

Timba Music in Cuba

By this time the seeds planted by the [Cuban] revolution were sprouting up everywhere like weeds. The "ENA", the state music conservatory was and still is turning out astonishing numbers of brilliant and hungry virtuoso musicians. Any Cuban bandleader can almost immediately find dozens of teenage musicians of all instruments, any one of whom is capable of simply blowing the socks off of the best American musicians in any major city.

The US embargo and the demise of the Soviet Union have ironically turned Habana into a large petri dish for the cultivation of musical monsters. Kids in Cuba have no money, no skateboards, no television, no video games, no drugs, no guns and no hope for economic advancement except through music. And what little money the government has, it tends to pour into its educational system, such that the ENA is simply bursting at the seams with musical greatness. The hungry teenagers are assimilated into the great timba bands, where they feed off each other and reach even higher levels of musical prowess.

All of this begins to explain why the experience of hearing one of these bands is so shocking and powerful to Americans. It's as if the 17th century slave traders, Karl Marx, Boris Yeltsin and the American Embargo have all unwittingly conspired to create a musical super-race, isolated on a Caribbean island, and becoming ever more concentrated and intense. God only knows what will happen when the Embargo is inevitably lifted and/or Fidel Castro dies, but for the moment timba in Cuba continues to explode as a cultural and musical phenomenon.

- Kevin Moore, "The Informed Concert Promoter's / Arts Editor's Guide to Modern Cuban Dance Music, AKA 'Timba'", Summer 2000

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Gitanos go to Cuba

In February, 1999, Kevin Moore, Alice Rodriguez, Bosco el Gitano and Dan Filip of Orquesta Gitano went to Cuba for a two week study session. Kevin wrote the following account of their journey:

(Kevin's disclaimer: This is not intended to be journalism...it's just a personal letter to Bruce and describes the impressions of an American musician suddenly in Cuba for the first time. It most certainly contains all sorts of factual inaccuracies. This trip to Cuba literally blew my mind and in the letter, I'm just recounting my experiences and impressions to Bruce, one by one, as I remember them.)



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Okay Bruce, I've recovered enough to attempt the impossible task of describing the great Cuban Odyssey.

We spent the first night in Cancun, where, at a club called "Azucar", we heard a blazing 3 set performance by Charanga Habanera...the bassist looked like a skinny Dennis Rodman and was just as crazy...he had a red stick-like upright electric and was really incredible...the pianist was also a standout, as was one of the 3 lead singers, who could also play piano almost as well as the main guy. By the end of the night I was in a major trance similar to the one I'd experienced at the Fillmore in SF when I heard Vocal Sampling, Cubanismo & Van Van back to back.

When we first got to Azucar, they were playing low-key tourist music, but our faithful guide (John Calloway, a Bay Area flautist/pianist who was hired by the school to help organize everything) knew David Calzado and talked him into doing the "real" material...much of it from the new "Tremendo Delirio", which I have and like very much. Calzado was interesting...he's the leader and I'd thought he would be the lead singer, but he basically sang a little coro and ran around sort of egging the others on...I guess he's more the mastermind than a major player. I'm not up to date on the details of the infamous Charanga Habanera split up, so I don't know which half of the band this is or what their official name is, but they were definitely happening in a big way and when I left Azucar, I was already in Cuba, though the flight didn't leave til the next evening.

When the plane arrived, Alice was held up by the Cuban authorities...for carrying a hot plate! It was touch and go for a full hour as everyone waited on the bus for Alice to emerge from airport security. Once that was settled, we started the eerie drive through Havana at night. It looked like Germany after the war...lots of European architecture...all of it looking like it had through several years of bombing raids. The poverty is extreme...paint peeling off of every building...blown out windows...dirt and pollution everywhere.

We arrived at the school/boarding house/hotel neighborhood. The Hotel Palco, where about half of the people, including the Gitano contingent, stayed, was very luxurious...it even had bidets. The Casa Fina was very bare bones and I was glad to have shelled out the extra money for the hotel. There was only one toilet in Casa Fina with a seat and you had to give them your key when you left, necessitating waking someone up every night when you got home from the amazing concerts which always ran to 4:00 a.m. Also lots of mosquitoes, etc. On the other hand, the people running the boarding house, and the school itself, were

incredibly warm and friendly.

There were 45 in our group...15 dancers, 11 pianists, me on bass, Alice on trombone and the rest percussionists. This meant that Alice got daily private lessons from the trombonist from Los Van Van and I from the bassist of Anacaona, the famous all-woman salsa band, which is now playing a lot of timba as well. My teacher, Odalys Cuesta, studied for years with Carlos del Puerto and was just soooo funky....she could take any bassline and throw in these little "notas muertas" or whatever she called them...they were funky little percussive sounds that made it sound like she was playing bass accompanied by congas. She was a great teacher and had me practicing several hours a day to keep up. She also took us to rehearsals of her band, where we met the Anacaona piano player...the spelling of whose name I never saw, but it sounded like "yanisel"...anyway, she was REALLY amazing and later Dan (the Orq. Gitano pianist) and I got our hands on an old 486 with MIDI and hired her to play scads of MIDI files into it...she was the montuno queen of all time...she could play the funkier, steadiest, most creative montunos while dancing and singing beautifully and calling all the cues for the band. Yikes...AND she was only twenty....and too poor to even afford her own keyboard, phone or car....in the U.S. she would be making 6 figures almost immediately from recording, gigging and teaching.

The next band I heard was at "La Cecilia", near the school...\$20 to get in, so mostly a tourist venue, but an excellent outdoor PA system and the band was Manolin, El Medico de Salsa...unfathomably great...especially the piano and bass...hell, especially all of them! And sitting in that night, all at once, were: Juan & Samuel Formell, Orlando Cespedes, the old singer of Charanga Habanera, Paulito FG, the lead singer from NG La Banda, and several other seemingly equally famous people I didn't recognize, but the crowd did. This was one of the nights that's almost painful to remember because I want to relive it so badly. I was standing to the left of the stage, very close, and the grooves that the pianist (Luis Bu Pascual) and the bassist were laying down were just too much to bear...by the time it was over I was in a blissful, floating, slack-jawed state of shock...all I could do was laugh and shake my head as the montunos continued echoing through the deepest recesses of my body. And I had never even heard of this band! Where have I been? Now, of course, I've bought both of their CD's and listened to them dozens of times and they just keep getting better and better...each piano montuno is a separate, unique work of art...but I digress!

In Cuba, the music seldom starts before 11:00 and usually goes to 4:00 or 4:30 a.m., so there I was in the middle of the night, completely dazed by the power of what I'd just heard...the only cab I could find was \$10 to go what I knew was less than a mile, so I set off on foot and wound up lost in a neighborhood that made Harlem look like the Hamptons. Had this neighborhood been in LA at 4:30 in the morning, or any other time for that matter, I would have been one dead violin player, but it gradually dawned on me that I was really quite safe...there are incredibly few guns, drugs, or violent crime in Cuba...even though everyone is poor as hell, and it's really a very peaceful place in its own mysterious way. I made my way up to a gang of muscular 19 year olds who were partying in the street, asked directions in pigeon Spanish, got home without incident....got my customary two hours of sleep and headed up to the school to practice for my 9:30 bass lesson.

In addition to private lessons and ensembles, there was this basic percussion class with this maniac named Raul who was a stunning virtuoso on every possible percussion

instrument...but even more interesting were his two 15 year old assistants, Alberto and Osleany...these guys were students at the school and were ALSO stunning virtuosi on every possible percussion instrument. The things they could do were simply mind-boggling...for example, they could play the typical timbale cascara rhythm (1, 2, 2+, 3+, 4+, 1, 2, 3, 3+, 4+) in the right hand, and play the same rhythm ONE BEAT LATER in the left hand! Meanwhile the left foot is tapping clave and the right foot is tapping godknowswhat and the rest of their body other than the feet and hands is dancing better than anyone I've ever seen in the states and they're singing perfectly in tune over all of this. Oh, and did I mention that all the percussionists can play bass & piano too?

The really neat thing about these 15 year olds was their attitude towards life...they live to groove...no video games, no TV, no skateboards, no money, no complaints...just ritmo and more ritmo...and they would spend hours teaching you anything you'd wanted to know about the most intricate Cuban rhythms, including all aspects of the profoundly complex, deeply polyrhythmic rumba and bata stuff...we started taking them with us to clubs...if somebody was playing some outside rhythm I could ask them afterwards and they could write it out and play it with any extremity while playing anything else with the other three. I'm not kidding when I say that any one of these 15 year olds...and I hung out regularly with about 5 or 6 of them...could come to the U.S. and be at the top of the Latin scene in any major city. This again brings up the question of what would happen if the embargo were lifted and "prosperity" brought these guys into the super-nintendo world of their US brethren...would the next generation be as amazing at music...or as wholesome, hard-working and good-natured?? On the other hand, should the current generation be deprived of their rightful place in the global music scene and we deprived of hearing them and playing with them? Who knows? The intensity of the music scene I was immersed in made political and cultural issues seem almost completely insignificant and irrelevant. Of course they're hugely significant and deeply fascinating and controversial, but if you're a musician or a dancer and you go to this place, the music is so overwhelming that it's hard to even think about anything else.

At the school there were also multiple amazing lectures by the Alain brothers, two very funny, very bilingual, genius musicologists who could and did keep you enraptured for hours with tales of the history of Cuban music...going back to the earliest African and European roots and evolving into danzon, guaguanco, rumba, mambo, salsa, timba, et al. That's one thing that really struck me about the music scene in Cuba...everything is part of one continuous, organic whole...every musician knows, loves and plays the entire history of Cuban music. In the U.S. there are major cultural chasms...from Sinatra to Elvis to the Beatles to Punk to Rap to R&B to Hip Hop to Heavy Metal to Techno to ???...people into one genre may be oblivious to the others. In Cuba it's all one big musical organism, from the earliest Danzon to the funkier Timba.

Now before you quit your job and pack your suitcase and family for Havana, let me tell you the REST of the story...this place is most godawful polluted mess you have ever seen! Every car (most are from the 40's & 50's) spews dark clouds of smoke...the smell of chemical and sewage pollution is everywhere, even worse after the rain...the buildings are literally coming apart at the seams...every time I played a note on the bass, paint chips would flake down off of the ceiling...by the end of a session my hair and clothes were all white...the food is barely edible. Most toilets (and I became quite an avid student of them, mind you, during my bout

with the Cuban Turista) a) don't have seats b) don't flush and c) don't have toilet paper...and the Cuban bureaucracy makes the Pentagon look like a model of efficiency. There are almost no computers and most people don't have cars or phones. The government seems completely disorganized and it seems like the rules change almost daily. The lack of personal freedom vis a vis the government and police is significant and disturbing...but again, all of this pales in the face of the incredible cultural depth of the Cuban people, and their powerful, magnificent personalities and the awe-inspiring way they have of simply devouring life and all it has to offer. I've been playing music with a great but incredibly eccentric Cuban singer (who came over during the 1980's boat lifts) for over a decade and only now do I begin to understand him. I used to think he was more than a little bit crazy, but in fact he's just a stranger in a strange land. In many ways, it's the U.S. that's crazy from being so out of touch with the real, raw flavor of life that thrives in Cuba on every street corner.

So where was I? Okay, our trip lasted two weeks, with arrival and departure on the weekend, so there was this one open weekend in the middle with no classes...I was dying to dive and did considerable research trying to arrange to go to Maria la Gorda or Isla de Juventud...both on the south side of the island and supposedly the prime scuba locations...but getting there by car or taxi was hugely prohibitive...plus, it turned out that not only was Paulito FG playing at La Cecilia Saturday night, BUT... there was a rumored Valentine's Day Eve concert in Matanzas with Van Van, NG, and Ponchito Alonzo... Matanzas is a couple hours from Havana and a bit further is Verdadero, a tourist beach location with scuba diving...It cost \$210 to rent a legal bus/taxi with driver and about 8 of us chipped in. The weather turned terrible and diving was not an option...also Verdadero was hardly a tropical paradise...it was a poorly run, dirty little beach town...oh well...and it was colder than shit...I couldn't believe I was in the tropics and buying sweatshirts!!

Meanwhile, Dan, the Gitano piano player, had a big package of anti-parasitical medicine for a sick boy in Matanzas...only trouble was that the address was basically his Mom's friend's name and Matanzas...no street, no phone...no zip code... Now Matanzas is a pretty big city, but we had a pretty cool cab driver. As we watched in amazement, he stopped at corner after corner, rapping at warp speed with whatever Cuban he could flag down and after about an hour actually delivered us to the doorstep of the sick boy's mom's friend. After this phenomenal buildup, we expected a greeting worthy of Mother Teresa, but basically the gal seemed to say "Oh...right...okay...get out of my face"...oh well. As we found out later by email, the boy finally got the stuff and is doing a lot better.

Later that evening we arrived at a massive soccer field type area with old statues commemorating various Eastern Block communist Olympic-esque events. It was \$1 to get in and there were eventually somewhere around 5,000 dancing, partying Cubans there, maybe a lot more...plus a grand total of 8 Americans. We bought a big bottle of Cuban rum for \$2 and blended into the crowd....well, sort of.

One of our U.S. contingent was Maria...your basic twenty-something American girl, but a very good dancer for an American. But since world-class dancing is the norm in Cuba, from the Matanzan perspective her defining feature was a massive mane of shockingly blonde hair. Well, the Matanzans must never have seen a blonde because they lined up in long queues to take turns dancing with "Madonna of Matanzas" while being egged on by their laughing, rollicking compadres. Maria was in heaven, not only from all the attention, but

because she had come to study dance and these people were such unbelievably great dancers...my God, words just fail me...the dancing was, to me, beyond even the music...there were 6 year old girls at that soccer field who danced better than anyone I've seen in all my years of gigging in salsa dance clubs....anyway, I don't think Maria or her dancing were ever the same after that night. When the course ended, she stayed behind and was last seen heading off towards Santiago with a Cuban guy she'd met.

And neither, I must add, was your faithful author the same after that night...

...each song got more and more intense...I'd never heard of the opening band, but they were masterful...then NG La Banda notched everything up another couple levels of intensity. By this time we were crowding the stage in a sea of throbbing rhythmic humanity...and by the time Los Van Van came out I was back in the trance mode that had started with Charanga Habanera, deepened with El Medico, been revisited at various points along the way, and was now rapidly reaching the point of no return...THEN...about 3 tunes into the set (about 3:00 a.m.) I felt a towering presence and looked to my left to see the navel of a seven foot plus black guy (Vladimir) who looked like a Watusi warrior in street clothes. I'm 6'3" and this guy dwarfed me. At this point all inhibitions were gone and I nudged my compadres..."Hey check this dude out!" Vladimir befriended us instantly and it turned out he was somehow connected with the presentation of the concert. He beckoned us to follow him...through the crowd...and up onto the stage...and he planted us squarely between Samuel Formell and the 3 trombones...immersed in yet another sea of dancing, throbbing humanity and gazing out over the world's greatest salsa band into what I can only describe as Cuban Woodstock...no one clapped after the songs...the crowd and the band were one and the same...dancing, partying and grooving their asses off endlessly into the night...at some point, as Vlad smiled down knowingly, something snapped...and I have never been quite the same since...there's something going on down there that just can't be described and when it hits you...well...you'll see when you get there.

Other bands seen:

Manolito y su Klan - young hot, hard edged timba

Irakere sin Chucho - they were playing pure swing jazz...Charlie Parker tunes and what not...our tour guide, John Calloway, sat in and played his ass off.

Maraca rehearsal...damn...I missed this because I had ensemble rehearsal, but those who went said it was great and I did get to meet some of the band members who were hanging out at the school cafeteria.

Klimax - amazing arrangements, heard them in a very touristy location with bad PA, but still great...one of my favorite bands...Chuck Silverman's favorite band...

Anacaona (three times) - my teacher's band...all beautiful women. The band has been around for 60 years-they just keep switching personnel...sort of like the Harlem Globetrotters...they've got some cheezy old-fashioned material, but also so great new timba

stuff...the pianist is God.

Los Van Van (2nd time) - this time at the Habana Libre Hotel...\$20 to get in so not so much of a Cuban lovefest as in Matanzas, but the PA was amazing and I was practically touching the peg of JF's Ampeg Baby Bass...I'd been studying bass for 2 weeks at this point (it was my last night) and the bass just swallowed me up...still another out-of-body experience...also, Van Van has a lot of new material and is about to release a new album. Manolito (see above) sat in and sang some very inspired pregons...the energy of playing with Van Van made him sound better than he had with his own band.

Many and varied rumba and salsa jams performed and danced to by the teachers and students at the Escuela Nacional where we studied...some of this music was just as amazing as the famous groups, and in very intimate settings, such as the school "piano bar", kind of a glorified snack bar where the students get together to jam and party at night.

Hernann Lopez-- looks German, but plays Cuban...a spectacular latin jazz pianist who played classically-influenced jazz against rumba rhythms played by a drop-dead virtuoso multiple percussionist who played congas with his hand and various clave and bell parts with foot pedals.

About 50 fascinating video clips as part of a lecture at the school on the history of Cuban music.

Several bands whose names I never even got who were also brilliant.

In some ways, it makes more sense to say who I DIDN'T see...Paulito FG left for tour before I could catch him, though I heard him sit in with El Medico. Missed Maraca. Isaac Delgado was in the U.S. No Cubanismo, no sign of my old favorites, Ritmo Oriental...Bamboleo played the Tropicana but it was sold out... All in all, I did not feel cheated and had at least 8 or 10 serious out-of-body listening experiences.

So there you have it...CUBA in a nutshell...too bad I'm now nuts after experiencing it! Now Dan, Bosco, Alice and I need to sit down and devour all of the material we brought back and let it soak in.

Needless to say, I'm going back next year.