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THE AMERICAS

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ANACOANA

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By Paige Evans

The history of Anacoana, Cuba's oldest and most recognized women's orchestra, spans seven decades and several musical genres. In 1932, an almond-skinned music graduate named Concepcion Castro founded the group with six of her 10 younger sisters. Though other women's bands existed in Cuba at the time, most were playing music imported from their powerful and influential neighbor, the United States. Concepcion envisioned something different for herself and her sisters. The *Hermanas Castro* — or Castro Sisters, as the group was originally known — played *son*, an Afro-Cuban music.

Most contemporary Cuban dance musics are based on *son*, which evolved in the island's *Oriente* region in the late 18th Century. The genre combines musical elements brought by Cuba's two principal immigrations: its lyrics are written in eight-syllable, rhyming Spanish *decima* verses and sung in a West-African-style, call-and-response between a soloist and chorus. *Son* was originally played by a sextet with double bass, Spanish guitar and four inherently Cuban instruments: a *tres* (a slightly smaller, modified guitar with three sets of double strings); *bongos* (a two-headed drum used to play West African rhythms), *claves* (a pair of cylindrical hardwood sticks tapped together to set the music's polyrhythms) and *maracas* (a pair of hollowed gourds filled with seeds and shaken to the beat). As the genre developed, a cornet, piano, cello, violin, flute, drum set and *tumbadora* (a tall, conical Cuban drum) were added to the traditional formation. With the advent of radio in the 1920s, *son* gained popularity throughout Cuba and was gradually modified to create a range of different dance musics.

To avoid confusion with a popular all-male band called *Hermanos Castro*, the seven Castro sisters soon renamed their group Anacoana — after a spirited, indigenous Dominican queen who rebelled against her island's colonizers and loved to dance and sing. Performing in open-air cafes along the Prado, Havana's stately central boulevard, Anacoana quickly gained popularity and fame. After two years, the group expanded into a 12-woman orchestra, playing U.S. jazz classics then in vogue, in addition to their original *sones*. Over the following decades, Anacoana incorporated Cuban *danzones* into its repertoire, as well as other, *son*-based genres like *guarachas*, *canciones*, *boleros*, *mambos* and *cha-cha-chas*.

According to the renowned Cuban musicologist Argeliers Leon in his book *Del Canto y el Tiempo* (*Of Song and Rhythm*), *guarachas* were first sung on the streets of Cuban cities by quartets, who satirized elements of urban life and politics. Using a call-and-response form, they improvised portions of their texts and returned to repeated refrains. Like Spanish picaresque tales, *guarachas* often have a roguish hero and are filled with humor and double

entendres. Their tempo, faster than that of a traditional *son*, captures the tumult of Cuban city life and culture.

Cancion, traditionally sung in the salons of aristocratic Europe, was brought to Latin America in the 18th century by traveling European theater companies. Cuba's romantic *bolero*, which fuses *cancion*'s elaborate texts and ornate vocal melodies with *son*'s West-African percussion, is a distinctly Cuban genre designed for both listening and dancing.

Another influential Cuban music played by Anacoana, *danzon*, evolved from the French *contradanza* brought to Cuba by migrations of French and Haitians at the end of the 18th century. The text of a classic French *contradanza* had two sections of eight lines each; the first section was peaceful and the second more active. The lyrics of Cuban *danzon* maintain this binary form but explore inherently Cuban themes. *Danzon* incorporates the French classic trio of piano, violin and flute into an orchestra with Cuban percussive instruments, adding a tango-style rhythm.

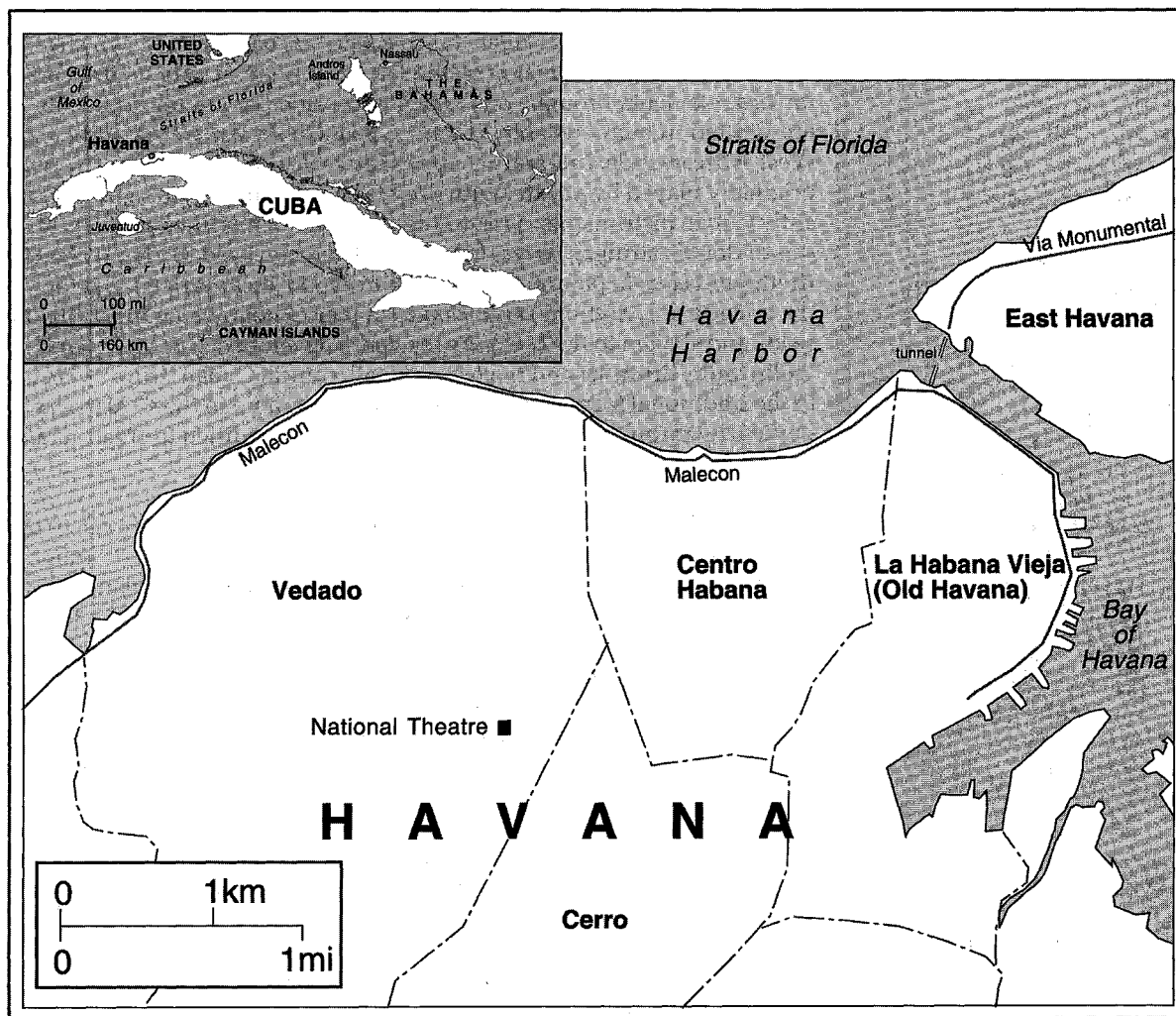
Anacoana began playing two popular new styles of

danzon: *cha-cha-cha* and *mambo* in the 1940s. The *cha-cha-cha*, whose onomatopoeic name was based on the sound feet make in dancing, added a chorus to *danzon* and offered social criticism in its satiric lyrics. The *mambo* augmented the traditional *danzon* instruments with a viola and cello, expanding its orchestra to 13 musicians (like those playing big-band jazz at the time) and adding syncopated rhythms and new sonorities. Some *mambos* also used the voice as a percussive instrument, to sing rhythmic but incoherent texts.

When Fidel Castro's revolutionary government distanced itself from its domineering neighbor in the 1960s, the open cultural interchange between Cuba and the U.S. that had influenced Cuban musicians for decades was shut down. Distinctly U.S. musical genres, like swing jazz, were prohibited in Cuba; and orchestras like Anacoana began to focus on exclusively Cuban genres.

* * *

After months of drought, I venture out into a torrential downpour and fruitlessly hunt for a cab to take me to the Centro Habana home of Anacoana's current



director, Dora Aguirre. A rundown Russian Lada finally stops for me. As I climb into its back seat, a scowling young woman clambers out of its front. Peering anxiously after her, the Lada's elderly driver exclaims: "Please! Come back! It is raining! Please!" But the woman shakes her head determinedly, striding alongside the road. Trailing behind her, my driver — a persistent man — begs her to get back in.

When it becomes clear that the woman would rather walk in a storm than ride in his car, my defeated driver abandons his efforts and takes me, in complete silence, to Dora's. Along the way, as I gaze out the wet, wiperless windshield at muddied bicyclists dodging puddles and potholes, I consider what may have happened between my driver and the angry young woman. I imagine he said something lewd, and perhaps ran his horny hand along her youthful thigh. Stranger things have happened.

When I appear at her front door, Dora's stooped, light-skinned mother warmly greets me and ushers me into her cluttered living room. She motions me toward a worn couch whose back and arms are draped with swaths of lace, then sits nearby at an old-fashioned, pedal-run sewing machine. While trying nonchalantly to tidy up my clothes and hair and so lessen my resemblance to a drenched rat, I ask Dora's mother if she sews professionally. Flashing a sheepish grin, she demurs: "No! I just play at it. I see a style I like, and I think: 'I could do that. And for a lot less money.' And I do it."

Dora, a caramel-skinned Amazon, strides into the room, introduces herself and settles beside me on the couch. In a husky, enthusiastic voice, she begins recounting Anacoana's history to me. Though busily sewing, her mother keeps an ear cocked to Dora's commentary and interjects occasional comments. Like her daughter, she knows Anacoana's history in vivid detail. When Dora mentions that Anacoana's musicians were all light-skinned mulattas like herself, her mother leaps up and fetches a worn leather photo album. She leans over me, flipping through sepia photos of the original orchestra and pointing out each musician by name. She knows the date and location of each photograph.

Eventually, when her mother's pictorial narrative reaches Anacoana's present generation, Dora suggests I look at the remaining pictures later. Her mother retreats with the album, and Dora recalls: "I first started with Anacoana in 1983, when I was 18 years old. I was just graduated in saxophone from the Conservatory Amadeo Roldan. I was one of the only women to study saxophone at that time. My sister, Georgia, who joined Anacoana shortly after I did, was the only woman who studied bass. She plays piano with Anacoana, but in school, she studied bass.

"The other women in the orchestra were all in their 60s and 70s. At first Georgia and me, who had seen them

on television, thought they were old-fashioned. They wore long, conservative uniforms and had strict rules. Gradually, though, we both realized that some of their rules made sense, that their discipline was not all bad.

"In 1988, the Ministry of Culture offered good retirement deals to older musicians, to give younger musicians a chance to advance themselves. The entire older generation of Anacoana — five Castro sisters and seven other women — retired. So the Ministry of Culture asked Georgia and I to rethink the orchestra. We tried out friends and peers from the conservatory and formed an all-women's septet — on piano, bass, *tumbadora*, tenor sax, alto sax, *bongos* and *timbal* (Cuban metal drums). I sang in addition to playing the saxophone. But we wanted more sound, so we added a flutist and a second singer. Later, we added a trumpet, trombone and keyboard. There have been twelve of us for the past four years."

A squat man carries in three glasses of chilled mango juice on a tray. Dora introduces him as her husband, Ramon, and says he is an actor who performed last year in an internationally successful, Cubanized version of Moliere's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*. Ramon qualifies with a good-natured laugh: "Our audiences loved it, especially in Spain. But the Cuban critics hated it when we performed here in Havana."

When I mention I used to work for an Off-Broadway theater, Ramon's eyes light up, and he cries: "Broadway! It is my dream to see something on Broadway! It must be incredible! A miracle! All those effects! Just like in the movies, only on stage! We could never do anything like that in Cuba. We do not have the money for it." I counter that many of the overblown effects in Broadway musicals belong in movies, where they are better executed, and not on stage. Unfazed, Ramon eagerly continues: "I know tickets are very expensive on Broadway, but I do not care. I would save and save and buy just one, if I ever had the chance."

Dora and her mother quickly drain their mango juice and place their empty glasses on Ramon's tray. As Ramon expectantly hovers over me, I gulp down the overwhelmingly sweet and flavorful juice. Dora steers the conversation back to our interview: "Anacoana had always played a variety of genres, and we wanted to continue that tradition with the new group. By playing a wide range of music, we attract a diverse audience. Though we have our own distinct style, we appeal to different generations, to people who like to dance and those who come to listen.

"Our combination of instruments is not a standard formation for any of the traditional Cuban genres. With twelve musicians, we can play a broad variety of musics. In addition to the more traditional genres played by the original Anacoana, we also play Latin jazz and

salsa." Latin jazz, which has been permitted and popular in Cuba for the past two decades, incorporates Afro-Cuban percussion into big band jazz, infusing the original genre with greater heat and spice. *Salsa*, which first developed among New York's Latin musicians in the 1970s, is an internationally commercial dance music derived from *son*. It adds several brass instruments to the traditional *son* formation.

"When we started the new Anacoana," Dora continues, "We wore long, conservative uniforms and chose not to exploit our womanhood. We wanted to be respected for our music. But as we traveled more and watched women's groups from other countries play, we began to realize that women's groups could also have other attractions. Though it is difficult to find a uniform that suits everyone, we began to wear more attractive, revealing outfits."

A gangly guy with a long pony tail, sallow skin and violet-tinted glasses ambles into the room, folds his lanky limbs into an armchair opposite the couch where Dora and I are sitting and gazes at Dora with an intense stare. Dora introduces him as her younger brother Jorge, Anacoana's producer. (Producers in Cuba work like stage managers do in the U.S., organizing materials and equipment for rehearsals and performances and looking after the talent. Cuba's sole producer-as-financier is the state.)

Our conversation turns to Anacoana's three compact discs, one of which was produced by a state-owned Cuban studio together with a German company. As Jorge explains it: "Cuban studios cannot produce many records. They cannot afford the necessary materials. So they participate in co-productions with foreign producers to help cover expenses. The facilities and talent here are less expensive than they are abroad, so foreign producers like to record here. But Cubans are no longer satisfied with unusually low pay. We are traveling more, getting to know international pay scales and world markets. Also, Cuban musicians now often have representatives abroad who fight to get them fair pay. Cuban musicians are eager to travel abroad. They can earn much more than they do here in Cuba."

Dora grunts in affirmation. "At first, we earned the standard salaries allotted to licensed professional musicians — about a hundred and fifty to three hundred pesos [the equivalent of seven to 15 dollars] per month. But during the special period, the government could no longer afford to pay this. So they made musicians' salaries relative to output, like in a factory. The system was clearly designed by some bureaucrat who knew nothing about creativity. Musicians were required to play a certain number of performances per week, a certain number per month. But there were not enough professional venues for every licensed musician to play the specified number of perfor-

mances, so that ridiculous system could not work.

"Now, Anancoana belongs to a new kind of firm, where we organize our own performances, and we earn based on that. At most venues in Cuba, we have to choose beforehand either to take a flat fee or a percentage of the money made from ticket sales. It is impossible to tell ahead of time which is the better choice. You cannot know if a concert will be publicized, if there will be a large audience or no one will show up. There has been a big drop in attendance at dollar venues recently, since the authorities began forbidding Cubans from entering with tourists. So we usually go with the flat fee."

* * *

The *salsa* music blaring from its patio and the row of Cuban men peeking in over its tall fence lead me to the decaying but stately Vedado mansion where Anacoana rehearses. Under a clump of leafy trees, Anancoana's 12 musicians are practicing a *mambo* entitled "*La Cubana Es Sabrosa*," or "The Cuban Woman Is Tasty." The musicians are of varied ages and skin tones: the percussionist playing the *timbal* is 55, the pianist is 20; the electric bassist is white, and all the other women are varying shades of brown.

When the song ends, the musicians break into a rapid-fire discussion of the piece and quickly agree on where problems lie and how they should remedy them. The tenor-sax player draws a filterless cigarette's thick smoke deep into her lungs; the trombonist (a bleached blonde named Amor, who also runs a successful private restaurant) passes around a plastic bottle of water; the *tumbadora* player does a sexy, swivel-hipped dance for the pianist (who is replacing Dora's sister Georgia while she is on maternity leave); the singer applies make-up. From his perch above the fence, a youth in a New York Yankees baseball cap shouts suggestive remarks at the singer, who volleys back quick-witted retorts.

At Dora's command, the orchestra launches into a popularized Afro-Cuban song to the *santeria orisha* of the sea, Yemaya. Dora sings the song four, five and then six times, as the harsh afternoon sun begins to bore into the group's shady sanctuary. Everyone is waxing hot and exasperated by the sixth round; but the pianist urges Dora to run through the song again, arguing: "We do not want to seem ridiculous when we sing it tomorrow." On hearing this, Jorge — who until now has been sitting quietly on the sidelines — leaps to his feet, points accusingly at the pianist and shouts: "You will seem ridiculous before Dora does!" The pianist snaps back: "I was not talking to you! And I meant the entire orchestra would seem ridiculous, not only Dora." Working himself into a tizzy, Jorge heatedly continues defending his sister's honor. Dora quiets him with a dismissive "*Jorgito*, please..." and addresses the pianist in a measured tone: "Any time we sing a new song, we are going to make



Photo: Diamela Fernández Cutino

mistakes. From that first performance, we learn better how to perform it the next time. If we want to practice it until it is perfect, we will not perform it until the year two thousand and one."

* * *

The next day, as my photographer friend Diamela and I push our way to the front of a crowd outside the Cafe Cantante (a club in the basement of Havana's National Theater), a security guard blocks us from entering. After a lengthy debate, I persuade the guard that Dora invited me to shoot photos for an article I'm writing on Anacoana. While ushering us inside (conjuring images from my adolescence of the fleetingly influential bouncer at Studio 54), he sternly warns: "Do not take photographs of the audience." Evidently, the cafe has been reserved for a party honoring employees of the Ministry of Health; the dark, low-ceilinged room is full of grim-faced workers, neatly seated at tables. Up on stage, Anacoana's musicians — dressed in short, sexy shifts — are playing rousing *mambos* and *salsa* tunes. As Diamela photographs the band, I watch Anacoana's fiery music transform the audience into a boisterously dancing crowd. And as Dora begins to sing the brand new song to Yemaya, a roomful of people enthusiastically clap and sing along with her. □



Photo: Diamela Fernández Cutino