



Snapshot: Cuba

A Musical Paradise Thriving In A Forbidden Land



RHYTHM NATION

1. Matanzas, Cuba. 2. Cuban tumbadoras. 3. Trinidad, Cuba. 4. The Veradero 70 playing on the streets in Trinidad.

By Brad Boynton

I think reverse psychology works. When I was a kid my mom told me that beets were messy and would stain the furniture, but it only made me want to try them that much more, and I'm still a huge fan. Cuba is the same way. The mere fact that we're not supposed to go there makes it enticing. It's the island that has given birth to rumba, salsa, and batá drumming and is continually churning out killer drummers. The fact that it holds the keys to unlocking clave makes it even more compelling. There are many more tradi-

tions, drums, and rhythms that haven't yet been exported and filtered through our American media machine, which only makes this small island even more of a drummer's paradise. Add to that '56 Chevy's plying the streets of Havana, clubs open till dawn, sandy beaches, and a bottle of seven-year-old rum for less than \$10 and you can easily convince yourself that the very place you're not supposed to go is *the* place you want to be. Oh, except for that pesky little travel restriction for Americans, which we'll talk about in a second.

Hands And Sticks

Aside from maybe North Korea, this is a place that has more government control and secrecy than almost any other place on earth. And it's also more advanced than we'd expect, with a 99 percent literacy rate, more doctors per capita than almost anywhere in the world, a lower infant mortality rate than the United States, and virtually nonexistent crime. With a quick hop from Cancún you can seemingly time-travel back to the '60s to glimpse the incredible worlds of music, architecture, classic cars, and a bygone era of communism.



CAPITAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

1. Antique abakua drums at the Museum Of Music, Havana. 2. Typical timbales. 3. & 4. Sonoc Drum factory. 5. Beco makes handmade bells for the top players.

Think about how Cuban music has shaped our own playing as drummers, and brought us groups like Buena Vista Social Club and Afro Cuban Allstars as well as players like Horacio “El Negro” Hernandez, Luis Conte, and Changuito. Those are a few of the names we’ve become familiar with on this side of the water, but this article will also talk about the types of musical experiences that you can only get if you enter that time machine yourself.

After working in music retail for more than 20 years, I’ve observed that most drummers have placed themselves into one of two camps: the folkloric — with its hand drums and African-influenced traditions — versus the modern musical styles, which incorporate keyboard synths, sophisticated arrangements, and mathematical precision. Having studied congas for a number of years before going to Cuba, I thought I’d be drawn to the folkloric side myself. But the world I found was also teeming with drum set players sporting Thomas Lang chops, and timbale players with rudimental vocabularies that would put most drum line players to shame. So whether you gravitate toward one camp or the other, Cuba is an incredible place for both hand and stick drummers alike.

As players, we all know Latin music can be intimidating because of its structure and tradition. If you show up to a salsa gig and play bongos during a chorus, forget to come down off your bells for a piano solo, or flip clave coming out of a break, you’ll be fired. Going to the source can help you straighten it all out. There are many styles of music both social and religious that you’ll hear in every nook and cranny in Cuba. You’ll find rumba on the streets, salsa in the clubs, and religious ceremonies behind closed doors. Of course you can go to some hotels and find all three conveniently packaged for tourists, but you can do that in Oakland or Miami, too. If you hit the streets and put energy into it you can probe even deeper to learn the structure, terminology, and tradition. So, dust off your Kangol cap and let’s go.

La Habana

My first trip to Cuba was in 2002 when I went on an organized, licensed tour with educator/clinician Chuck Silverman for the Havana Drum Festival. Trips like these are a way to quickly get connected to artists and events on the ground in a way that you could never plan in advance. Even on organized

tours a lot of events are last minute. On a typical day we’d have breakfast as a group at Hotel Lincoln and Chuck would say something like, “Well, I’ve heard that some of you want to study Makuta with Lali today, so we have a class scheduled for 10 A.M. We’ve also been invited to a Klimax rehearsal at noon and they said you guys can sit in on instruments if you want. Also, if any of you are interested in a drum factory tour, we have a mini-bus coming to take us to the Sonoc factory so you can see how congas are made. I personally was thinking of going to the Partagas cigar factory after the drum factory tour and then stopping off at the fruit market on the way — the papayas are in season. Let’s see ... there’s a national-league baseball game in Centro Habana tonight, the Industriales vs. Cienfuegos. Oh, and there’s some crushin’ timba to-night with Manolito at 6 P.M., and Paulo F.G at 11 at Casa de la Musica down the street. Let’s see a show of hands for who wants to do what.” Every day was an action-packed drummer’s dream, and every day began at the breakfast table with a menu of opportunity.

Like a ’58 Chevy with a turbo thrust V-8 under the hood, Havana has all cylinders firing day and night. Every time I’ve been there, there’s been some sort of street fair or carnival, and music wafts from every building whether it’s live or slamming Charanga Habanera from the boom box. People’s lives are pretty exposed there owing to the way the homes are built with courtyards, balconies, and open doors to let the breeze in. Walking down the street during the day, you’re just as likely to hear groups rehearsing as see a batá drum being carved or school children in uniform rehearsing for a parade. Even small cafés and restaurants have live music and by showing even the slightest interest you’ll make friends and even be asked to sit in.

As soon as you arrive, head over to the National Museum Of Music in old Havana, which has an extensive collection of instruments. You can see the evolution of rum barrels into congas, and cod crates into cajons. You’ll see old copper timpani introduced by the French, which over the years have shrunk in size and evolved into timbales, as well as see bongos with the original synthetic skin, tucked with X-ray film!

In old Havana you can visit the craft market to buy a gourd guiro or pair of claves, or to grab a drink where Ernest Hemingway used to hang out. Lot’s of the

hotels have rooftop terraces with spectacular views, and getting there is half the fun. You can hail an old classic taxi that plies set routes for about a buck, although I prefer the Cocotaxi, a coconut-shaped version that hops on curbs and zooms down back allies. If you get bored, you can venture to Chinatown for the best food in town, buy \$2 CDs on the streets, or get a day pass at one of the hotels to use their pool or Internet connection.

Salsa Cubana/Timba

A salsa ensemble will typically have separate players on drum set, timbales, and congas, as well as on bongos and guiro. And unlike rumba where three individuals play the three separate congas, in salsa a conguero will play three, four, or even five congas at once. Groups that play in Havana regularly and typify the timba sound include Charanga Habanera, Pupy y los Que Son Son, and Klimax. In the Cuban brand of salsa it's the timbalero who's driving the bus rhythmically, and this frees up the drum set player to play more, well, like a percussionist.

For inspiration, if you like holding sticks in your hands, check out Herlan Sariol (Bamboleo) and Jean Roberto San Cristobal (Klimax) to get a sense of timbaleros as primary time-keepers with their relentless use of jam blocks and bells to drive the band, as well as their use of abanicos (literally "fan," the sick rolls timbaleros play) to signal section changes or dynamics. Artists who pioneered the use of drum set in timba include Giraldo Piloto (NG La Banda, Klimax), Samuel Formell (Los Van Van), Jimmy Branly (NG La Banda), Ludwig Nunez (Bamboleo), and Eduardo Velazquez (Chispa y los Complices). Or if jazz is your thing, give a listen to Dafnis Prieto as well as classic Irakere recordings featuring Enrique Pla, both of whom are jazz drummers influencing the direction of Latin jazz drumming as we speak.

Matanzas

If there is only one place besides Havana you must visit, let it be Matanzas, birthplace of rumba. A bus to Matanzas is an easy two-hour ride from Havana. Groups like Afro Cuba de Matanzas and Los Munequitos de Matanzas exemplify the style and should be in the archives of any serious drummer studying rumba. Matanzas is also the home to many prominent batá players as well as Santería and Palo priests, musicians, and initiates.

It's a beautiful city with cobblestone streets, brightly painted houses, and bustling markets. While Matanzas doesn't have the tourism structure and big hotels

of Havana, there are many private homes called Casa Particulares that are licensed to host foreigners and usually cost just \$25 a night. It's a small enough town that if you let your cab driver or host let you know you want to see drums, they're probably just a few calls away from finding you jaw-dropping music and dance.

On my first trip to Matanzas, within hours of arriving we'd been invited by Francisco "Menini" Zamora (leader of Grupo Afro Cuba de Matanzas) to a tambor or Santería ceremony where we watched as batá drummers wove a tapestry of rhythms that induced trance and brought out multiple personalities in some participants. The following day we met with the late Afro Cuban percussionist Daniel Alfonso Herrera, who as luck would have it was just putting the finishing touches on his book/DVD on batá drumming, *El Lenguaje del Tambor*.

Congas are all around, only don't ask for them by that name or people won't know what you're talking about. What we call congas in the States, Cubans call tumbadoras, and a conga player or conguero is referred to as a tumbador on this island. There isn't much standardization in their sizes or shape. Every conga I saw in Matanzas seemed almost unique, some straight-sided, some with coopered bands, and in sizes ranging from scrawny 9" quintos to 14" tumbas sporting bellies bigger than the *Family Guy*. The middle drum, which we generally know as the conga, is known here by one of many other names including segundo, salidor, or tres-dos.

In rumba you hear all three drum voices, each played by individuals, and the drums can be all tumbadoras, all Cuban-style (pyramid-shaped) cajons, or a combination of the two. The drums are accompanied by shekere, claves, and cata, a small box played with sticks. In urban areas the cata is often substituted by the jam block or yamblo as you'll hear it called. The first thing you'll notice when you hear authentic Cuban rumba is the dialogue between drums and the value of rhythmic melodies, which are far more important than chops. A quinto player in Matanzas might play for two or three minutes adding only a few notes so as to bring out the conversation of the supporting drums.

Ask around about attending a tambor, cajon, or guiro. I know we think of those as instruments but in Cuba these are also all types of ceremonies. In fact, the guiro ceremonies I've been to don't even use guiros as we know them but rather shekeres, a single tumbadora and hoe blade, or guataca playing a 12/8 bell pattern.



AUTHENTIC & LEGENDARY

Gon Bops Timbales are as authentic as the artists who play them. From the introductory Fiesta model with black powder-coated steel shell design – to the bright, lively cold-rolled steel shells of the Tumbao Series (shown) – Gon Bops has a Timbale for all players and all styles.

Discover a full line of Latin percussion instruments, available now at the finest drum shops.

Gon Bops™

GonBops.com/timbales

A DIVISION OF SABIAN

You might even find yourself at a birthday party complete with cake, balloons, and streamers for one of the orishas, or saints, in the Santería religion.

Santiago de Cuba Shuffle Shuffle Shuffle, Kick!

If Matanzas is the place for rumba, then Santiago de Cuba is where you want to go to see the summer carnival along with another of Cuba's popular rhythmic exports, the *comparsa*. The word *comparsa* refers both to the groups that play it, as well as the rhythm, which is played on portable instruments including *tumbadoras*, *requinto* (resembles a snare drum), *bombos criollos* (shallow bass drum), as well as bells, *sarténes* (miniature frying pans played like an *agogo* bell), and horns. The *comparsa* groups organize themselves similar to Brazil's *samba* schools with distinctive costumes, dances, songs, and traditions that are often passed from one generation to the next.

More than perhaps any other place in Cuba, you can feel and find remnants of the waves of Spanish and French influence as they have mixed with the West and Central African music and religions. As a result, Santiago is the birthplace of many styles that contain these various elements. The Cuban *bolero* evolved here from Spanish and African influences and this region is also the birthplace of the rural *changüi*, *son*, and *danzón* — all building blocks for modern *salsa*. It's also the region that brought us Buena Vista Social Club

legends *Compay Segundo*, *Ibrahim Ferrer*, and *Eliades Ochoa*.

There's speculation about why we call *congas* by that name, but you can most likely trace the term to Santiago as well. The Bantu-speaking people from central Africa, or the Congo region, came to this part of Cuba and soon they were referred to as Congo people and their drums as *congo* drums. The early *ngoma*, or *congo*, drums were carved from a single piece of wood (rather than stave constructed) which eventually gave way to the *tambores de conga* (*conga* drums) that we see in *comparsa*. Those "conga" drums are the engine driving the world-famous *conga*-line that many of us are familiar with. Oh, and did I mention that *Desi Arnaz* was born here? That may have had something to do with it, too!

Muy Fuerte Señor

Music in Cuba is strong for many reasons. The first is that the government controls all the artists and venues, and judging by the mansions that some musicians (and baseball players) live in, the Cuban government values and supports music in a way you won't see in the States. And since everybody from doctor to lawyer to doorman make about the same \$40/a month, aspiring musicians don't need to choose between their passion and a day job.

If there is a positive thing that the Castro government has done, it has been to level the playing field not only between occupations but race as well. Its support of

the African-influenced folkloric traditions has brought styles like *rumba*, which were once relegated to the multifamily homes — or *solares* in the slums — to where it is today: a national treasure that has managed to transcend both race and class.

Today, nearly all musicians are graduates of the music conservatory where they learn to read, write, and arrange music in addition to mastering their instrument. Even musicians who learn from their family or while playing on the street are evaluated and licensed by the government if they want to play professionally. Without needing a day job in addition to music, artists can concentrate on music as their full-time occupation. They are paid to rehearse, record, and perform and every gig doesn't have to pencil out financially like it does in much of the rest of the world. The result has been the sky-high musicianship in Cuba that has become the envy of the world.

Monstrous *salsa* orchestras complete with thick horn sections, *roadies*, managers, sound engineers, and chartered buses are commonplace. That's what gives us legendary groups like *Muniquitos de Matanzas* and *Los Van Van*, which endure over decades even as individual members come and go. Some institutions, like the *Afro Cuban Allstars*, have become so popular that I've heard there are no less than three separate groups touring the world's stages at any one time. From street performer to the small *cuarteto* playing small clubs to the regional and international acts, it is all



POUNDING THE PAVEMENT
1. School kids practice on the streets of Havana. 2. Street performer, Havana. 3. Guiro and bongo bell players drive Cuban salsa. 4. A *batá* carver in Havana.



Photography: BRAD BOWNTON

a part of a highly structured, government-supported industry.

But perhaps the most profound reason why Cuban music is so strong is something more philosophical, and something we've seen from the villages in West Africa to the *favelas* (slums) in Brazil: When you live in a poor country without many material possessions you tend to cling to tradition for survival. Your family may not have a TV or microwave, but within hearing the first two clicks of the clave, even Auntie Elena starts to move her hips. Music in Cuba is life, and a day wouldn't be complete without rhythm, song, and dance.

License To Travel

Without getting into the history here, you're most likely familiar with the travel restriction instituted by the American government that prevents U.S. citizens from traveling there. Ironically, the rest of the world travels to Cuba freely, and when Americans do arrive they are welcomed with open arms. To make it easy on us they don't even stamp our passports, but rather stamp a piece of paper, which you give back as you leave the country. Regulations are constantly changing, however, and

hopefully we are moving toward a time when we'll be able to travel without having our hands slapped by U.S. authorities.

And although there are still U.S. Federal laws on the books prohibiting most travel to Cuba, enforcement of those laws under the current administration is now lax. Various non-profit and religious organizations have been quick to take up the slack, organizing tours and educational exchanges. A handful of U.S. colleges currently have licensed study-abroad opportunities to Cuba for their students. If you're thinking about a tour, there are a few who offer legal, licensed trips for the rest of us. These tours are music focused and will connect you to the artists and the scene much faster than if you go on your own. Keep in mind that most Cubans don't have Internet access or email, making advanced planning on your own almost impossible. On an organized tour, they'll have everything already lined up for you. Check Chuck Silverman's site (chucksilverman.com), Plaza Cuba (plazacuba.com), as well as KoSA's (kosamusic.com) to learn more about organized tours from North America. You can also get up-to-the-minute travel information from afrocubaweb.com, and if you want

to see in advance what groups might be playing in Havana clubs, take a peek at canalcubano.com. And while tours are great for initial contacts, it's by being alone and taking chances that you'll be able to dive deeper into the world of drumming in its original cultural contexts.

No one can see into the future and know when Cuba will fully open up to foreign capital, joint ventures, and many of the freedoms that we in the rest of the world enjoy. And yet as soon as it happens, some of the cultural richness that we've come to expect will undoubtedly shift as musicians migrate to opportunity and better-paying gigs abroad. That's code for the fact that many of the best artists are probably going to split right about when the Chevys are sold, the land reclaimed, and boatloads of Americans fill the streets. If you want to be one of those people who can say, "Oh, yeah, I went to Cuba back when the Castros were still in power and a hand-rolled cigar was a quarter," then it might be time to double-clutch it and start your research today. 

Brad Boynton is the owner of Rhythm Traders in Portland, Oregon.

PERCUSSION WITH ROOTS



Photograph courtesy of Eric Hines

Built locally. Played globally.



Tycoon Percussion Signature Grand Series

tycoonpercussion.com