Cuban Fire
The Story of SALSA and LATIN JAZZ

ISABELLE LEYMARIE
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CUBAN FIRE
Cuban Fire

THE STORY OF SALSA AND LATIN JAZZ

Isabelle Leymarie
To the memory of Odilio Urfe, Machito, Charlie Palmieri, and Chico O'Farrill, dear friends and irreplaceable musicians and human beings
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Emergence of the Havana son

Ésta es la canción del bongó
Here is the bongo song
El que más fino sea
May the finest of you all
Responde, si llamo yo.
Answer, if I call.

Nicolás Guillén

Trovadores and estudiantinas

Several musicians from Oriente, attracted by the dazzling cultural atmosphere of Havana, its bustling nightlife and work opportunities, settled in the capital during the 1910s and 1920s. Among them were trovadores Floro y Miguel (Floro Zorrilla and Miguel Zaballa), the Enrizo brothers (Nené and Sungo), “El Galleguito” (José Parapar), Higinio Rodríguez, “Nano” (Romín) León, Justo Vásquez, “Pancho Majagua y Tata Villegas” (Francisco Salvo Salazar and Carlos de Villegas), “Teofilito” (Rafael Gómez) and his Pensamiento trio, the El Blanco y el Negro duet (with the guitarist and tresista “Santiago” Smood – a former American soldier established in Cuba, and the pianist “El Gallego” Menéndez), the Patricio Ballagas–Oscar Hernández duet, and the one set up by José Castillo and Manuel Luna, composer of the famed La cleptómana, with its beautiful lyrics by Agustín Acosta:

Era una cleptómana de bellas fruslerías,
robada por un goce de estética emoción.
Linda fascinadora de cuyas fechorías
jamás supo el severo juzgado de instrucción.

She was a kleptomaniac of beautiful trinkets, driven by the pleasures of aesthetic emotion.
Pretty bewitcher whose misdeeds
the severe examining judge never found out about.

Other estudiantinas such as La Estrella Italiana, La Estudiantina Oriental, La Arrolladora, led by tresista “Guayabito” (Narciso Sánchez), Los Apaches, La Creme de Vie, and Los Guajiros also worked in Havana.

Trovadores sought to recreate the atmosphere of Oriente in peñas, musical gatherings held in theaters and in cafes, that fostered creativity. They often performed such rural forms of son as the son reginero, typical of the town of Manzanillo. Some of these artists were greatly instrumental in establishing the son and the bolero in Havana. Many, however, leading carefree lives and often exploited by record companies, survived in dire poverty: Miguel Companioni,

7 Based on a verse form called regina.
for instance, never received any royalties for his hit Mujer perjura (1918), recorded by María Teresa Vera.

**A few trovadores and composers of sones**

Born in Sancti Spíritus, in the former province of Las Villas, Miguel Companioni Gómez (1884–1965) became blind as a child. He worked in a bakery store, sold pharmaceutical products, and around 1902 decided to dedicate himself fully to music. He studied guitar, piano, flute, violin, and bass, and composed poetical and slightly precious songs: *Por qué latió mi corazón, A lé lé, Juana, La fe, La lira rota:*

\[\text{Tú rompiste el encanto de mi vida bohemia,} \\
\text{Silenciaste mi lira, destrozaste mi amor.} \\
\text{Y mi ruta poblaste de tormentos y sombras} \\
\text{Y mi fe en las mujeres, tu perfidia mató.} \\
\text{No me pidas ahora nuevos cantos de amores,} \\
\text{Tú rompiste mi lira, ya no puedo cantar.} \\
\text{Aquel amor inmenso que en mi vida mataste,} \\
\text{A vivir como entonces nunca más volveré.} \]

You destroyed the charm of my bohemian life,<br> You silenced my lyre, crushed my love.<br> You filled my path with torments and shadows<br> And your perfidy destroyed my faith in women.<br> You broke my lyre, I can’t sing any more.<br> That immense love which you killed in my life<br> Will never live again as it once did.

A prolific songwriter (*Redención, Naturaleza, the pregón Se va el dulcero*), Rosendo Ruiz (1885–1983) was born in Santiago into a poor family. He studied the guitar with Pepe Sánchez, played locally with his friend Manuel Rubio, and among other songs wrote the *danzón Venganza de amor*, the *bambuco* Entre mares y arena (1911), and *Dos lindas rosas* (1913). In Havana, where he continued to work as a tailor as he had done in Oriente, he met pianist Antonio María Romeu, who helped him publish *Entre mares y arenas*. Although Ruiz greatly admired Garay, the older *trovador*, resenting Ruiz’s success, penned *Perfidia* (distinct from Alberto Domínguez’s song of the same name) with him in mind. Ruiz then composed *Gela, Confesión, De mi Cubita es el mango*, which became an international hit, and *Junto a un cañaaveral*, immortalized by Abelardo Barroso. He also led the Trío Habana (with José Hernández and Enrique Betancourt), the Cuarteto Cuba, and in 1934 the Trío Azul, in which composer Guillermo Rodríguez Fife sang. He died destitute in Havana.

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8 An Afro-Colombian genre.
With his handsome and sensitive face, Manuel Corona wrote many refined and lyrical songs such as Mercedes, Nubes de ensueño, La Alfonsa (for which he devised four different versions, sung simultaneously by him, Patricio Ballagas, Rafael Zequeira, and María Teresa Vera). He also specialized in musical rejoinders: La Habanera, for instance, was an answer to Garay’s La Bayamesa, Gele amada to Ruiz’s Gele hermosa, Animada to Patricio Ballagas’s Timídez, Tú y yo to Oscar Hernández’s Ella y yo. Born in Caibarién in 1880 in a humble family, he moved to Havana at the age of fifteen, where he worked as a cigar-maker. In 1900 he wrote the bolero Doble inconsciencia. Two years later he went to Santiago, where he befriended the trovadores Manuel Delgado, Pepe Sánchez, and Pepe Banderas. In 1916 he composed the guaracha-rumba El servicio obligatorio, criticizing the compulsory military draft imposed by Menocal’s government, and evoking the rooster (gallo), an archetype of the Cuban male:

Hay quien dice acongojado
Mi pobrecita mujer
Si me llevan obligado
Se quedará sin comer.
Uno que se siente gallo
De una gallina sin par
Dice que le parta un rayo
Si lo mandan a pelear.

Some say with anxiety
If I am drafted against my will
My poor little woman
Will go without food.
One who feels like the rooster
Of a hen without equal,
Wishes lightning would strike him
If they should send him to fight.

Two years later he created the superb bolero Longina:

En el lenguaje misterioso de tus ojos
hay un tema que destaca
sensibilidad.
En las sensuales líneas de tu cuerpo
hermoso,
las curvas que se admirán
despiertan ilusión.

In the mysterious language of
your eyes,
a theme stands out:
sensitivity.
In the sensuous lines of your
beautiful body
the curves one admires
awaken desire.

Towards the end of his life, suffering from tuberculosis, he spent time in a sanatorium and then returned to sing in the cafés of Havana. He died in Marianao in 1950, like Ruiz, penniless and forgotten.

Born in Palmira, in the former province of Las Villas, and raised in Cienfuegos, Eusebio Delfín (1893–1965) was a banker by trade. An excellent guitarist and smooth singer, he accompanied himself with great finesse, in a style generally
less percussive than that of his peers from Oriente, featuring many arpeggios. In 1923, with composer Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes, he organized a Cuban song festival at the Teatro Nacional, in Havana; he led a conjunto and facilitated the guitar’s acceptance in the capital. He is mostly known for La guinda roja (1924), Aquella boca, and ¿Y tú que has hecho? (also known as En el tronco de un árbol, “In a Tree Trunk”), songs for which he wrote only the music.

Born in Santiago, Ñico Saquito (Benito Antonio Fernández Ortiz, 1902–1982) sought inspiration from proverbs, jokes, or events of daily life for his sones and guarachas: Cuidadito compay gallo, Cosas del compay Antón, Que hio compay Andrés, Menéame la cuna, Ramón, about the disagreements of married life, Estoy hecho tierra, La negra Leonó, Yo no escondo mi abuela (“I don’t hide my grandmother”), and the humorous El peluquero:

Dios bendiga al peluquero,
uestru peluquero que disfraza a mi mujer.

God bless the hairdresser,
the hairdresser who disguises my wife.

He worked as a foundryman, mechanic, groom, street-vendor, and sugarcane cutter while singing with his guitar, writing songs (he penned numbers for the famed Carabali Izama comparsa) and playing baseball. During the 1930s, he formed various groups, was lead singer of Manolo Castillo’s Cuarteto Castillo, and wrote such hits as Al vaivén de mi carreta and María Cristina. In 1936 he moved to Havana, where his career picked up. He performed on the radio with singer Alberto Aroche, guitarists José Antonio Piñares and Senén Suárez, and trumpeter “El Guajiro.” He also toured Latin America, playing in Venezuela with Los Guaracheros de Oriente. After living there for several years, he returned to Havana in 1960, singing at La Bodeguita del Medio.
Little is known about the life of Bienvenido Julián Gutiérrez (1900–1966). Born in Havana, he was self-taught. He did not play a musical instrument himself and composed by ear for various vocal groups, among them Los Roncos. His modern-sounding sones – Inolvidable, Convergencia, Que extraño es eso, Ta’caliente, Los tres Juanes, El huertanito – possess great charm and originality.

Also from Havana, Oscar Hernández (1891–1967) formed trios with Manuel Corona and Juan Carbonell, but he mostly composed, writing highly romantic songs such as La rosa roja, En el sendero de mi vida, and Para adorarte.

**Sextetos and Septetos**

At the turn of the century, Isaac Scull, Carlos Godínez, Vasarnilla, and other musicians from Havana having learned to play the tres in Oriente, then brought this instrument back to the capital. In the 1930s, the music of the trovadores became marginal, but the son continued to rise. It almost displaced the danzón, and was performed by various groupings of musicians.

If the rustic guajira and the delicate danzón still smacked of Europe, the bawdier son was more “African,” and many of its exponents practiced santería or pano (Congo cults) or belonged to Abakwa potencias. As with jazz in New Orleans, the son first thrived in the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of the black neighborhoods of Havana: in the dives, courtyards, and tenements of Los Pocitos, Jesús María, Pogolotti, Cayo Hueso, Belén, and in the rowdy cabarets of Marianao beach: La Gloria, El Pompilio, Panchín. In Marianao, which flautist José Fajardo called “the school of popular music,” rhythms sprang forth day and night, and heated jam-sessions pitted against each other such stellar percussionists as José Manuel Carriera Incharte (“El Chino”), Santos Ramírez, and timbalero “El Chori” (Silvano Shueg Hechevarría), who later led the Rumba Palace band.

Despite Machado’s crackdown, the music industry furthered the success of the son, which finally achieved acceptance among the more affluent classes. Records of the 1920s give but a poor idea of the bands’ exuberance. As on early jazz discs, the sound tends to be blurred and at times the percussion is either barely audible or drowns out the other instruments. And songs, limited to about three minutes so they could fit on the record, do not always show the complete development of the music, although its pervasive charm still comes through.

By the early 1930s, Havana was gripped by a son fever. In its bustling streets, dancers showed off fancy steps and son bands from different neighborhoods competed before juries which evaluated their literary and musical merits. As with the calypso on the island of Trinidad, son contests sometimes degenerated into fights to which the police had to be summoned, lest they escalated into full-scale riots. In EcüYamba-O, Carpentier evoked the jail sentence given to musicians from the Sexteto Boloña – all members of an Abakwa sect – for disturbing the
public peace. On Sundays, crowds flocked to the Jardines Tropicales, a park where several bands took turns and played for hours. The son also flourished in the academias de baile; the famed Alhambra theater featured son and rumba dancers “Pepe” (José Benito) Serra, “Garabateo,” Evaristo Bemba, Juan Olimpo Lastre, and, some fifteen years later, Carmen Curbelo and the team of René and Estre (René Rivero Guillén and Ramona Ajón); and Yolanda and Pablitto danced at the Rumba Palace.

Sextetos followed in the wake of bongos and estudiantinas. They comprised two singers (the first one singing tenor and accompanying himself with claves, the second singing baritone and playing maracas), tres or guitar, bongo, guiro, and bass. In 1927, the addition of trumpet, borrowed from jazz, turned these groups into septetos. Trumpeters “Florecita” (Óscar Velazo) and José Interián elaborated on their horns a sober and lyrical way of playing known as “septeto style,” and bongoceros Óscar Sotolongo, Santos Ramírez, “El Chino,” “Montoto” and his son “Manana” (Agustín Gutiérrez) laid the foundation of the modern bongo style. The son grew increasingly complex and syncopated. If, around that time, jazz was more harmonically sophisticated than popular Cuban music, rhythmically the son had the edge. The Cuban phrasing, based on the clave, is quite different from the jazz one: the lines are more compact, the spacing broader; and, in the 1920s, bongos provided more interesting syncopations than the still rudimentary trap drums of New Orleans jazz, with their steady rhythms. The trumpet wailed above the bongo, producing notes that seemed to float behind the beat, and then the coro answered. With this simple but efficient scheme, the son finally won the hearts of all Cubans and became one of their most enduring musical symbols.

During Machado’s second mandate, the son continued to grow covertly. Soneros hid in rough neighborhoods like Los Pocitos, where the police never dared to set foot. Certain sones such as Miguel Matamoros’s La mujer de Antonio (1929) expressed in thinly veiled allusions the social and political discontent then brewing everywhere on the island:

\begin{verbatim}
Mala lengua
No sigas hablando mal de Machado
Que te ha puesto ya un mercado
Y te llena la barriga.
\end{verbatim}

Protests also cropped up in other songs such as the guaracha La bomba lacrimógena, deploring the use of tear-gas bombs by the police.

One of the first son groups to record was the Agrupación Boloña. Founded in Havana in 1915 by bongocero, guitarist, and marimbulero (marimba-player) Alfredo Boloña, it turned into a sexteto in 1923. Author of Giiaguina yirabó and other lively songs, Boloña (1890–1964) first joined Gerardo Martínez’s Trío Oriental— which included guitarist Guillermo Castillo and tresista Carlos Godínez

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(all three were also members of Los Apaches) – as bongocero, thus turning the trio into a cuarteto. Martínez left the group in 1910, which subsequently recorded under the name of Orquesta Habanera de Godínez. The same year, Boloña also worked with a band which included Manuel Corona (on guitar), Graciano Gómez, Manuel Valdés, and singer Hortensia Valerón. When Boloña founded his own Agrupación, he took Valerón with him and recruited maraquero Victoriano López, bongocero Joaquín Velázquez and tresista Manuel Menocal.

The ensemble later became a sexteto and, with the arrival of trumpeter José Interián, a septeto, and it performed in New York and in Venezuela. As musicians easily shifted their allegiances according to work opportunities, Boloña’s personnel often fluctuated. At various times, trumpeter Félix Chappotín and his brother, bongocero and bassist Vicente, Mongo Santamaría, the composer and daring tresista Eliseo Silveira, and singers Mario Rosales, Frank Grillo (the future “Machito” of the Afro-Cubans), and Abielardo Barroso also worked with the group.

In the United States in October 1926, with “El Chino” on bongo, Tabito on bass, and Abielardo Barroso and José Vega on vocals, Boloña cut several sides which established their fame. Among them were Échale candela, Aurora en Pekín, the hit Juana Calavera (about a noted prostitute), Carolina mulata, and A la cuata co y co, an evocation of santería that contained Yoruba words:

Me tengo que hacer un ebbo  
con coco, maíz y jutía,  
y un gallo pa’Yemayá.  
Refrain:  
A la cuata co y co  
Oya sile oya deo  
a la cuata co y co.

I must make a sacrifice  
with coconut, corn and an  
agouti,  
and a rooster for Yemayá.  
Refrain:  
Half-and-half  
Oya sile oya deo  
half-and-half.

In 1935 Vega and another vocalist, “Tata” Gutiérrez, left the band in order to form the Septeto Bolero, and the Septeto Boloña disintegrated.

In these early days of the son, one of the leading ensembles was the Sexteto Habanero. Many musicians regarded it as a model, and Nicolás Guillén once said that this sexteto, along with the Trío Matamoros, strongly influenced his poetry. Set up in 1920, also with members of Los Apaches, it outlived Boloña’s Agrupación. It is still active today (although with a different line-up), and Cubans fondly remember its old songs: A la Loma de Belén, Espabilate, A mí que me importa Usted, Mama Inés (evoking the Havana neighborhood of Jesús María), Alza los pies, Congo, or Criolla carabalí. Probably influenced by the bongocero Agustín Gutiérrez, who belonged to an Abakwa brotherhood, Criolla carabalí, sung in the old efik language, alluded to the Efí Abarakó potencia.10

Guillermo Castillo played with Godínez for the 1920 Havana carnival, and shortly thereafter, he organized the Sexteto Habanero, which comprised Godínez,
Antonio Bacallao (botija), “El Chino” or Óscar Sotolongo (bongo), Gerardo Martínez (lead singer, claves), and Felipe Neri Cabrera (vocals, maracas). Cabrera wrote for the group the lilting Bururú bararará, recalling the rural son of Oriente with its abrupt call-and-response:

Bururú bararará
¿Cómo ta’ Migué?
Bururú bararará
Bámono con él.

Soon the group’s botija was replaced by a more melodic marimba, and then by a bass, even more versatile and modern-sounding.

One day in 1924 Abelardo Barroso, who then worked as a taxi-driver, happened to have members of the Sexteto Habanero in his cab, and as he was driving, he started to sing to himself. Impressed by his talent, they took him into the band and, with him, the group then recorded A pie, La camaronera, and other numbers.

Gifted with superb intonation and a spectacular voice which earned him the nickname “Caruso,” Barroso (1905–1972) was one of Cuba’s finest all-round vocalists, and he influenced a host of singers, Benny Moré among them. The son of a cigar-roller who loved music, he grew up in a home often visited by Manuel Corona, “El Galleguito,” Higinio Rodríguez, Arquímedes Pous, and other musicians. He also earned his living as a boxer, skater, and baseball-player, and he readily acknowledged his musical good fortune: “I moved up in life thanks to music. Early in my career, I could never have guessed that I would one day sing in front of the King of Spain!”

11 One of the first bongoceros in Havana – he played bongo there as early as 1913 – Sotolongo later led the Septeto Típico Habanero.
In early 1926, Habanero recorded in the Victor studios in New Jersey (No me maltrates nena, Guantánamo, Niece de mi vida). During this trip, Agustín Gutiérrez introduced the bongo into the United States. Upon their return to Cuba, Castillo adapted as a son the danzón Tres lindas cubanas by pianist Antonio María Romeu. Derived from a popular tune from the city of Cárdenas, Tres lindas cubanas celebrated the various regions of Cuba:

Three, three, pretty Cuban girls,
Pinar del Río, Havana,
Matanzas and Santa Clara.
When I go to Camagüey,
Oriente calls me.

On May 23 of the following year, the song earned the band first prize in a national son contest, a distinction which brought them instant fame. Four months later, Habanero recorded it, along with Caballeros silencio, Un meneito suave, A la Loma de Belén, and other numbers. In 1928, trumpeter Enrique Hernández (later followed by Félix Chappotín) joined the band, and among other recordings they issued were Mamsa Inés, No juegues con los santos, Bongó del habanero, and Miguel Matamoros’s poetical Olvido:
Aunque quieras olvidarme, ha de ser imposible
Porque eterno recuerdo siempre tendrás de mí,
Mis caricias serán el fantasma terrible
De lo mucho que sufrí, de lo mucho que sufrí alejado de ti.

Although you want to forget me, it is impossible
Because you will always remember me,
My caresses will be the terrible reminder
Of how much I suffer, of how much I suffer away from you.

In the beginning, the son, considered vulgar, had been rejected by black social clubs, which thought they would disgrace themselves in the eyes of whites if they featured it. And so ironically, after a tour of Oriente, it was at the posh Habana Yacht Club, Miramar Yacht Club, and Vedado Tennis Club that the predominantly black Septeto Habanero played, breaking down racial barriers and carving an important niche for themselves in Havana’s competitive music scene. Singer Rafael Ortiz recalled their historic engagement at the Miramar Yacht Club: “When the grand ladies saw those six black guys tuning their instruments they had a fit, but when the Sextet broke into a montuno it went straight to their feet and not a couple was left seated.”

In 1926, joining in the race for Cuban music, Columbia signed up the Sexteto Occidente. Led by the two strong personalities María Teresa Vera and Ignacio Piñeiro, Occidente also became one of the most influential son groups of the late 1920s. A young and pretty mulata, Vera (1895–1965) was one of the first Cuban female musicians to achieve international recognition. Unlike most trovadores she came from Pinar del Rio, the beautiful tobacco region in the western part of the island. When Vera was a child, her mother moved to Havana, working as a maid for a wealthy family. Vera studied guitar with José Díaz, Patricio Ballagas, and Manuel Corona, who became one of her closest friends and wrote two of her favorite songs: Longina and Santa Cecilia. As a singer and composer, Vera was self-taught. She penned several tunes, among them Esta noche tocó perder, Noche criolla, and especially Veinte años, her major success. At the age of sixteen she made her debut at the Politeama theater in Havana, in a tribute to Arquímedes Pous, dubbed the following year “most popular negrito of Cuban music” by the magazine Teatro Alegre. A few years later, she recorded her first song: Gela, with Rosendo Ruiz, and then formed a duo with Rafael Zequeira, with whom she also recorded. In 1926, two years after Zequeira’s death, she formed yet another duo, with Miguelito García, and then the Sexteto Occidente.

Piñeiro and singer Miguelito García made the most substantial contributions to Occidente’s repertoire. Steeped since childhood in Afro-Cuban culture, Piñeiro was an inspired and prolific composer and a natural poet (Mi yambú, the guaguancó Como voy a sufrir, the guajiras Alma guajira, Canto a la vueltabajera, and Rin rin lea, the risqué son Entre tinieblas, the poignant Sobre una tumba una rumba).
Born in Jesús María, Piñeiro (1888–1969) befriended Cuba’s greatest soneros and rumberos (Tomás Pérez Sanguily, Eliás Arostegui, Tomás Eriza) as well as members of Abakwa potencias. After working as blacksmith, cooper, stevedore, cigar-maker, and bricklayer, he sang, at the turn of the century, with various coros de clave and coros de guagnancó, among them El Timbre de Oro and Los Roncos, eventually becoming their musical director. He wrote for them ¿Dónde estabas anoche?, El Eden de Los Roncos, Cuando tu desengaño veas, and Mañana te espero, niña, and briefly belonged to Renascimiento.

In New York, Occidente recorded several songs by García and by Piñeiro, among them El globero, Esas no son cubanas, Ninfa del valle, and Perro flaco, which became classics. Sessions followed, under other names, for other record labels. But back in Havana, Vera, jealous of Piñeiro’s success, had a falling-out with him, whereupon he left to join the Sexteto Nacional. In 1937 Vera formed a duo with Lorenzo Hierrezuelo (who subsequently founded Los Compadres). She later sang on Radio Cadena Suaritos, and performed well into her later years. When she died, the great Barbarito Díez sang Veinte años as a tribute, before her coffin.

Within Nacional there were no personality clashes. Piñeiro could give free rein to his imagination and, under his leadership, it became the most exciting septeto in Cuba and a training ground for many musicians. An offshoot of a group formed by “Vaquero” Collazo, it was originally run by singers Juan Ignacio de la Cruz and Alberto Villalón, until Piñeiro assumed the leadership. In addition to Piñeiro (bass), Nacional included de la Cruz (tenor voice, claves), Bienvenido León (baritone voice, claves), Villalón (guitar, coro), “El Chino” (bongo), and Francisco González Solares (tres, first voice of the coro). With his splendid voice and sunny personality, León—lured away from Nano León’s cuarteto—was one of the group’s major assets.

Riding on the success of its first recordings, the sexteto made a highly acclaimed debut at the Habana Sport, in 1927. In 1927 and 1928 they recorded in New York with Abelardo Barroso, and Piñeiro helped Barroso develop his soneo (improvisations). Two years later, Lázaro Herrera (“El Pecoso”), former trumpeter...
of Felipe Valdés’s típica, Agustín Gutiérrez, and singer Alfredo Valdés joined the band, which then became a septeto, and a dancer by the name of Tomasa occasionally livened up performances. Valdés, who came from a family of musicians (his brothers were Marcelino and Vicentico Valdés), brought to the group his exceptional mastery of Afro-Cuban rhythms.

After a new string of recordings, among them the rumba Como voy a sufrir, with a guitar accompaniment reminiscent of rumbas flamencas, and the son montuno Entre preciosos palmares, Nacional travelled to the Sevilla Fair. They had just recruited “Cheo” Jiménez – a former singer of the Sexteto Facenda – but Jiménez died of pneumonia in the New York harbor, on board the boat about to take them to Spain. The band nevertheless fulfilled its engagement, and Piñeiro’s Suavecito won over Spain as it had Cuba. The refrain, with its racy allusions (“slow and easy is how I like it best”), contrasted with the lyrical praise of the son expressed in one of the stanzas:

El son es lo más sublime
Para el alma divertir
Se debería de morir
Quien por bueno no lo estime.

There is nothing more sublime
than the son
To gladden the soul.
Whoever does not appreciate it
Ought to die.

Suavecito was later covered by countless artists, among them Antonio Machín, whose rendition included stirring vocal improvisations.

In 1930 the Septeto Nacional took on another first-rate vocalist, “Rapinéy” (Marcelino Guerra). Three years later, they performed at the Chicago World’s Fair, along with another Cuban group, La Clave Oriental, and rumba dancers who aroused the enthusiasm of the American public. There Piñeiro introduced his famous son-pregon Échale salsita:
Sali de casa una noche aventurera
Buscando ambiente de placer y de ventura
¡Ay mi Dios, cuando gocé!
En un sopor la noche pasé.
Paseaba alegre nuestros lares luminosos
Y llegué al bacanal.
En Catalina me encontré con lo no pensado.
La voz de aquel que pregonaba así:
“Échale salsita, échale salsita.”

I left home on an adventurous night,
Looking for an atmosphere of pleasure and joy.
O God, how much fun I had!
I spent the night in a state of stupor.
I was happily passing by our well-lit houses
And I arrived at the party.
In Catalina I suddenly heard
An unexpected voice which sang:
“Put a little sauce on it, put a little sauce on it.”

Échale salsita impressed Gershwin, who had traveled to Cuba the previous year. Piñeiro had shown him his song, and Gershwin used its opening motif in his Cuban Overture:

Échale salsita – Ignacio Piñeiro
Upon its return from the United States, Nacional performed at the prestigious Miramar Yacht Club and appeared in the movies *La veguertita*, *El frutero*, and *Sucedí en La Habana*. Shortly thereafter, Piñeiro left the band. Lázaro Herrera took over its leadership, but between 1937 and 1954 Nacional gave no performances.

A small group from Santiago, the intense and rhythmical Trío Matamoros, vied with the best Havana ensembles. Founded by the singer and *tresista* Miguel Matamoros, it had a lasting influence throughout Latin America as well as in Africa, where it contributed to the birth of the Zairean and Congolese rumba.

Matamoros was an outstanding composer, and with their witty lyrics and catchy melodies, the songs of the trio: *Luz que no alumbra, Olvido, Él que siembra su maíz*, expressed the quintessence of Oriente. *Son de la loma*, in particular, became a worldwide hit, almost equaling the popularity of *Guantanamera*.

The tune occurred to Matamoros as sometime in 1922 he and his cousin Alfonso del Río were singing under the windows of a Santiago sanatorium: one of the windows opened and a woman and her daughter started listening to them. The girl then asked where the musicians came from and expressed her desire to meet them:

_Mamá yo quiero saber_  _Mother I want to know_
_De dónde son los cantantes_  _Where these singers come from,_
_Que los encuentro muy galantes_  _For I find them very gallant_
_Y los quiero conocer_  _And would like to meet them,_
_Con sus trovas fascinantes_  _With their fascinating songs_
_Que me las quiero aprender._  _Which I want to learn._

Refrain:

¿De dónde serán?
¿Serán de La Habana?
¿Serán de Santiago? Tierra soberana.
*Son de la loma* y cantan en el llano.
Ya verás, tú verás.

*Son de la loma* – Miguel Matamoros
The verb *son*, meaning “they are,” also evokes the musical genre (the *son*) of this song, and according to Matamoros, the word *loma* (hill) refers to Santiago and *llano* (plain) to Havana.

Matamoros’s copious output deals with the most diverse topics. Another of his songs, *Hojas para baño*, for instance, advising a woman to give her husband a bath with ritual plants in order to increase his sexual power, evokes *santería*; *Lágrimas negras*, a woman (in fact a neighbor of Matamoros abandoned by her husband) wishing happiness to the man who left her; and *El paralítico*, a Spanish doctor who, in Havana in the late 1920s, recommended totally ineffective treatments for paralysis, with the famous refrain exhorting: “Suelta la muleta y el bastón y podrás bailar el son” (“Drop your crutch and your cane and you will be able to dance the son”).

Born in the exuberant Santiago barrio of Los Hoyos, famous for its *comparsa*, Matamoros (1894–1971), while still a child, began to play harmonica for rich cigar- and rum-manufacturers. At seven he wrote his first song, the bolero *El consejo*. The following year, his parents gave him a guitar and he soon became known in local circles for his musical abilities. He also built his own *tres* which, since he was left-handed, he played backwards. His father died when Matamoros was still young and, in order to support himself, he held a variety of small jobs, among them house-painter and telephone repairman. He took a few *tres* lessons with Augusto Puente Guillot and his reputation grew. At fifteen, he was already gigging around town, and three years later he gave his first public recital, at the Heredia theater. He also formed a duo with a friend, Trino Martinelli, and around 1919 he teamed up with *bongocero* Juan Corona. Two years later he left for Havana but, disheartened by the racial incidents he experienced, he returned to Santiago.
There, in 1924, he formed a duo with Rafael Cueto, with whom he had performed at the Albizú theater in Havana. The following year, he recruited the fine baritone singer Siro Rodríguez—a blacksmith by trade—and founded the Trio Oriental. Cueto fired up the group with his propulsive guitar tumbaos, Rodríguez harmonized and played claves, and everyone contributed songs, Cueto Pico y pala, Rodríguez Tu boca, and the spirited guaracha-son La China en la rumba:

A party to which I went
Lacked women
And now you will see
How I resolved this.
I had China come by,
The queen of rumba.
This China gets one all excited
With the way she dances.
If China comes
I will start dancing.
And if she leaves,
I'll leave too.
Hear how the son sounds
Go ahead, China, you are so great!
See, see how the son sounds,
Go ahead, China, you are so great!

In 1926, the trio left for Havana, where Eusebio Delfín encouraged them to stay in the capital. Matamoros took a job as a chauffeur, continuing all the while to write songs. Among them the bolero La droga milagrosa (“The miraculous drug”), and especially the son montuno El que siembra su maíz, inspired by a corn-peddler from Santiago who used to yell “¡huye! ¡huye!” (“run away! run away!”) to advertise his piñoles (a sweet paste made with roasted and ground corn). “El que siembra su maíz/Que se coma su piñol” (“Let whoever sows his corn/Eat his piñol”), the refrain announces.

And then, with no apparent connection, the allusive verse admonishes:

Hey girl, says your grandmother,
Don't go into the kitchen
Because there is gasoline
And one mustn't play with fire.

Jumping from one subject to the other, the following stanza lambasts women’s fickleness—another obsessional theme of Latin music—and introduces the archetype of the rooster:

havana and cuba
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish Phrase</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La mujer en el amor (sí señor)</td>
<td>In love the woman (yes sir)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se parece a la gallina (como no)</td>
<td>Is like a hen (and how)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que cuando se muere el gallo</td>
<td>When the rooster dies (yes sir)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(sí señor)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A cualquier pollo se arrima (como no).</td>
<td>She grabs any old cock (and how).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With its “sí señor” and “como no” – a typically Cuban idiomatic formula coming like a leitmotiv at the end of each verse – this montuno section, with its antiphonal form, recalls the rhythm of the changüí.

In 1928 Matamoros signed a contract with the Victor label and the trio went to record in the United States (Promesa, Lagrimas negras, Olvido, El que siembra su maíz). There Matamoros was informed that a Trío Oriental already existed, led by guitarist Roberto de Moya, and he renamed his group Trío Matamoros. They then performed at Havana’s Campoamor theater, whereupon Matamoros’s boss wrote to him: “An artist of your quality deserves a better fate and it would be unfair of me to keep employing you as a chauffeur.” Thus dismissed, Matamoros dedicated himself fully to music and wrote another hit, La mujer de Antonio. The trio toured to Mexico and then returned to Havana for a series of recording sessions, one of them with Antonio María Romeu. Their already busy schedule picked up in the 1930s with countless recordings, some with humorous titles (Nudism in Cuba, The Cocaine Addict, Kill, God Forgives You, The Miracle Drug), an appearance in the Paramount movie Mosíicos Internacionales, and performances in Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, Europe (along with Orquesta Siboney), Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, and New York. For some sessions, “Pepe” (José) Macías or José Quintero (trumpets), Manuel Povedo or Agustín Gutiérrez (bongo), Paquito Portela or Cristóbal Mendive (bass), Manuel “Mozo” Borgellá (tres), Ramón Dorca (piano), and other musicians would be added to the trio.

In the early 1930s, female bands had become a new gimmick in the United States. The vogue also spread to Cuba, with Ensueño, created in 1931 by Guillermina Foyo; the Sexteto Casiguaya; Orbe, led by Esther Lines and then Carmita Franco; Conchita Fernández’s Sexteto Caracusey; and, especially, Orquesta Anacaona, still active today.

Formed in Havana in 1931 by singer Elia Orelí, Anacaona consisted of the Castro sisters of Chinese descent: “Cuchito” (Concepción), the eldest (musical director, tenor saxophone, alto clarinet), “Bolito” (Olga, alto saxophone, clarinet, flute, maracas), Caridad (bass), Alicia (saxophone, clarinet, bass), Ondina (first trumpet), Xiomara (second trumpet), Ada (trumpet, violin, tres), the outstanding “Millito” (Argimira, drums, bongo, timbales), plus Elsa Rigual, sister of composer Pedro Rigual, Delia Valdés or Hortencia Palacio (piano), Anita Permuí de Valdés, wife of Alfredo Valdés (guitar), Xiomara Junco (violin), and possibly a woman named Rita (bass).
The friends Ignacio Piñeiro and Lázaro Herrera gave them useful advice and the band made their debut in 1932 at the Dora Café, on the elegant Prado Avenue, astounding audiences with their professionalism. In 1933 Oreli was replaced by Machito’s sister, the winsome Graciela Pérez, then seventeen years old. 

First specialized in the son, Anacaona progressively opened up to jazz and the Castro sisters also performed and recorded as an independent septeto (Después que sufres, Amor inviolado). In 1936 the orchestra toured Latin America. Two years later, under flautist Alberto Socarrás’s musical direction, they played at the Havana Madrid, in New York, on the same bill as Enrique Madriguera, Nilo Menéndez, and Marcelino Valdés, to an appreciative audience of musicians, and then in Paris: at the Moulin Rouge, at Les Ambassadeurs, and Chez Florence, alternating there with Django Reinhardt. “We used to lock ourselves up in our room to smoke and do all kinds of silly things,” Graciela remembered. The band became the toast of the town but at the onset of the Second World War were forced to return to Cuba, and Graciela went on to join Machito’s orchestra in New York. 

In the late 1930s, son bands acquired two new instruments: the conga – heretofore regarded as a mere carnival drum – and the piano, introduced by Estrellas Cubanas, La Sonora Matancera, and singer Fernando Collazo’s Septeto Cuba. Towards the end of the following decade, Arsenio Rodriguez used a conga, a piano, and three trumpets in his ensemble, setting a pattern for bands which then became known as conjuntos. Conjuntos, along with charangas, are still the most common types of groupings in salsa.
Countless other son outfits competed in Cuba's restless music scene. Among them the aforementioned Septeto Cuba, founded in 1930 and consisting of Enrique García (first voice, claves), Óscar Pelegrín (tres), José Interián (trumpet), Alfredo Rivero (bass), Heredia López (second voice, maracas), and Marino González (bongo) (pianist Armando Valdés later joined the band); the septeto Jóvenes del Cayo, founded in 1924 by singers Domingo Vargas and Miguelito Valdés; the Grupo Típico Oriental; tresista Isaac Oviedo’s Septeto Matancero, which included Graciano Gómez (guitar and flute), Julio Govín, Barbarito Diez, Hermano Bien (bongo), and Óscar “Florecita” Velazco (trumpet); the Sexteto Gloria Cubana (with pianist María Teresa Ovando); the Quinteto Típico, co-led by Oviedo and the ubiquitous Graciano Gómez; the Sexteto Liborio; Óscar Sotolongo’s Septeto Típico Cubano; Botón de Rosa; Terry 1927; Gloria Matancera, founded in 1929 by singer Juan Manuel Díaz; bolerista Mario Ruiz’s Conjunto Kubanacán; Abelardo Barroso’s Sexteto Agabamar, formed with musicians who also played with the Septeto Nacional (Alfredo Valdés, Eliseo Silveira, Manolo Reynoso, Sungo and Nené Enrizo, Agustín Gutiérrez, Machito, and later Cheo Marquetti on vocals and bass); the Sexteto Munamar, founded by stevedores from the harbor of Regla; the Sexteto Universal, also set up by Barroso; guitarist Raul Díaz’s Conjunto Apollo; Estrellas Habaneras; Ignacio Carrillo’s Sexteto Típico; the Sexteto Unión de Redención (originally called Líderes de Redención); Rafael Ortiz’s Sexteto Cienfuegos, in which Marcelino Guerra sang; the Sexteto Facenda; the group led by the Enrizo brothers; and, in Cienfuegos, Los Naranjos, founded in 1926 and initially consisting of timbales, two marimbulas, two tres, jawbone, claves, güiro, and vocals. It added a bongo the following year, removed other instruments, and in 1930 introduced a trumpet and swapped its marimbulas for a bass.

The rise of charangas, the bolero, and the guajira

The charangas

In the early 1920s, típicas had been Cuba’s favorite type of band. Flautist “Tata” Alfonso, who injected elements of rumba brava into his danzones, led one of the best ones, and several of his musicians – pianist Jesús López, güiro player Abelardo Valdés and timbalero Ulpiano Díaz – later rose to fame. Cornettists Pablo Valenzuela, Pablo Zerquera, and Domingo Corbacho, flautist “Tata” (Juan Francisco) Pereira, saxophonist Aniceto Díaz, ophicleide virtuoso Félix González (with Aniceto Díaz on güiro), and clarinettists José Belén Puig and José Urfé were, however, serious rivals. Tata Pereira followed a rather unusual musical path: he started out playing music in the Saint Theresa convent, in Matanzas, and later set up the marching band of the Havana police! In 1920 a típica,
Orquesta Alemán, performed in Tampa, Florida, which had a sizeable community of Cuban tobacco workers.

In 1924, the pianist and composer Moisés Simons (previously called Simón) organized a danzón concert at the Payret theater in Havana, but típicas fizzled out shortly thereafter. Their cumbersome brass instruments were too loud for small clubs, and they were superseded by the smaller and more flexible charangas “a la Francesa” – so called because both the danzón they played and the flute they used were of French origin. The instrumentation consisted of piano – introduced into charangas by Antonio Torreolla – wooden flute with keys, violins, bass, timbales, and güiro (eventually replaced by maracas). The trilling French flute sounded wonderful, but it had to soar high above the percussion, greatly taxing the flautists’ stamina, and later, it was often supplanted by the metallic flute, more versatile and physically easier to play.

As early as 1911, the pianist Antonio María Romeu (1876–1955) had formed one of the very first charangas. Known as “El mago de las teclas” (“The wizard of the keyboard”), he had begun his career as a teenager and in 1899 joined Leopoldo Cervantes’s típica, which already resembled a charanga with its violin, flute, bass, timbales, and güiro line-up. It would become a true charanga a few years later, with the acquisition of a piano. Romeu took on two of Cervantes’s best musicians: the marvelous bassist Rafael Calazán and timbalero Remigio Valdés. In addition, Romeu played on the radio – alone or accompanied by simply a güiro – and at the famed La Diana café, a favorite hangout for musicians, where his brother Horacio, also a pianist, held sway. Romeu wrote countless danzones: Ojos triunfadores – said to have influenced Darius Milhaud in his Saudades do Brasil – Huyéndole a un ratón, Jibacoa, Que linda eres tú, the delightful Flauta mágica (in collaboration with Alfredo Brito), inspired by flautist “Panchito” (Francisco Delabart, in which Brito played brilliant solos, and Marcheta.

In 1926 Romeu gave the first performance of his danzón Tres lindas cubanas at the Sociedad Unión Fraternal. Shortly thereafter, Romeu recorded it with a long piano solo. This historic solo was left practically unchanged by other bands on subsequent recordings of it. Popularized by the Sexteto Habanero, Tres lindas Cubanas became a classic. In 1928 Romeu obtained a gold medal at the Sevilla Fair for his compositions and the following year he recorded various numbers with Miguel Matamoros (among them Quince y Bolichón), in one of the tresista’s rare sessions with charanga musicians. And in 1931 he produced the humorous Los chamacos, subtitled Fumando marihuana (“Smoking Marihuana”).

The flautist “El Moro” (Miguel Vázquez) was another imaginative improvisor, and he too brought in the habit of soloing at length, backed by the rhythm section, on the coda of danzones, inspiring other flautists to do likewise. Típicas and charangas were purely instrumental ensembles until Romeu hired the singer Fernando Collazo for his charanga. A cigar-roller by trade, the handsome Collazo appeared in the 1932 “Maracas y bongó” – Cuba’s first talkie – with his Sexteto Cuba, wooing women with his dark eyes and winsome smile. In 1935 he also