberto Pla's Latin Ensemble. From 1988-1990 he spent time in the U.S. in New York and Miami, working with Daniel Santos, Orlando Contreras and La Sensacion with El Niño Jesus and Eddie Guagua Rivera. David has backed many artists such as Omara Portuondo and Cachaito from the Buena Vista Social Club, Bebo Valdez, Slim Gailard, Carlos 'Patato' Valdez, Daniel Ponce, Papaito, Henry Fiol, Tito Allen, Adalberto Santiago, Tito Nieves, Maelo Ruiz, Marvin Santiago, Cano Estremera and Jimmy Bosch. He has recorded with Jacob Collier, Paul McCartney, Vic Goddard, Tindersticks, Slim Gailard, Snowboy and Latin Section (eight albums), Alex Wilson (four albums including co-producing "Anglo Cubano" recorded in Cuba), Cubanismo, Alfredo Rodriguez (both also recorded in Cuba), Cheikh Lo, and Afro Cubism. David has been playing Cuban folkloric drumming in both performance and ritual contexts for twenty-five years. He is a sworn ritual batá drummer who has played alongside many of the most respected elders of the tradition.



Over the last ten years, he has dedicated time to sharing his knowledge. He has experience of teaching individually, in groups and at university level.<sup>106</sup>

**Note:** I interviewed David, have seen him perform on several occasions and took a percussion class with him, playing Cuban dance music on congas.

**Daymé Arocena:** Daymé Arocena was born in 1992 in Havana. She started her musical education playing piano, violin, and guitar, until she tried choral conducting, realising that her voice was her instrument of choice, singing jazz and Cuban music. From an early age Daymé joined various children's groups, and in 2010 she joined the jazz fusion quintet Sursum Corda, with which she toured Norway and Nicaragua. Subsequently she created the female-only band Alami. In 2013 she was invited by the Canadian saxophonist Jane Bunnett to join her Maqueque project (in which she continues to collaborate), with which she recorded the album of the same name that won the 2015 Juno award in the category of best jazz album. She was later invited to be part of Havana Cultura Mix, which resulted in “Havana Cultura Mix – The Soundclash!”, an album produced by DJ Gilles Peterson, in which he brought together DJs from all over the world to work together with Cuban musicians. Daymé sang on three tracks, including the hit “U Knew Before” and was added to the catalogue of Peterson’s Brownswood Recordings label. She debuted at the beginning of 2015 with an EP entitled “The Havana Cultura Sessions”, followed by her first solo album, “Nueva Era”, declared as one of the best 50 albums of 2015 by the National Public Radio of US (NPR).

**Notes:** I have seen Daymé perform live in London on two occasions and had informal conversations with her following the event.

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<sup>106</sup> The biography has been taken from the official website of Bombo Productions - <https://www.bomboproductions.com/david-pattman/>

**Dayramir González Vicet:** Dayramir was born in 1983 in Havana and is a pianist, composer, arranger, and musical director of the project Habana enTRANCé, fusing rock, classical music, jazz, and Afro-Cuban folklore. Born in a musical family, he started piano lessons at the age of seven and later graduated from ENA. At the age of 16 he started his professional career, playing and composing for former Irakere member Oscar Valdes' Afro-Cuban jazz ensemble Diákara. After securing first place in Havana's JoJazz festival for two subsequent years in 2004 and 2005, Dayramir won three Cubadisco awards for his 2007 self-titled debut album "Dayramir & Habana enTRANCé". Dayramir became Berklee College of Music's first Cuban national to receive the prestigious "Presidential Scholarship". He has been performing across the world, including with legends such as Chucho Valdes and his father, the late Bebo Valdes, headlining Carnegie Hall, and representing the young generation of Afro-Cuban jazz. Dayramir is a Yamaha-endorsed Afro-Cuban jazz pianist and composer based in the US, currently between Los Angeles and New York City.

**Note:** I interviewed Dayramir in Havana and have had numerous informal conversations with him. I observed part of the recording of his latest album in studio Abdala and translated from Spanish into English the discographic notes. The album is called "Dayramir González: A Tribute to Juan Formell & Los Van Van" and was released in 2022. It includes performances from various popular Cuban artists including percussionist Brenda Navarrete, lute player Barbarito Torres (BVSC), rocker David Blanco, the rap singer Telmary Díaz, as well as the popular singers Alain Pérez, Mandy Cantero, Mayito Rivera, Haila María Mompíe (see p.262), Luna Manzanares, Teresa Yanet, and Arlenys Rodríguez. I was preparing a piano masterclass for Dayramir at Royal Holloway University of London to take place in June 2022 which, however, was cancelled due to the Covid19 pandemic and lockdown.

**Eduardo Sandoval:** Born in 1985 in the neighbourhood of Playa in Havana, Eduardo Jesús Sandoval Ferrer was encouraged by his parents to study music from an early age (his father, Eduardo Sandoval Senior, is a singer). Eduardo continued his studies in the Alejandro García Catúrla Elementary School of Music, the Amadeo Roldán Conservatory and ISA, developing as a trombone player. After completing his academic training, Sandoval performed his Social Service as part of the National Concert Band. As an instrumentalist, he has accompanied the Big Band led by Giraldo Piloto, Sexto Sentido, Bobby Carcassés, Leoni Torres, X Alfonso, the group led by Raúl Paz and Alain Daniel among others. He has also shared the stage with the Big Band of Chico O'Farril (2010), jazz saxophonist Michel Herrera and his Joven Jazz project; and Yasek Manzano and Habana Jazz Collective. Although Sandoval aims not to limit himself, he feels part of the aesthetics of the young jazz movement sees this whole process as an evolution of the legacy of musicians such as Chucho Valdés and Ernán López-Nussa. He considers himself a continuation of what the famous Cuban trombone player Juan Pablo Torres did.

**Notes:** I interviewed, have had numerous conversations, and worked on various projects alongside Eduardo Sandoval. He was one of the key collaborations I had during my fieldwork in Havana, which helped me to understand and meet numerous musicians from the contemporary jazz and popular music scenes. Sandoval was also the reason I was introduced into studio ethnography. I had developed short videos and provided him with numerous photographs from his events and recordings to serve for his promotional activities. I also established the connection and negotiated his acceptance as a recognised artist by British custom trombone maker Michael Rath (having also travelled to the factory in the north of England).

**Eliane Correa:** Eliane Correa was born in 1987 and is a young Argentinian-Cuban and Spanish pianist, musical director and composer, based between London and Havana. She was trained classically at the Luxembourg Conservatoire and went on to study piano and composition at ISA in Havana in 2005, relocating to London in 2007 to study a BA and MA Ethnomusicology at SOAS, University of London. During her early years in London she became known for her work as a bandleader, composer and pianist in her Cuban fusion project Wara, which went on to tour both the UK and internationally, released several records and won three Lukas Awards (Best Latin Alternative Band 2012, 2014 & 2018). Since 2012, she leads two other projects, Eli & La Evolución, a contemporary and timba fusion, and Afro-Cuban jazz/soul ensemble En El Aire, with which she released the album Rumba Con Flores in 2016 (Movimientos Records). Eliane is the session pianist of The World of Hans Zimmer, a large-scale production of the composer's works for a symphonic orchestra format. Her current work also includes curating the London Latin Jazz Festival and as musical director of the West African-inspired interactive show "Do You Speak Djembé" (a.k.a. "DJEMBE! – The Show" in the US). Eliane recently composed and directed the soundtrack for critically acclaimed Argentinian feature documentary "Sombras de Luz" ("Shadows of Light"), premiered internationally in 2018 in Rome, and has taken part in the composition and recording of a range of works for the screen, in Cuba, Argentina and Spain.

**Notes:** I interviewed Eliane, have had numerous informal discussions with her and seen her perform on several occasions in London and Havana.

**Eliel Lazo:** Eliel Williams Lazo Linares was born in 1983 in Havana. He is a Cuban percussionist, songwriter, composer, producer, jazz, rock, Latin and pop musician living in Denmark. He began playing at an early age and studied at Oscar Valdes' school of percussion (former singer and percussionist of Irakere). In 2003 Eliel won the Percuba

International Percussion Prize. In 2004 Lazo recorded his first album Art Ensemble of Habana with Commodo Depots records from Japan. He first visited Denmark in 2004 on an invitation from the Danish Radio Big Band and in 2007 he made Copenhagen his home. He has played with musicians such as Michel Camilo, Chucho Valdes, Changuito, Tata Guines, Herbie Hancock, Bob Mintzer, Oscar Valdes, Carlos del Puerto, Airto Moreira. Eliel has also played with Cuban bands Diakara, Klimax and Habana Ensemble. In 2011 he received the Danish Music Awards (DMA World) for his album “El Conguero” (“The Conga Player”, released by Stunt Records). He collaborated with musicians such as Herbie Hancock, Bob Mintzer, Wayne Shorter, DR Big band, WDR Big band (Germany), BBC Big band (UK), The Savage Rose, The Antonelli Orchestra, Mikkel Nordsø Band and others. In 2008, the newspaper Havana Times labelled him “one of Cuba's top percussionists”. Eliel's latest is called “Eliel Lazo and the Cuban Funk Machine” (2014) featuring American tenor saxophonist Bob Mintzer and a line-up of Cuban, Danish and Swedish musicians. The album is a tribute to funk and Cuban song from the 1970s and was dedicated to percussionist Jose Luis Quintana Changuito and Los Van Van’s founder Juan Formell. It was nominated for the 2015 Cubadisco awards and for the Danish Music Awards (World and Jazz The CD).

**Note:** I interviewed Eliel, have had several informal conversations with him, seen him perform once in London and have also taken a percussion workshop with him.

**Gente de Zona:** A Cuban reggaetón (cubatón) group founded by singer Alexander Deglado in 2000 when few rappers got together in the spiritual home of Cuban rap, the barrio of Alamar in Eastern Havana, also reflected in the name “People from the Barrio”. The group started performing in the peripheral neighbourhoods of Havana – Guanabacoa, Alamar and regal – where it won its first popularity and audiences. Later, GDZ joined the cultural association AHS, in 2002 the music agency “Antonio María Romeu”, and in 2005 the ACRap, which gave the

band a professional push. GDZ had their first serious international success through the song “Bailando” (2014) in collaboration with Enrique Iglesias, which was nominated for three Latin Grammy Awards, which was followed by further success of their cubatón release “La Gozadera” (2015) in collaboration with salsa legend Marc Anthony. A number of artists changed alongside Alexander Delgado in the band. Randy Malcom joined the group in 2013 from Charanga Habanera and remains part of it.

**Note:** I have seen GDZ perform live in London.

**Gerardo De Armas Sarria:** Gerardo was born in 1972 in the barrio of Parraga in Havana. He is a singer and percussionist of Afro-Cuban music, and Rumba in particular, which he learnt in his neighbourhood. He spent eight years as singer and back-up percussionist for folkloric ensemble Yoruba Andabo, with whom he performed across Cuba and internationally. Subsequently he was a singer with Iroso Obbá and The London Lukumi Choir upon moving to the UK in 201. He has performed at venues like the Royal Opera Hall, the Jazz Cafe, Ronnie Scott's and the Forge. His collaborations as percussionist and singer include artists Eliel Lazo and Carlos Acosta. Gerardo has led percussion and singing workshops in various cities across the UK and Europe and is the founder and leader of the band Gerardo y su Rumba Aché, an 8-piece band based in London, performing traditional Cuban rumba and other Afro-Cuban genres such as palo, makuta, abakuá and Yoruba traditional music. Gerardo co-founded the project Alma de Tambor (Soul of the drum) alongside Snezhina Gulubova, a female percussion and vocals project dedicated to performing a repertoire from the rumba, Yoruba and palo traditions, expressing the essence of Cuba’s African rhythms. He subsequently moved to Italy in 2021, currently teaching music classes, recording, and performing in Rome.

**Note:** My collaboration with Gerardo started as a teacher-student relationship where I took conga and batá classes with him, developing my performance skills and knowledge of

Afro-Cuban rhythms. Beyond taking classes and workshops, I played with Gerardo at dance classes and jam sessions and have taken part in religious ceremonies with him. I interviewed him and have spoken to him informally on many occasions. Working alongside him, I helped Gerardo with the organisation of his promotional materials, teaching classes and the managerial section of the project Alma de Tambor, which was due its first performance at the end of March 2020. Few days prior to the show the UK went into a lockdown due to the Covid19 pandemic and the project has been on hold since.

**Gilles Peterson:** Gilles Jérôme Moehrle was born in 1964 in Caen, France. He is a broadcaster, DJ and record collector who's played a pivotal role in supporting forward-thinking underground music in the UK and beyond over the past three decades. He hosts weekly primetime Saturday afternoon show on BBC Radio 6 Music, leads the independent record label Brownswood Recordings, and is the founder of online radio station Worldwide FM. Throughout his career, Peterson has promoted the new frontiers of jazz, hip-hop, and electronic music, receiving an MBE award (2004), an AIM Award for Indie Champion (2013), the Mixmag Award for Outstanding Contribution To Dance Music (2013), the PRS for Music Award for Outstanding Contribution to Music Radio (2014), and The A&R Award from The Music Producers Guild (2019). Starting his career installing illicit transmitters and hosting shows for pirate radio station Radio Invicta, he later joined the newly founded Jazz FM and joined the influential pirate-turned-legal station Kiss FM. In 1998, he was hired by BBC Radio 1, where he hosted a weekly show until his move to his current slot on BBC Radio 6 Music. He also hosts a syndicated radio program that is broadcast all over the globe, from Mexico City to Paris. Peterson has been behind several game-changing record labels. Firstly, he founded Acid Jazz in the late 1980s, and later he started Talkin' Loud, whose roster included Incognito, Galliano, Young Disciples, Courtney Pine, MJ Cole, Terry Callier, The Roots, 4 Hero,

Nuyorican Soul, Carl Craig's Innerzone Orchestra and Roni Size's Reprazent project. Five of the albums on Talkin Loud were nominated for a Mercury Prize, with Reprazent's New Forms winning in 1997. His current venture, Brownswood Recordings, was formed in 2006 and has released Ghostpoet's Mercury Prize-nominated debut album and the 2018 We Out Here project, a celebrated compilation showcasing the UK's thriving young jazz scene. As a curator and collector, he has compiled over 100 albums. In 2011, he founded the Steve Reid Foundation in memory of the legendary jazz drummer. The charity supports musicians who are ill and facing financial difficulties, with past recipients of support including Arthur Blythe, Bernie Worrell, and George Cables. They have also partnered with the PRS for Music Foundation to create the Steve Reid InNOVation Award, which has supported upcoming artists such as Moses Boyd, Nubya Garcia and Sarathy Korwar. Peterson curated the Look Up event series in 2018, which explored the arts and mental health and raised £20,000 for youth mental health charity Safaplace. He is behind several events championing the music that he supports through his DJ sets and radio shows. Since 2005, he has hosted the annual Worldwide Awards in London and Worldwide Festival in Sète, France, and since 2015, a winter ski edition of the latter in Leysin, Switzerland. Gilles set up the online radio station, Worldwide FM, in 2016 and in 2019 he is launching the new We Out Here festival in the UK (biographical data from [www.gillespetersonworldwide.com](http://www.gillespetersonworldwide.com)).

**Haila Mompié:** Haila María Mompié González was born in 1974 in Las Tunas and is a Cuban son and timba singer. She is known as the former lead vocalist in Azúcar Negra, as a former Bamboleo singer, and for her solo career. She started her musical schooling at the age of nine in Santiago de Cuba. At the age of 15 her family moved to Havana where she met the son-singer Yaquelín Castellanos who offered Haila a position in the group “Septeto Tradición”, which mostly played in the traditional style of the son septetos of the 1920s and '30s. Together



with the musician and composer Leonel Limonta, Haila started in 1997 *Azúcar Negra*, a timba band signed by Bis Music. In 2000 Haila started her solo career.

**Hammadi Rencurrell Valdés:** Hammadi was born in 1979 in Havana. Percussionist, arranger, musical director, and teacher, he has worked closely with legendary dancer Carlos Acosta for over a decade and been involved in the production of seminal albums like “*Irakere 30 Años*” (“*Irakere 30 Years*”), and Chucho Valdés’ “*New Conceptions*”, which was awarded a Latin Grammy. He was musical director for Acosta's “*Tocororo, a Cuban Tale*” which broke all box office records at Sadler’s Wells Theatre in 2003, was nominated for an Olivier award and transferred to some of the most important venues and festivals around the world. As a performer he has played at The London Coliseum, the Barbican, Royal Festival Hall, Roundhouse, London Jazz Festival and many others, and is currently part of Ariwo, a Cuban/Iranian quartet focussing on the unexplored intersection between electronic & Afro-Cuban music.

**Note:** I have interviewed, had various informal discussions, and seen Hammadi perform on numerous occasions. I started conversations with him during my MMus research on the construction of the Cuban cultural scene in London. I had also followed Ariwo’s growth and work since their second concert at Jazz Café in London in 2017.

**Havana D’Primera:** One of the most popular Cuban timba bands, Havana D’Primera was founded by Alexander Abreu in 2007 with 16 members in total. Bandleader, singer and songwriter Abreu fuses rhythms across salsa, jazz, funk, and Afro-Cuban music. Since its founding the band has released five studio albums and one live album. His first album “*Hazando Historia*” (“*Making History*”, released in 2009 by EGREM) won the award for “*Best Debut Album*” at the 2010 Cubadisco awards. The first release for the record label Páfata Productions, “*Pasaporte*” (2013) was named by the Los Angeles Times as one of the 10 Best

Latin Music Albums of All Times. In addition, it was awarded the award for “Best Popular Dance Music Album” at the 2013 Cubadisco Awards and won the award for “Best Choreographic Video” at the Lucas Awards 2012 with the video for the song “Al Final de la Vida” (“At the End of Life”). More recently the album "Será Que Se Acabó" (“Could it be that it is Over”, released in 2021 by Páfata & Unicorn) was released as a tribute to Cuban popular music of the 1980s and the 1990s, won the 2022 Cubadisco Grand Prize, and secured a nomination for “Best Salsa Album” at the 2022 Latin Grammy Awards.

**Notes:** I have attended numerous concerts by Havana D’Primera in Havana and London and while I have spoken to several band members.

**Ibeyi:** Ibeyi (“Twins”) is a French (Cuban-Venezuelan) musical duo consisting of twin sisters Lisa-Kaindé Diaz and Naomi Diaz. The duo sings in English, French, Spanish and Yoruba. Their music has elements of Yoruba, French and Afro-Cuban, and fuses jazz with beats, samples with traditional instruments. Lisa is the lead singer and plays the piano. Naomi plays the traditional Afro-Cuban percussion instruments such as batá drums and cajón. The twins were born in 1994 in Paris and lived in Havana for the first two years of their lives, moving subsequently to Paris, where they were educated. Their father was the influential Cuban percussionist Miguel “Anga” Díaz (dies in 2006), who has received a Grammy award for his work with the Irakere, and was also a member of the BVSC ensemble, playing with Ibrahim Ferrer, Rubén González and Compay Segundo. In 2013, Ibeyi signed with the record label XL Recordings, releasing their first EP. In 2014, they received attention for the video for their album’s second single, "River". The twins appear in a closeup shot throughout, taking turns having their heads forced underwater while the other sings. Their 2017 album “Ash” was nominated for IMPALA's European Album of the Year Award.

**Notes:** I have seen two performances by Ibeyi in London.

**Irakere:** Irakere (“Forest”) is a Cuban band founded by pianist Chucho Valdés in 1973, starting a new era in Cuban jazz fusing Afro-Cuban folkloric music, Cuban popular dance music, funk, jazz, and even classical music. Irakere brought historic innovations in both Afro-Cuban jazz and Cuban popular dance music (won the Grammy Award for Best Latin Recording in 1980). Another important contribution by Irakere is their use of batá and other Afro-Cuban folkloric drums, chequerés, erikundis, maracas, claves, cencerros, bongó, congas, and güiro. “Bacalao con Pan” was the first song recorded by Irakere to use batá. The tune combines the folkloric drums, jazzy dance music, and distorted electric guitar. This was the first to use a wide array of percussion instruments such as batá, abakuá and arará drums. In 1977 Irakere performed at the “Belgrade Jazz Festival” and the “Warsaw Jazz Jamboree”. The group had the opportunity to play along with jazz artists Betty Carter, Mel Lewis, and Thad Jones. That same year several jazz legends including Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz, and Earl Hines travelled to Cuba on a “jazz cruise.” This was the first time since the break in relations between Cuba and the US that a group of jazz musicians from each country were able to play together (Acrost 2003: 214). Subsequently, Irakere played at the Newport Jazz Festival in New York City and the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. In the 1980s Irakere recorded dance music, rhythmically akin to the contemporaneous style known as songo. Irakere continued recording dance pieces into the 1990s. With Babalú Ayé (1997), the band fully embraced timba, the new genre which had directly resulted in part, from Irakere's innovations. Chucho Valdés left the group the same year.

**Notes:** I have seen Irakere perform several times, both in Havana and London, and have had numerous informal discussions with band members.

**Issac Delgado:** Issac Felipe Delgado-Ramirez was born in 1962 in Marianao, Habana, is one of the founding members NG La Banda and a popular salsa and timba performer. His father, Luis Delgado, was a tailor and his mother, Lina Ramirez, was an actress, dancer, and singer in the Teatro Musical de La Habana. He studied violoncello at the Amadeo Roldan Conservatory and later graduated in sports education. At 18, Delgado joined the group “Proyecto” at the request of the pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba, decided to study vocal technique with Mariana De Gonish and enrolled in the school for professional musicians “Ignacio Cervantes”. Delgado began his professional musical career in 1983 when he joined Orquesta de Pacho Alonso. In 1988, Delgado became the lead vocalist of NG La Banda. In 1991 he started his own band and recorded the album “Dando La Hora” (“Giving the Time”) under the artistic direction of Gonzalo Rubalcaba. This album received the 1992 EGREM Prize. His second CD “Con Ganas” (“Eagerly”) again with Rubalcaba, received two EGREM prizes in 1993. Subsequently, Delgado started recording with both New York salsa musicians and Cuban timba musicians.

**Notes:** I have seen Issac Delgado perform in London and Havana, at both public concerts and private parties. I have had numerous discussions with musicians from his current salsa band.

**Joel Verdecia (DJ Flecha):** Joel Verdecia known as DJ Flecha was born in 1974 in Havana. He is a professional DJ with more than 25 years of experience and a great defender of Cuban music internationally. In the mid-1990s he joined the youth recreation group “Disco Mobil Provincia Habana” where he had the opportunity to support the boom of timba, participating in multiple concerts at the Palacio De La Salsa, Le Select, La Cecilia, Los Jardines De La Tropical. At the end of the 1990s he began to work in the heart of the nightlife of Havana, playing in clubs such as El Karachi, Scherezada, La Red, Amanecer, El Ticoa. In 2001 he became resident DJ in *Casa de la Música* in Central Habana, moving to London in 2008. DJ

Flecha has played Cuban music in more than 54 cities and participated in festivals across Europe. He is also one of the founders of DJ Team Cuba Group, leaders in the promotion of Cuban Music around the world. DJ Flecha has been nominated three times as Best Tropical Latin DJ in the UK for his popularity and for his originality when it comes to mixing, being considered one of the most technical DJs of the Latin scenes in Europe.

**Notes:** I interviewed DJ Flecha, have had numerous informal conversations with him and seen him play at several venues, dancing to his music.

**Kishon Khan:** Khan is a Bangladeshi-born British pianist, composer, arranger and music producer who grew up in North London. He was classically trained since the age of four and turned to jazz in his during his teenage years. He lived in Cuba in the 1990s, where he continued to study piano and developed an interest Afro-Cuban music. In 1999, Khan set up the Afro-Cuban funk jazz band Motimba, releasing their first album *Monkey Vibrations* in 2003. Khan later set up *Lokkhi Terra*, fusing Bangladeshi folk tunes, afrobeat and Cuban rumba and released two albums – “No Visa Required” and “Che Guava's Rickshaw Diaries”. Khan is a Professor of Practice (Music) at SOAS, University of London.

**Note:** I interviewed Kishon Khan, have had several informal discussions with him, and have seen him perform on numerous occasions.

**Lando Lavarra:** Rolando Navarrete Preval (a.k.a Black Lyon), originally from Guantánamo (born in 1991), is a Cuban singer, songwriter, beatmaker and rapper who has created a musical style called changotrap. He began his musical career singing at rap festivals in various provinces of Cuba, standing out as one of the main rappers of the new school of hip hop on the island. He arrived in Havana in 2017 and since then has opted to defend a much more personal and solid musical style: the changotrap, which mixes trap with Afro-Cuban folk music (rumba,

conga, bembé and others), and tells stories about their daily lives with lyrics from the Cuban popular slang and language. Since then, he received several awards including Cuerda Viva, Lucas, the Ignacio Villa scholarship and El Reino de este Mundo scholarship, both of the latter awarded by the AHS. At the beginning of 2022, Lando Lavarra received several awards and nominations for the animated video “Canto Negro” (link available in bibliography) at festivals in Spain, Brazil, Venezuela, and Chile. He was also selected as the Musical Ambassador of Cuba in One Beat Music, an initiative of the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and Bang on a Can’s Found Sound Nation. He is currently producing his first official album under the EGREM label entitled “Malas Intentions” (“Bad Intentions”) under the musical production of Tato Parapar, a multi-instrumentalist who has been in charge of the productions of urban artists such as Farruko, Lenier, Alex Duval, Yulien Oviedo and Young Kaiser.

**Notes:** I have seen Lando perform at rap peñas and have had several informal conversations with him. I have also planned work on an article regarding his new style of changotrap.

**Los Van Van (Juan Formell):** Los Van Van is one of the leading musical groups of post-revolutionary Cuba. It was founded in 1969 by bass player Juan Formell, who directed the band until his death in 2014. Formell and former band members Changuito and Cesar “Pupy” Pedroso are some of the most important figures in contemporary Cuban music, having contributed to the development of songo and timba, two popular dance music genres. Using a charanga line-up (flute, string instruments, and rhythm section) as its base, Los Van Van added trombones, and was the first Cuban group to use synthesizers and drum machines. Initially, their sound was a fusion of son montuno, rumba, and North American rock and pop. Later the band incorporated funk, disco, and hip-hop, as well as salsa. These influences would

first give rise to a style known as songo, and later timba. Los Van Van has consistently adapted its style to the times and remains one of Cuba's most popular dance bands.

**Maichel Blanco Cuevas (Maichel y Combinación Cubana):** The younger brother of famous salsa musician Maykel Blanco, Maichel was born in 1989 in Havana. He is a self-taught musician (with a Bachelor's degree in Construction) and started his musical career in 2011 with his brother's project "Maykel Blanco y Su Salsa Mayor". The same year, Maichel founded his own studio and music label JMB Records. In 2012 he founded the band "Los Patrones" and in 2015 the timba project "Maichel y Combinación Cubana". After releasing several singles, the band's first album "Lo Mio Es Otra Cosa" ("Mine is a Different Thing") was released in April 2021.

**Note:** I spent a week in the studio with Maichel in late 2020 during the recording of his debut album. I recorded the footage for a behind-the-scenes short documentary to accompany the album. I have had several informal conversations.

**Malcoms Junco Duffay:** Rapper and producer Junco Duffay was born in 1975 in Havana (died 2021). Known as Rebeled' Malcoms, Malcoms Justicia and simply Malcoms, he started his artistic career in 1987 as a dancer of the group Estampa, focusing on break dance and Michael Jackson choreographies. In 1995 Malcoms participated in the first rap festival in the country Habana Hip-Hop and in 1996 he began his career as a singer, starting the group Obsesión. In 1999 he founded his independent studio and label 18A16, based in his home in the barrio of San Miguel de Padro and specialising on urban music. The studio was one of the first of its type in the country and produce some of the most popular artists on the scene, including: La Reyna y La Real, Kumar, Barón González y Familias Cuba, Danay Suárez, Brebaje Man y Explosión Suprema, Mariana y la Maquinaria, Cubanos en la Red, Sexto Sentido, Papa

Humbertico (Mano Armada), La Banda de Reggae Remanente, Papo Record, Hermanos de Causa, Adverzario, Doble Filo, Los Aldeanos, Raudel Escuadrón Patriota, Primera Base, and Yimi Konclaze amongst others. Malcoms worked with the cultural association Asociación Hermanos Saiz, with the Centre for Research and Development of Cuban Music (CIDMUC), and with the ACRap. Through his work at CIDMUC Malcoms co-authored the book “Contar el Rap: Naracciones y Testimonios” (“Retelling Rap: Narratives and Testimonies”, Volumes 1 and 2, 2017). Malcoms was producing his last album as an artist when he died suddenly from heart attack on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2021 and the only song released after his death was “Sin Permiso” (link in bibliography).

**Note:** I interviewed Malcoms, had numerous informal discussions and had started working alongside him on few projects, including production, academic research and recording music. Our collaboration had developed quickly even though we only started working together in early 2021 and was cut short due to his death the same year. I dedicate my PhD to him due to the inspiration Malcoms gave me as a person – his dedication to Cuban rap and his ability to always help artists without expecting anything in return. It was a very emotional yet fulfilling experience to work on the documentary “Prohibido Olvidar” in his memory (link in bibliography).

**Mario “Mayito” Rivera:** Mario Enrique Rivera Godínez was born in 1966 in western province of Pinar del Río, famous for its handmade cigars. Known as “The Poet of the Rumba”, he is one of the most recognised contemporary singers in Cuba and amongst timba dance music audiences abroad, having been the distinctive voice and face of one of Cuba’s leading groups Los Van Van for over 20 years. Mayito began his musical training as a child and upon moving to Havana, he studied percussion at the National School of Art (ENA), which he later expanded with advanced studies at the Higher Institute of Art (ISA). He later joined the musical group of



the well-known Cuban singer Albita Rodríguez and was a bass player in the Grupo Moncada, a formation belonging to the nueva trova movement. At the age of 26, Mayito was discovered by Juan Formell, the director of Los Van Van, an orchestra that by then had already become legendary. Initially hired to play bass and sing backing vocals, he established himself as the group's lead vocalist. Simultaneously, he continued his solo career and released three individual albums (1999 Pa'bachatear... Chappotín [Let's Dance Bachata, Chappotín], 2005 Negrito Bailador [Black Dancer], 2013 Alma [Soul]). Mayito has performed across Europe, Asia, and the US.

**Note:** I interviewed Mayito Rivera and have seen him perform on few occasions. He was interested in collaborating with me on a project to outline his career and the skills required to sing timba; however, the idea was not supported by his wife and manager Lorena.

**Maykel Blanco Cuevas (Mykel Blanco y Su Salsa Mayor):** Maykel was born in 1981 in San Leopoldo in the neighbourhood of Centro Habana. His family belonged to the emblematic troupe “Los Guaracheros de Regla” and at an early age he became very interested in music enamoured by “Los Tambores de Bejucal”, thus, taking on percussion. He studies at the Guillermo Tomás Schools of Music and the Amadeo Roldán Conservatory. At the age of 17 he joined the “Abel y la Seducción” orchestra and a year later he created “Suprema Ley”, beginning his professional career. He signed with Spanish record label Envidia Record and produced more than ten phonograms for his group and several other artists, including Tirso Duarte. He also participated in the recording of 40 albums as a percussionist in various productions and created music for several “Latin Jazz” groups, such as “Havana Express”. Maykel founded his new orchestra “Maykel Blanco y Su Salsa Mayor” in 2004, fusing son, songo, timba and contemporary rhythms, and currently one of the most popular dance music bands.

**Notes:** I have seen “Maykel Blanco y Su Salsa Mayor” perform live in London and have had informal conversations with some of the musicians.

**Nelson Batista:** Nelson was born in 1962 in the Buena Vista neighbourhood of Havana. Cuban music was a part of Nelson's childhood and he learnt dancing on at neighbourhood gatherings and on the streets of Havana, often watching and copying his father dancing. He trained in dance alongside his regular studies at specialised dance courses in a community centre in the barrio of Playa. Nelson moved to the UK in 1987 and took up salsa dancing as a career in 1988 when he became actively involved in promoting and organising Latin dance and music activities in London. His popularity brought him a significant student base and Nelson extended his classes to venues all over the country, thus establishing himself as the most prolific salsa dance teacher in the UK. Many of Nelson's students have since progressed to dance professionally and to teach Salsa themselves. In addition to his personal involvement in the Latin dance and music world, Nelson has performed in national theatre, having participated in the Danceworld 94 exposition. In 1992 he was called upon to choreograph and advise on the music for the production of Salsa Celestina at the Watford Theatre and has appeared in TV programmes including. He continues to teach at Danceworks (a dance school in Central London) and through private lessons.

**Note:** I have known Nelson since early 2012 and have interviewed him and informally spoken to him numerous on topics varying from Cuban music, religion, dance and slang to accommodation, food, and history. Nelson was one of the initial influences who encouraged me to pursue my interest in working on Cuba music and helped me with the practicalities of organising my initial trips to the island. He has also been a valuable source of first-hand information on the development of the Latin and Cuban scenes in London. I have helped Nelson on numerous occasions as a support teacher in his dance classes and workshops.

**NG La Banda (José Luis "El Tosco" Cortés):** NG La Banda (NG stands for *nueva generación* ("new generation")) is a Cuban musical group founded by flutist José Luis "El Tosco" Cortés. NG La Banda are the considered the creators of timba (a term coined by Cortés). Prior to founding NG La Banda, Cortés played in Irakere and Los Van Van. The first timba album "En la Calle" ("On the Street"), was released in 1989, followed by "No Se Puede Tapar El Sol" ("The Sun cannot be Covered") in 1990, and "En la Calle Otra Vez" ("On the Street Again") in 1991. None of these phonorecords were released on CD in their entirety, but the label of American ethnomusicologist Ned Sublette, QBADisc released a nine-track compilation in 1992. NG La Banda became known as the music of the people, emanating from the barrios and the poorest parts of Havana. Cortes became known as "El Tosco" ("Rude Boy") because of his sexual lyrics and unabashed stage and street presence. As a result of NG La Banda's success, many more timba bands sprung up throughout the 1990s.

**Oreste "Sambroso" Noda:** Oreste Noda was born in 1967 in the province of Matanzas. Having started his musical life as a trombone player, he found his real passion in the conga drums. His unique rhythmic abilities soon saw him established as Cuba's go-to conguero. Playing with various projects, latterly with bands in Varadero, Noda moved to London in 2004 where he established himself as a percussionist with various projects and a promoter of Cuban events. Some of the projects he has been playing with upon moving to London include South African jazz icon Hugh Masekela, Britain's Jazz Jamaica All Stars, and the now Mercury-nominated Soweto Kinch with which he went on a 2004 UK tour. Subsequently, Noda toured the world for eight years. There were also frequent trips back to Cuba, where his numerous collaborations include the Indo-Latino project by Indian percussionist Pandit Dinesh. Currently, he is a key member of the Afrobeat-Bangla-Cuban collective Lokkhi Terra and

Ariwo (meaning “noise” in Yoruba), a Cuban/Iranian quartet exploring the intersection between electronic and Afro-Cuban folkloric music.

**Notes:** I interviewed Noda and spoken to him on numerous occasions, starting from my MMus degree research into the Cuban music and cultural scene of London. I have seen him perform on numerous occasions and helped him with promotional activities of his events, usually across social media and through recording videos and writing synopsis of the events. In 2018, I co-organised two jam sessions for musicians touring London with the musical theatre Carmen la Cubana.

**Pupy y Los Que Son, Son:** Was the band of the Cuban musician Cesar "Pupy" Pedroso, a Cuban pianist who became famous with Orquesta Revé and then as a founding member of Los Van Van. For many years, Pedroso wrote some of Van Van's most important songs such as “Calla Calla”, “Tranquilo, Mota”, “Seis Semanas”, “El buenagente” and others. When Cesar "Pupy" Pedroso, pianist and founding member, left Los Van Van in 2001 he founded his own band Pupy y Los Que Son, Son, which is likely a name with a triple-entendre. The word son can mean both “they are” and also refer to the traditional music son (the same Latin root as “sound”), originating in the eastern provinces of Cuba, from which Cuban-style salsa has significant influences. It is also a reference to the idiomatic Spanish expression “those who can, do”.

**Notes:** I saw Pupy y Los Que Son, Son for their first performance in the UK in 2015. Subsequently, I met Pupy Pedroso in Havana and had an informal conversation where he shared his surprise that it took so long for UK audiences to start inviting timba bands regularly to the UK.

**Reymel Martínez Fandiño:** Sound engineer, producer, arranger, and DJ Reymel was born in 1982 in Havana. Primarily emerging from Havana’s rap scene, he is known across venues in Cuba and Europe for playing, mixing and producing rap, reggae, soul, funk, Dancehall and other urban styles. Reymel took part in the festival “Coup de Jeunes” (“Youth Shot”) in France and received first prize in the Delight club in Saint-Rémy, France. He teaches music production across Latin America and works as a producer of phonograms and first films for a number of hip-hop groups in Cuba and abroad. Reymel belongs to the ACRap. In 2022, he released his album “Influencias” (“Influences”) by Bis Music and under the sponsorship of the ACRap.

**Notes:** I have seen Reymel play music numerous times, have had informal conversations with him and worked together on a debate for the 2021 International Symposium of Cuban Hip-Hop.

**Roberto Fonseca:** Born in 1975 in Havana, Fonseca is a Cuban pianist and composer. Since an early age he was surrounded by the music of his father, the drummer Roberto Fonseca, his mother, the singer Mercedes Cortés Alfaro, and his two older brothers – drummer Emilio Valdés and pianist Jesús “Chuchito” Valdés Jr. To start with Roberto was interested in playing drums, but at the age of eight he set his heart on the piano. His first concert was at the age of 15 at the 1991 Jazz Plaza Festival. He holds Master’s degree in musical composition from ISA and has worked in Cuba and internationally, fusing various rhythms, such as Afro-Cuban folklore, Latin jazz, hip-hop, drum and bass, Cuban popular rhythms, and urban music. In 2009 Roberto launched his project “Akokan” (“Heart”) with the participation of the Cape Verdean artist Mayra Andrade in the song “Siete Potencias” (“Seven Powers”), and the North American guitarist Raúl Midón in the song “Second Chance”. The same year Roberto Fonseca met for the first time British DJ Gilles Peterson, launching the project “Gilles Peterson Presents Havana Cultura: New Cuban Sound”. In 2010, the pianist dedicated himself to the release of his album

“Akokan” in North America as the opening act for Cuban diva Omara Portuondo. At the end of 2013 Fonseca was nominated for the 2014 Grammy Awards in the category “Best Latin Jazz Album” for his album “Yo” (“I”).

**Notes:** I have seen Fonseca perform in London and Havana.

**Rubén Marín Maning:** Born in the barrio of Guanabacoa in 1974, Marín Maning is a singer and lyricists. He began his artistic career at the age of 16, influenced by the strong current of rap in Spanish that was entering Cuba and became popular at the time. As an adolescent, he felt attracted to the music that came through different channels from the United States and Puerto Rico and began leaning towards black music. Marín Maning was influenced by Vico C, Gerardo, LL Cool J, Public Enemy, Ice T, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambata, Das EFX, OniX, and Sugarhill Gang amongst others. During the early 1990s, he became interested in improvisation (freestyle) and together with friends from the neighbourhood began to develop in the streets doing beat box and capturing the attention of people on the streets, buses, and other public places. In 1992 Marín Maning started writing his own songs and decided to form his own group called the Funky-Boys. There were no such other rap groups in Cuba at the time and the Funky-Boys were given the opportunity to perform for six months in East Havana, which allowed them to develop their skills as rappers, while still considering it a hobby. As an English name could be a hindrance to an artistic career at the time, the band changed its name to Primera Base in August 1993, which it maintains to this day. Cuba’s first rap group became one of the most emblematic performers of Cuban rap with regular tours across the country and internationally. The only original member who remains today and currently its director is Marín Maning, often using the artistic pseudonym Rubén Primera Base. Since October 2016 Marín Maning has also been working as Director of the Cuban Rap Agency, a national music company dedicated to the genre and the only one world-wide.

**Note:** I interviewed Rubén, have had numerous informal discussions, and worked alongside him at the Cuban Rap Agency for over a year. I have also helped Primera Base with promotional activities and created a short video “Dos Extremos, Una Cultura” (“Two Extremes, One Culture”) recorded in the studio (link available in bibliographt). We have shared the problems of work life in Cuba, the challenges of working in the rap scene, in the grief of losing our friend Malcoms and the emotive experiences of religious ceremonies. It is the strongest collaboration I have had during my fieldwork.

**Síntesis:** Founded by Carlos Alfonso, Síntesis is one of the most popular and emblematic groups of contemporary Cuban music, which developed its unique style of ethno-fusion with elements of Afro-Cuban rhythms and chants sung in the original languages, songs with lyrics in Spanish, and international styles such as pop and rock. The group started as a vocal quartet, then turned to symphonic rock before going on to explore the fusion between Afro-Cuban music and contemporary music. Their albums Ancestors volumes I, II and III form part of the classics of Cuban fusion music and were the first to fuse Afro-Cuban music with contemporary international genres such as pop and rock. Carlos’s wife Ele Valdés also forms part of the project as a singer, and so does their daughter Ele Alfonso (singer). Their son Equis “X” Alfonso has independent projects. The Alfonso family are one of the most recognised and prominent artistic families in Cuba and the driving force behind the FAC project and innovations it brings to Havana’s music and art scene.

**Note:** While I had informal conversations with Eme Alfonso on the Havana World Music Festival, none of the information was utilised in this thesis. Our collaboration might develop soon by organising hip-hop events at FAC.

**Telmary Díaz:** Born in 1977 in Havana to a journalist mother and sociologist father, Telmary initially aspired to follow her mother into journalism. Her career path changed the day she accepted a friend's invitation to check out a spoken word freestyle event. After her first time on stage, Telmary decided on another direction, seeking music, poetry, and singing as a more fulfilling form of communication. She has also studied English language and literature, screenwriting, and theatre. cites her main goal in any of her endeavors as working towards better communication with her audience. She has been able to draw from disparate parts of a range of musical styles to create a distinctly new fusion, while honouring that tradition. Telmary's music not only fuses Afro-Cuban and Latin beats, but also adds funk, jazz, hip-hop, and urban slam poetry. In 2007 she released her first solo album "A Diario" ("A Diary") winning a Cubadisco award for Best Hip-Hop Album. In 2018 the album "Fuerza Arara" ("Power to Arara") was nominated to the 19th Latin Grammy awards for "Best alternative music album".

**Notes:** I have seen Telmary perform on numerous occasions and in the studio recording with Eduardo Sandoval.

**Teté García Catúrla:** Regla Teresa García Catúrla was born in 1937 in Remedios, Villa Clara. She is the daughter of Alejandro García Catúrla, one of the most important Cuban composers of the 1920s and 1930s. As a young woman joined all-female groups Orquesta Anacaona and subsequently Cuarteto d'Aida. After the death of the Aida Diestro in 1973, the founder of the quartet, Teté led group, touring Panamá , Grenada , México , Spain , Angola, and Finland. More recently she toured Argentina, France, Japan, Greece and the US. After her retirement from the quartet, she formed the group Rumba Tere for young musicians recently graduated from their schools of music. Her work has always been in the traditional popular music of Cuba. She released an individual album in 2003 called "Llegó Teté" ("Teté Came", released



by Bis Music) and was a contributing singer in the 2015 video "Chan Chan - Song Around the World" by the Playing for Change movement.

**Note:** I have seen Teté perform live at the Guajirito and have had informal conversation with her.

**Victor Hechavarria Sarret:** Hechavarria Sarret was born in Santiago de Cuba, where he also graduated from the Music Conservatory Estaban Salas. He has been working as a professional trumpeter player and teacher since 2009 and relocated to London in 2011. Victor has previously toured Europe with the show Havana Rumba. He is currently working with projects which include Modern Romance, The Congo Faith Healers, Ska Cubano, Omar Puente and his Cuban Roots and Hot Orange Big Band, performing Afro-Cuban, Latin and 1950s American jazz.

**Note:** I interviewed Victor and have seen him perform salsa, Afro-Cuban and American jazz on several occasions.

**Wichy de Vedado:** Considered one of the pillars of the underground electronic music scene in Havana, DJ and producer Wichy de Vedado began his musical journey playing 1980s U.S. pop and popular Cuban music. A group of German DJs (including DJ Hell and DJ Tiny) visiting Havana, introduced Wichy de Vedado to techno, house, and electronic music, which inspired him to experiment with his own electronic beats.

**Note:** I interviewed Wichy de Vedado, recorded an episode for the 2021 International Symposium on Cuban Hip-Hop and attended an evening in Havana where he was playing his music.

**X Alfonso:** Equis “X” Alfonso, the son of the founder of Síntesis Carlos Alfonso, is a Cuban hip-hop and Afro-rock musician. He was born in 1972 in Havana and has been playing music since he was seven years old. When I was around 16, he started playing jazz and fusion music, working with nueva trova musicians and putting together his own arrangements and recordings. X Alfonso started his career with a group called “Estado de Animo” while he was still at music school. He joined his parents’ group Síntesis in the early 1990s playing keyboards. Subsequently, he moved to percussion and vocals. X Alfonso released six records with “Síntesis” and four of his own, starting his solo career in 1998. He fuses jazz, hip-hop, a blend of Big Band hits from the forties and the fifties, Africa drums, symphonic orchestra and flamenco. In 2010 he received the title of Goodwill Ambassador of UNICEF for his artistic work with and for children and FAC has become one of the most important cultural projects in Cuba.

**Yasek Manzano Silva:** Cuban trumpet player and composer Manzano Silva was born in 1980 in Havana. He studied music at Havana’s two leading conservatories: he began his studies at the Alejandro Garcia Caturla and since 1995 at the Amadeo Roldán where he became interested in jazz. He has performed with Celia Cruz, Los Van Van, Irakere, Bobby Carcassés and the British bands Manic Street Preachers and Simply Red. He later attended the Havana School of Arts and Music. In 1995 Manzano began to perform regularly at jazz venues in Havana. In 1997 American jazz trumpeter Roy Hargrove gave him his first trumpet and Yasek started to play in various jam sessions across the city. Later, he travelled to New York and was offered a scholarship at the Juilliard School of Music where he studied under jazz trumpet player Wynton Marsalis and played in the Juilliard Jazz Orchestra. Upon his return to Cuba in 2003, Manzano started his professional career by forming his own group and recording his first album. He has performed with many notable Cuban musicians, including Chucho Valdés, Joaquín Betancourt,

Frank Fernández, Beatriz Márquez, Marta Campos, Emilio Morales, Amauri Pérez, Roberto Julio Carcassés, Tony Martínez, Soraima Pérez (Sory), and the rock band Tesis de Menta amongst others. He has recorded and performed internationally, including in the US, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, France, the UK, South Africa, Switzerland, Italy, and Barbados. He is a member of UNEAC.

**Zenaida Castro Romeu:** Born in 1953 in Havana, Zenaida Romeu belongs to the third generation of a family of musicians. In 1983, she became the first woman to graduate in orchestral direction from ISA. She initially received piano lessons from her mother Zenaida Romeu before studying orchestral conducting with Gonzalo Romeu and choral direction with the Hungarian teacher Agnes Kralovsky as well as participating in masterclasses with professors Olaf Koch and Gert Frishmuth in Cuba and Germany. She has given masterclasses in choral and orchestral conducting and lectures on Cuban music in Spain, Mexico, and the US. She played a pivotal role in renewing the Cuban choral movement by founding the “Cohesion Chamber Choir” in 1982, introducing body language, gestures and repertoire into the choir which replicated the instrumental traditions of Cuban orchestras. In 1989, Zenaida Romeu was given the opportunity to work as Assistant Orchestra Director to Gonzalo Romeu at the Estudio Lirico company, where she worked to revive Cuban lyrical music, presenting zarzuelas and operettas, gaining great recognition in Cuba and abroad. She toured Italy, directing operettas for the Naples-based Bellini Theatre Company. Zenaida Romeu spent 1990 and 1992 living in Spain, giving master classes in choral conducting in Vigo. She returned to Cuba and formed her chamber orchestra Camerata Romeu in 1993 with sponsorship from the Pablo Milanés Foundation. The group’s name pays homage to the generations of musicians on the maternal side of her family, and its mission is to dedicate itself to the recognition and promotion of Cuban and Latin American music. The repertoire and the costumes of the musicians are

designed to present a new, fresh image, along with a requirement of performing everything from memory: from Bartok's Divertimento to Camerata in Guaguancó de Guido López Gavilán or Egberto Gismonti's Music for Strings. A year after its formation, Camerata Romeu was given the recently restored Minor Basilica of San Francisco de Asís in Old Havana to use as its headquarters and has had visiting composers, soloists, groups, and orchestra directors who have worked with the orchestra within Cuba as well as overseas. Zenaida Romeu has directed all the Cuban orchestras and has been guest director of the National Philharmonic of Cuba, including leading several national tours with them. Founder of the Orchestra of ISA, she has also directed the Bard University orchestra and the Winston Salem Youth Orchestra in North Carolina. As a conductor she has conducted symphony orchestras in Cuba, the US, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Canada. She has accompanied important Cuban soloists and international figures such as Michel Legrand, Egberto Gismonti, Horacio Franco, Ben Sung, Ernan and Harold Lopez-Nussa, Gonzalo Romeu, Barbara Hendricks, Arve Tellefsen, Øyvind Gimse, Joao Donato, Swami Jr., Maurizio D'Alessandro, Carlos Reyes, Polly Ferman, Antonio Peruch, Serranito, Gerardo di Giusto, Omara Portuondo, and Arturo O'Farrill among others. She has received dozens of awards including two Latin Grammy nominations, several Cubadisco awards, the Marseille Medal, the Philadelphia Bell, a diploma as Illustrious Guest of the City of Los Angeles, the Giraldilla, Lucas, Cuba Disco Honour Award, and the Order for Cuban Culture, among others.<sup>107</sup>

**Notes:** I have seen several performances of Camerata Romeu and guests.

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<sup>107</sup> Biographical notes taken from [www.camerataromeu.com](http://www.camerataromeu.com).

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