

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
Peter Geithner
Thomas Hughes
Stephen Maly
Peter Bird Martin
Judith Mayer
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wiggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

A. Doak Barnett
David Elliot
David Haggood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

BPE-5 1998
THE AMERICAS

Paige Lewis is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

"The Beat of a Different Drummer"

HAVANA, Cuba

December 7, 1998

By Paige Evans

For as long as I can remember, music has transported me. I listen to it whenever I can, find bliss in freeform dancing, have always presumed a sound sense of rhythm. But, though I revel in others' music, I myself have never been musical.

Like many little girls at my private, single-sex school, I began studying piano at an early age. Encouraged by my nascent efforts, my parents bought a baby grand piano for me to practice, maybe even someday entertain their guests. Things did not turn out as planned. I loathed my piano teacher. All peppermints and nervous blinks, he insisted on playing duets and wrapping his arm around me. I quit playing after six months. All was not lost, however: the piano looked great in the living room. Years later, it was hacked at by overzealous firemen when the adjacent study, not the living room, was in flames. That piano was the only musical instrument I have ever played.

In high school, my fantasy career was to play drums for Talking Heads, my favorite band. I envisioned myself beating out their songs' powerful rhythms, making their back-up singers sway. After college, when I moved to Rome, a friend gave me a set of ceramic bongos as a housewarming gift. Though I sometimes beat the drums when listening to a record, they mostly went unused. I yearned to play those bongos, but other things — teaching, travel, writing, relationships, running, random activity — got in the way. All was not lost, however: they looked great in the living room. After three years of disuse, my beloved bongos splintered in my suitcase when I moved back to the U.S.

My high-school fantasies about playing professionally have thankfully abated. But I still long to drum. To satisfy this urge, and in order to better understand the complex and varied rhythms underlying Cuban music, I sought out a Cuban drumming teacher. In this syncopated city, percussionists are everywhere. The Cubans with whom I discussed the subject, as usual, offered me a wealth of advice. Some argued that older percussionists trained in formal techniques make the best teachers; others preferred young "street" drummers who play instinctively and know the current musical trends; some suggested I study traditional Afro-Cuban music; others assumed my interest lay in the more popular salsa; some argued for group lessons in a school setting; others thought "particular," or private, lessons were the way to go.

* * *

On the morning of my first lesson, I am running late. I speed down the bike lane on my new, used mountain bike — past a man pedaling his family

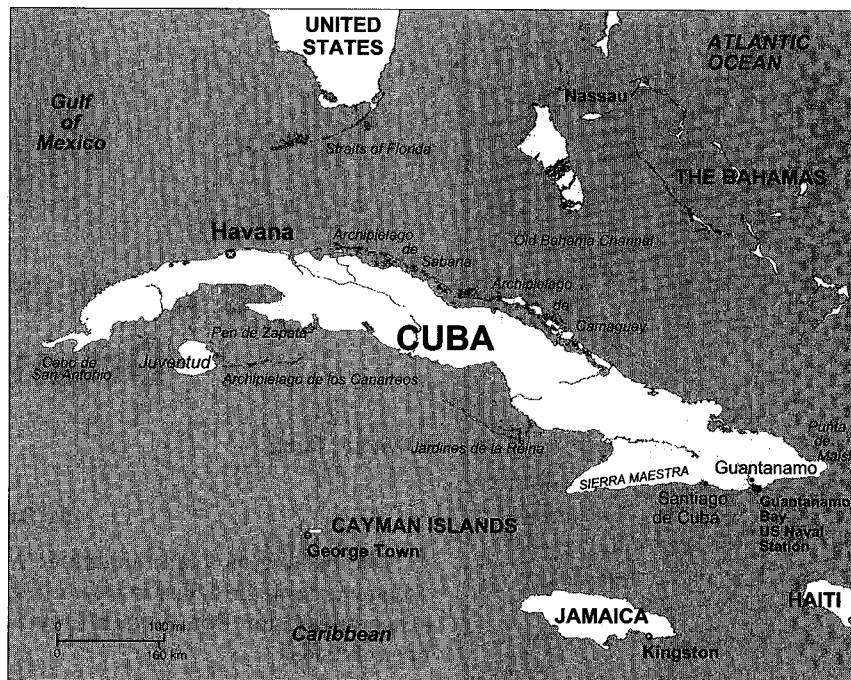
of four on a dilapidated Chinese bicycle; past a portly woman in the olive uniform of the Ministry of the Interior with a motor jerry-rigged to her bike; past a frail older man trailing a cart loaded with three hulking hogs; into a thick cloud of jet-black exhaust; past a gangly adolescent in the mustard slacks of Cuban high schoolers. The boy speeds up and passes me, barely dodging the bus that has pulled into the bike lane and the Russian truck parked directly in front of it. Like many Cuban males on bikes, this boy will not be passed by a woman.

I reach the Centro Habana corner where, according to his telephoned directions, my new teacher should live. But the street sign bears a different name than the one Pedro Pablo gave me over the phone. Many of Cuba's streets have double names: the post-Revolutionary name printed on their signs and the pre-Revolutionary name by which Cubans know them. Confused, I ask a kind-eyed old woman for directions. She indicates a deserted street. As I pedal along its tattered pavement, a Cuban friend's warning that "They will kill you for a mountain bike" echoes through my brain.

"Psss. Psss." Someone hisses at me in that way Cubans have of getting another's attention. The same way Italian men hissed at foreign women in Rome; only here in Cuba it is genderless, generalized practice. I hated the sound in Rome, have been trying to get used to it here in Havana. A fellow New Yorker who has lived here for 20 years tells me I will even find myself hissing someday.

This morning, wary of yet another conversation about what country I'm from and eager to reach my teacher's house, I try to ignore the call. But this man is making himself hard to ignore. "PSSSSSSSS. PSSSSSSSS." I turn to look at the hisser. He is a reedy, bittersweet-chocolate-skinned man with gray-flecked hair and a wad of bandaging above one huge, bloodshot eye. He introduces himself, husky-voiced, and shows me his identification card to prove that he is, indeed, Pedro Pablo. Then he whips out an address book, displaying the foreign addresses therein and describing his many former students from the United States and other parts of the world.

While lugging my bike up the winding stairs of his *solar* — an urban apartment building centered around a communal courtyard — Pedro explains: "A boy on the street threw a rock at me last night. There was a lot of blood. I have seven stitches. You must be careful with young boys these days. They are crazy. They will ride



by, grab your bag, your gold chains. Throw rocks at you!... I am very sorry to look like this when I am meeting you for the first time."

Pedro ushers me into his dim living room and gestures for me to sit. He wheels my bike into the kitchen, props it against the refrigerator, proclaims it of good quality and asks what I paid for it. I know he will use my response to gauge how much money I have and whether or not I am savvy with it. When I tell him what I paid for the bike, Pedro's eyes widen at the sum and he exclaims: "*Cogno!* That is a lot of money!" Then he asserts: "Still, for a mountain bike, it is a good price. I will buy a bicycle, too. Later, when you have a drum. That way, we can hold our lessons in your apartment. If you feel secure with that. I will buy myself a Chinese bicycle, though. They are heavy and less comfortable than mountain bikes, of course, but they are also less expensive."

Pedro folds his lanky, Levi-ed limbs onto a red vinyl couch that matches my chair. "How would you like to begin? With rhythms from Oriente? I am the best teacher of Oriente's rhythms in Cuba. Ask anyone about me. Ask the teachers at that percussion school near your house. They all know me. They know I am the best with Oriente's rhythms. Oriente's rhythms will be the next international music craze. I will be famous; soon, because of this..."

Pedro masterfully beats out an intricate, segmented Afro-Cuban rhythm on the drum then fixes me with a roguish, big-toothed grin. "You are lucky I am not famous yet." His face grows abruptly serious. "If you had a famous teacher — a man like Octavio Rodriguez — he would barely listen to you. Octavio would leave the room to talk with friends during your lessons, smoke ciga-

rettes, drink rum. He would cut off the lesson after 45 minutes. And he would charge you a lot of money for this, because he is a famous musician. Me, I do not go by the clock. If we are involved with something, we will go for more than an hour. Most teachers will not do that. I never rush because of the clock..."

As Pedro speaks, my eyes wander the windowless room. They see a stone Elegua in a *Santeria* shrine beneath the stairs; an antiquated boom box amidst a world of trinkets on the bookshelf; two dusty stuffed lions under the coffee table; a velveteen carpet cartooned with poker-playing dogs on the wall.

I ask Pedro about his fee. He replies: "Most teachers charge 20 dollars per lesson. But we are going to work together for two years. I will only charge you 15 dollars per lesson, two times each week." I remind Pedro I am here as a student and suggest 10 dollars per lesson, which I know to be a fair price. Pedro intones: "Life is hard in Cuba. Very hard. With the money from your lessons, I must eat, help my family, buy clothes so I will look all right when I teach you. Many teachers charge 25 dollars per lesson, usually for 45 minutes. My lessons always last more than an hour. I never go by the clock." There is a moment of silence, then Pedro concedes: "All right. We will do 10 dollars per lesson, three lessons per week." This bargaining two-step is an inevitable part of life here in Cuba.

* * *

Though he plays the *tumbadora* with a folkloric band at a tourist hotel and the sacred *bata* drums at *santeria tamobores*, Pedro does not presently own a drum.¹ He has borrowed the orange plastic *tumbadora* we will use for our lesson from a fellow percussionist in his *solar*. Its skin is old, its sound dull and flat. While positioning the drum correctly between my legs, Pedro advises: "You should buy a drum soon. A good drum. A drum where you can distinguish the sounds more easily than with this one. So you can tell when you are making a mistake. That will be better for learning... Really, you should get two drums — the second one for me. That way, we can play together during lessons. That would be much better for learning. More professional..."

Pedro demonstrates four hand positions for playing the *tumbadora*, emphasizing the importance of mastering the proper technique for each before advancing to the next. I make slow, halting progress. With impressive calm and patience, Pedro leads me step-by-step. He fixes

me with an open, penetrating gaze. When my mind wanders, he urges me to concentrate; when I grow nervous, he encourages me to keep calm. He reminds me to "Always play with *el tiempo*," the primary beat underlying any music. "You should buy one of those things..." His extended pointer finger wags like a metronome. "But you will not find one here in Havana. You must have someone bring one from New York for you."

Using *claves* — two hardwood sticks that, when clapped together, set the rhythms for several Cuban musics — Pedro taps out the rhythms of the *clave del son* and the *clave de la rumba* for me. With his patient coaching, I finally master them. Then Pedro taps out another basic Cuban rhythm, a *seis por ocho*. I tap out the six. Then I tap out the eight. But I cannot manage to combine the two.

A knock at the door interrupts my fumbling attempts. A wee boy with a massive head strides into the room, settles beside Pedro on the couch. Pedro introduces him: "This is Juan. He is three years old. He has an incredible sense of rhythm." He turns to the boy. "Do a *seis por ocho*." Quickly, with daunting facility, Juan's tiny hands clap out a *seis por ocho* rhythm.

Just then, a young man in pajama bottoms appears with soaped cheeks and a razor. Pedro introduces him: "This is my brother, Jorge." Jorge sits beside Juan and shaves while watching my lesson. The fact that I am almost constantly, curiously watched here in Havana goes against my New Yorker's penchant for anonymity; but I have already grown somewhat used to it. Today's audience, though, is making me nervous.

As I struggle with the *seis por ocho*, a bear of a man lumbers in from the kitchen and hunkers down into a chair opposite me. Pedro does not introduce him. I am acutely aware of the beefy man as he stares at me from under heavy lids. Gripping the *claves* in sweaty palms, I stumble over the six, then fumble the eight. Pedro warns me I am regressing. He tells me to tap out the *son* and *rumba claves*. I try, get them wrong. Try again, fumble them again. And again. This is hellish. Paralyzed with self-consciousness, I have lost any grasp of the rhythms Pedro taught me.

I try to clear my mind using a Buddhist meditation technique I learned in a yoga class years ago. But a Cuban friend's proclamation that "Those rhythms are so simple for Cubans! They are so easy!" echoes through my brain. I remember the Cuban man who, at a party,

¹ A *tumbadora* is a barrel-shaped drum made from wooden staves or plastic. Its skin is held in place by metal "keys." Three kinds of *tumbadoras* are played in rumba: the narrowest of the three, the *quinto* drum, plays the most elaborate rhythms and enters into a direct dialogue with rumba's dancers. The *tres-dos* medium-ranged drum and the wider bass *tumbador* carry the basic rhythm. The *bata* are three double-headed, hourglass-shaped drums of progressive sizes. They are seen as one instrument and are played accordingly, always in relation to each other. *Bata* are sacred and most can be played only by consecrated drummers.

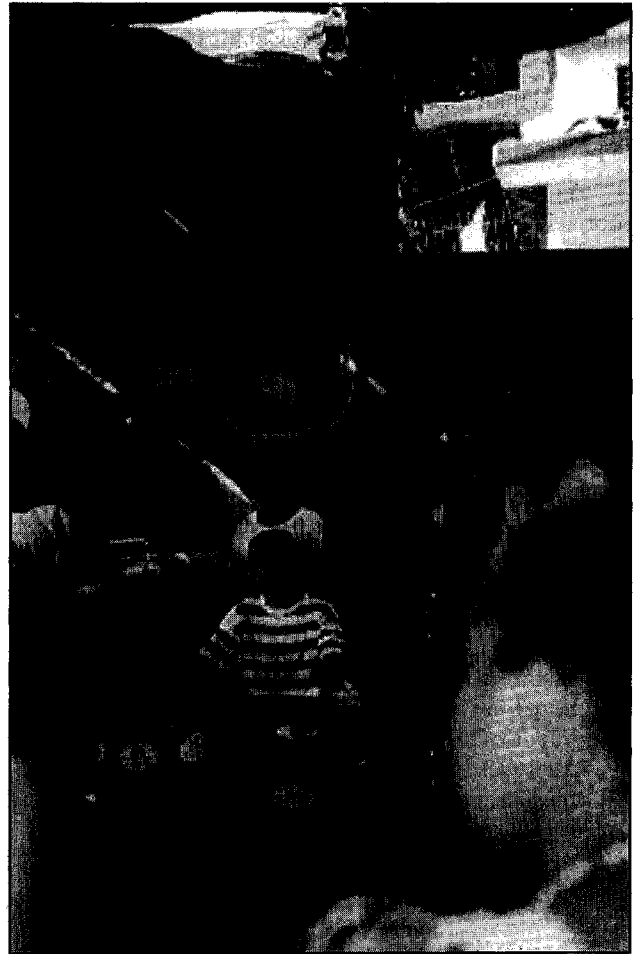
ordered me to follow his lead and swivel my *cintura*, asserting that Latins “use dance as a form of self-expression” — as though I had never danced before in my life. Liquid-hipped Cubans gyrate in my mind’s eye, smiling amusedly as nearby tourists thrash wildly to salsa. I desperately hope that, despite what he has said, Pedro is, indeed, watching the clock.

* * *

Once the crowd has dispersed after our lesson, Pedro asks: “When will you return to the United States? Or is anyone coming to visit you from there?” Then he explains: “Playing the *tumbadora* and the *bata* is my passion. But I must earn more money than I can make from this alone. So, I also buy and sell gold. I need a digital scale to do this.” He extracts a palm-sized digital scale from a drawer in the coffee table. “My scale is broken. You cannot find scales like this here in Cuba. They have them in the United States, though. I am sure they are very easy to find there. And, of course, a scale from the United States would be of a very high quality. Could you or a friend buy me one? I could pay you for it in lessons.” His smile illuminates the dreary room. “If you could do this, Paige, I would thank you from the bottom of my soul.”

* * *

The next morning, I meet Pedro outside a theater where his friend, Harold, has been rehearsing for the upcoming *rumba* festival. While kissing my cheek, he comments: “You smell like cream. I like that smell.” Shaking his head wearily, he flashes his winning grin. “I am dead, a cadaver. I was out until four o’clock last night at



Two rumba drums, a *tumbadora* at left and a *cajon* (rectangular, skinless) at right



The fellow in the checked shirt is working the *claves*, the sticks clicked against each other to set the basic *rumba* rhythms.



*Warming up the
Tumbadoras at a
Havana rumba party*

a discotheque, drinking and dancing." Pedro introduces me to Harold, a little man with a white cap angled rakishly over sleek reflector sunglasses, pock-marked cheeks and a mouthful of gold teeth. Harold has a *tumbadora* to sell. If I buy it, I imagine Pedro will get a commission from the sale.

Harold leads us down a debris-strewn sidestreet in La Habana Vieja, stops at a wooden door, knocks. No one answers. He knocks again. Still no response. He pounds the door, then raps on a gated window. Nothing. Curious neighbors appear in doorways, calling to other neighbors down the street. Finally, a slim-hipped



The author, ready to rumba

young woman in a spandex shortsuit ambles towards us on towering platforms, dangling a key from iridescent fingernails. She kisses Harold and Pedro, eyes me, opens the door. We follow the young woman into the darkened living room. A potent mildew odor assaults my nostrils.

At Pedro's urging, I sit. The young woman parks herself on a nearby tabletop to watch. Harold takes a used wooden *tumbadora* from a corner of the room and plunks it down in front of me. He raves: "This is a fine drum. An exceptional drum. And it is in excellent condition." I tap the drum tentatively, having no idea what constitutes a good drum. Pedro runs his finger along the skin, makes a resonant sound. Harold continues: "The only thing wrong with this drum is that it is missing a key. But I can replace that, no problem, at no extra charge." Pedro suggests he find a car to hire, so I can take the drum home with me now.

Harold asks 150 U.S. dollars for the *tumbadora*. I know this to be a hefty sum for a used drum. I do not buy it. Afterwards, Pedro tells me: "I thought the drum was new, or barely used. I did not realize... You should buy a new drum. That is always better. If you buy a used drum, you will inherit someone else's defects. You will constantly have to have it maintained, paying each time. Like a car. It is better to buy a new car, no? Instead of an old one that is always breaking down? That way, you can put your own mark on it."

* * *

Happily, our second lesson goes better than the first.

Pedro begins by describing the various percussive instruments used in playing the *rumba*. These include *cajones* — skinless drums derived from the salt cod boxes on which Havana and Matanzas dockworkers, forbidden to play drums by their slave masters, originally developed the music — and three distinctly-timbred *tumbadoras*. Then, clanging a pair of spoons against the borrowed *tumbadora*'s metal rim, Pedro teaches me the basic rhythms for the three different genres of *rumba* — the *yambu*, the *guaguanco* and the *columbia*. At first, I can barely discern the subtle variations in the intricate polyrhythms. But by hour's end, with Pedro's patient guidance, I clang the spoons distinctly and assuredly for each genre.

Afterwards, Pedro suggests we visit Cuba's premiere drum factory, the *Fabrica Fernando Ortiz*, so I can see the prices and quality of exceptional new drums. As we seek out a *taxi colectivo* to take us to the working class neighborhood of Cerro, Pedro advises me: "Always tell the drivers you are living here, as a student. Otherwise, they will ask you for a lot of money." In fact, it is illegal for *taxi colectivo* drivers to give rides to foreigners without Cuban residencies; tourists are expected to use costly, state-owned taxis instead.

Through a crack in the basement window, Pedro shows me the Fernando Ortiz factory's workroom where Cuba's finest bongos and *tumbadoras* are made. Then he leads me to the factory's store, where an outstanding new *tumbadora* bearing the legendary Cuban percussionist Tata Guinea's signature costs 300 U.S. dollars.

As we walk away from the factory, a mocha-skinned man with tiger's eyes, a New York Yankees baseball cap and a hand full of gold rings sidles up to us and speaks to Pedro in Havana street slang. Though my ear is somewhat attuned to Cuban slang by now, I understand only flashes of their conversation. When the man asks me how long I have been in Cuba, Pedro answers: "She has been here five months. She is half Cuban by now. She understands everything."

It turns out that the man is Carlos, a friend of Pedro's who works at the Fernando Ortiz factory. Carlos leads

us down an alley to his home, where Pedro greets an old man sitting in the doorway as "tío," or "uncle," and three generations of women watch the afternoon *novela* — Cuba's wildly popular, hour-long equivalent of a soap opera — at a deafening decibel.

Pedro shouts to me over the din: "We will be working together for a long time, Paige. I would not lead you to a bad drum. How would that look? Carlos sells *tumbadoras* of an excellent quality. They are just like the Tata Guineas, but Carlos sells them cheaper." So many things are sold "por afuera" by Cuban factory workers I'm amazed anything is left to sell in the stores. Of course, not all contraband goods are legitimate. Minions of Havana residents, for example, claim to have relatives working in the Cohiba cigar factory who can procure high-quality cigars at a discount; and scores of these alleged Cohibas turn out to be poorly-made imitations.

Carlos' mother serves us strong, syrup-sweet coffee in demitasse cups, while Carlos shows Pedro and me two new wooden *tumbadoras*. The drums lack Tata Guinea's signature on their sides but otherwise look exactly like those sold in the factory's store. Carlos turns the *tumbadoras* upside-down so I can see from the inside that their wooden staves are tightly joined.

Pedro tells me both drums are *tresdos tumbadoras* — the medium-pitched drum that carries the *rumba*'s basic rhythms. They are a pair, made for a right-handed player: the larger, lower-pitched *tumbadora* is the *hembra*, or female drum; and the thinner and higher-pitched is the *varron*, or male drum. Carlos says he will not sell the pair separately; Pedro encourages me to buy both.

Pedro takes the *hembra* between his legs and plays a *guaguanco rumba* with skill and passion. When he turns to me, his eyes ache with longing. "This is a beautiful drum, Paige. It is a long time since I have played a drum like this one. It is an outstanding drum. With a drum like this, you will learn a lot. With a drum like this, after two years, you will really play." For some reason, I believe him. I expect I will learn a lot from Pedro Pablo. He is an excellent teacher. Some day, as he says, I may really play. Some day, he and I may even play duets. □