MUSIC OF CUBA
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Introduction, notes on the recordings and musical transcriptions by John Santos
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Recorded by Verna Gillis in Cuba 1978-79
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SIDE ONE
Band 1: Yambú (Rumba)
Band 2: Palo (Recorded in Guanabacoa)
Band 3: Palo
Band 4: Ogún (Santería)
Band 5: Shangó (Santería)
Band 6: Canción—Bolero

SIDE TWO
Band 1: Pregones:
A: El Grutero
B: El Tamalero.
C: El Panadero.
D: El Pescadero.
Band 2: Conga Santiaguera.
Band 3: Son. “Soneros Son”
Band 4: Guaracha
Band 5: Danza Campesina

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The importance of this collection of Afro-Cuban folkloric music can be seen by observing two facts:
1. That all the forms presented here have played integral roles in the formation of traditional and popular Cuban music.
2. That traditional and popular Cuban music have been a tremendous influence on the music of the Americas and other parts of the world.

In realizing these two facts, it becomes apparent that these recordings are some of the seminal forms to many of today's popular musical styles. Another interesting fact is that although these forms are in some cases hundreds of years old, the recordings are recent (1978-1979), giving some indication of the continuity of traditional music in Cuba and its impact on popular forms. This music is constantly evolving and adapting to its environment while maintaining its function as a vehicle of social comment and expression for the Cuban people in particular, and for many people outside of Cuba as well.

The particular combination of musical forms presented here reflects Cuba's cultural heritage very accurately. Some forms, such as the Bolero, were brought to Cuba by the Spanish colonists. Palo, Baksos and Bomba are almost purely African in origin. There are also forms such as the Yambú, Conga, Guarchac and the Son, which were created through the process of cultural syncretization which has been ongoing since the first African slaves arrived in Cuba at the beginning of the 16th century. The Danza was derived from the Contradanza which was brought to Cuba by the French towards the end of the 18th century.

A brief look into Cuba's unique history will provide us with some insight into these recordings. Cuba's particular cultural heritage is largely the result of two horrendous examples of inhumanity—the annihilation of the indigenous peoples of the island, and the institution of the abominable slave trade which endured for almost 400 years. Spanish colonization began at the end of the 16th century. The Indians of Cuba were exploited, enslaved, murdered and practically extinct within 35 years after colonization began. This explains why there is virtually no Indian influence in Cuba's traditional or popular music, unlike the countries of Central and South America, where the Indian heritage has played a major role in cultural development.

The extinction of the Indians marked the beginning of the African slave trade. Over the course of the next four centuries, huge numbers of slaves were brought to Cuba from west and central Africa. The largest numbers of slaves were from the linguistic groups known as Bantu (from central Africa) and Yoruba (from Nigeria).

Being the largest island of the Caribbean, Cuba became the largest importer of African slaves in the area. The deep religious commitment of the different African groups was the one thing which could not be stripped of them. Music, singing and dancing are vital parts of African religion and daily activity. An astounding number of rhythms, instruments, dances, dialects and forms merged and evolved on the island of Cuba. The white peasant farmers of Spanish descent known as Campesinos or guajíros also had their own poetry and music. The elite class of land owners and slave owners had their classical music of Western Europe. All of these elements overlapped through the years and with the ending of slavery in the 1880s, the process of syncretization accelerated even more.

Cuban music has travelled around the world. Its most obvious influence has been on what is presently the world's most popular form of Latin music, Salsa which is concentrated in New York, Puerto Rico and Venezuela, yet very popular in Europe, Africa, Japan and in the rest of the Americas. Salsa draws on the contribution of Cuban music much more than on any other single element. It cannot be disputed that Cuba has always been the world's Latin Music capital.

The abrupt and informal ambience of these recordings is due to the fact that they are mostly field recordings as opposed to having been produced in a recording studio. The participants are in almost all cases not professional musicians, but are naturally creating and responding to the music which is a genuine element of most traditional folk music. It should also be noted that the transcriptions of the texts may not be exact. Some of these texts are hundreds of years old and have been passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. They are very often interpreted quite differently by individuals according to who taught them. The lyrics also incorporate a great deal of colloquial Spanish and African dialects for which there exist no formal written counterparts. Therefore, the transcriptions are done largely through phonetic interpretation.

Due to the present lack of relations between the governments of Cuba and the United States, information on Cuban culture is virtually impossible to obtain in our educational systems or in our communities. This is especially unfortunate, not only to students of Latin music, but also in terms of preventing the people of both countries from learning more about one another.
SIDE ONE


Rumba is one of the most basic forms of profane Cuban musical expression. It developed mostly around the poor black communal living quarters (sadorca) in the urban areas of Havana and in the slave barracks (baracaco) of rural Matanzas. These overcrowded living conditions gave birth to the Rumba as a means of diversion.

The Rumba consists of dance, rhythm and song, all three of these components being of equal importance. However, if we had to describe the Rumba with only one word we would have to say “party” because it is a collective celebration in which everyone participates, regardless of age, race, social class or musical ability. The strongest influence in the Rumba is obviously African, although its Spanish heritage is also evident. The African influence is mostly Congolese.

Rumba must be considered a general topic under which exist several sub-categories. The most important of the sub-categories are the Yambú, Guagüăneco and Colúmbia. In its early stages, the Rumba had no formal instruments. A chair, cupboard, table, drawer, spoons, sticks, a crate, or whatever was available served as instruments. Eventually, the Tumbadora (drums of Congolese origin commonly known as Congas) became an integral part of the Rumba complex. Although the lyrics of the rhymes are usually in Spanish, the call and response interaction between the vocal soloist and the chorus is clearly of African origin. The choreography of the Rumba is highly pantomimed and improvisational and is characterized by the movement known as Vaqueño, which is a pelvic movement of erotic symbolism. This movement is directly derived from the fertility dance of Congolese origin known as Yuka. The Yambú is the only style of Rumba which does not incorporate the Vaqueño.

The most important musical instrument in the Rumba is a pair of hardwood sticks called Claves. They are struck against each other producing a clear and penetrating sound and a syncopated rhythm upon which the entire Rumba is based. Whether or not the actual Claves are being played, the “Clave feeling” is always present and might be clapped with the hands, played on a bell, or played on the side of a drum with a stick.

The Yambú is identified by its restrained tempo, the use of the Cajón (wooden box) and by the use of the Regina, which is a simple form of traditional Spanish poetry consisting of four-line stanzas.Usually two Cajones are used; a large one which maintains a steady rhythm, and a small one (Quinto) upon which syncopated improvisations are played. In this example, however, the steady rhythm is played on a Tumbadora (Conga drum). Also, a bottle struck with a coin is substituted for the Claves and a bell or stick plays straight quarter-notes.

The text opens with an extended Díana (vocal introduction common in all Rumbas) sung in alternation by the soloist and chorus in which “vocabularies” or syllables having no meaning are used. Then begins the Coro, or chorus refrain, which is sung in alternation with improvisations by the soloist. The excitement and tension builds as a result of the incessant polyrhythmic repetition and the interplay of the drums and dancers until dropping in volume and intensity to accommodate the introduction of another song by the Gaita (vocal soloist). At a Rumba or Rumbón (a celebration where the people sing, dance and play Rumba) this entire process may continue indefinitely.

Rhythmically, this track is a good example of the simultaneous use of double and triple meter which is very common in African music:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bottle</th>
<th>Ell or Stick</th>
<th>Tumbadora</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By adding two notes to the common five-note Clave patterns, a strong triple meter is established. The Clave rhythm is usually played in one of these two ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clave</th>
</tr>
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Add to this the rhythmic phrasing of the call-and-response vocals, the complex rhythms of the choreography of the dancers, and the improvisations of the Quinto, and we have the unique polyrhythmic form known as the Afro-Cuban Rumba.

The translation into English is difficult, but the general meaning can be understood.

- Noosotros cultivamos el canto
- Ogan búa para divertirlo
- Y para tener
- Un lindo rato de placer con los amigos
- Porque así nos dio la idea
- Para que el público vea
- Y preste un rato de atención

Pero al oir poco cansado

We cultivate song
Listen so that you can enjoy it
And so that you might have
A beautiful moment of enjoyment with friends
Because it gave us the idea
For the people to see
And lend a little attention
But to hear while singing

Band 2: Palo. Recorded in Guanabacoa.

Palo Monte is a cult of Congolese religious affiliation which is characterized by the belief and use of powers contained by elements of nature, such as rocks, sticks, and water. Other similar groups of Congolese origin but with ritualistic differences are Palo Briyumba, Palo Mayombe, and Palo Kimbisa. The people who belong to these groups are generally referred to in Cuba as Congos, or Paleros. All of these forms developed and were passed on in a clandestine manner by word of mouth from generation to generation under the ruthless hand of slavery.

The antiphonal structure of the vocals between the Gallo (lead singer) and the Vasallo (chorus) is an African tradition which has become an important part of popular as well as traditioinl Cuban music. This is especially true since the ending of slavery in Cuba (1880’s) and can still be seen today in popular Cuban and Cuban-based music.

The instruments used in this piece are: two hand-drums known collectively as Ngoma, and a shaker-type instrument known as Nkembi. A metal bell-like instrument called Ngompi and a pair of sticks struck against a hollowed log called Gigido are fairly common in this music, although they are not used here. Usually, three Ngoma are used. Their proper names from smallest to largest are: Cokimba, Mula and Caja. The Ngoma are traditionally carved out of a single log and skinned on one end. These are the precursors of the modern-day Conga drums which were refined in Cuba.

The piece opens with a prayer typical of those sung while secret rituals are performed. According to the greatest ethnomusicological authority on Afro-Cuban music, Fernando Ortiz, this song is derived from the Mayombe tradition:

- Oya ya lumba lumba
- Oya ya kuenda nganga
- Muana ndinda lo tombo waseere
- Oro taka wá ni moto
- Oya ya oya oya yando adio mi nganga adio

The next part flows in with the Mayombe-derived rhythm known as Palo. It is a religious rite which has its own music, choreography and songs or chants. The rhythm is steady and powerful with minimal rhythmic variation. It can be expressed or felt in 6/8 or 2/4 time:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nkembi</th>
<th>Mula</th>
<th>Caja</th>
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Band 3: Palo

The battery of drums (Ngoma) is complete here (three drums) and a bell (Ngongú) and a pair of Claves are also used. A Sekere (African-derived instrument made of a dried calabash gourd with a mesh of beads strung on the outside) is used here in place of the Nkembi and is played with a wide variety of rhythmic variations.

Band 4: Ogún (Santería)

The descendants of the Yoruba people known as Lucumi in Cuba. The greatest evidence of their impact in the history of Cuba is the existence of the religion known as Santería. It is based in Yoruba religion/mythology with certain adaptations of Catholicism. Santería emerged when the Spanish attempted to convert the Africans to Christianity. Today the religion thrives throughout the Americas, undergoing many different adaptations and interpretations, but maintaining its base in the Yoruba religion. Ogún is the Orisha (Yoruba deity) of metal and war. He is identified with the Christian Saint called San Pedro and is widely venerated in Cuba as well as in Africa.

The rhythm used here is played on two Congo-like drums. It is an adaptation of a Batá rhythm that is dedicated to Ogún. In Lucumi ceremonies, Congo-like drums and other instruments have often been used over the years as substitutions for the sacred Nigerian double-headed drums collectively known as Batá. Guine, Bakóke and Bembé are the most important forms used in the absence of the Batá. In the form known as Bakosó, as in this piece, two drums are used although the rhythm is usually played differently.

In the Lucumi language, the soloist is known as Akpóún and the chorus is called Ankerí. This is a song of praise and supplication to Ogún:

- Ogunde aree ire bobo lokua
- Ogún waxote Ogún waleon
- Ire bobo lokua e
- Saraycoco Ogunde

Band 5: Shangó (Santería). Bembé recorded in Santiago de Cuba.

2
The tradition of Spanish guitar and romantic poetry is one which influenced all of Spain’s colonies in the New World. In Cuba, this Spanish root was responsible for *El Punto, La Décima, El Romance, La Guarjira, El Bolero, La Canción, La Trova*¹, *La Guarcha, La Tenada, El Zapateo*, and other forms. This is the music of the common peasant farmers of Spanish descent known as Guajiro or Campesinos. For this reason this music is generally called *Música Guajira* or *Música Campesina*. Aside from the indigenous *Areito*, it is probably the oldest documented style of Cuban music.

Solos are improvised with string accompaniment and improvisation forms the basis of this style. A wide variety of stringed instruments were brought to the Americas by the Spanish colonists. Some of those which appeared in Cuba are the Guitar, the *Trea*, the *Bandurria*, the *Tipi*, the *Guitarrón*, and the *Laitd*. *Música Campesina* became “Creolized” in Cuba through incorporation of such African elements as the *Botija*, the *Marimba*, *Conga drums*.

This example is typical of traditional *Música Campesina*. The text conveys love and patriotic nostalgia. The solo voice is accompanied only by stringed instruments. Notice that there is no alternation between the soloist and chorus as there is in the African-derived forms. Also, the first two verses are in triple meter, which was particularly common in *Música Campesina* through the nineteenth century, although the Bolero and the Canción are now commonly interpreted only in 2/4 time.

**SIDE TWO**

**Band 1: Pregones. Recorded in Santiago de Cuba.**

The Pregones are the cries of the street vendors. They recall a tradition which has disappeared from the cities of Cuba. These haunting melodies and rhythmic phrases were created by ambulatory street vendors who competed for the attention of housewives and passersby in order to sell their products. The best singers sold the most goods. This tradition was introduced to Cuba by the Spanish, but soon took on a distinctly Cuban flavor when the Cuban vendors began incorporating elements from various facets of Cuban folklore. Before long, Cuban composers began borrowing melodies and lyrics from the most popular Pregones to create new musical compositions.

It is interesting to note the similarity between some of the Pregones and Spanish Flamenco style singing. The Moors from North Africa dominated Spain and the entire Iberian Peninsula for some 500 years. The nasal sounding vocal style typical of Flamenco singing is said to have developed under this Moorish influence. This quality of singing can also be heard in North Africa and the Middle East, indicating yet another strain of African influence in Cuban music. In these four Pregones, the vendors (vendors) are very profound in describing their products. The language is beautiful and poetic yet extremely colloquial. For this reason, we have restrained from offering detailed interpretation. The order of the four Pregones is as follows:

A: *El Frutero*. He is selling pinnacles, mangoes, mameyes, coconuts, melons and other fruit.

B: *El Tamaler*. He is offering hot tamales and refers to Romeo and Juliet and Adam and Eve in his position.

C: *El Panadero*. Baked goods are for sale here in specific quantities. The vendor asks God to help him sell his products.

D: *El Pescadero*. Fresh fish is being offered here, but hurry if you want some, because the vendor is leaving!

**Band 2: Congo Santiaguero. Recorded in Santiago de Cuba. (Instrumental).**

The Congo as used here is a dance and musical form which is connected with Carnaval in Cuba. The dance is choreographed for large groups of people who wear much fancy and schematic, often elaborate costumes, parade in the streets accompanied by banners, floats, farolas (fancy, decorated lights) and/or ornaments swirled on a long pole, and musicians. These groups are known as Comparsas, whose history is also very colorful.

During the colonial period, groups of slaves with mutual ethnic backgrounds (*Cohibos* or *Sociedades de Negros de Nación*) were organized to do abolitionist work and to continue cultural traditions of each group. Sometimes they were vehemently persecuted for their “sedition and covert” activities. However, sometimes they were able to get permission from the Spanish authorities to form parades in the streets of the cities where they would come out with costumes, dances, songs and music of their respective African tribes and nations. This would usually coincide with Catholic holidays or other public celebrations.

Eventually, the tradition grew into huge annual celebrations in which thousands of people would participate. Because of their mass appeal, the *Congas de Comparsas* became extremely effective for commercial and political activities. The popularity of the Congo was further increased when a well known Congo song “La Chambelona” is said to have decided the 1920-21 election in Cuba where General Garcia Menocal was ousted from the office of President. During the years of struggle for independence from Spain in the latter part of the 19th century, weapons, medicine and information were smuggled inside the drums of the Comparsas to aid the Mambises (revolutionary guerrillas).

The most well-known Carnival celebrations occur in Santiago (the original capital) and in La Habana (official capital since 1819). They have many similarities, but are distinct in certain aspects of instrumentation and musical structure. This piece is a good example of the Congo style from Santiago, identifiable by instrumentation; the brake-drum from a car wheel is struck with a metal rod to clearly produce the steady rhythm which permeates the entire piece. This instrument is referred to simply as *Hiera* (literally, iron). The *Bebí* is a tapered, cylindrical drum, open at both ends with a skin stretched over the larger opening. This instrument is similar in function and in sound to the well-known barrel-shaped Conga drums more common in the *Congas Habaneras*. The *Bombo* is the largest drum of the battery both in size and in sound. It is a double-headed bass drum played on one head with a mallet and dampened as desired on the other head to change the tonality. The *Gaita* is similar to the *Bombo* in the way that it is played, but it is a relatively flat drum in shape (about 8 inches high & 22 inches diameter). A third drum about 10 inches high is sometimes also used. It is called *Pilonera*.

Additionally, other drums which are played in a similar fashion to the *Bombo* and the Gaita (one mal­let and one open hand) are often used in the Congo Santiaguera, especially in the style from Santiago known as *Conga Carabalí*. They are known as the *Responde­dores* and the *Fondedores* which is the smallest.

Missing from this form are the *Chá Chá* or *Marups* which are shaker-type instruments common to the style, and the shrill sound of the *Trompeta Chika* (*Sona* or *Mussette*), a double-reed horn which is probably the most identifiable instrument of the Conga Santiaguers.

**Band 3: Son. “Soneros Son” Recorded in the Casa de la Trova in Santiago de Cuba.**

*Estudiantina Internacional.*

The Afro-Cuban Son is probably the most important form of Cuban music in terms of its influence and relevance to popular music over the last 100 years. It is the grandaddy of modern-day *Salá*. The Son was originally a dance of Campesino extraction which also underwent an extensive process of evolution.
The Son was being played in Oriente (the mountainous eastern-most province of Cuba) about the time slavery ended in Cuba (1886). African elements such as percussive instruments, call-and-response vocal structure and rhythmic musical structure were added to the Spanish elements of guitar-like instruments and Coplas or Decimas as verses for solo voice. In this early stage of the Son, the usual instrumentation was Tres, Guitar, Marimbula or Botija (providing the bass line), Bongo, Claves, Guiro and/or Maracas.

Beside the instrumentation, the most distinctive character of this Afro-Cuban style Son is the Montuno section of the music. This is the "funky" section in which the vocal soloist alternates with the chorus after the simple verses at the beginning of the piece. The Montuno aspect of the Son revolutionized Cuban music as it was added to the Danzón, the Bolero, the Guajira, the Guaracha and other styles. The instrumentation of groups which interpreted the Son evolved into sexteto, septeto, conjunto and jazz bands. In today's Salsa many elements such as the Montuno, the Coro, the Bongos, the musical structure, the use of the "Clave" feeling and the choreography, are all directly taken from the Son.

The decades of the 20's through the 40's were an important era for the Son. It became established in the capital, La Habana and from there experienced diffusion across Cuba and in Europe and the rest of the Americas. Some of the most important figures of the Son in this stage were: The Sexteto Habanero, The Septeto Nacional de Ignacio Fíneiro and the Conjunto of Arsenio Rodríguez.

The group which interprets this Son is the Estudiantina Invasora from Santiago de Cuba. The Estudiantinas were groups that interpreted the Son around 1900 in Santiago. They were usually larger than the typical Son groups of that time consisting of more stringed instruments and using the Paia Criolla or Timbales instead of the Bongos.

In this typical Son Afro-Cubano, called "Sosero Son," the first section is short and simple, while the emphasis lies in the Montuno section. The author is Pedro Fernandez, whose voice can be heard in the introduction before the tune begins.

Exo es mi Son, bailalo bien
Es todo Cubano, gósalo mi hermano
Ha pasado el mundo, mi Son Cubano
Este es mi Son Cubano.

This is my Son, dance it well
It is purely Cuban, enjoy it my brother
My Cuban Son has travelled around the world
This is my Cuban Son.


The Guaracha is originally a form of Música Campesina. However, it developed into another good example of the typical Cuban fusion of African and Spanish-derived elements. As was common in most of the Música Campesina, the Guaracha had a triple feel to the meter. Eventually, it was interpreted also in 2/4 time, and now the elements of the Guaracha which influence popular music are almost exclusively in 2/4 time. Generally, the text of a Guaracha is humorous or satirical, traditionally sung in the Spanish style of Coplas or verses with string accompaniment and later adding the customary African chorus refrain (Estridilla) sung in alternation with the soloist. During the 19th century, largely due to the Cuban vernacular theatre (Teatro Bufo), the Guaracha's popularity spread and later passed into the dance halls.

In this piece, a comical description is given of a young man who is quite a character in the neighborhood. The verse (which is given here) sets up the chorus (Coro) upon which the vocal soloist freely improvises in call-and-response form:

En el barrio donde vivo
Hay un sujeto burlón
Que siempre esta acarapando
Y entiendo en combinación
Compra barato
Y vende muy caro
Ya se lo hizo a la abuela
Es un barbaro en la evolución.

In the neighborhood where I live
There is a funny character
Who is always capitalizing.
Wheeled and dealing
He buys cheaply
And sells very expensively
Now he is at the end of the line
He is a monster of evolution.


The Danza was a development of the Contradanza which was introduced into Cuba by the French at the end of the 18th century. Later, during the 19th century, the world-famous Habanera and Danzón were to emerge from the Contradanza and the Danza. All of these forms were generally interpreted by Orquestas Típicas which were bands made up of woodwind, brass, string and percussive instruments. The Spanish Campesinos adapted these forms to their own instrumentation of guitar-family stringed instruments, thus expanding their musical repertoire. Adaptations of various musical genres into Música Campesina, such as in this interpretation, are common throughout Latin America.

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RECORDINGS


La música del Pueblo de Cuba (Recorded 1950-1974) Egrem/Areito 3440, 3441. La Habana—Descriptive information by Maria Teresa Linares.


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Cover photo by Brad Graves. Cover art work: Irene figure made by Juan "El Negro" Raymat in New York City in 1982. Irene is the most picturesque personality of the Cuban Abakú religion. Her characteristic costume and choreography are unique in Afro-cuban folklore.

This album is dedicated to the brilliant Cuban percussionist Daniel Ponce, who has had an enormous cultural impact on American music since his arrival in 1980. Tremendo persona, músico, talento y amigo...