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FJM-30: Cuba
Carnaval Cuban Style

Havana, Cuba
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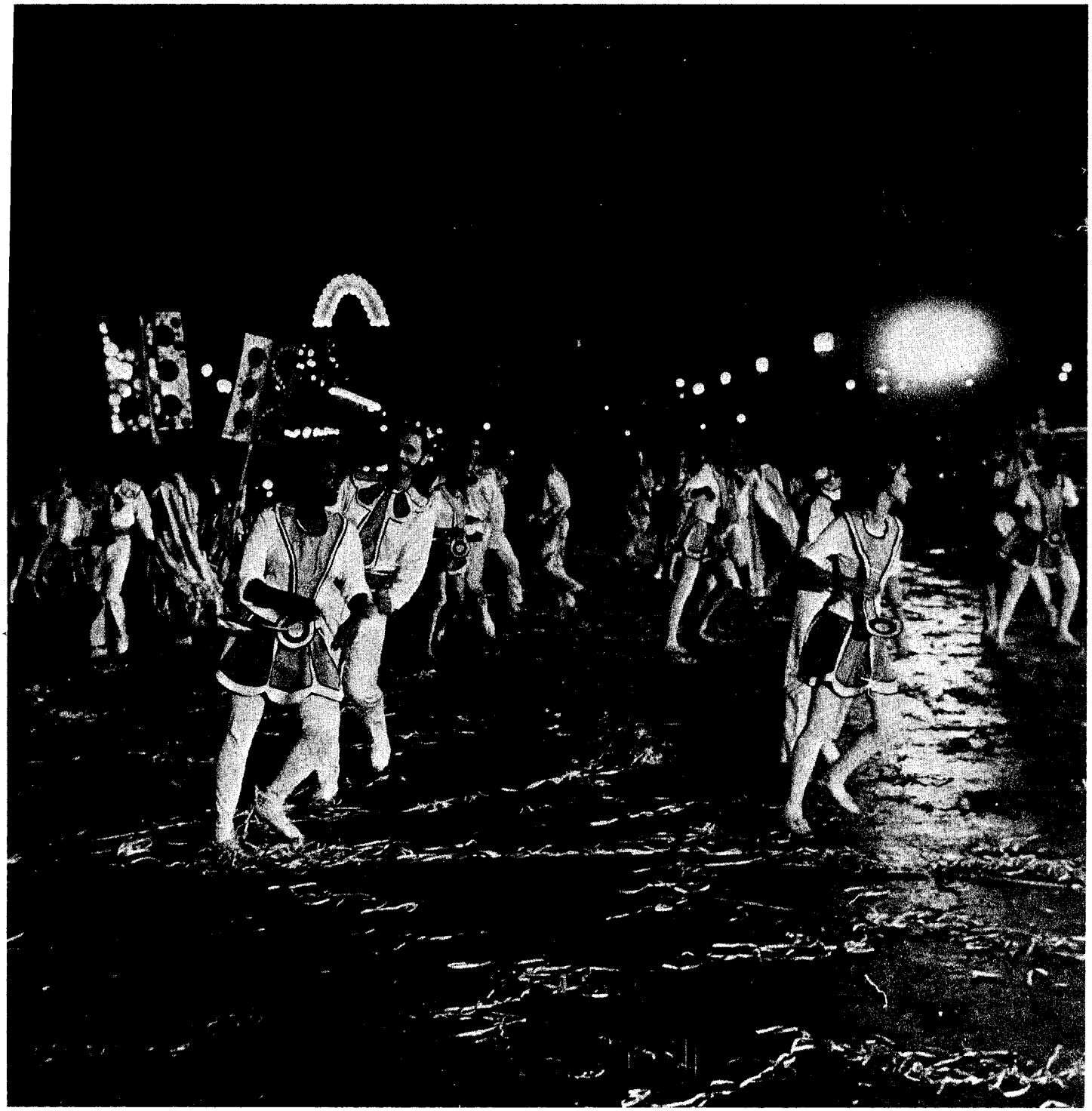


In December 1970, while speaking before an assembly of light industry workers, Fidel told the Cubans that for the second year in a row they would have to cancel Christmas and New Year celebrations. Instead, there would be Carnaval in July.

> "We'd love to celebrate New Year's Eve, January 1 and January 2. Naturally. Who doesn't?.....But can we afford such luxuries now, the way things stand? There is a reality. Do we have traditions? Yes. Very Christian traditions? Yes. Very beautiful traditions? Very poetic traditions? Yes, of course! But gentlemen, we don't live in Sweden or Belgium or Holland. We live in the tropics. Our traditions were brought in from Europe--eminently respectable traditions and all that, but still imported. Then comes the reality about this country: ours is a sugar-growing country...and sugar cane is harvested in cool, dry weather. What are the best months for working from the standpoint of climate? From November through May. Those who established the tradition....listen if they had set Christmas Eve for July 24, we'd be more than happy. But they stuck everybody in the world with the same tradition. In this case are we under any obligation? Are the conditions in capitalism the same as ours? Do we have to bow to certain traditions? .....So I ask myself: even when we have the machines, can we interrupt our work in the middle of December? [exclamations of "No!"] And one day even the Epiphany festivities will be held in July because actually the day the children of this country were reborn was the day the Revolution triumphed."

So this summer there is Carnaval in July: Cuban Christmas, New Years and Mardi Gras all in one. Moreover, besides being a convenient time to celebrate the end of the long sugar harvest (eight months of steady labor that ensures the economic survival of the Cuban Revolution), this month is politically appropriate because July 26 marks the anniversary of the 1953 attack on Moncada, the beginning of the Cuban Revolution.

The origin of Havana's carnaval dates back to the 16th century when, on the 6th of January each year, the city's officials and representatives of various cabildos (community organizations) personally presented themselves to the Capitan General of the island in order to pay homage to the King of Spain. This day, el Dia de Reyes, was celebrated with a grand parade, in effect a passing in review of the entire city's population. In offering a pledge of their loyality, each cabildo prepared some sort of entertainment as well. In competition to outperform each other, these groups, dressed in colorful costumes, presented original comparsas (street dances) and musical compositions that subsequently formed the basis of the contemporary carnaval celebrations.

Early reproductions of the celebrations held during the Dia de Reyes. The slaves were granted one day of freedom each year to pledge their loyalty to the King of Spain.

The fusion of the Afro and Hispanic elements of Cuba's Carnaval is also a result of the January 6 festival. As a gesture from the King, in return for their loyalty, the slaves in Cuba were also allowed to participate in the celebrations. They also had cabildos, usually structured upon religious or tribal associations that were (and still are) called "naciones." The three principal naciones, Lucumi, Congo and Arrars, presented their own comparsas and musical compositions, one of which is still presented today: the Alacran.

The festival of the Dia de Reyes was celebrated annually throughout the colonial period until 1844 when, suspecting that the slaves might use their one day of freedom to organize a rebellion, the Capitan General prohibited their further participation in the Carnaval. From 1888 (the Republican period of Cuban history) the celebrations of the 6th of January were de-emphasized as a colonial fete. Then, as a consequence of the influence of the Cuban Catholic Church, Habaneros celebrated Cuaresma (the Spanish equivalent to Mardi Gras) instead. These festivals, however, never became as popular as the carnaval once held in January. And therefore today, when Cubans think of carnaval, it is not in terms of Cuaresma, but of la Dia de Reyes or, in the past few years, the 26th of July.

As with other changes Cubans have experienced in the past eleven years, the present alteration in holiday patterns is no mere whim of the leadership. Rather, there is an economic logic to the shift that will probably make summer Carnaval a permanent feature of Cuban life. Judging from the efforts that went into this year's celebrations (in contrast to the July festival of last year), this seems even more certain. In 1970, for example, Carnaval was enjoyable; but it was nothing more than a huge street fiesta consisting of a lot of beer, music and some isolated street dancing along the Malecon. Consequently, it seemed to have little impact upon the public imagination. There was a minimal amount of organization, only passive participation and very few links with the rich tradition of past carnavals. This year, however, there have been changes; and because of them, Carnaval 1971 has been a spectacular success.

First among the changes is the vastly improved organization of the Carnaval, primarily as a result of the new and happily efficient Havana Carnaval Commission. For example, as June and the sugar harvest ended, preparations were already underway for the ten-day (July 17-27) festivities. There was a face-lifting campaign conducted throughout the metropolitan area of Havana: 38,000 volunteers from the neighborhood-based Committees for the Defence of the Revolution put a new coat of paint on 20,000 of the city's oldest buildings. At the same time, giant floats were being constructed by the various unions or mass organizations. These floats--carrozas as they are called here--are as elaborate and colorful as any in a Thanksgiving Day parade. All of them were made at night, in the side-streets or factories by the workers themselves. A few were still being welded

and painted as the carrozas were moved from the side-streets to the Malecon the night of the 17th. In other parts of the city, comparsas were being carefully choreographed by more than a dozen groups, among them the Conjunto Folklorico (specializing in Afro-Cuban music and dance) and the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (the Revolution's organizational umbrella for the performing arts). Costumes were being sewn for everyone by the hard-working women in the CDR's or by another mass organization, the Federation of Cuban Women. The streets too took on a Carnaval air as painted burlap was tacked onto wooden slats and placed around all the light-poles along the Prado and Malecon. Then, most important as far as the Habaneros were concerned, hundreds of wooden beer stands were erected in the streets, these to service the hundreds of thousands of bucket-toting beer drinkers who, rather than buying just a bottle of beer at a time, would push a pail at the vendors instead.

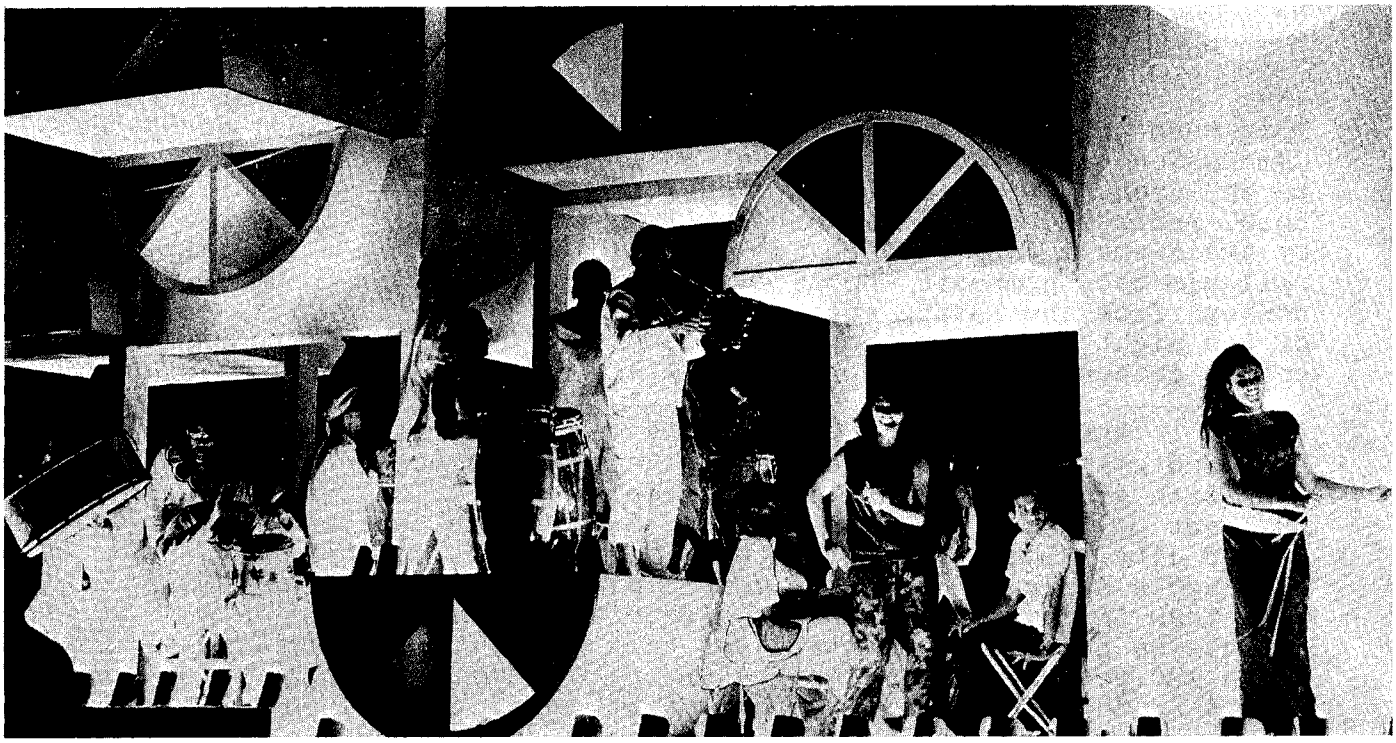
Then popular enthusiasm in Havana was given a substantial boost on the 3rd of July when over 140 young women competed in the selection process for Queen of Carnaval. Each girl, sponsored by one of six student-worker organizations, was judges on the basis of her work, interests and attitudes. For some visiting Americans, the idea of a competition for a Carnaval Queen (actually Cubans called her "estrella" or star) seemed somewhat anachronistic or contradictory after the revolutionary changes that have occured in Cuba during the past ten years. However, there could be no doubt that the Cubans enjoyed the notion. The Sports Palace where the competition was held that night was filled to capacity and thousands were still outside trying to enter when the gates were closed. A nineteen year old architectural student from the University of Havana was the final winner.

Finally everything came together the night of the 17th. Habaneros flooded into the center of the city, particularly to the Prado and the Malecon for a four hour parade of floats and comparsas. In the same area, interspersed among the crowd, several orchestras perched atop high platforms played for those who preferred dancing to watching the parade. From the sea, breezes carried the music well into the center of Havana and one could hear high-pitched flutes and bongos far away. Beer was available by the bucket. For those not so well equipped, foot-high carton containers were provided by the vendors.

Along the Prado the crowds were dense, captivated by the color of the costumes, illuminated floats, fire works and fast-paced dancing of the comparsas. From the Malecon to the Parque de la Fraternidad these groups presented several different types of popular dances including the traditional marengue and, of course, contemporary Cuban rock. The most skilled performers came from the Conjunto Folklorico who delighted the crowds with a traditional Afro-Cuban dance, the "Alacran." It had last been presented in Havana's 1937 Carnaval and tells of a scorpion caught in the canefields.

(Photo: COR)

Everyone, it seemed, was on the Prado that night. The only ones who were not playing carnaval were the very young, the very old or the bus drivers who were too busy ferrying their jammed passengers into the center of the city. A story began to circulate among the crowd that joked about the unusual sight one could find at the Coppelia, Havana's most popular distributor of ice cream. There, at eleven o'clock, one could have some ice cream "sin necesidad de hacer la cola"....without even having to wait in line! In this case, beer was more preferable. One unforgettable little girl sat holding a large container of beer she had somehow obtained at the festival. Carefully guarding it, she was on a bus taking the beer home to her father who, because he had been on militia duty, had been unable to fete that night.



above: The float built by the Federation of University Students (FEU) passing before the crowded Prado

below: The Ministry of Transport's contribution to Carnaval '71

Later in the week, the children of Havana had their night. More than a hundred thousand small boys and girls were invited by the Commission to attend the Carnaval de Ninos, a special evening devoted to children. It was the best night of the week-long celebrations. Local radio and television personalities walked the Malecon cheered by their small fans. There were floats and comparsas made by the children too, gymnasts who performed on mobile trampolines and even cowboys from the Havana rodeo. But the most highly appreciated event of the night came when Army paratroopers, dropped by low-flying aircraft, descended over the crowd and into the bay along the Malecon.

Havana does not host Cuba's only Carnaval, however. In each city and even in the smaller towns, Carnaval is celebrated, sometimes even with greater spontaneity and mass participation. Among the most jubilent of these is the one held in Santiago de Cuba, the island's second city. Located in Oriente province on the southern coast, Santiago's Carnaval is really more typical of the Caribbean-style fete than is Havana's. A Cuban historian explains why. "This is because we here in Havana take out carnaval tradition from the middle class who preferred to be spectators rather than participants. The people of the capital city were conditioned to think in terms of spectacle, of grand balls where one danced the 'contretempo' or simply watched others perform."

The spectator quality of the Havana carnaval contrasts with the celebrations traditional to Santiago. There, Carnaval has always been held at the end of the sugar harvest, a fact that made it a festival of workers rather than officials. Morevore, because the workers of the canefields were for the most part black, particularly in Oriente, their festival has had a greater infusion of Afro-Cuban music and dance. Instead of floats and stylized dancing moving in parade, Santiagueros play carnaval much more spontaneously, very much in the Trinidadian way. With arms in the air and feet brushing the pavement (cepillar), the people of Santiago make their own dances. (In Trinidad they call it "Chip-Chiping.") What has evolved in Santiago, therefore, is the conga santiaguera, a rhythmic swaying accompanied to the sounds of a wooden guiro.

In place of the aristocratic Prado, the people of Santiago have their Troncha, a street that has assumed the distinction of being the center of Santiago's carnaval. Thus, while people in Trinidad speak of "playing mass," Santiagueros say they are "arrollando en la Troncha." Here, it is interesting to note that the July 26 attack on the Moncada barracks (an army barracks assaulted by Fidel Castro in 1953) was purposely scheduled to coincide with Santiago's carnaval celebrations. While the city was preparing its festival, Fidel and 155 other members of the July 26 movement were about to initiate the first battle of the Revolutionary war.

Today, the route of the conga santiaguera passes directly in front of the same Moncada barracks. There, in the pink-stucco facade, the pock-marks of bullets remind the dancers of that strike made 18 years ago. For Cubans, history is no abstraction.

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