



RESEARCH ARTICLES

Nobody Dances With Pain: Re-centering Traditional Cuban Music in the Musicolonial Politics of the Transatlantic Caribbean

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Keywords: Traditional Cuban music, Son Cubano, commercialization, neocolonialism, decoloniality, cultural heritage, music studies, musicolonial politics

<https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.147460>

Folk, Knowledge, Place

Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2025

In the vibrant landscape of Caribbean culture, music stands as a powerful testament to the region's history of resistance, resilience, and identity. Focusing on Cuba and the genre of Son Cubano, this paper explores how traditional Cuban music has functioned, from 16th-century Spanish colonization to the present, as a tool for asserting sovereignty, shaping cultural memory, and fostering transatlantic solidarity. Today, however, this heritage faces threats from commercialization and impeding artistic expression. Drawing on the fields of musicology and cultural anthropology and framed by the concept of musicoloniality, the paper traces the evolution of traditional Cuban music between (neo)colonial power and decolonial aspirations. Through ethnographic vignettes of Cuban musical artists and autoethnographic reflections, we show how traditional Cuban music conveys transinsular narratives and challenges Western representations of music and the communities it originates from within a music system that privileges marketability over meaning. We propose a decolonial approach that recognizes traditional Cuban music not just as cultural heritage but as an ongoing form of political and artistic resistance. In doing so, this approach responds to the call of Caribbean artists to reclaim traditional music as a space for social critique and cultural sovereignty.

Introduction

“It should be made known ... that what is now presented to the jaded European taste, avid for new stimuli as something new, capable of providing new thrills, is not something which has been improvised as a tourist attraction, but a spiritual achievement of people that has struggled during four centuries to find a medium of expression.”

Emilio Grenet
Cuban folk musician
Havana 1939

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Traditional Cuban music, and particularly *Son Cubano*, stands at the crossroads of resistance and commodification. Once a powerful expression of collective identity and anticolonial struggle, it now circulates in global markets often stripped of its political resonance. Genres like *Son* and *Trova*, long celebrated as the musical heartbeat of the Cuban islands, are increasingly dismissed by younger Cuban musicians as outdated or backward. Economic necessity and influence of global media drive many artists to either abandon traditional styles or adapt them to conform to the expectations of international audiences – audiences who often seek only a sanitized, exotic version of Cuba as a site of endless leisure. This mirrors what Marek Susdorf (2024) theorizes as the musicocolonial politics of the Western empire, advancing a global system that commodifies and reconfigures non-Western music to maintain cultural hierarchies rooted in colonialism.

The consequences of this system, we claim, are visible in the global marketing of Cuban music, where traditional genres are transformed into *only* entertainment products. A famous example is the Buena Vista Social Club. Though deeply rooted in Afro-Cuban traditions, the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon—revived and globalized by Ry Cooder and Wim Wenders in the 1990s—reframed *Son* for foreign consumption. The resulting global success fostered an idealized image of Cuba as timeless and nostalgic (Fairley, 2004, p. 83), attracting musical tourism but obscuring Cuba’s complex social reality.

However, this narrative conceals more than it reveals. Cultural heritage must be interpreted in its historical and social context. As Cuban composer Emilio Grenet noted in 1939, what Europe perceived as ‘new’ in Cuban music was actually the product of centuries of struggle. While *Son* acted as a musical stimulus for the European elite in the 1930s, its global ‘(re)discovery’ in the 1990s was misleading. Cuban artists argued that *Son* was never forgotten but had always remained an integral part of the islands’ soundscape (Hutchinson, 2020, p. 58). Rooted in the intertwined traditions of *Son*, *Bolero*, and *Danzón*, the music of Buena Vista Social Club stands as a living testament to Cuba’s cultural resilience. Yet, what has been erased in its global representation is not the music itself, but the social and political reality from which it emerged, namely, the struggles of working-class Afro-Cuban communities, the coded social critique within its lyrics, and the historical context of inequality and censorship that shaped the performance. In transforming this music into a nostalgic symbol of timeless, carefree Cuba, the global market stripped it of the very resistance and historical consciousness that once defined it. As Glenn Chambers (2007) and Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1998) note, both the Cuban state and the global music industry recognized the symbolic and economic value of *Son*, positioning it as a national emblem while sidelining its critical and oppositional dimensions.

This article therefore advocates a decolonial mode of listening (Lovesey, 2016)—one that goes beyond surface enjoyment and leads to a deeper engagement with music as a site of memory, resistance, and identity. Taking

this as the starting point, we explore how *Son Cubano*, as both a musical form and socio-cultural practice, has shaped and reflected cultural identity and resistance in the transatlantic world. This paper argues that *Son Cubano* functions simultaneously as an archive of Afro-Cuban resistance and as a space where the enduring hierarchies of music colonial politics (Susdorf, 2024) are negotiated and contested. By tracing the genre's historical evolution, its transnational commodification, and its contemporary decolonial reappropriations, we demonstrate how music continues to operate as a mode of resistance both within and beyond Cuba. Accordingly, we ask: how does the trajectory of *Son* reflect Cuba's ongoing negotiation between (neo)colonial domination and decolonial self-assertion? And how has the global commercialization of Cuban music affected how the islands' communities and cultural narratives are represented within the wider transatlantic sphere?

To address these questions, we draw on autoethnographic reflections, qualitative interviews with Cuban musical artists, and a close lyrical analysis of *El Cuarto de Tula*, a song composed by Sergio González Siaba and recorded by countless orchestras and musicians, such as the 1967 version performed by Nito Rojas with the Conjunto Tropicabana, among others, later popularized globally by the Buena Vista Social Club. This mixed approach allows us to examine how musicians within Cuba and across its diaspora reclaim *Son Cubano* as a language of critique and survival. By combining insights from musicology, cultural anthropology, and decolonial theory, we offer a perspective that moves beyond literature-based analyses to foreground lived experiences, artistic self-reflection, and musical form as entangled sites of resistance. We use an iterative process in which theory and empiricism inform each other dynamically. Accordingly, the following sections do not separate theory from data but intertwine them throughout.

The article proceeds as follows: The paper begins with an overview of our sample and methodological procedure. Then we outline the (neo)colonial legacies embedded in Cuban music by tracing its diverse musical influences and historical entanglements. We then introduce key theoretical concepts that inform our analysis. In the subsequent sections, we analyze the politics of transatlantic musical circulation through the case of *El Cuarto de Tula*, showing how it exemplifies the dynamics of appropriation, reinterpretation, and resistance. We conclude with a call to re-center and de-silence traditional Cuban music as a critical voice within global cultural discourse.

Researching Cuban traditional music

This article is grounded in an empirical survey between November 2024 and June 2025 to capture various perspectives from within the Cuban music branch. We undertook remote interviews with five Cuban musicians and artists, most of whom live and work in Cuba but also abroad. The participants, aged between 36 to 52 represent varied musical and professional backgrounds, including percussionists, a singer, a radio coordinator, a teacher, and the director of a music academy. Each participant was informed

ahead about the study's objective and provided written consent. The interviews were conducted in Spanish using a semi-structured format focused on artists' reflections on musicolonial power structures and decolonial musical practices. All quotations have been translated into English by the authors. Interview transcripts were reviewed and approved by each interviewee, who retained control over their words and use of the stories they contributed. All interviewees explicitly consented to appear under their real names.

In addition to these conversations, we incorporated autoethnographic material drawn from the music diary of co-author Raisal Tejeda Martínez, written during his two-year participation in the cultural mission 'Corazon Adentro' (2012-2013), a collaborative initiative between Cuba and Venezuela. This mission was rooted in the ideals of solidarity and anti-imperialism, and brought Cuban artists and educators into Venezuelan communities to promote cultural expression through workshops, theater productions, music ensembles and visual art programs. During this time, Raisal Tejeda Martínez wrote extensive notes, documenting and reflecting his own thoughts as a musician and composer of Cuban traditional music. These diary notes offer first-hand reflections on the role of traditional Cuban music as a vehicle of social transformation, complementing the remote interviews by linking artistic practice with lived decolonial experience.

The interviews were conducted by video or telephone call using WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, as part of what John Postill (2017) describes as remote ethnography: an ethnographic research approach at a distance through digital communication technologies, allowing researchers to participate in and observe social life without being physically co-present. Since COVID-19, telematic media such as webcams or live streaming have become integral to social and artistic interaction, making 'being there' from a distance an increasingly accepted ethnographic practice (Pink et al., 2016). As our interview partners were based across four continents, remote ethnography was a conscious methodological choice for us and not a second-best option. It allowed us to prioritize listening as a decolonial research practice.

Remote or digital ethnography, as coined by Sara Pink et al. (2016), allows an open research design that can be shaped to the institutional context and to the engagement of the participants. In this vein, our open research design enabled "collaborative ways of co-producing knowledge with research partners and participants" (Pink et al., 2016, p. 11) and thereby moved towards the creation of "spaces of liberatory praxis" (Mutua & Swadener, 2004, p. 20). As ethnomusicologists Luis Chávez and Russell P. Skelchy (2019) note, the attempt to decolonize music or musicology requires a "collaboration between ethnomusicologists, composers, and musicologists, which can take the form of publications, musical compositions, or live performances" (p. 138),—a principle we sought to embody by integrating theoretical reflection with artists' lived insights. While our study does not

claim to fully realize such collaboration, it combines (auto)ethnographic and theoretical perspectives to foreground traditional Cuban music as a site of decolonial listening and resistance within global music colonial politics.

The legacy of colonialism in Cuban music

Cuban music is inseparable from the colonial histories that have shaped the islands' social and cultural fabric. From the suppression of Indigenous musical practices to the forced migrations of enslaved Africans and Chinese laborers, music in Cuba has always evolved in tension with the power structures imposed by imperialism. These legacies are not confined to the past, they continue to echo through today's global circulation and commercialization of Cuban sounds. As Aníbal Quijano (2000) argues, coloniality did not end with the collapse of the colonial empires, rather it endured as an underlying matrix of power that continues to organize culture, labor, and knowledge. In the realm of music, this means that hierarchies established under colonialism, that define which sounds are 'refined' and which are 'primitive', whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced, remain deeply embedded in global cultural systems. Returning to this history is therefore essential for understanding how music colonial dynamics (Susdorf, 2024) operate today.

Few Indigenous elements remain audible in contemporary Cuban music, and the most important influences come from southern Spain, West Africa, and China. This process of *mestizaje*, cultural mixing, was both a creative force and a contested site of identity formation. As colonial domination sought to erase African and Indigenous expressions, new hybrid forms like *Son Cubano* emerged as acts of cultural negotiation and resistance. Tracing this genealogy allows us to see that the struggle for musical self-definition did not begin with modern debates about globalization or commodification but has been integral to Cuban music since its very beginnings.

Indigenous foundations: Echoes of the Areíto

Before colonization, Cuba was inhabited by three main Indigenous groups: the Guanahatabeyes, the Siboneyes, and the Taínos. Archaeological findings, including pictograms, artifacts and remnants of musical instruments reveal distinct musical traditions that used natural materials like shells, stones, and ceramics (Esquenazi Pérez, 2007, p. 20ff.). Their communal and ritual traditions were embodied in the Areíto, a religious cultural artistic movement, composed of dances, ceremonies, performances, songs, pictography, and some rustic instruments. Instruments like rattles made of wood, horns from conch shells, bone whistles, or those made from jaws of animals or drums created from hollowed-out tree trunks, were integral to their music and festivals, often attached to the body to respond to bodily movements (Bercht & Brodsky, 1997, p. 21; Ortiz, 1994). These early forms of music, passed down orally, laid the groundwork for later cultural expressions and instruments

(Marcano, 2011), as Raisel Tejeda Martínez's diary notes show, which he wrote while working as a music teacher during his Cultural Mission in Venezuela:

Kobo (conch shell)

- *Used as a wind instrument by blowing into a cut opening*
- *The pitch depended on the shell's size, larger shells gave deeper tones*
- *Played in rituals, processions, and community gatherings*
- *Replaced by the Botija, a clay jug used as a bass instrument in early Son ensembles*
- *The Botija was easier to tune and blend with stringed instruments less raw, more controlled*

Quijada (jawbone of horse or cow)

- *Played by scraping or striking the loosened teeth to produce a buzzing, rattling sound*
- *Created a raw, earthy rhythm, deeply percussive and symbolic*
- *Known by different names: Charrasca (Venezuela), Mandíbula (Spanish Caribbean islands), Cacharina (Argentina, Peru)*
- *It was replaced by the Güiro, which was more consistent in sound and easier to produce*
- *The Güiro is made from a hollowed-out fruit with carved notches, carried African roots but became standardized in Cuban popular music"*

Diary entry of March 10, 2013

This diary entry highlights the evolution and adaptation of musical instruments, influenced by cultural exchanges, such as the introduction of the African-origin *güiro*. These changes reflect more than just shifts in sound: they show how each instrument carries a story of adaptation and sometimes erasure. As Amancys Mileivis Pérez Savón, a music history teacher at a Cuban music academy, notes in our interview:

Regarding the Areíto as a manifestation and its indigenous contributions to Cuban culture, it's a bit difficult to represent these days due to the development humanity has undergone. But it still exists as a cultural memory.

During the colonial era, Areíto songs and dances narrated the encounters between Indo-Caribbeans and Europeans and the plans to rebel against colonial subjugation (Marcano, 2011, p. 20). However, Spanish colonization, beginning in 1511, led to the near-total eradication of these Indigenous societies. As Fairley (2000, p. 603) notes, the early colonial destruction of Indigenous culture left little trace in contemporary Cuban music, though vestiges remain in musical aesthetics and rhythms. In many Caribbean regions, entire Indigenous populations were wiped out, and enslaved Africans were forcibly resettled to compensate for the lack of labor (Bolívar Aróstégui, 2017).

Although Indigenous elements no longer dominate the modern Cuban soundscape, their continuities subtly challenge the colonial hierarchy of music that privileged European musical forms. As Juan Diego Díaz (2024) argues, ethnomusicology has historically marginalized non-Western rhythmic systems by labeling them as 'folk theories' (Blacking, 1967) or 'ethnotheories' (Nattiez, 1990; Zemp & Malkus, 1979), thus obscuring their intellectual depth. In the Cuban context, the Areíto and basic idiophones embody these "implicit or latent indigenous musical theories" (Díaz, 2024, p. 219), that act as subtle but enduring re-inscriptions of Indigenous sonic knowledge. They can be understood as quiet but disruptive resistances to the music colonial order that once sought to erase them.

Hispanic influences in the Cuban music

The ancestor of the Spanish guitar (the lute-like *vihuela*) arrived in Cuba in the 16th century as part of the colonization process that the conquistadors advanced along with their language, religion, and power structures (Giro, 1986). As Amancys Mileivis Pérez Savón explains to us:

The heritage from the colonizers comes from Spain, you know, Christopher Columbus and all his people. What did they bring? Mainly string instruments like the Vihuela, the Guitar, and all that. ... And this fundamental legacy of Spanish music can be found in rural music.

Through the following centuries, the *vihuela* was replaced by the classical guitar we know today (Tyler & Sparks, 2002). The guitar's influence extends to Cuban folk and popular music styles. It is a crucial instrument in genres like *Son*, which often features guitar, *tres* (a Cuban stringed instrument descended from the guitar), and percussion instruments like claves and bongos (Carpentier, 1945/2001). However, as the music historian Amancys Mileivis Pérez Savón emphasizes, this inheritance was not a passive reception but an act of creative transformation:

There's something really interesting about the guitar. In Cuba, if I remember correctly, Issac Nicola wrote the first book on guitar study. This shows that in Cuba, not only in popular music but also in classical or concert music, or what we might call more reflective music, there's a capacity to adopt elements that aren't originally from our culture but are inherited. And yet, we take these elements and develop them in remarkable ways.

The creation of the first guitar study book by Issac Nicola Romero (2000), one of the founders of the modern Cuban Guitar School, illustrates how Cuban music has evolved by integrating and transforming external influences into unique cultural expressions. This ability to adopt should not be understood simply as assimilation but as an act of resignification within the constraints of the imperial order, turning the colonizer's sound into a vehicle of local identity and collective memory. Simultaneously, Susdorf's (2024) notion of 'musicolonial mechanisms' reminds us, that such adaptations were shaped by the conditions of colonial instruction, which sought to align musical practice with European ideals of harmony and morality. Yet within these imposed frameworks, Afro-Cuban musicians and communities exercised agency by selectively appropriating and reinterpreting these elements into their own artistic framework.

This dynamic is also reflected in the incorporation of Gregorian chant and Spanish sacred polyphony into the repertory of Cuban music (Roy, 2000). When the Spaniards built modest churches in the mission towns and cathedrals in the main urban centers, Christian harmonies were imposed on the colonized. This influenced the emergence of polyphonic songs and the quatrains and couplets of various worker songs which were chanted by charcoal burners, washerwomen, and coal pickers (Esquenazi Pérez, 2007). As Amancys Mileivis Pérez Savón says, "The way verses are written, the décimas, all of that comes from Spanish heritage."

Besides the string instruments, the Spanish also brought wind instruments made of wood and clay, such as the *caramillo*, the *zampoña* and the *pipiritaña*, which were used in various peasant songs for agricultural and maritime activities as well as in the urban environment by scissor grinders and bakers (Esquenazi Pérez, 2007).

African heritage in Cuban music

The labor shortages that followed the devastation of Cuba's Indigenous population were not the primary cause of the transatlantic slave trade, but rather a consequence of European colonists' relentless pursuit of profit and expansion (Knight, 1970). This greed-driven demand for labor led to the mass enslavement and forced migration of African people to Cuba, particularly from regions of West and Central Africa such as Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, and the Congo. By the mid-19th century, Africans constituted nearly half of the island's population (Fairley, 2000). From the moment of capture and

embarkation on the African coast, slave traders and owners deliberately mixed enslaved groups of differing ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to prevent uprisings and systematically eradicate African religion and music (Palmié, 1991).

Nevertheless, some elements of African music survived and transformed across the Caribbean and Latin America (Ewens, 1995). In Cuba, this endurance was made possible partly through the *cabildos de nación*, the self-organized mutual aid and religious associations legally permitted under Spanish colonial rule, which allowed enslaved and freed people maintain aspects of their cultural, ethnic, and spiritual identities (Castellanos & Castellanos, 1992; Esquenazi Pérez, 2007). The first cabildos were founded in 1568 and became centers of Afro-Cuban religious and musical practice (Bolívar Aróstegui, 2017). Within these cabildos, music or singing served as a crucial means of cultural preservation and resistance, sustaining rhythmic and ritual traditions such as the Yoruba *bembé*, the Congo call-and-response chants, and the use of distinctive percussion instruments including the *tambores yuka* from the Congo, the *tambores batá* from Nigeria, and idiophones like the *güiro* and the *chequeré*, both crafted from hollowed out gourds (Roy, 2000).

The various African ethnic groups produced numerous variants of songs, music, and dance, both of ritual and secular nature. Elements from different origins were combined, some genres were transformed, and new ones were created. As Amancys Mileivis Pérez Savón points out:

The African influence in Cuba is evident in the various ethnic groups like the Yoruba or Lukumí, Bantú or Congo, and Abakuá or Karabalí. For instance, in Bantú culture, there's the famous 'vacunado', a religious dance expression that later appears in the Guaguancó. ... this music is part of the Makuta, a Congo dance music genre. When Makuta is danced, which represents the Bantú or Congo ethnicity, the pelvic movements are carried over to Cuban Rumba, specifically in the Guaguancó with its vacunado. The Columbia dance has movements linked to the Abakua or Ñañigo ethnicity. ... The dance steps refer to a symbolic figure in the Abakua cult called Ireme. As for the Yoruba or Lukumí, they have blended Yoruba chants with symphonic rock and various contemporary music styles like Timba, Songo, Salsa, and more.

As is evident from Amancy Mileivis Pérez Savón's explanations, an intricate web of different African influences has formed. Most musical influences are based on the primacy of religious preservation. The Cuban literary scholar Martha Esquenazi Pérez (2007) sees this as being rooted in a spiritual need to preserve faith in the beliefs handed down from ancestors. To understand the nature and role of music in this entanglement, she argues that it is necessary to examine the religious component as well.

Among these groups, the best known in Cuba are the Yoruba cults, which survived through various religious evolutions like the Afro-Cuban Regla de Osha (Santería) or like the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, both migrating into diasporas, such as the United States (Ewens, 1995). They use various percussion instruments like *tambores de bembé*, *cajones* and *güiros* (Hutchinson, 2020), which Amancys Mileivis Pérez Savón sees as the greatest heritage of African ethnic groups: “The enduring legacy of African percussion instruments further emphasizes the balance between innovation and the preservation of traditional roots within Cuban music.”

Esquenazi Pérez (2007) also interprets these transculturation processes, which began on the plantations, as fundamental to the formation of traditional Cuban music. *White* Cubans also joined the religious communities and contributed their musical styles, such as Celina González (1929-2015), who was famous for *música campesina* (Cuban country music), a style rooted in various types of *Sons*. Celina González was a follower of the Afro-Cuban religion Regla de Osha. Her early songs therefore had a strong religious influence and reflected her faith. One example is the song ‘Que viva Shango’, in which she expresses her devotion to the Catholic saint Santa Bárbara, thus reflecting the syncretization of African and Christian religion (Fairley, 2000). This song was her breakthrough. Together with her partner Reutilio Domínguez Terreno she wrote the song, which combines the typical décimas and quatrains of the *guaguancó* with themes of the deities of the Yoruba pantheons, receiving great public response (Lam, 2008).

The cabildos, along with broader religious communities and later syncretized Afro-Cuban religions and their music, can be understood as spaces of cultural autonomy that resisted colonial control over sound, ritual, and social organization. It illustrates that the adaptations or preservations of music and instruments not only sustained traditions but also provided tools for resistance and identity formation. These practices resonate with contemporary musicolonial politics, where Afro-diasporic sounds continue to be contested and (re)appropriated, which highlights the enduring struggle for cultural agency and creative self-determination “between creolised sonic identity and an urban American influenced template” (Alleyne, 2009, p. 92f.).

Chinese elements in Cuban music

While the transatlantic slave trade is most often associated with the forced migration of African peoples, Chinese communities also brought their cultural and musical traditions to Cuba during the 19th century. The first arrivals were so-called *coolies* (peasants), hired by the Royal Board of Development and Colonization to work in the sugarcane plantations under conditions similar to slavery. In 1853, free Chinese immigrants began arriving, many of whom later join Blacks and *white* Cuban creoles in the wars for independence in 1868 and 1895 (Chang Pon, 2018; Esquenazi Pérez, 2007). After the founding of the Cuban Republic in 1902, larger immigration

movements followed, especially from the southern Chinese regions such as Guangdong (Canton), Fujian (Fugen) and Chantew (Suataw), consolidating a vibrant Chinese community (Chang Pon, 2018, p. 151ff.).

Havana's Chinatown (*Barrio Chino*) became a vital cultural hub fostering Chinese artistic and musical expressions. The earliest record of Chinese theater in Cuba dates to 1873, featuring wooden puppet performances by "Chinese who had a good singing voice" [Antonio Chuffat Latour 1927] cited in Baltar Rodríguez, 1997, p. 146; translated into English by the authors). By the early 20th century, artistic associations such as *Kuoc Sen*, *Kuoc Kong*, *Kuan Tih Lock* and *Chiong Wah Yin Lock Kou Se* promoted and preserved Chinese cultural life in Cuba, while integrating it into the Cuban soundscape. Their performances mixed Cantonese opera with Cuban rhythms and Western instruments such as banjos, saxophones, ukuleles etc., resulting in a unique cultural fusion (Chang Pon, 2018, p. 162f.; Linares Savio, 2000, p. 45f.).

These fusions were particularly visible during popular carnivalesque festivities, especially in eastern Cuba. Late 19th-century reports from Las Tunas and Matanzas describe Lunar New Year and lantern festivals featuring performances that fused Chinese instruments and formats with local Cuban sounds. In Majibacoa, for instance, the Chinese New Year was introduced with sung theater accompanied by *guitarritas* (small guitars), while in Matanzas, San Fan Kong and the Lantern Festival performed a parade with musicians playing cane flutes, pails tied at the waist, cymbals, and bells (Esquenazi Pérez, 2007, p. 181). These hybrid celebrations illustrate how Chinese traditions were not only maintained but also creatively recontextualized within Cuban popular culture. Rather than remaining isolated, Chinese musical practices were woven into the broader tapestry of Cuban sonic life, particularly through instruments and performance styles.

The influence of Chinese music on Cuban musical traditions was strongest in the cities of Havana and Santiago de Cuba, where Chinese instruments became woven into the fabric of popular and folk music. Among the most notable contributions are the *Corneta China* (Chinese cornet), a Chinese wind instrument still played in the conga or carnival groups, and the *Caja China*, a wooden percussion block used in genres like *Salsa* and *Rumba* to mark rhythmic accents (Lapidus, 2015). The *Corneta China* is derived from the Chinese *Suona* trumpet (唢呐), known in Mandarin as *hai di* 海笛 ('sea flute') or *jin kou jiao* 金口角 ('golden-mouthed horn') (Lei, 2021). Raisal Tejeda Martínez recalls this legacy in his diary notes with a personal anecdote:

Today, after rehearsal, one of my students asked me where the *Corneta China* comes from. It stopped me in my tracks. A simple question, but it stirred something deep. That instrument, so loud and piercing during carnival, is more than just a sound to me. It's part of my blood. My great-great-grandfather came to Cuba from China in the 19th century. My mother told me that he came from Canton, brought here as a

forced laborer to work in the sugarcane fields. He was one of many who came with nothing but their hands and sounds. And somehow, a piece of that sound survived, the *Corneta China*. I explained to my student, that the *Corneta China* arrived in Cuba in the 1920s ... and now it blasts proudly through our congas at every carnival in Santiago. It's wild to think how that sharp cry has become part of what people now recognize as 'Cuban'. But if you really listen beyond the noise, you'll find even more Chinese influence. The *Caja China*. Once it was a basic wooden box and then it turned into the Jam Block we use today in Timba and Salsa. Even the soft shimmer of Cortinas or Chimes in Afro-Cuban jazz carries that old echo of East Asia. ... It made me proud to tell my student all this. Sometimes it feels like our music holds all our ancestors in many layers and with different pulses. The Chinese roots are quieter, but they are there. They are woven into every beat and every celebration we play.

Diary entry of November 5, 2012

The *Corneta China* and *Caja China* are not just historical curiosities, they are living artifacts of decolonial resignification. Their continued use and integration into Cuban music exemplifies how subaltern sounds were actively transformed and reinterpreted within musicolonial structures (Susdorf, 2024). What began as the sonic remnant of coerced migration now performs as a statement of cultural endurance and hybrid identity. Through process of adaptation and appropriation, Chinese sonic traces have become a staple in Cuban folk-popular music as active rearticulations of identity and belonging. However, as Jocelyne Guilbault (1993) observes in her study on zouk in the French Caribbean, such hybridizations are never neutral: they unfold within global hierarchies that determine which sounds are commodified and which are marginalized. Within this frame, the various influences on Cuban music can be understood as subtle acts of decolonial creativity, moments where cultural memory resists the homogenizing tendencies of global sound industries.

Mestizaje and the invention of Cuban music

The music that emerged from the abovementioned crucible was a fusion of Indigenous influences, Spanish melodies, African polyrhythms, and Asian percussive elements, reflecting the diverse experiences and identities of Cuba's pluriverse population shaped by centuries of migration, oppression, and resistance. One of the most enduring legacies of colonialism in Cuban music is the concept of *mestizaje*, which lies at the heart of its musical aesthetics (Arnedo, 2001). Yet these are not merely ancestral layers or static traditions.

Instead, as musicolonial politics shows us, they are arenas of ongoing negotiation between dominance and agency as well as extraction and resilience (Díaz, 2024; Susdorf, 2024).

This syncretic blend gave rise to the uniquely Cuban genre *Son*, that emerged from folkloric music in the eastern provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo. Over time, *Son* became the basis of modern genres like *Salsa* and *Latin Jazz* (Alén Rodríguez, 1998; Roy, 2000). The result is a musical idiom that embodies both continuity and transformation: a living archive of how colonial entanglements and creative reappropriations shaped Cuba's sonic identity.

(Neo)colonial hierarchies and decolonial longings

The legacy of colonialism also carries darker implications for Cuban music, as it reflects the enduring inequalities and power dynamics that continue to shape society. Cuba's tumultuous history as a Spanish colony, followed by periods of U.S. intervention and influence, has profoundly shaped its musical landscape. Despite achieving formal independence in the early 20th century, Cuba continued to grapple with neocolonial forces, including economic exploitation and political manipulation by internal and external powers (Moore, 2006).

Within this context, *Son Cubano* and *Afro-Cuban Jazz* emerged not only as aesthetic innovations but as sonic acts of resistance. Characterized by its syncopated rhythms, call-and-response vocals, and intricate guitar patterns, *Son* especially became the soundtrack of everyday life for Cubans while carrying coded commentaries on inequality and resilience. Artists like Benny Moré, Celia Cruz, and Arsenio Rodríguez used their music to affirm and to critique the systematic marginalization that accompanied Cuba's modernity (Roy, 2000).

Yet, as shown in studies addressing musicolonial politics (Díaz, 2024; Susdorf, 2024) and nostalgic repacking in 'world music' (Guilbault, 1993), Western cultural industries continue to appropriate and depoliticize musical forms like *Son Cubano* by transforming them into sanitized commodities for global consumption. This commercialization reproduces colonial logics of extraction: value is derived from local creativity, but meaning and authorship are reframed for Western markets. Against these pressures, contemporary musicians continue to defend *Son* as cultural memory and resistance. As Vietnam based percussionist Yurislandy Chacón Queralta puts it in an interview, "I am grateful to those musicians of yesterday for having paved the way for what today is our Cuban music. ... and to maintain the legacy of our musical history."

His statement captures *Son's* enduring power as a living archive, where its rhythms and lyrics become remembrance, and music remains both celebration and critique, both honoring tradition and responding to change.

Traditional Cuban music has long been a powerful instrument of anticolonial resistance and public awareness. In common with much folklore more broadly, genres such as *Son*, *Trova*, and *Rumba* have historically served

as vehicles for social critique, collective memory, and the lived experiences of the Afro-Cuban community under colonial and neocolonial oppression. As radio journalist Yaneisa Peña Turró, based on a Cuban island, explains to us:

Since its emergence, music has served as a form of human expression, it was used to voice social critique or convey deep emotions. Son was no exception in Cuba. ... musicians have always used its lyrics to express their various sentiments in response to their surroundings, be it political, or love.

However, the global marketing of traditional Cuban music (e.g., through projects such as Buena Vista Social Club), often shifts toward nostalgic entertainment rather than political resistance. The ‘world music’ industry often frames non-Western musics through exoticized narratives that erase their social and political contexts, while commercialization further flattens critical content to fit Western expectations (Alleyne, 1996). This framing aligns with our idea that ‘nobody likes to dance with pain’, appealing to consumers seeking ‘exotic’ and/or pleasurable experiences or spectacles.

Decolonial approaches to music, therefore, call for a shift from passive consumption to critical listening and thus tuning in not only to rhythm and melody but to the historical and political stories embedded in sound. In this vein, the dominance of Western music and musicology, that is reflected in their prioritization in repertoires, curricula, and scholarly discourse, must be decentered to begin what Oliver Lovesey (2016) describes as “decolonizing hearts, minds, and ears” (p. 1)—recognizing the political agency inherent in musical practices from the Global South.

While foundational Caribbean thinkers such as Fernando Ortiz (1965), Emilio Grenet (1939), and Frantz Fanon (1961) acknowledged the complex cultural and political dimensions of music, only recent scholarship (Alleyne, 2009; Díaz, 2024; Fairley, 2004; Hutchinson, 2020; Susdorf, 2024) has examined how popular and traditional music across the Caribbean and beyond operate as crucial spaces of negotiation, where local creativity confronts global capitalism and the enduring hierarchies of (neo)colonial power. Building on these insights, we situate *Son Cubano* within these debates, arguing that it both reflects and reshapes the colonial and postcolonial dynamics in the transatlantic soundscape.

In contemporary Cuba, this struggle continues, as Yanet Maité Rodríguez Hernández, director of a music academy on a Cuban island, observes in an interview, “The lyrics of the Son are still ... critical ... but it’s sad to say, that they have taken a back seat in the current Cuban musical panorama.” That traditional Cuban music is being pushed into the background is also reflected in the thoughts of Maikel Vega, a Cuban percussionist, who has lived in Vietnam for the past few years:

The traditional genres and even some of the classic Cuban styles are being overshadowed by these newer genres like Repacto, Fashatón, Trakton, Reggaetón, and Timbatón. Even though these new styles might not have the same musical depth or quality, they're really grabbing the spotlight right now.

Mainstream music media, both in Cuba and abroad, play a central role in shaping what is heard and remembered. Global platforms often prioritize trends that favor profit over cultural integrity and substantial musical quality, marginalizing traditional genres in favor of styles that conform to global tastes. This concern is echoed by Yurislandy Chacón Queraltá:

The consumption of foreign music is enormous ... The media should really step in and do something about it, but they don't. ... The music industry keeps pushing one kind of sound as the standard, and people just go along with it. For us musicians, it's hard to push back against that kind of machine.

Their words underscore how musicocoloniality manifests today: global industry logics and local censorship marginalize socially conscious Cuban music, while shaping participation in the global music industry, that is dependent on musical trends propagated on platforms such as radio, social media, and music video networks. In this way, the global music industry sustains what Susdorf (2024) calls musicocoloniality, an exploitative system, in which sound is managed to maintain colonial authority and exploitative production conditions “from the 1600s to the present” (p. 384).

To gain visibility or financial survival, many Cuban and Global South musicians must adapt their sound to the demands of Western-dominated markets. In doing so, they risk reshaping or softening their political voice, as the *white*-Eurocentric dominated music-producing machine privileges sales over critique. This dynamic reflects the ongoing “colonial extraction” (Surdorf, 2024, p. 397) in which non-European sonic traditions are extracted, decontextualized, and repackaged as consumable difference within capitalist circuits. Just as early ethnographers ‘mined’ colonized soundscapes for data and prestige, as analyzed by Surdorf (2024) using the Dutch colony of Suriname, today’s industry continues to extract musical diversity. As with other colonial systems of control, musicocolonial politics do not merely silence subaltern voices, they co-opt them, sometimes repackaging resistance as spectacle.

This logic is partly visible in the rise of *Reggaetón*, which currently has a great presence on the Cuban music scene. Once a genre of marginal voices and urban critique, *Reggaetón* has been absorbed into the global mainstream culture, where commercial success often demands more profitable themes like partying, luxury, and romance (Legrand, 2006). As Mike Alleyne (2009) observes, this global circulation transforms Caribbean sound into a spectacle

of difference instead of “attempting to sell the music on the basis of its aesthetic strengths” (p. 77). Music academy director Yanet Maité Rodríguez Hernández remarks:

In the current Cuban musical panorama, the presence of Reggaetón is evident. This foreign genre bursts into the Cuban music, and honestly not in a very positive way. It’s here to stay.

Despite this commercialization, *Son* continues to ground new hybrid forms. As Yaneisa Peña Turró explains to us, its rhythmic and melodic patterns remain the foundation of Cuban popular music, even when fused with *Timba* or *Reggaetón*:

Even the most legendary bands, and the newest ones too, keep using *Son* as their foundation. ... You can hear it in all the fusions happening now, like when Reggaetón gets mixed with *Son* and *Timba*, like in *Habla Matador* by El Taiger, or how Cimafunk blends funk with *Songo*, like in *Son del Buey Cansao* by Juan Formell. ... It’s like a musical ajiaco, a stew of sounds, but *Son* is always the base, with its groove and flavor.

This persistence reflects how subaltern sounds are resignified to sustain agency within a system that commodifies them (Díaz, 2024). Yet under musicolonial conditions, this blending is not always empowering. As Alison Torres-Ramos (2015) argues, the commercialization of *Reggaetón* hypersexualized and criminalized portrayals of marginalized communities to cater Eurocentric views of the Caribbean as exotic, sensual, and dangerous. Meanwhile, the complex sociopolitical realities of the artists and communities behind the music are glossed over (Gonzalez, 2025).

In this vein, Torres-Ramos (2015) argues, *Reggaetón* evolved from a marginalized genre talking about struggles and resistance to a homogenized genre focusing on having a good time. The global music industry transformed the nature of this genre and made it one-dimensional to maintain hegemony and gain corporate profits (Torres-Ramos, 2015). Yet, resistance persists, as Yanet Maité Rodríguez Hernández affirms: “There will always be people, institutions and groups working to rescue our traditions, both the *Son* and many genres of traditional Cuban music.”

Thus, while global structures continue to depoliticize and extract Cuban sound, artists across Cuba and its diasporas transform these pressures into creative resistance. We adopt this decolonial lens to examine how traditional Cuban music functions as a counter-hegemonic practice within a global system that continuously tries to neutralize its critical edge. In doing so, we aim to illuminate the enduring political relevance of music as both cultural memory and active resistance. As we turn from the cultural significance of *Son* within Cuba to its journey across borders, it becomes clear that this genre, like many others rooted in colonial histories, does not travel untouched, as we will discuss in more detail in the following section.

Politics of transatlantic musical flows: The case of Buena Vista Social Club

Despite Cuba's extraordinary musical richness, its sounds circulate within global structures shaped by (neo)colonial hierarchies. Two forces significantly reshape its trajectory today: the commercialization of music in global markets and the restrictions imposed by the Cuban political system on freedom of expression. Economic inequalities and political instability in Cuba, coupled with the long-standing U.S. embargo since 1960, have limited the access to international markets and resources for many local musical talents, obstructing fair cultural exchange. These conditions make Cuban music especially vulnerable to appropriation and misinterpretation, affecting not only its production and circulation but also how it is understood and consumed.

The Impact of commercialization

The global success of Buena Vista Social Club epitomizes this "hegemonic mainstream commodification of Caribbean music" (Alleyne, 2009, p. 85). When the project gained worldwide attention in the late 1990s, its romanticized imagery aligned only "with little direct relevance to Cuban cultural life" (Fairley, 2004, p. 83) at that time. Overnight the ensemble's elderly musicians have been transformed into international celebrities. While the album and documentary brought long-overdue recognition and financial support to the musicians involved (Fairley, 2004), they also exposed them to the exploitative mechanisms of a global industry where authenticity becomes a product. While the lyrics of the Buena Vista Social Club often reflect hardship, they were rarely promoted as socially critical. Instead, they were framed as expressions of national identity and marketed to tourists in search of an 'authentic' yet apolitical and carefree Cuba (Segundo, 2000).

The deliberate omission of contemporary Cuban music in Wim Wenders' Buena Vista Social Club documentary, particularly the vibrant styles popular in the 1990s, was a conscious choice to maintain a romanticized, apolitical image (Philipps, 2000). This nostalgia fits neatly into broader narratives perpetuated by Hollywood films and corporate marketing, where pre-revolutionary Cuba is sold as a frozen-in-time paradise, detached from its ongoing struggles (Hutchinson, 2020). The consequences on the international audience are reflected in music academy director Yanet Maité Rodríguez Hernández' thoughts:

Most of the non-Spanish speaking listeners who consume Buena Vista Social Club's music are not only unaware of the messages conveyed by their songs because of their lack of knowledge of the language, but also because they have no knowledge of what really happens in our country.

Her reflection underscores a deeper problem: when Western audiences consume Cuban music primarily for its rhythm or ‘vibe’, they often overlook its actual meaning. This selective listening reinforces a pattern of cultural consumption that privileges style over substance, as she further outlines:

The vast majority do not pay attention to the lyrics, they just enjoy their rhythm without knowing what the song is saying. ... The special thing about Cuban music is, that it defends and criticizes in a different way and is sometimes pleasant to the ear due to its musical style. And because of the way it sounds, people often miss the message.

Similarly, radio coordinator Yaneisa Peña Turró notes in an interview that global audiences are “carried away by the emotions that Cuban music triggers,” overlooking its critical undertones.

This selective consumption is what Alleyne (2009) identifies as the lack of a “widespread appetite ... for the music as sociopolitical commentary rather than merely as a party supplement” (p. 82.). Closely linked to this is the notion that there is only *this* one musical identification with Cuba which is why outsiders so often mention the nostalgic sounds of the Buena Vista Social Club when Cuba is associated with music. While this is understandable given its popularity, it is striking when viewed against Cuba’s great (traditional) musical diversity. At the time of Buena Vista Social Club’s success, the lived reality of Cuban music as experienced by most Cubans on the islands before and during that period was largely ignored (Fairley, 2004). The Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon thus marked a pivotal moment in the late 20th century. Yet, 25 years later, the same workings of music colonial power persist, as Cuban musicians continue to navigate the fine line between cultural representation and commodification.

Political constraint and the boundaries of artistic expression

Alongside market pressures, Cuban musicians face internal political constraints that limit what can be publicly expressed. While artists are technically free to compose as they wish, the reach and visibility of their work is directly shaped by the state’s ideological gatekeeping. Songs that deviate from official narratives or criticize government policy are rarely broadcast, even when they achieve popular acclaim. As radio journalist Yaneisa Peña Turró explains:

Musicians in Cuba are free to compose whatever they want, but if their songs go against the policies of the state, their music cannot be broadcast ... There are Cuban musicians who do not agree with the current system and government and their music goes unnoticed ... although musically it is a super hit song in the street.

More recent studies underscore this dynamic by showing how musicians navigate a delicate balance between creative freedom and political conformity. These strategies include performing socially critical music in private gatherings such as galleries or homes, making unannounced appearances, appropriating institutional cultural venues, or maintaining a form of symbolic critique (López Cano, 2014). The latter often entails remaining lyrically within a framework that aligns with socialist ideology to avoid the risk of censorship, blacklisting, imprisonment, or being condemned as deserters (Dever, 2021). Others rely on metaphorical expression, as Yanet Maité Rodríguez Hernández elaborates:

Music with its poetic interweaving of words tends to somehow cover up the criticisms that are made to the system that is imposed ... but the possibilities in these moments of criticizing the system through music must be careful and well worked. This can sometimes have serious consequences for the artists and their projects. These artists in spite of making quality music and being recognized artists, their music is consumed by a small number of people because they are not promoted.

In this environment, metaphor and ambiguity become strategic tools. Musicians encode dissent in poetic language, irony, or allegory to keep their critique legible to local audiences while avoiding overt confrontation with authorities. This balancing act dilutes the radical potential of music but also affirms its enduring role as a site of coded resistance and cultural survival (Pijpers, 2016).

The intersection of commercialization and state censorship thus creates a precarious space for Cuban music. On one hand, global market flattens it into nostalgic spectacle. On the other, the Cuban state curtails its most confrontational voices. Yet, as our ethnographic interviews show, Cuban musicians remain deeply aware of these forces. Whether through poetic metaphor or sonic innovation, many continue to use music to reflect their realities, critique their conditions, and preserve cultural memory. In doing so, they reaffirm the role of *Son* not just as entertainment, but as a living archive of resistance and resilience. To understand it fully, we must listen not only for its melodies, but also for the messages hiding within them, as we do in the following analysis of Buena Vista Social Club's *El cuarto de Tula*.

Tula's Room / El cuarto de Tula

In the La Cachimba neighborhood, the commotion has started
En el barrio La Cachimba se ha formado la corredera

There went the firefighters with their bells, their sirens
Allá fueron los bomberos con sus campanas, sus sirenas

Oh mama, what happened
Ay mamá, ¿qué pasó

Tula's room; caught fire
El cuarto de Tula; le cogió candela

She fell asleep and didn't put out the candle
Se quedó dormida y no apagó la vela

Call Ibrahim Ferrer, look for the firefighters!
¡Que llamen a Ibrahim Ferrer, que busquen los bomberos!



Figure 1. Link to video performance of 'El Cuarto de Tula' by Raisel Tejeda Martínez at Universitas Mataram, Lombok, Indonesia, 25 June 2024.

At first glance, *El Cuarto de Tula* is a lively *guaracha* recounting a bedroom fire caused by a forgotten candle. Yet, the song demonstrates that *Son* is never just light indulgence: it encodes metaphors, community action, and cultural memory.

Its composer Sergio González Siaba (1915-1989) lived and died in relative obscurity, never receiving recognition or royalties for his work. His global fame came only posthumously through Buena Vista Social Club, highlighting how musical and political erasure can shape artistic legacies.

According to an urban legend, Tula was a woman who turned to sex work out of necessity during the 1970s or 1980s. The legend says that she sought guidance from an Afro-Cuban Regla de Osha priest. She was advised what to do and lit a candle to her Orishas when she returned home. After many prayers she fell asleep, overcome by exhaustion, with the candle still burning. It is said that the Orishas, in compassion to her request for peace, decided to take her away by setting fire to everything so that she would no longer suffer. Even today, for many Cubans, especially those living with blackouts and economic hardship, this story is familiar and symbolic. The recurring image of the candle functions not only as a plot device but also as a metaphor for instability, vulnerability, and spiritual hope.

The lyrical layering exemplifies how *Son* uses everyday imagery to speak about deeper human experiences and communal dynamics without openly breaking social taboos. The song's structure mirrors the thematic layering.

Four-bar verses lead into a repetitive, chant-like chorus, building rhythmic tension with each return to the line “*El cuarto de Tula le cogió candela.*” The ‘fire’ (*candela*) signals both literal danger and flashes of a hard life situation. The urgency in the repeated chorus mimics communal alarm, turning melodrama into a collective response, and signaling that there is more to this fire than meets the eye and/or the ear. It hints at hidden tensions in everyday life by echoing social dynamics and emotional undercurrents that resonate beyond mere entertainment.

This use of repeated call-and-response between verses and chorus, a characteristic of Afro-Cuban musical traditions, evokes the presence of the community, transforming a personal tragedy into a shared experience, and revealing how *Son* always marries story and communal voice. When the lyrics reference band members like Ibrahim Ferrer and Eliades Ochoa (“*Que llaman e Ibrahim Ferrer*” and “*viene Eliades*”), they are framed as symbolic first responders to bear witness. The improvisational *montuno* section provides room for musical solos, especially on the laúd, reinforcing *Son*’s folk origins and its function as a collaborative, expressive platform.

Siaba’s composition demonstrates how Cuban voices critique through metaphor and double entendre, especially when open dissent risks censorship. Beneath its festive surface, *El Cuarto de Tula* presents a socio-political and spiritual parable about survival, exhaustion, and the fragility of daily life. Even repackaged for global audiences, it retains its power as a social commentary. However, as Western audiences often hear *Son* only as ‘world music’ and as background ambiance, its political and emotional depth risks erasure. The song reminds us that behind every catchy hook can lie a fire waiting to be put out, not just danced to—because nobody dances with pain.

Conclusion

In this article we explored how *Son Cubano*, as both a musical form and socio-cultural practice, embodies the entanglement between cultural identity, resistance, and the legacies of (neo)colonialism in Cuba and the broader transatlantic sphere. By tracing its evolution from colonial-era cabildos to today’s fusion of *Son* with *Reggaetón* and *Timba* on global stages, we have shown that *Son* functions simultaneously as an archive of Afro-Cuban resistance and as a space where the hierarchies of musicolonial politics (Susdorf, 2024) are continually contested. Rooted in Cuba’s creolized history and shaped by multiple ethnics and diasporas, *Son* reflects the complex reality of identity-making in a postcolonial world. Its hybridity signals not cultural dilution but creative re-appropriation: transforming imposed structures into tools of agency.

At the same time, the global circulation of Cuban music has revealed how the logics of (neo)colonial power persist in the transatlantic music industry. Current musicolonial tactics of the empire (Susdorf, 2024) repurpose traditional and non-Western music into commodified soundtracks for

international markets, muting its socio-political context. As our empirical findings indicate, this is not merely a matter of linguistic ignorance, but a structural silencing where affect is prioritized over meaning.

In Cuba, artists also navigate constraints such as censorship and limited access to media. Global recognition often depends on conforming to market expectations, as reflected in our empirical surveys. In both cases, traditional Cuban music is dehistoricized and depoliticized, distanced from the very communities that created and sustained it. Still, artists continue to find creative ways to critique, resist, and reassert identity, keeping *Son* alive as a living archive of Cuban experience.

To counter this, we must re-center and de-silence traditional Cuban music as a critical voice. This demands a shift from passive consumption to critical listening, and a rethinking of the systems through which music is promoted. We must disrupt the circuits of musicolonial politics by foregrounding music not just as entertainment, but as testimony.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the musicians and historians who generously shared their time, experiences, and expertise with us. Their invaluable insights greatly enriched the study. We also extend our thanks to the participants of ISISA's 19th Islands of the World Conference at the University of Mataram in Lombok for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this article, which we presented in the panel on island cultures. Our appreciation also goes to the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and insightful suggestions, which significantly improved this paper. Parts of the research presented in this article were supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) through a Firnberg Project (T 1255-G).

In memoriam

On November 30, 2025, our interview partner Yanet Maité Rodríguez Hernández passed away. We are deeply grateful for the generous insights she shared with us, especially her profound knowledge of Cuban music, whose echoes will continue to resonate far beyond these pages. With heartfelt appreciation and respect, we dedicate this article to her memory.

Submitted: June 25, 2025 CST. Accepted: November 17, 2025 CST. Published: December 12, 2025 CST.



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