

# CUBA

THE SIGHTS, SOUNDS, FLAVORS, AND FACES

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Manzanillo, Sunday morning. The *glorieta* (music stand) in the square looks like a strawberry pie on a table, and it is bubbling. A motley choir has the *compañeros* and *compañeras* on fire, and they are twirling, embracing each other, kissing, welded together, blazing with passion. This man-woman mutual belt-buckle-polishing session is the ablution of the other Cuban religious service, dancing. As everyone knows, God will recognize His own, but to this aphorism the *manzanilleros* have added a category all their own: a state competition for choreography instructors. And if the Good Lord had in mind to be a judge at this competition, He would surely have His work cut out for Him.

Music and the rumba are stuck to this rambling town in the south of the island like permanent glue. It is no coincidence that El Original de Manzanillo is one of the best-known orchestras in Cuba. Its conductor, Cándido Fabr e, is as well known throughout the country as Che and Matusalem Rum. The great Eduardo (El Tibur n) Morales himself, the singing star of the Conjunto Son 14, often takes time off from his Santiago group to cheat on them and sit in with the musicians here, and that's saying something. But this November morning, the party that started in the Parque Central has a surprise in store. The musicians, blazing with brass and drums,

are suddenly swallowed up in a rattletrap jitney. As the bus continues on its way, it attracts an escort of cyclists carrying bandoleers made of flowers shaped like guitars.

The convoy comes to a halt at the top of a rise overlooking the town. We are at the cemetery. Carlos Puebla, the composer of *Hasta Siempre*, was born in Manzanillo and is buried here. In this town, the second week in November is dedicated to celebrating his memory: political speeches are accompanied by solemn, pious choral music. The strains of *Hasta Siempre*, *Comandante* are picked up over and over again by the trumpets, trombones and helicons. Bronzed cheeks glisten with tears. Then, discreetly, a few individuals slip flasks out of their *guayaberas*, take a healthy swig at the end of each verse of this patriotic song, and start moving their feet in time with the music. The funerary prayer ends as a joyful dance that makes its way toward the exit of the cemetery.

And it's not over yet. The next thing we do is clamber on board various dubious *guaguas* (minibuses) already crammed with passengers, and head off to Guasimal, a fishing and farming village about six miles away. The people know it's a feast day today. El Guasimal orchestra is a hundred years old, just like its leader—steady on his feet, but his eyes are a bit of a problem (he's totally blind)—who plays the bass, a single string stretched between a bit of reed and a tree trunk—you make do with what you



Thanks to the rumba  
We're never tired. ”

From a 1950s Congolese song

have. The other musicians are also playing bizarre, rudimentary instruments. But they work just fine. There is a *güiro* (the jawbone of a cow that is rubbed with a piece of wood), maracas, and of course drums and bongos, while they make coffee the old-fashioned way—one woman piles up the beans, another filters the liquid, while two men crush sugarcane to obtain the juice, the sugar destined to sweeten the full-bodied brown beverage. Rum flows down everyone's throats. No, not brand stuff—no Havana Club, no Matusalem, no Marineros, not even the locally distilled Pinilla. No, this is homemade rum, and it goes by various names: *chipetren* (train spark), *salta patras* (jump back) or *hueso de tigre* (tiger bone). Just what you need to keep going during a four-day party, a four-day *descarga* (unwinding session). And if somewhere along the way you manage to come up with a few dollars, you can have yourself a *lechón con arroz* (roast suckling pig with rice).

*¡Hasta siempre, guajiros!*

And so back to town.

Lino has set up his monumental organ on the plaza. He is last in line of the Borbolla family. His great-great uncle developed a passion for the musical machine that some Frenchmen who settled in Cienfuegos had brought in their baggage. So Lino inherited one of these machines, a veritable locomotive ten feet long. With his nephew beside

him at the controls, he has the *manzanilleros* dancing around the *glorieta*, besotted with music and nostalgia to the strains of "Chattanooga," and as nightfall puts the finishing touch to the evening with "La Vie en Rose."

This evening, Eduardito is topping the bill at the Casa de la Trova. At eighty, this former tailor, dancer, singer and guitarist will be stealing the show with maracas in his shoes.

*¡Hasta siempre, compañeros!*

When El Tiburón returns to Santiago, he finds it difficult to regain his balance, and his fellow musicians in Conjunto Son 14 won't forgive him his day of musical infidelity, so he heads off to the Calle Heredia to say hello to his old friend, the guitarist Gerbe at the Casa de la Trova. This is a national institution that had already seen better days back in the 1990s when, in the name of modernizing, they replaced all the old wood, redolent of rum and cigar smoke, with plastic in pastel shades.

Ah, the shame of it all. The shades of Beny Moré, Maduro, Pepe Sánchez, Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer and Pepín Vaillant should drink to it. With his *ranchero* hat eternally on his head, El Tiburón sometimes runs into Eliades Ochoa there, the other Cuban who always has a Stetson on his head, and the two musicians embrace each other and sigh about the trashy *desastro*.

*No es fácil . . .*







Is it possible to land in Havana without hearing a *guaracha* and admiring a few salsa steps, all washed down by a *cinco años* at the *Museo del Ron* in the harbor? The reply does not take long to come. *¡A la batalla!* as Manolín, the *Medico de la Salsa*, yelled before he left Cuba for Miami. What medicine this is, for disturbed spirits and end-of-month anguish, a fiesta in this singing, dancing island.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD**

A salsa number in the Havana Club Bar.

**LEFT**

Fireworks, music, and dancing the salsa at El Parisián, the famous cabaret in the Hotel Nacional.

**RIGHT**

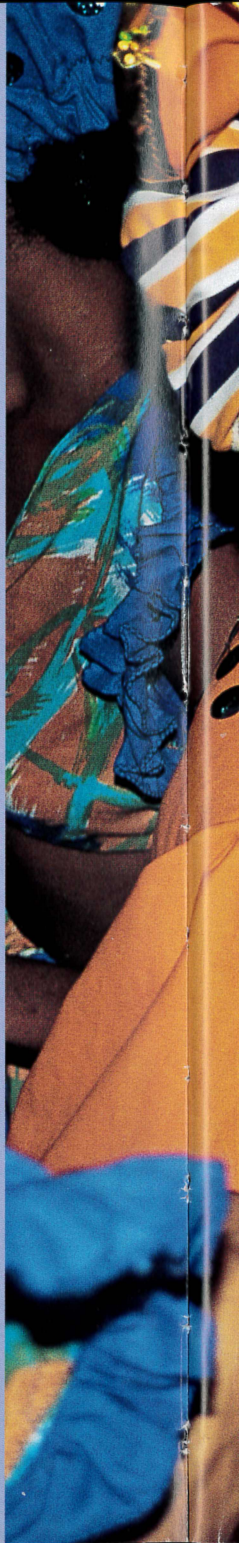
The late Pepín Vaillant, who enchanted the world with his trumpet at the mythic Tropicana in Havana and at the Casino de Paris, in Pigalle.





*Bongocero*, beat the skin with your hands of flesh and metal. Call on Changó, Yemayá, Obatala and all your saints to enter into your veins and feed your fevered fingers. This blood, which comes from the *orishas*, your godparents who never abandoned you or your ancestors when they were painfully torn from the shores of Africa—this blood, let your heart pump it in powerful jets down to your drum. The adrenaline in the music draws in the spectators, and when the feet of the *guaracheros* draw their patterns on the floor, you will have passed through to eternity. ¡*Así es!*

**LEFT**  
A conga player at a Santiago Carnival.  
**RIGHT**  
The last touches before the carnival parade.











The Tibetan rag-dung (or Chinese brass trumpet) is a cousin of the *jaita* from the Maghreb. Its strident tones incite the carnival dancers to join in the parade of the *comparsas*, especially in Oriente. Thus the signal is given for a week of unbridled joy in the streets of Santiago. In the dark night, to the play of multicolored cotton fabric, appears the maddening beauty of countless Venuses swelling with provocative sensuality. Watch your blood pressure. Unusually violent heart attacks are frequent here.

LEFT  
Carnival scenes, Santiago.  
RIGHT  
An ecstatic dancer on the catwalk at the Tropicana, Santiago Carnival.



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“I am a showman  
A lame devil  
Don’t ask more of me  
This is what I want  
To celebrate  
*Chuas . . . chuas . . . chuas.*”

—Chorus of a Santiago Carnival song

RIGHT  
Carnival masquerade, Los Hoyos,  
Santiago.







People come from all around the world to share the Cubans' sense of hospitality. It comes at a price, of course, but it is inventive and always musical. Around the tables of El Patio on the Plaza de la Catedral in Havana, you can hear people speaking English, French, German or Italian. First of all, they'll have knocked back a *mojito* or two at La Bodeguita del Medio right by the Calle Empedrado, no doubt reflecting that the bar stools on which they're sitting have also been sat on, once upon a time, by Brigitte Bardot and Sophia Loren, and of course the pioneer, Ernest Hemingway.

**LWFFT**  
El Patio, Plaza de la Catedral, Havana.  
**RIGHT**  
A *trovador*, Guantánamo.





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It has taken ages for Cuba's singing stars to emerge finally from decades of painful oblivion and enjoy the glory that is rightfully theirs. Yet Ibrahim Ferrer, Compay Segundo, Eliades Ochoa, Maduro, Gerbé and many others have musical brothers and cousins who sing and enchant people both in Cuba and on the international stage. At Guantánamo, *changüi* musicians bring back life into this dance, which is performed in farmyards by dancers who are also cane cutters. ¡Auténtico, compay!

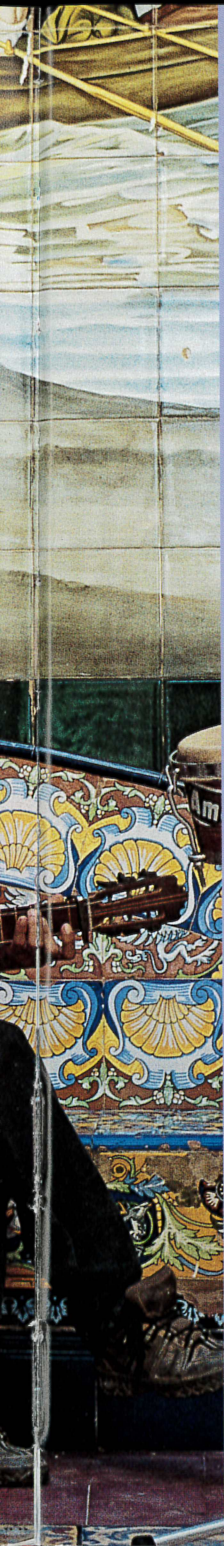
LEFT AND RIGHT  
Sunday fiesta, to the sounds of *changüi*, a musical style that originated in Guantánamo.











Under the benevolent ceramic gaze of Christopher Columbus landing at Nipe Bay, guitarists from Manzanillo's *casa de cultura* sing of the good fortune of living in a town dedicated to music and recognized as the unquestioned cradle of the son. On Sunday, they will be dancing on the plaza where the *glorieta* stands, and where Lino Borbolla will be twisting the handles on his giant organ to make the *manzanilleros* dance to "Chattanooga," "La vie en Rose," and "Chan Chan." Manzanillo is also the birthplace of Carlos Puebla, the composer of *Hasta Siempre*, *Comandante*, the song of Che Guevara.

LEFT  
Rehearsing for the evening concert at the *casa de cultura*, Santeto Arsis de Manzanillo.

RIGHT  
Postcard from the 1940s.






Beat your drums, call on the *orishas*, and may their spirit give you the strength to get through the struggles of life. These are the words of the *toque de santo* that devotees of Cuba's syncretic religion use to call upon Changó, San Lázaro, Ochun and the other venerated divinities in the national pantheon. As the drums beat out their rhythm, the tension rises. Soon the *santeros* will be rolling about on the ground in a trance and communing with their respective saints. Impressive. ¡Que viva Changó!

LEFT  
A *tumba francesa*, Guantánamo.  
RIGHT  
A musical group at the Casa de la Trova, Santiago.









“Bravo for the little fanfare,  
For the good little people  
Who have played their little rumba  
To perfection without desks or sheet music  
In the district of Carmes.”

—Miguel Martín Farto,  
*Las Parrandas de Remedias*

LEFT  
A Chinese trumpet player, Santiago.



The noise of the drums and bongos manages to mask even the thunderous racket of engines on Cuba's streets. More than the guitar, this instrument is the symbol of music here. When there is no drum, there is always the *cajón*, a drawer that keeps time with the beating of the musicians' hearts. These rhythms seem to invade the paving stones in the towns and convince the customers they need to receive the sacrament with their heads, their hands and their feet. ¡Aché!

**LEFT**  
In a guitar factory, Havana. Making carnival costumes, Santiago. A maracas workshop, near Baracoa.

**RIGHT**  
The Plaza Mayor, Trinidad. Lino Borbolla and his orchestra in a street in Manzanillo. A barrel organ, Manzanillo. Taking turns singing, Havana Club. Eduardito in front of the Casa de la Troba, Manzanillo, since demolished. An improvised rooftop concert, Santiago.

**VINTAGE PHOTOGRAPHS**  
LEFT A music stand on the Malecón, Havana, c. 1909.  
RIGHT The promenade in the Parque de Palatino, Havana, c. 1909.  
POSTCARD Musicians at the Hotel Nacional.

Trabajo y  
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nsecuencias  
Especial.

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Nuestro Cent  
Esta Tri  
Por  
1er De Marzo

EL RA  
MANZANILLO

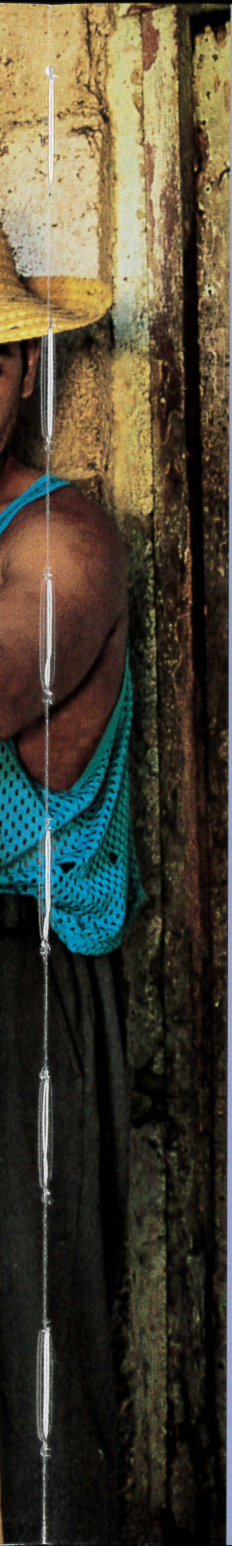




RADIO #  
ANZANILLO.







Manzanillo organist Lino Borbolla's musical box is worth a fortune. By some miracle, it has managed to escape its owner's despair, which at times reached the point of setting fire to the whole thing when he needed to replace missing punch cards and special wooden parts . . . in short, everything that makes an instrument from another age not just valuable but also fascinating. Instead, Lino restored the organ—there are only three more of the same kind in the country—and with it gets the *manzanilleros* dancing until they cannot take any more Hatuey or nostalgia.

**LEFT**  
Organ, Bartolomé Masó.

**RIGHT**  
Lino Borbolla tuning the organ in a Manzanillo church.

**FOLLOWING SPREAD**  
The Casa de la Trova, Santiago.





