

# **Rockin' Las Américas**

**The Global Politics of Rock in Latin/o America**

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## **Between Rock and a Hard Place**

### **Negotiating Rock in Revolutionary Cuba, 1960–1980**

**DEBORAH PACINI HERNANDEZ AND REEBEE GAROFALO**

In the mid-1960s, singer/songwriter Silvio Rodríguez was fired from his job at the Cuban Radio and Television Institute for mentioning the Beatles as one of his musical influences on the air. Some thirty-five years later, on December 8, 2000, the anniversary of John Lennon's death, a statue of John Lennon was dedicated in a park located in the once-fashionable Vedado section of Havana. Present at the ceremony were not only Abel Prieto, Cuba's long-haired Minister of Culture, but Fidel Castro himself, who helped Rodríguez unveil the statue. Understanding these two events and the nature of cultural negotiations between rock fans and the state that had taken place in the intervening years is crucial to situating rock within the popular music landscape of post-Revolutionary Cuba.

As happened in many locations around the world, U.S. rock 'n' roll exploded throughout urban Latin America in the 1950s, propelled by radio, recordings, film, and in the more developed countries such as Cuba and Mexico, by the new medium of television as well, which only added to its innovative aura. In Latin America, rock 'n' roll was welcomed by some (primarily young) people as an expression of urban modernity, youthful exuberance, and liberated nonconformity, but more commonly, it was rejected vigorously (primarily by their elders) as a symbol of U.S. cultural decadence and the seemingly unlimited power of the United States to force its products on unwilling nations.

Nowhere was this view of rock 'n' roll stronger than in post-1959 Cuba, where the Revolution and rock—both erupting in the same decade—were

seen as intrinsically antithetical. Desiring to establish its independence from U.S. cultural imperialism, Cuba's revolutionary government did everything in its considerable power to disrupt the economic and social mechanisms it held responsible for the spread of rock and to stimulate alternative musical practices based on autochthonous Cuban traditions. While state policies succeeded in driving rock underground, they could not eliminate the enthusiasm of urban young people—even those committed to the Revolution—for rock, for whom rock represented alternative but equally valid notions of liberation. The Beatles, and especially John Lennon, were potent symbols of this contestatory idea, and over time they have acquired a significance to urban Cubans unmatched elsewhere in Latin America.

Arriving in Cuba in the mid-1950s, rock 'n' roll foreshadowed global cultural flows that are commonplace today. Rock's entry into post-revolutionary Cuba, however, was not easy: the image of a cultural "flow" does not adequately describe what was more like smoke seeping under a closed door. Yet, while the Cuban Revolution is often thought of as a rupture with the ideology and economic systems of the developed capitalist world, in practice many of the changes associated with this political transformation occurred gradually. With the exception of a short period between 1964 and 1966—interestingly, the period of the first wave of the so-called British Invasion—rock was never completely absent from Cuban radio and rock bands continued to perform whenever musicians could negotiate spaces in which to play. As a result, Cuba's musical landscape during the early 1960s resembled an amalgam of pre-revolutionary cultural forms, including the familiar mambo, rumba, and cha-cha bands from the 1950s, as well as a steady if dwindling stream of rock. Rock's presence in post-1959 Cuba, given the absence of international market forces and their attendant mass media promotions, demonstrates once again that there is no simple equation between cultural globalization and cultural imperialism.

### Before the Revolution

It is hard to imagine today, in the context of unabated hostilities between the United States and Cuba, that the relationship between the two countries was once exceptionally close—so close that historian Louis Pérez entitled his 1997 book on the subject *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy*. By the end of the 1950s most Cubans were thoroughly familiar with U.S. popular music and culture, either through their own travels or the media, or through personal contact with the 6,500 U.S. residents in Cuba or the almost 300,000

tourists who were attracted each year by Cuba's highly developed entertainment industry, which included dozens of hotels, casinos, and cabarets. A good number of these venues were either owned or controlled by U.S. interests, including mafia organizations. They often hired major U.S. artists such as Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, and Nat King Cole as headliners—much to the dismay of Cuban musicians who felt excluded from these lucrative gigs.<sup>1</sup> Of the Cuban musicians who did play in tourist-oriented venues, many incorporated into their repertoires whatever U.S. musical styles were popular at the time.<sup>2</sup>

As Pérez has observed, travel between Cuba and the United States was facilitated by as many as twenty-eight flights a day between various U.S. and Cuban cities (for example, Santiago–Charleston, Camaguey–Miami, Havana–Tampa), as well as by sea train and automobile ferry services that linked the island with the U.S. mainland. Middle- and upper-class Cubans routinely traveled to the States—primarily Miami and New York—for business and as tourists, but most commonly to shop. These Cubans were insatiable consumers of U.S. products of all sorts that they could obtain more cheaply in the United States; indeed, they were such good customers that some California, New York, and Florida department stores advertised their sales in Havana's newspapers. Much to the dismay of Cuban nationalists, Cuban consumers of U.S. goods also embraced U.S. popular culture of all sorts. Indeed, one U.S. visitor observed in 1959: "The United States is mirrored in every phase of Cuban life. The modern Cuban eats hot dogs, hamburgers, hot cakes, waffles, fried chicken and ice cream. It has become almost impossible today in Havana to find native foods such as *malanga*, *yuca* or *ajiaco*."<sup>3</sup>

The Cubans who ate waffles and traveled to the U.S. to shop tended to be affluent, but working-class Cubans—many of them Afro-Cubans—had also been traveling since the turn of the century between Cuba and Florida, particularly Tampa and Key West, where they worked in the cigar-rolling industry.<sup>4</sup> As Pérez notes: "Cigarworkers on both sides of the Florida straits inhabited a single universe. . . . This was a world in which Cuban workers in Havana and Tampa traveled freely and frequently, as much the catalysts as the consequences of change."<sup>5</sup> Even those working-class Cubans who could not or did not travel were familiar with U.S. popular music, thanks to Cuba's extraordinarily well-developed mass-media infrastructure (constructed primarily with U.S. capital). Indeed, despite the island's small size and its appalling economic inequalities, Cuba's media infrastructure was unrivalled in Latin America, with the exception of such affluent nations as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Cubans owned more televisions and telephones, and had more newspapers per capita than any other Latin American country, and were ranked third in

the number of radios per capita (after Mexico and Brazil).<sup>6</sup> In 1950, nearly 90 percent of Cuban households had a radio, which could tune into at least one of Cuba's 140 radio stations.<sup>7</sup> Among these was Havana's Radio Kramer, which regularly played popular music from the United States.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, radio from the United States, especially from the South, could also be picked up easily.

Cuba imported records from the United States, but its domestic recording industry was also very well developed, with seven record companies and a pressing plant that manufactured records for such foreign firms as Odeón, Capitol, and EMI, as well as for local companies.<sup>9</sup> Records, whether domestic or imported, were played not only on home record players, but also on the approximately fifteen thousand jukeboxes located in cabarets, bars, and *bodegas* throughout the country, which gave Cuba's working classes access to current musical developments.<sup>10</sup> Cuba also had over four hundred movie theatres that routinely played U.S. films, including such rock 'n' roll classics as *Rock Around the Clock* and *Blackboard Jungle*.

Given the intensity of cultural contacts, it should come as no surprise that rock 'n' roll became very popular in Cuba in the 1950s, especially as a dance form. Elvis Presley, as well as black artists such as Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry were well known in Cuba in the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Numerous Cuban rock and roll groups were also popular at the time, including Luis Bravo, Los Llopiz, Los Armónicos,<sup>12</sup> and Los Hot Rockers (who experimented with a rock/cha-cha version of Rafael Hernández's famous song "Cachita").<sup>13</sup> In addition to a vigorous domestic music scene and internationally famous popular dance bands, Cuba also had a well-established rock 'n' roll scene at the time of the Revolution. If white middle-class Cubans were its primary consumers, working-class Cubans were also familiar with it via travel to Florida or the media.

### Going Underground: Rock in the 1960s

The Cuban Revolution inherited an extraordinarily advanced media and entertainment infrastructure, as well as a populace accustomed to having access to a wide variety of cultural forms, both domestic and foreign. Because this infrastructure was intended for an unregulated market economy based on patterns of individual consumption, after the Revolution Cuba was faced with the question of how to develop a cultural policy that utilized these mass media in the service of strengthening national identity and indigenous cultural forms. This was not an easy proposition: on the one hand, the state sought to consolidate political power and establish Cuban cultural hegemony; on the other, it had to deal with the long-standing—if now ideologically question-

able—cultural practices of its populace, ranging from Afro-Cuban music forms among the black working classes to the preference for U.S. popular music forms—including rock 'n' roll—primarily among those sectors of the population that had once constituted the middle and upper classes. Many ordinary Cubans, even those fully committed to the Revolution, rejected the state's attempts to define and confine their musical practices, and in numerous instances the state either backed off or looked the other way when it encountered resistance or noncompliance. The 1960s, then, can be characterized as a decade of negotiated fits and starts, experimentation and retreat, as the state sought to centralize cultural policies while balancing the competing tendencies that comprised Cuban popular culture.

As the Revolution consolidated its control over private enterprise, all Cuban mass media came to be seen as powerful ideological instruments to be used in the service of state policy. As Cuban television and radio stations passed into the hands of the state, U.S. popular music came to be regarded as the music of the enemy. This response has to be appreciated not simply as a reaction to foreign musical styles sung in English, but also to rock's ethos of youthful rebellion and its accompanying stylistic elements of long hair, tight (later, bell-bottom) pants, and miniskirts, which appeared to some party stalwarts as dangerously individualistic and antithetical to the goals of the Revolution. With no commercial means for its dissemination, it was impossible for rock in Cuba to become a mass phenomenon; instead, it went underground.

The official status of rock in Cuba during the 1960s has been the subject of considerable debate. By most accounts, there was an official prohibition against playing English-language rock on radio and television only between 1964 and 1966 (although, interestingly, Spanish-language rock, mostly originating in Spain, was permitted). After 1966, rock occupied only a marginal place on Cuban radio and television. Memories of rock's status in the 1960s vary widely. Cuban media sociologist Alfredo Prieto recalls that "it was an arrestable offense to listen to rock music," although he also notes that "kids did [listen] anyway, picking up Miami stations on the Malecón or at an alternative beach, the Playita de la 16 in Miramar."<sup>14</sup> Cuban rock historian Humberto Manduley explained that when the Unión de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC) sponsored the first colloquium on the Beatles in 1996, the biggest polemic was whether the Beatles had been actually forbidden or whether people simply steered clear of them to avoid problems.<sup>15</sup> The conference proceedings contain a variety of opinions on the subject, ranging from Yolanda Valdez's statement that "the Beatles were absolutely forbidden," to Guille Villar's recollections of freely listening to rock in public places—and his

charge that the U.S. embargo was responsible for the invisibility of the Beatles in Cuba.<sup>16</sup>

Perplexed by such different recollections, Castellanos undertook archival and oral history research and then penned an epilogue to the proceedings, which he entitled “The Censure of the Beatles: Myth or Reality”; he concluded that if extreme positions had indeed been taken by uninformed government functionaries, the Beatles had never actually been forbidden and that no one had ever been arrested for listening to them. Castellanos concedes that some rock fans were beaten up or had their heads shaved and their records broken by overzealous citizens, but he insists that these were unfortunate individual incidents rather than state-directed repression. Humberto Manduley concurs with this conclusion, arguing that there was never an official prohibition of rock, although there were, as he puts it, “personal positions based on a phantom idea that was created, and people reacted to that.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, frequent references to clandestinity by rock fans who lived through those years suggest that there did exist a pervasive climate of apprehension and fear. Indeed, young people with long hair were sometimes detained, not explicitly for being rock fans but for being “anti-social.” Sometimes, they were sent to the “rehabilitation” camps, along with prostitutes, thieves, and gamblers.<sup>18</sup>

Even if Cuba’s censorship policies were not codified, the Communist Party’s insinuations that rock ‘n’ roll was unacceptable led to widespread self-censorship. As in other socialist countries, censorship operated as a process of negotiation, with individuals and organizations testing limits until the state perceived the need to intervene.<sup>19</sup> In the mid-1960s, the treatment of the Beatles was emblematic of this practice, which partially explains why they occupy such a significant place in the memories of those who lived through the early stages of the Revolution. A more pertinent issue is how this deeply suspect form of music, originating in the United States, managed to survive and to articulate with Cuba’s other, more unambiguously national musical scenes.

### Roll Over, Beethoven

The mid- to late 1960s coincided with a crucial moment in the international trajectory of rock—the advent of the Beatles and the antiestablishment, antiwar hippie movement that they helped to promote. Much of the rock produced in the U.S. and the U.K. during the politically tumultuous 1960s was explicitly oppositional, but the Cuban government did not alter its view of rock, nor acknowledge rock’s progressive potential. As Cuban cultural organizer Rodolfo Rensoli put it, “Rock was much misunderstood here, being a genre that wasn’t considered national, and it was associated with the so-called

*diversionismo ideológico* [ideological diversionism], that supposedly brought with it capitalist influences, deviances of all sort, physical and moral.”<sup>20</sup> Francisco López Sacha, the president of UNEAC, recalls: “The Beatles were virtually ostracized by the media. . . . We saw them only once in the splendor of their days of glory, when Santiago Alvarez [Cuba’s renowned documentary filmmaker, recently deceased] had the courage and intelligence to include them in an ICAIC newsreel.”<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Alfredo Prieto remembers this documentary quite differently, recalling that Alvarez mocked the Beatles by cross-editing images of the group with images of apes and monkeys.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of the documentary’s intent, it was clearly momentous for fans, who had never before seen broadcast images of the famed group.

Even during the most stringent years of the 1960s, it was still possible to hear rock ‘n’ roll in Cuba via U.S. radio stations broadcasting from Florida, as well as from clear channels that could be tuned in from as far away as Arkansas—albeit discretely, at low volume, to avoid attracting attention.<sup>23</sup> By 1966 the impact of the Beatles worldwide was so great that Cuban censors realized the futility of trying to enforce a ban on rock on Cuban airwaves.<sup>24</sup> In 1966 Radio Progreso began programming the occasional Beatles record (although initially without attribution), and in 1967 the group’s name was mentioned for the first time on Chucho Herrera’s program, *Sorpresa Musical*.<sup>25</sup> These gains were achieved via constant if subtle cultural negotiations on the part of deejays wanting to play rock. Deejay Pedro Cruz remembers how the Beatles’s “Anna” became their first “hit” in Cuba: “I remember that it had a lot to do with the fact that back then it was a common practice to pay homage to the Federation of Cuban Women, or the International Day of Women with programs of songs that had as titles women’s names, and this excuse was taken advantage of to its fullest. ‘Anna’ became the first Beatles song to enter the Cuban hit parade.”<sup>26</sup> Not until 1971 did regular programming of Beatles music begin, with the advent of Pedro Cruz’s radio program *De on Radio Rebelde*, which played Beatles songs for an hour every Monday morning and evening. While the station manager was frequently called to task for “Beatle Mondays,” the show was allowed to stay on the air. As Cruz recalls, “I don’t know how we did it. I imagine the reason was the incredible obstinacy of the director of the radio station and his immense pleasure in defying the impositions ‘from above.’”<sup>27</sup>

If young Cubans managed to keep up with developments in rock via the radio, the 1960 U.S. embargo made it extremely difficult for them to obtain records and other paraphernalia such as magazines, posters, and record players—and, significantly, for aspiring musicians, musical instruments. Castellanos notes that even in 1962 rock ‘n’ roll records from the United States could

still be purchased in Havana, but as the decade progressed, Cuban record stores were no longer able to stock them. Records brought into Cuba by travelers, however, would not be confiscated by customs.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, lucky individuals like Guille Vilar, whose father traveled on official business, were able to obtain recordings from abroad—which immediately became prized possessions and were shared widely.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, it was still also possible to buy inexpensive pirated discs, called *placas*, of rock recordings at some of the same radio stations that were prohibited from playing them on the air. Some Cubans assert that these *placas* were legal and above board;<sup>30</sup> others refer to them as clandestine.<sup>31</sup> In either case, their availability demonstrates the porousness of state control over the circulation of rock from abroad. Thus, even after commercial records ceased to be available for purchase, many Cubans owned or had access to at least some rock records.

For most rock fans, staying current with musical developments—especially during the global wave of Beatlemania—demanded extraordinary perseverance, which encouraged a strong sense of community. Vilar recalls this collective spirit when it came to sharing records and information: “Way before they [the Beatles] were played on Cuban radio, we were up to date on their records. A week or two after a new record was out, everyone knew who had it and we would all go in procession to hear it, regardless of the place or time.”<sup>32</sup> According to López Sacha, “The Beatles dropped like a bolt of lightning over the Motorolas and RCA Victors that had survived the blockade, and over those Czech record players that had begun to replace them.”<sup>33</sup> These records were most often played in private gatherings and at a low volume, however, for fear of reprisals. According to Cruz, “That’s why, when someone heard that the Beatles were going to be on some program, the news was spread to everyone, so that this way we could raise the volume and listen to the music real loud; and what was better, free of the static interference radio ‘from the outside’ had.”<sup>34</sup>

It is worth noting that the character of the rock ‘n’ roll that entered Cuba followed the trajectory of its development in the United States, but due to the lack of contact between the two countries after 1960, Cubans had few ways of contextualizing the music they received. Following the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, the first generation of U.S. rock ‘n’ rollers—such as Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, and Little Richard, as well as doo-wop vocal groups, whose profoundly hybrid music foregrounded African American performance styles—gave way to a second generation of white rockers like Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon, and Fabian, who had few connections to these musical roots. Since these white artists, and those of the subsequent British Invasion, were the most likely to air on powerful Top-40 radio stations that could be picked

up in Cuba, most Cubans were exposed to rock that was increasingly separated from its African American roots. Most Cuban rock fans were only dimly aware of the racial dimensions of these developments. “Curiously, at that moment,” recalls Manduley, “the modes of rock and roll that were most popular were the ballads—Paul Anka—no longer the energetic, strong music of before.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite the barriers to rock in the media, young Cuban musicians continued to play it, and rock fans enthusiastically attended any performances they could. Many of Cuba’s 1950s rock ‘n’ roll musicians emigrated in the first exodus of artists from the island, but others—from the Elvis Presley imitators who still inhabited the nightclubs in the early stages of the Revolution to artists like Luis Bravo and Los Bucaneros—remained and continued to enjoy popularity among rock fans, even under the most trying circumstances.<sup>36</sup> Without the kind of state support for obtaining instruments and instruction available to musicians playing officially approved music, Cuba’s early rockers had to improvise. They taught themselves how to play traps and electric guitars, which were not taught in music schools, and they often had to construct their own equipment, using telephone wires for bass guitar strings and making drums out of scrap metal and X-ray film.<sup>37</sup> Because commercial nightspots were oriented toward more traditional musics, rock musicians often played for free at neighborhood cultural centers that were willing to open their doors to rock (the most well known of these being Vedado’s Patio de María), or at private parties such as birthday and *quinceañera* (fifteenth birthday) parties. Interestingly, the willingness of rock groups to play at adolescent birthday parties nurtured successive generations of rock fans.

In spite of rockers’ resistance to revolutionary cultural policies, Cuban rock lyrics were not oppositional. Cuban players did, however, continue to perform English covers in defiance of official disapproval. González Moreno argues that this was a strategy for introducing young Cubans to new music they might not necessarily hear via other channels; Manduley confirms that Cuban youth usually heard domestic versions of rock songs well before hearing the original.<sup>38</sup> Los Pacíficos were Cuba’s first Beatles cover band, performing Beatles music in English and wearing Beatles suits in a variety of Havana venues. While they never recorded, at the height of their career (which lasted from 1965 to 1970) a performance at the 5,000-seat Anfiteatro de Marianao was cancelled because of the size of the overflow crowd wanting to hear Beatles music performed live.<sup>39</sup>

The most successful rock ‘n’ roll group in Cuba throughout the 1960s was, notably, Los Zafiros, a group of young black men from Cayo Hueso, one of Havana’s historically black neighborhoods, who are seldom mentioned in Cuban accounts of rock history. Los Zafiros began in 1962 as a quartet backed up

by a single electric guitar that took its cue from U.S. doo-wop—complete with 1-6-4-5 chord progressions, nonsense syllable background choruses, and a soaring falsetto. In the 1994 Spanish language feature film *Los Zafiros—Locura azul*, as well as in numerous press accounts, the group is often compared to the Platters.

Los Zafiros began recording in the state-owned EGREM studios in 1963, and by the mid-1960s they were so popular they were referred to as “the Beatles of Cuba.” In 1965 they were included in a traveling revue entitled the Grand Music Hall of Cuba, which featured various stars of Cuban popular music and which performed in Moscow, Poland, and East Germany. They made their biggest impression in Paris, where, it is said, they even received an offer from Berry Gordy to sign with Motown—which they declined.<sup>40</sup> Los Zafiros’s success might appear to be an aberration, given the climate of hostility to U.S. influences, but mitigating circumstances help to explain this apparent contradiction. The group became popular at a time when Cuba was seeking to elevate the status of its Afro-Cuban cultural heritage, in part to foreground its sense of national pride, and, ironically, to counteract the influence of outside cultural forces, most notably rock. Los Zafiros, however, were Afro-Cuban, they sang in Spanish, and just as doo-wop was the most hybrid form of rock ‘n’ roll in the U.S., the music of Los Zafiros integrated outside influences into an overall sound that exuded Cubanness. Perhaps for these very reasons Los Zafiros tend not to be included as members of the Cuban rock pantheon by Cuban rock historians.

### Reconstructing Cuban Popular Music

Rock was not the only musical genre affected by the transition to socialism. Many of Cuba’s best dance-band musicians emigrated, while those who remained, such as the venerable Benny Moré, found themselves cut off from the musical developments and exchanges with their counterparts, in New York, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere, that had been so productive for musicians from both regions. To fill the vacuum created by the absence of music from abroad, the government tried to stimulate Cuban music by providing financial support and media access to all national music forms, the most well-known example being the highly regarded national folkloric companies that performed Afro-Cuban music and dance in theatrical settings. Hoping to revitalize Havana’s dance scene, in 1963 the Communist Party also threw its support behind a local bandleader, Pedro Izquierdo, aka Pello El Afrokán, hoping that the Mozambique, a dance he had invented, would divert attention from the

public’s interest in rock. Pello was featured constantly on radio and television, and the Mozambique did enjoy a brief period of widespread popularity. Young urban Cubans, however, resented attempts to impose the Mozambique from above. At the same time, they were increasingly bored with Havana’s older dance bands, which were still playing styles popular in the 1950s. As Manduley put it, “They sounded old, and the young public didn’t want to listen to music that sounded old.”<sup>41</sup>

While most Cubans tend not to think about culture and social relations in racial terms, it is difficult to discuss the decade of the 1960s without considering its racial dynamics. In 1960 the government began seizing U.S. properties, including many of Havana’s nightclubs, subsidizing their operations and opening them to the populace for nominal fees. For the first time, black Cubans could enjoy music and dance in elegant venues such as the world-famous Tropicana. As the musician Pablo Menéndez recalled: “What happened was, instead of American tourism, now you had Cuban workers. If you were a poor black Cuban, you weren’t allowed even near the Tropicana before the Revolution, so after the Revolution this was your major aspiration and it was possible for you to go there. So having the birthday party for your fifteen-year-old daughter at the Tropicana, with your whole family invited, and putting a bottle of rum at every table, was the thing being done at that time.”<sup>42</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that black Cuban musicians such as Los Zafiros and Pello El Afrokán hit the zenith of their popularity during the early to mid-1960s.

Even though the Cuban government actively discouraged English-language rock (just as it was becoming increasingly white) and proactively stimulating black Cuban culture, the state’s support for black Cuban culture was uneven at times. It tended to be more enthusiastic about those forms, such as rumba, that could be presented as “folkloric” and displayed in theatres and museums.<sup>43</sup> Other forms of lived Afro-Cuban popular culture, however, from Santería practices to revelry in bars—both of which were considered undesirable vestiges of the past—were more problematic. Carlos Moore notes that in 1967, for example, the government harassed those black Cubans who wore dashikis and Afro hairstyles, and who listened to rhythm and blues, funk, and jazz—a clear parallel to the harassment of young rock fans sporting long hair and miniskirts.<sup>44</sup> We should note that Moore’s reference to the preferences of black Cubans for U.S. rhythm and blues, funk, and jazz diverges from those of other Cuban rock historians, whose references, when recalling youthful tastes in the 1960s, tend more toward white U.S. and U.K. musicians and groups—suggesting at least some degree of racial divide between the musical practices of black and white Cubans.



### Rockin' the Revolutionary Boat

In 1968, just as the restrictions on foreign rock in the mass media were being relaxed, the government embarked on what it called the “revolutionary offensive,” which included a crackdown on all remnants of private enterprise and the closing of all Havana nightclubs for an entire year.<sup>45</sup> Pablo Menéndez interprets the closing of the nightclubs as reflecting the government’s conclusion that it was time to “get serious and try to develop this country, go out and do some work!”<sup>46</sup> but it also indicates the effort to exert greater control over popular music and culture. Attempts to stimulate indigenous Cuban music by supporting groups such as Pello El Afrokán and the Zafros had failed to turn the attention of Cuban youth away from musical developments that were happening elsewhere in the world, particularly in rock.

To be sure, some young people were too involved with revolutionary activities such as literacy campaigns to suffer nostalgia for Havana’s former nightlife, or to be interested in international cultural trends that seemed irrelevant to a revolutionary society. Many of these youth, however, could see no contradiction between their revolution and rock. To them, rock should not be equated with U.S. cultural imperialism, but rather with the liberating musical, cultural, and political experiments that youth elsewhere were engaging in. Indeed, some young rock fans were convinced that the cultural liberation movements taking place in the capitalist West were, in spirit, closely linked with the Cuban Revolution. As Menéndez put it, “The young generation was looking for something new and exciting, and hooking into a rock revolution that was happening because of other dynamics in the world, that were actually inspired by the Cuban Revolution; it was this ping-pong thing, between the Cuban Revolution and the rest of the world. It looks like it’s not connected, but it’s all connected.”<sup>47</sup>

These ideas about the role of music in a revolutionary setting were best expressed in the musical practices of young musicians who believed that one of the benefits of living in a revolutionary society was to be able to make new forms of music. Musicians such as Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, who had come of age listening to and playing music influenced by rock, perceived no contradiction in incorporating rock influences into their music, especially those of socially committed U.S. musicians such as Bob Dylan. Such ideas conflicted with the increasingly dogmatic official position requiring that music in a revolutionary setting should not only be totally committed to the Revolution and accessible to the masses but also free of foreign influences. Even after his firing, Silvio Rodríguez remained deeply committed to the Revolution, but,

like so many of his contemporaries, he continued to play music that included rock influences.

While restrictions on playing English-language rock on the radio had begun to loosen in 1967, the government continued to be suspicious of music that exhibited foreign influences. Haydée Santamaría, director of Casa de las Américas (one of Havana’s premier cultural institutions), was concerned about the future of committed young musicians like Rodríguez, whose careers were not advancing because they were running afoul of party cultural policies.<sup>48</sup> Hoping to give these young musicians a sanctioned platform, Casa de las Américas sponsored the first Festival de Canción Protesta (Festival of Protest Song) in 1967, and invited other socially-conscious musicians from elsewhere in Latin America, such as Uruguay’s Daniel Viglietti. Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés were among the participants performing original songs in Spanish, which included some rock influences. This historic concert drew hundreds of young people, leading some Party officials to realize that rock influences *per se* were not automatically counter-revolutionary; henceforth the participating musicians enjoyed a certain “official acceptance,”<sup>49</sup> although they were still banned from the media.

In 1968 Alfredo Guevara, director of ICAIC, traveled to Brazil, where he was struck by the popularity of Tropicália, a (short-lived) category of urban popular song pioneered by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil within the larger genre called Música Popular Brasileira (MPB). Tropicália was characterized by an attitude, or stance, that accepted rock or decided to use it for its own ends; expressed musically, it was a hybrid of rock and various Brazilian styles that mixed traditional and modern aesthetics and it was enthusiastically embraced by many Brazilian youth—although its electric guitars and rock stylings also generated heated opposition from nationalists.<sup>50</sup> Guevara was also impressed by the milieu of social activism in which Tropicália and MPB were embedded, and the manner in which young musicians and their fans used popular music to resist the oppression of Brazil’s authoritarian government. Believing the same confluence of musical experimentation and a socially progressive outlook could capture the attention of Cuban youth, in 1969 Guevara established a musical unit within ICAIC, under the mentorship of the classically trained composer Leo Brouwer, whose official purpose was to provide soundtracks for ICAIC’s films, but whose real mission was to serve as both hothouse and refuge for creative and committed young musicians such as Silvio Rodríguez, whose professional development would be nurtured institutionally by ICAIC. Like Haydée Santamaría, Guevara was a former militant whose revolutionary credentials were impeccable; thus, according to Martins, Guevara was able to

create a “privileged institution [using Raymond Williams’s term] . . . incorporated into the system, but which nevertheless, presents a certain controlled level of contestation.”<sup>51</sup>

Under Guevara’s protection, Brouwer, who himself was *prohibido* because he had protested the banning of jazz, set about hiring like-minded young musicians (whether or not they were formally trained) who would study the roots of Cuban music but whose interests extended beyond Cuban forms, and who would participate in collective musical experimentation and contribute to theoretical dialogues about the role of contemporary music in a revolutionary society.<sup>52</sup> The first musicians to be invited were the acoustic singer/songwriters Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, and Noel Nicola. Later, invitations were extended to Eduardo Ramos (bass), Leonardo Acosta (saxophone), Leoginaldo Pimentel (drums), Emiliano Salvador (piano), and Pablo Menéndez (electric guitar), among others. These additions expanded the group’s ability to play a wider range of musical styles; the gender balance was also improved when Sara González was invited to join in 1972. Brouwer’s goals for the study group/musical think tank that came to be known as the Grupo Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC (GESI) were “to reclaim song with social content, but with a high sense of poetics, impeccable construction, and a high degree of technology. . . . It was a group that was going to mark—I was sure of it and so it happened—a milestone in Cuban popular culture.”<sup>53</sup> Menéndez recalls: “The concept was like a guerilla focus, start with this little group of rebels in the film institute and see how they could influence the rest of Cuban culture.”<sup>54</sup> To this end, GESI members studied music theory and aesthetics with Brouwer, as well as with some of Cuba’s most distinguished figures in music education. More a collective than a fixed musical unit, they played together constantly, forming impromptu configurations as the spirit moved them and experimenting freely with anything and everything they desired.

In addition to studying traditional Cuban music, these young musicians were encouraged to listen carefully to whatever popular music from abroad they could get their hands on, from Brazilian Tropicália and MPB to U.S. jazz and rock, so that they could incorporate it into their collective experiments. Interestingly, much of the foreign music they listened to came from ICAIC’s extensive collection of recordings, which even included rock groups such as Iron Butterfly and Country Joe and the Fish.<sup>55</sup> Not all the musicians were equally committed to rock—some were more interested in song or jazz—but those who were rock fans were deeply interested in finding echoes of Cuban-ness in rock—noting, for example, that the Chambers Brothers used a cowbell on “Time,” that the Four Tops had conga drumming in “Bernadette,” and that the Beatles’ “And I Love Her” used claves. They also searched for signs of hy-



This photo of the Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC, more commonly known as GESI, was originally taken for an album produced in 1972, though it was never used. Original photo by María Eugenia (Marucha) García. Provided courtesy of Pablo Menéndez.

bridty in other musical sources, which allowed them to construct the counterargument (to official policies) that rock was an international hybrid rather than a U.S. musical form. As Noel Nicola wrote in 1979, “For the Cuban people and Cuban musicians, the musical complex known as rock or beat, is not something distant nor totally foreign. It doesn’t take much effort to hear everything that comes from Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean and our own Antillean island.”<sup>56</sup>

Pablo Menéndez occupied a particularly interesting role with respect to the group’s knowledge of rock. Menéndez is the son of U.S. blues and jazz singer Barbara Dane, an accomplished and well-known artist in radical circles, who was the first U.S. musician to break the blockade in 1966 by performing in Cuba. After this act of solidarity by his mother, Menéndez was invited to study music at Cuba’s prestigious Escuela Nacional de Arte.<sup>57</sup> Arriving in Havana in 1966 at the age of fourteen, he started a rock band called Los Gallos with two of his classmates, the drummer Leoginaldo Pimentel and the keyboardist Emiliano Salvador, who later recommended Menéndez to Brouwer after they had been invited to join GESI. Having been born and raised in the U.S., and thanks to his mother’s musical and political influences, Menéndez brought to GESI not only his talents as an electric guitarist and a critical cultural observer, but also a deep knowledge of U.S. popular music, especially African American

music. "I would say, forget the Beatles, listen to the Shirelles, Chuck Berry. I had this old Wollensack tape recorder and I brought down tons of tape. Because I knew nothing of Cuban music when I came here, I was preparing for being exiled, so I spent a couple of months raiding my mother's record collection, which had everything, from the latest Beatles, Otis Reading, Rolling Stones, Animals, everybody, to the blues classics, Ray Charles, and a lot of folk music—all sorts of stuff."<sup>58</sup> As Menéndez noted in an interview published on the thirtieth anniversary of GESI's founding: "My contribution to the group was that the music of the metropolis, in many colonized countries, had always been somewhat mystified, and because of where I came from, I could recognize its origins, above all the Afro-American mix which is the fundamental dynamic within North American culture, and I knew its inner workings. . . . The music industry outside the U.S. gives a soft-boiled impression, a colonized one, in which it presents it as an Anglo-Saxon product even though it is part of a mixed and Afro-American culture. Somehow I translated that reality."<sup>59</sup>

Menéndez's ability to enhance his contemporaries' understanding of the racial dimensions of U.S. popular music helped the GESI articulate its defense of rock as a legitimate musical source, arguing that, on the one hand, it was the product of an oppressed racial minority, and on the other, that its multiple sources and influences complicated its reduction to a mere product of U.S. cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, the primary interest of Brouwer and most of the GESI musicians remained focused on creating a new musical language drawing on what they considered to be more sophisticated, or "cultured," music—jazz and symphonic rock, rather than dance music—which necessarily directed their interests more toward styles played by whites. Leonardo Acosta recalls arguments within the group because some members wanted to include more Cuban percussion but Brouwer wasn't interested.<sup>60</sup> Brouwer has denied Acosta's characterization, insisting that the vast majority of GESI's recordings were made with Cuban instruments, but that in the revolutionary spirit of the group, they were simply used in new ways.<sup>61</sup>

Being under the aegis of a prestigious state institution like ICAIC did not prevent GESI musicians from being *prohibidos* because of their suspect musical inclinations, such as "electrification" and the fact that they drew on rock sources (not to mention their long hair). Silvio Rodríguez remembers the scrutiny they were subjected to: "They practically used microscopes to check songs to see if they had any rock cells, which they interpreted as penetration cells, and pro-imperialist cells. In other words, in those days there were imperialist musical rhythms."<sup>62</sup> Pablo Menéndez is more pragmatic about the state's disapproval of rock and other foreign influences: "We didn't take them seriously and we didn't think it would last. As young people we were sure it would dis-

appear."<sup>63</sup> But being banned had a significant impact on the group, because in spite of their prodigious output none of their early recordings were released and they were not allowed to perform on the air; a few compositions, however, were heard anonymously, on film soundtracks. But as Brouwer recalls, GESI musicians persisted and continued to argue with the authorities until eventually the policies were modified: "At first we didn't do concerts because we were forbidden. . . . Later we did do public concerts all over the island, not only in the capital. . . . These concerts were not publicized, but they caused a commotion among adolescents and youth who agitated public opinion. . . . We may not have come out on radio or television, but we performed live, in a sort of counterattack, and we did it intentionally. . . . Later . . . simply by playing live on the street, they were forced to abolish the restrictions on disseminating the group and its music on the radio."<sup>64</sup>

In addition to having better access to foreign recordings than most ordinary Cuban rock fans, their privileged status facilitated GESI's connections to socially progressive *nueva canción* musicians from throughout Latin America, some of whom similarly incorporated rock elements in their music. Most of these were drawn to Cuba because of its revolutionary ideals; others were invited to participate in the numerous song festivals that the government began organizing in the 1970s. In the course of the 1970s such *nueva canción* luminaries as Chico Buarque, Milton Nascimento, Daniel Viglietti, Inti-Illimani, and Mercedes Sosa were invited to perform, creating opportunities for members of GESI to meet and perform on stage with the visitors. The results were not always harmonious. In 1970 the Chilean group Quilapayún performed at the Festival Internacional de la Canción Popular in Varadero. As Pablo Menéndez recalls, "We thought they were great, but they were doing prerevolutionary stuff, not the stuff you make after the revolution and you are building a revolutionary culture."<sup>65</sup> The musical differences were mutual. According to Silvio Rodríguez: "They did not approach us because they believed what they had been told: that we were an undisciplined group of political deviants because we liked rock. They also told them we were drug addicts. They went and repeated this in other countries. Out of this came their ironic statement that curiously, some people in Cuba made songs with revolutionary texts and imperialist music; and that instead of being a red culture, it was a pink culture."<sup>66</sup> Members of GESI were furious but were forbidden by ICAIC from publishing their written response, which, in retrospect, Rodríguez believes was a strategic decision by an ICAIC directorship already under official scrutiny.<sup>67</sup>

While not a rock band—they played all kinds of music from Cuban *guaguancós* to jazz—some of GESI's members were genuinely interested in rock and incorporated it into their music. One of its most famous tunes, "Cuba Va,"

a collectively composed song in which various members contributed verses, displays no attempt to hybridize or dissemble its straight-ahead rock aesthetic; it was, as Rodríguez puts it, “*rock a lo inglés*.”<sup>68</sup> Their eclecticism and their embrace of rock (not to mention the outstanding quality of their music) made them enormously popular among rock fans. Equally significant for Cuba’s rock scene was GESI’s (relatively) privileged position, which gave them a stronger position from which to push back against government harassment than was available to ordinary rock fans. Moreover, their rhetoric, clearly equating revolution with human liberation, gave other rockers a language with which to contest the official disparagement of rock.<sup>69</sup>

In the early 1970s Cuba’s cultural policies took a step backward in the wake of a series of conflicts with some leading intellectuals that generated international criticism even from allies. The government defensively renewed its attack on foreign cultural influences, insisting that artists abstain from criticizing the government and requiring all art to become a weapon in defense of the Revolution.<sup>70</sup> In 1972 the government sought to incorporate the growing popularity of young singer/songwriters such as those participating in GESI by creating an official entity called Movimiento Nueva Trova (MNT), under the aegis of the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC), the community youth party, which formalized these musicians’ relationship with the state. Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, who had been playing that style of music since the mid-1960s, left GESI and affiliated themselves with MNT—although they continued to collaborate with their former musical partners.

Between 1972 and 1978—the year GESI officially ceased to exist—the group underwent a number of transformations: Brouwer stepped down as director and was replaced by Eduardo Ramos; some original members left, new ones were added; and the group gradually achieved a certain level of official acceptance. They began performing more frequently in concerts, and in 1976 were even sent on a European tour to represent Cuba. If GESI’s second period was perhaps less exciting than its stimulating if more precarious earlier years, their importance in Cuba’s popular music scene actually increased, because their music began to be heard by a wider audience. While GESI had been producing quantities of music since 1969, it wasn’t until 1972 that the recordings made in ICAIC’s studios—comprising over two hundred masters—began to be released. A total of six vinyl records were eventually released, some of which also contained songs commissioned for political events. Their first record, for example, was made for the Federation of Cuban Women to take to a women’s conference in Chile.<sup>71</sup> Other songs selected for release were those determined to be “politically committed.”<sup>72</sup> Since the singer/songwriters were overrepresented, while the more experimental and instrumental music characterizing

the collective was not included, these recordings do not reflect the full range and complexity of GESI’s musical activity.<sup>73</sup>

### Rock in the Broader Cuban Music Landscape

While GESI’s wide-ranging experiments were taking place under the protective umbrella of ICAIC and its fraternal connections with MNT, there was also an underground but thriving grassroots rock scene. Even the best-known bands, such as Los Dada, Los Kent, and Almas Vertiginosas, however, were unable to record because of official disapproval.<sup>74</sup> If most of their earlier output was in English, Cuban rock bands were beginning to experiment with lyrics in Spanish in the 1970s, inspired by the visit of rockers from Spain such as Los Bravos and Los Mustang. González Moreno notes that most Cuban rockers merely substituted Spanish-language models for English-language ones, rather than producing genuinely new forms of Cuban rock. Some, however, sought inspiration in the music of Silvio Rodríguez because the structure of his music facilitated a transfer to a rock format and his lyrics reflected local concerns. Another group, Los Dada, also experimented with ways to nationalize rock by adding a *chékere* to its percussion.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the fact that rock was an underground phenomenon, it articulated with the rest of Cuba’s popular music landscape in significant, if subtle, ways. Several important dance bands emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s were influenced in one way or another by U.S. rock and jazz. They, too, had to proceed with caution as they pushed against the restrictive boundaries set by official orthodoxy, although they were able to more easily conceal their experiments under the cover of more overtly national sounds. One of these bands was the Orquesta de Música Moderna, founded in 1968. During the 1960s, the term *música moderna* served as a code word for jazz and rock, so the band’s name alluded to forbidden influences. While primarily a jazz band, it was an older style jazz band, which was acceptable to the authorities because it sounded like prerevolutionary bands such as Benny Moré’s. As Rodríguez ironically observes, “Since people weren’t endangered by listening to this music or of being contaminated by imperialist microbes, they were permitted to make it.”<sup>76</sup> While the band had to be circumspect about how it incorporated jazz, any increase in the range of allowable sounds was welcomed by popular music fans. Bandleader Carlos Alfonso recalls the impact of the band on young rock fans like himself: “They were the light!”<sup>77</sup>

The following year, 1969, another seminal Cuban dance band, Los Van Van, was established. Its bandleader, Juan Formell, had begun his career arranging for Elio Revé’s *charanga* band, whose repertoire included a fusion

called *changüi-shake*.<sup>78</sup> With his own band, Formell was free to expand his innovations, such as adding the electric guitar and trap set (rock's signature instruments) to the Latin dance band format, and incorporating vocal harmonies characteristic of U.S. pop-rock groups popular at the time, such as the Association and the Circle. Alfonso recalls, "When Formell did his compositions he lived in a shabby house in Center Havana, and with his guitar, his compositions seemed to be a rock song, but when you heard it with an *orquesta*, he mixed all of that, and the result was something miraculous."<sup>79</sup> Los Van Van has been credited with restoring Cuban dance bands to their prerevolutionary vitality and stature, and Alfonso believes it was Formell's incorporation of a subtle rock groove that attracted young urban Cubans who had formerly rejected what they perceived as the warmed-over music of their parents: "A few years ago I talked to him [Formell] and asked him about his influence from rock, and he said, 'That's the base, the foundation of my music.'"<sup>80</sup> Over the years, Los Van Van gradually moved away from the rock aesthetics heard on their early recordings and toward a more characteristically Cuban sound, based on the traditional *son*, called *songo*. Nevertheless, Formell never abandoned electric guitars and traps, which distinguishes Los Van Van from most salsa bands in the U.S. and Latin America.

In 1973 Chucho Valdez, Arturo Sandoval, and Paquito d'Rivera left the Orquesta de Música Moderna to form another seminal group, Irakere, whose sound was much more experimental than that of its predecessor. While primarily a jazz band, it incorporated Cuban dance music and also rock. Alfonso notes, "Irakere was simply the Cuban version of Chicago and Blood, Sweat and Tears. When Blood, Sweat and Tears came out, Cubans loved the combination of brass, strong vocals, and rhythms. Irakere is our version of that, with *bata* drums and *tumbadores*, but it was the same, the same objectives."<sup>81</sup> Irakere's ability to play Latin jazz, jazz-rock, and Cuban dance music equally proficiently had a major impact on the next generation of *timba* bands.<sup>82</sup> All of this is not to suggest that rock can be credited with the revitalization of Cuban popular music in the 1970s, but rather, that many of the young musicians responsible for the renaissance of Cuban popular music were both familiar and comfortable with the rock idiom and they saw no reason to summarily exclude it for ideological reasons.

The spirit of eclecticism and musical experimentation that characterized GESI and bands such as Irakere and Los Van Van was expressed in the music of another important rock band that emerged in the 1970s: Síntesis. Síntesis evolved out of the vocal group Tema Cuatro, formed in 1972 by Carlos Alfonso, his wife Ele Valdés, and three other musicians associated with MNT and GESI. Experimenting with a number of vocal styles, from Nueva Trova to

street vendors' chants, they even incorporated harmonies inspired by the Beach Boys. Alfonso was also attracted to English art-rock groups like Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Pink Floyd, and Yes, whose music had open structures, complex arrangements, and appropriations from European classical music. In 1978 he formed Síntesis, a nine-member group with synthesizer, piano, trap drums, electric guitar, six-string steel acoustic guitar, electric bass, and voices, which could approximate the symphonic qualities of the English bands he admired: Alfonso's original lyrics, however, were in Spanish. The group caused a sensation among rockers and intellectuals, although the press attacked them for using rock.<sup>83</sup> The liner notes to their first LP, *En busca de una nueva flor* (recorded in Mexico in 1978) were written by former GESI musician Noel Nicola. Recognizing the influence of Yes, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, and Cat Stevens, Nicola justifies these musical choices by using the same arguments GESI had employed in the past—that is, by emphasizing the universality of rock and insisting on the music's independence from U.S. influence:

In Cuba there are no multinationals, nor are we inert under the cultural bombardment from any metropolis, nor under the pressure of large record companies, nor under the uncontrolled actions of any manipulating machinations of any empire. Under these conditions, there is no reason to be afraid of critical and conscious assimilation of any universal musical current corresponding with its real values and technical contributions. In Cuba we are free to choose, and Síntesis has made good use of this liberty. It is healthy and important that there be a good "heavy rock" group in Cuba, with good instrumentalists, free of cheap imitation, and committed to serious and creative work within this current. Taking this direction, Síntesis has incorporated selected themes in the lyrics and selected musical patterns which depart from a Cuban national sensibility.<sup>84</sup>

Around 1980, Pablo Menéndez joined Síntesis as its electric guitarist. Menéndez and Alfonso had separately considered something that hadn't been done before: mixing rock with Afro-Cuban elements. In spite of the public legitimization of Afro-Cuban music and culture, Cuban rockers had generally avoided using traditional music forms perceived as antithetical to the more cosmopolitan aesthetics of rock. Alfonso recalls, "I realized that African, U.S., and Jamaican music were related to each other, so we started to drop our prejudices against ourselves."<sup>85</sup> Menéndez got his inspiration from a Sergio Mendes record called *Primal Roots*, whose aesthetics—"Brazilian *santería* music in a pop setting"—he wanted to adapt to the Cuban context.<sup>86</sup> This confluence

of interests took Cuban rock in a new direction: after *Síntesis*'s first composition, "Melewo," was aired on the radio, the response was so positive that EGREM asked them to record an entire LP. Entitled *Ancestros*, it included vocals by the *santero* Lázaro Ros, who was the most distinguished member of the Conjunto Nacional Folclórico. While its contemporary use of original Santería material and Yoruba lyrics generated some controversy, it won the prestigious Disco de Oro prize. *Síntesis* made other "straight" rock recordings after that, but they have been most successful with their signature sounds of Afro-Cuban rock.

Despite the success of *Síntesis* with Afro-Cuban rock, few other rock bands were stimulated to emulate their experiments with traditional Afro-Cuban music. The exception is Pablo Menéndez's band *Mezcla*, which means "mixture," formed after he left *Síntesis* around 1982. *Mezcla*, like *Síntesis* and *GESI* before it, is based on the concept of mixture and synthesis, although *Mezcla* has a stronger base in U.S. rhythm and blues—which is not surprising, given Menéndez's background. Both *Síntesis* and *Mezcla* have released recordings that have circulated internationally, although the prominent Afro-Cuban influence in their music renders it closer to world beat than to rock.

### Coda

While developments in rock in the 1980s are beyond the scope of this essay, we want to conclude by highlighting a few relevant events. In 1979, corresponding with a short-lived relaxation of tension between Cuba and the United States during the Carter administration, Columbia Records organized a joint concert of Cuban and U.S. musicians in Havana. The concert included the Fania All Stars, Weather Report, and Cuba's Irakere, as well as U.S. musicians Stephen Stills, Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge, and headliner Billy Joel, whose electrifying performance at the Karl Marx Theatre reportedly brought the proverbial house down. By the mid-1980s the government had begun relaxing its attitude toward rock. A new generation of bands such as *Venus* were moving on to Spanish-language lyrics about local concerns. By referring to their music as *rock nacional*, they positioned Cuban rock as part of the nascent Latin American *rock nacional* movement emerging elsewhere in the hemisphere. We should also mention singer-songwriter Carlos Varela, generationally somewhere in between the old and the new guard, who emerged from and is still considered to be part of the *Nueva Trova* movement rather than a rocker. Nevertheless, aesthetically, much of Varela's music is unequivocally rock, and his lyrics, which contain thinly veiled criticisms of the government's cultural conservatism, give voice to the perennial concerns of young rockers.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Cuba was forced to adopt a mixed economy. As the country opened itself up to tourism, performance venues proliferated and the most oppressive constraints on artistic expression disappeared. Rock began to be heard more frequently on radio, television, and in public venues, and new record companies, established as joint ventures (primarily with Spain), offered new possibilities for recording. Even the government-owned EGREM, responding to growing international interest in Cuban music, began re-releasing long-unobtainable recordings on CD, including *GESI*'s compilations. As the older, more conservative party stalwarts, who had so misunderstood Cubans' embrace of rock, have died or retired, they have been replaced by a younger generation of committed socialists, many of whom grew up listening to rock and roll. Abel Prieto exemplifies these changes: as president of UNEAC, Prieto made it possible for the first, 1996 conference on the Beatles, and three years after he was named Minister of Culture, in 1997, he brought to fruition the idea of erecting the statue of John Lennon in John Lennon Park, whose dedication was attended by Fidel Castro.

Today there are dozens, if not hundreds, of rock groups in Cuba, playing every imaginable sub-genre of rock, from grunge to death metal to punk, each with a devoted fan base. Additionally, rap made its appearance in Cuba in the 1980s.<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, rap's entrance in Cuba, while not without problems, was much smoother than rock's, since rock had already paved the way for the acceptance of music from the United States. We should note, however, that the young rockers and rappers we talked to (in 1999) still felt marginalized, although they did not experience the same levels of censure experienced by their predecessors. Only a few of the new generation of rockers had been able to record, most of them with Spanish labels rather than EGREM. One of these was Havana, an alternative rock group whose lead guitarist is Pablo Menéndez's son Osamu. Another example is *Garaje H*, whose rock/rap hybrid sound resembles that of *Rage Against the Machine*.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, Carlos Alfonso's extraordinarily talented and versatile son, X Alfonso, had not (until 2002) been able to record a solo rock album, although he has recorded Afro-Cuban rock with *Síntesis*. Rockers, as well as rappers, interpreted their continued marginalization as a lack of interest in Cuban rock by their government as well as by foreign record companies, correctly noting that traditional or national Cuban music is perceived as more commercially viable abroad.

Internally, the broader acceptance of rock and rap has brought to the surface another dimension of Cuba's rock movement, which appears to be characterized by something of a racial divide (similar but not identical to its counterpart in the United States), in which rock is more closely associated with whiter Cubans, while *timba*, and now rap, are more associated with darker

Cubans. In the 1980s U.S. researchers who visited Cuba noted that both white and African American musicians from the United States (for example, Billy Joel, Donna Summer, Earth, Wind and Fire, the Bee Gees, Michael Jackson) were very popular.<sup>89</sup> However, when Cubans were asked about their favorite music from the United States when they were growing up, they seemed to express preferences that correlated highly with race: black Cubans were more likely to mention African American musicians, and vice versa, for whiter Cubans. “Rock made by black people is more for dancing,” said Guille Vilar, “but rock for white people is different in many ways. . . . I think that black Cuban people . . . will like Earth, Wind and Fire, and if you ask whites, they will say no. White rock is the one most liked in Cuba, that’s my point of view.”<sup>90</sup>

In terms of Cuban rock, most of the musicians and fans at rock concerts we attended in the 1980s were white, while most of the fans at popular dance music venues such as Havana’s legendary Jardines de la Tropical were dark-skinned. When questioned, Cubans tend to explain this phenomenon in cultural, not racial terms—that is, they say that it reflects different musical preferences, not social divisions. In fact, Cubans generally do not think about themselves in racial terms: official discourse in Cuba has held, with some justification, that racial discrimination was eliminated by the Revolution and that only vestiges of personal prejudices remain. Moreover, to focus on racial differences rather than national unity could introduce an element of instability into Cuba’s social fabric, especially in the context of continuing U.S. hostilities. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, Cubans have begun paying more attention to the importance of race—and, interestingly, rap has been one of the main social forces generating this new dialogue.

Meanwhile, the wider acceptance of rock has had a dramatic effect not only on the practice of rock, but also on the historical discourse of rock within Cuba. Until recently, very little was known about Cuba’s rock scene, not just because very little was recorded, but because very little was written about it. Therefore, most people’s universe of knowledge was based on their own experiences and those of their acquaintances. Beginning in the mid-1990s, scholarly articles and books about rock in Cuba began emerging at an astonishing rate: these include Humberto Manduley’s articles on the history of rock in Cuba (1994, 1997) and his recently published book *El rock en Cuba* (2001); Ernesto Juan Castellanos’s books on the Beatles in Cuba (1997, 2000); and, beginning around 1999, a veritable avalanche of interviews and articles on the subject of Cuban rock has been posted on Cuban Web sites. Written from Cuban perspectives, these invaluable materials have finally opened a window onto an important chapter in Cuba’s cultural history. Recovered histories such as these have contributed to a very different climate for rock and roll than in

the past. Indeed, at a 1999 official gathering of musicians in Havana, where young rockers and rappers defended their music as “positive, even revolutionary,” Minister of Culture Abel Prieto agreed to bring these artists under the aegis of the same state agency that represents other popular musicians. Declared Prieto: “It’s time we nationalize rock and rap.”<sup>91</sup>

Imagine!

### Selected Discography

Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC. *Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC. Vol. II*. 1997. EGREM CD 0264.

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Zafiros. *Canción a mi Habana*. 1998. EGREM CD 0292.